

# “FOLLOW ME”

Mark 1:16-20; 8:31-38; John 21:15-22

Key Verse: Mark 8:34

**“Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’”**

Today’s message covers the theme of the upcoming regional summer Bible conference, which is based on Jesus’ words to...“Follow me.” When Jesus said this, he was inviting his disciples into a relationship with him and giving them a direction for their lives. Jesus repeated these words on several occasions to help them learn their meaning more deeply. These words speak to all of Jesus’ people, both new disciples and seasoned followers as well. It is my prayer that we may hear his call in a fresh way that revitalizes our spiritual lives and gives us clear direction.

In truth, everyone is following someone or something. Some people try to follow a leader who seems to know the way to success. So they buy his or her books, attend their seminars and so on. These days many people are looking for a political leader who will make a real change for a better future for America. Other people are following a romantic interest, and are willing to make total breaks from their past in order to do so. We often hear the expression “Follow your heart.” But the Bible says that the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure (Jer 17:9). Who or what we follow is the most important issue for each of us. It affects our personality, value system, life direction and eternal destiny. It is worthwhile to spend some quality time evaluating who we are following and why, and where our lives are heading. As we do this, Jesus’ words’ **“Follow me,”** can be the words of life to us. Let’s listen to Jesus as he calls his first disciples (Mk 1:16-20), as he guides them to deeper commitment in the mid-term of discipleship (Mk 8:31-38), and as he gives a final charge to Peter (Jn 21:15-22).

**First, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Mk 1:16-20).**

Mark’s gospel tells us that God sent Jesus, his Son, into the world as the Messiah. After his inaugural baptism, he defeated the devil in one-to-one combat in the desert. Then he began to proclaim: **“The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”** (1:15) Jesus

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proclaimed the restoration of God’s kingdom in people’s hearts. In order to advance the kingdom of God, Jesus was looking for kingdom workers. As he walked along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen (16). Fishermen? They were very ordinary people just trying to make a living. But Jesus had great vision and hope and said to them, **“Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men”** (17, NIV 1984). Jesus saw them as future apostles who would preach the gospel to innumerable people as key members of God’s kingdom. Jesus’ words **“I will....”** are the same as God’s words to Abraham, **“I will make you into a great nation...I will bless you”** (Gen 12:2-3). It was a one-sided covenant of grace. Jesus’ calling is not a burden; it is a great blessing.

Here we learn that Jesus calls ordinary people with the hope and vision to use them greatly. In order to accomplish this, Jesus challenged them to follow him and he promised to send them out to fish for people. What, then, did it mean to follow him? The Greek word translated “follow” is *ὀπίσω*, (*opisō*). It means *to “come after,” marking the one who speaks as the leader, and those who come behind as followers.*<sup>1</sup> The emphasis of this word is more on the relationship with a leader than on accomplishing a task. Though Jesus had a vision to use them greatly, his invitation was not merely purpose driven. He wanted to have a personal relationship with them. He wanted them to know him, that is, to learn his mind and heart and character, as well as his purpose. This knowledge would transform them from mundane men with many weaknesses into Christ-like men who would reveal God to others in both word and deed. God himself came to earth in human flesh and lived with his disciples for three and a half years. What a great privilege it was!

After being with them, Jesus would send them out to fish for people. Instead of working only to feed themselves and their families, they would work for people’s salvation according to God’s plan. Their labor would not be consumed at the dinner table each night. Rather, their labor would bear the fruits of eternal salvation in the lives of others. I had the privilege of attending the memorial service of Mother Barry’s younger brother Tom. It was not a funeral, but a worship service, titled: “A Service of Witness to the Resurrection and in Thanksgiving for the Life of Thomas Merritt Barry.”

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<sup>1</sup> Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 469). New York: United Bible Societies.

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Navy Captain Tom Barry lived as a shepherd for his four sons. Each of his sons shared detailed stories of how he came to know God through his father's Bible teaching and godly example. Tom also took care of his 28 grandchildren one by one in unique ways that impressed them deeply. So when he became sick they wanted to care for him. They gathered around him twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for the last six months of his life. At the service they sang a beautiful hymn to Jesus as they remembered their grandfather's shepherding. Not only did he serve his own family, he shepherded many other people as well. For example, during the service, a Scripture reading was done by a man named Don Cox. He read from a Bible which was given to him by Tom and Anna Barry long ago. He shared with me privately that they had sent him and his wife on a young couple's retreat 25 years before, where they both accepted Christ. Afterward Tom and Anna shepherded them with patience, prayer and perseverance until they were firmly established in their faith in Christ. Navy Captain Tom Barry's labor to share the gospel with people one by one is bearing the fruit of eternal life that will continue down through the generations. The world is like an ocean full of people who are perishing under the power of sin and death. People need someone to share the gospel with them so they can find eternal salvation. Engaging in this kind of labor is God's great blessing and it is most rewarding.

How did Simon and Andrew respond? Verse 18 says, **“At once they left their nets and followed him.”** They found meaning, direction and hope in Jesus. So they committed themselves to follow him. James and John responded in the same way (1:19-20). This kind of response happens when Jesus himself calls someone to be his disciple. So we can pray that Jesus may call young people to follow him through our summer conference. As he does, a new generation of disciples can be raised to participate in his salvation work. Young people have love for the truth; they have passion for justice; they want to live meaningful lives. If they just hear Jesus' call, they can follow him into eternal grace and glory as his gospel workers.

### **Second, “deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me” (Mk 8:31-38).**

After calling his disciples, Jesus did not ask them to do many things, but just to follow him. He showed them his divine power as he drove out demons, healed the sick, and even raised the dead. He showed them his mastery over nature by calming a raging storm at sea. He taught them his love for all

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people by embracing tax collectors and sinners and healing the most marginalized of people. After revealing who he was through his words and deeds, he asked them, **“Who do you say I am?”** Peter confessed, **“You are the Messiah.”** Peter was convinced that Jesus was not one of the prophets, but God’s Messiah, the Savior King, and pledged loyalty and commitment.

Then Jesus began to teach them what he must do as the Messiah: **“the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law...he must be killed and after three days rise again”** (8:31). God’s will for the Messiah was to suffer and die as a ransom sacrifice for the sins of the world and rise again. When Peter heard this, he reacted very strongly, even rebuking Jesus. Peter had his own idea about what the Messiah should do. Peter wanted Jesus to be like King David, and destroy Israel’s enemies and bring about a glorious new age of peace and prosperity. Peter had his own utopian dream and he wanted glory without suffering. Though he had just confessed Jesus as the Messiah, Lord and King, he was rejecting Jesus’ teaching strongly.

Jesus dealt with Peter very seriously. First, he rebuked him. But he did not fight against Peter; he fought against Satan who was working through Peter. Then Jesus pointed out Peter’s problem very clearly: **“You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns”** (8:33). Though Peter’s idea was not self-centered, but national, it was not a Biblical view of the Messiah. Jesus did not compromise with Peter and his disciples, but planted a Biblical understanding of the Messiah and clearly taught the requirements of following him. He called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”** (8:34). Jesus used the word **“must.”** It means there is no alternative way to be Jesus’ disciple. Whoever wants to be Jesus’ disciple must follow Jesus in his way, not their own way. What is Jesus’ way? It is to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him. Here **“deny themselves”** precisely means giving up one’s own idea and accepting Jesus’ idea. When one’s own idea and Jesus’ idea come into conflict, many people stop following Jesus. They don’t want to give up their own idea, thinking it is the best. But actually, Jesus’ idea is always the best. Once, Jesus fed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish. After that, they wanted to make him king by force so they would have a permanent supply of food. But Jesus did not follow their idea. Instead

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he taught them: **“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty”** (Jn 6:35). Then they complained that it was a hard teaching to accept. Jesus told them, **“The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life”** (Jn 6:63). At that moment, many stopped following Jesus. Jesus did not compromise at all. Rather, he challenged his disciples, **“You do not want to leave too, do you?”** Simon Peter answered, **“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”** When he accepted Jesus’ words rather than his own idea, Peter could continue to follow Jesus. One young lady grew up in a rich, respected family. While at a university she heard the gospel, gave her heart to Jesus and decided to live as his witness. She was able to give up her own dream of worldly success. But her parents could not. So she experienced conflict. She had to disappoint her parents. It was painful for her to bear. But she did so to continue to follow Jesus. And he has blessed her beyond imagination.

To **“take up their cross”** means to positively decide to share in Jesus’ rejection and suffering. Following Jesus requires making practical decisions. One young lady really wants people to like her. So when she invited people to Bible study she did her best to be nice and appealing. Nevertheless, she was rejected and sometimes even insulted. It was very painful for her. However, when she thought of Jesus she realized that he had been rejected even more painfully for her. She found that the time of rejection is the time to know Christ more intimately. She has overcome her sensitivity and now even rejoices when rejected. In this way, Jesus’ words **“follow me”** challenge us to move from a self-centered life to a Christ-centered life. Here the word “follow” is translated from the Greek word *ἀκολουθέω* (akoloutheō). It means **“to be a follower or a disciple of someone, in the sense of adhering to the teachings or instructions of a leader and in promoting the cause of such a leader.”**<sup>2</sup> In Mark 1:17, when Jesus said, **“Follow me,”** his emphasis was more on having a relationship with him. Here in Mark 8:34, **“Follow me”** means adhering to his teachings.

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Jesus teaches us to follow him practically even when it is painful and difficult. It is because it is the way to everlasting life. Those who live a self-centered life, seeking to accumulate everything they want, will someday lose it all, and forfeit their own souls too. They are foolish people. But those who lose their lives for Jesus and the gospel obtain eternal salvation. Those who gain everything else and lose Jesus lose everything in the end. But those who lose everything else and gain Jesus gain everything in the end. The end refers to the time of each one's death. Furthermore, it refers to Jesus' coming in great power and glory as King and Judge. Clothed in divine majesty with all authority and sovereign power, and surrounded by myriad of heavenly angels, he will be ashamed of those who were ashamed of him. But he will richly reward those who followed him according to his words.

**Third, follow Jesus by feeding his sheep to the end (Jn 21:15-22).** Now, switching from Mark's gospel to John, let's listen to Jesus' last words to Peter. Jesus' first words to Peter were “**Follow me,**” which gave him clear life direction and hope in Jesus. Jesus' mid-term words to Peter were “**Follow me,**” which helped change his mindset toward Jesus. Jesus' last words to Peter were “**Follow me,**” which meant to be faithful to Jesus to the end and finish well. In following Jesus, starting well is important; but finishing well is even more important. When we begin to follow Jesus, we are inspired by his hope and vision and we are full of passion to dedicate our lives to him. But as time goes by, and we experience sufferings and disappointment, we lose our passion and become complacent and want to retire from serving Jesus. What Jesus really wants from us is to follow him passionately to the end by feeding his sheep. Let's see how Jesus helped Peter.

Though Peter met the Risen Jesus two times, he did not know what to do. In order to survive, he went out to fish, along with several other disciples. He was an excellent fisherman, but that night he caught nothing. Maybe he remembered Jesus' words, “**Apart from me you can do nothing.**” He was discouraged and despaired. At this moment, the Risen Jesus visited him, blessed him with a great catch of fish and prepared a delicious breakfast cooked over a fire of burning coals. Jesus invited him, saying, “**Come and have breakfast.**” None of the disciples dared say anything because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus went to them one by one and served them with bread and fish. It was a great love feast. In this way Jesus restored his love relationship with them. Based on this love, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “**Simon**

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**son of John, do you love me more than these?”** Peter did not say, “Yes, I love you,” directly. Instead, he said in light of Jesus’ love, **“Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”** Then Jesus said, **“Feed my lambs.”** It was an appeal based on love. This conversation was repeated almost verbatim three times. It was what Jesus really wanted Peter to do as his expression of love for him. It is what Jesus wants all who follow him to do.

After that, Jesus said, **“Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”** John comments that Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Jesus wanted Peter to glorify God through his life and to glorify God through his death. Then Jesus said to him, **“Follow me.”** Peter suddenly felt very lonely and did not want to die alone. So he said to Jesus, **“How about him?”** meaning John. Jesus said, **“If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.”** Jesus wants each of his people to be faithful to him to the end, no matter what, without comparing themselves to others. Following Jesus is a very personal matter.

Jesus wants us to follow him with life commitment. Jesus wants us to follow him by denying our own ideas, taking up our crosses. Jesus wants us to follow him by feeding his sheep out of love for him. Jesus wants us to follow him to the end with unchanging passion. It is the way of eternal life and glory. Let’s follow Jesus and pray for many young people to follow Jesus.