**FOLLOW ME**

***( “Following Jesus”)***

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*“Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.’” (Mk 8:34)*

**Objective**

In this chapter, we want to elaborate on Jesus’ invitation “follow me” and the importance of a follower’s response. We also want to understand how an obedient faith-filled response leads Jesus’ followers to inner transformation, Christ-centeredness, and to a pattern of obedient faith, service and worship in a Christian mission or community.

**Introduction**

One of the beautiful marks of faith we see in Jesus’ disciples was when he called them to follow him. They left everything (Mk 2:14; Jn 1:35-50). Their journey with Jesus across the gospels described what it was like for a disciple to follow Jesus. They learned faith and changed a lot as holy people. The journey of a lifelong disciple of Jesus has great meaning, joy and reward despite its danger, pains and sorrows. When we follow Christ together as communities of faith we share a common truth, common affection and common goals that give us unity. Overall, Jesus himself perfectly tells us what following him entails. It requires commitment and devotion to Christ and his way of life.

**Definition**

The Bible best defines a true “follower” of Christ in the gospels. Mark 8:34 states, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (cf Lk 14:27, Mt 16:24). So, from a Christian perspective, a follower may be an *admirer*, *supporter*, *learner* and *emulator* and much more. In observing the disciples’ lives, they began as admirers of the Lord, becoming his learners and supporters and ultimately the ones who emulated his life and works in every conceivable way. Thus they truly exemplified a “follower” of Christ. From Mark 8:34, we elaborate on the following:

1. Who is a true follower of Jesus
2. What it means to follow Jesus: Principles and Examples
   1. Deny himself
   2. Take up his cross
   3. Follow me
3. Followership: Following Jesus in community

**Who is a True Follower of Jesus**

When Jesus said “*Anyone who would come after me*” in Mark 8:34, he wasn’t speaking to his disciples alone, but to any person. Yet any person who wishes to follow Jesus becomes confronted with intellectual, emotional, moral and other obstacles in following him. Jesus’ words, “*If anyone would come after me...*” help us to check our motives in following him. Is Jesus really who he says he is? Is he really the greatest Treasure and the only Savior for me? Jesus established the criteria to identify ourselves as a true follower of Christ from the counterfeit or casual non-committal sort of followers. His words in Mark 8:34 were delivered at a most critical time in Jesus’ ministry as well as in the disciples’ walk with Christ. Peter had made a momentous confession: “*You are the Christ*” (Mk 8:29). It was at that moment that Peter encountered Jesus as the Messiah. Peter found amazing grace and the ultimate sense of the meaning of his life in Jesus. This happened because Jesus had demonstrated to them the truth regarding the Messiah’s salvation work. They witnessed how he humbled himself to live among us. How he willingly laid down his life his life as a sacrifice for our sins. He predicted his resurrection to give us victory over the grave. In other words Peter had received the gospel. Yet in this life Satan tempts us to take easier ways of discipleship, just as Satan had tempted Jesus through Peter to abandon the way of the cross (8:32). It was then that Jesus set in stone the criteria for following Him. And they were radical! His true disciple or follower must (1) Deny himself (2) Take up his cross, and (3) Follow Him (Jesus).

There is no doubt then, Jesus’ true follower is the one who denies himself, takes up his cross, and follows Him according to Jesus’ command stated in Mark 8:34. Yet we must look at each one of Jesus’ directives to really understand what it means to be his disciple and to follow him.

**What it Means to Follow Jesus: Principles and Examples**

**“He Must Deny Himself”**

According to Mark 8:34, we surmise that the essence of “following Jesus” begins with self-denial. Self-denial has often been misconstrued as asceticism, beating the human body or mind into submission and giving ourselves low self-esteem. This is not the key to self denial. Rather, it is to renounce the self as the dominant element in one’s life and to acknowledge Jesus as Lord. It is to change from self-glory seeking, to seeking God’s glory. It is to change from being self-centered to being Jesus-centered. From seeking pleasures on earth to seek treasure in heaven. This is possible because of new birth in Jesus (1Pe 1:23). When we met Jesus personally we found who we really are because he cleansed us from sins. We have new life in Jesus that wants to bloom. When we have a conflict between the old self and God, it is to say “no” to the self and “yes” to God. Basically it is to die to oneself and then live for God.

Human beings are born to the realm of the flesh, born in bondage to the sinful nature, as slaves to sin. The Bible tells us that without the new way of life that Jesus has empowered us to live, human beings have no choice except to follow their own evil desires (Jude 1:16), natural instincts (Jude 1:19) and corrupt ways (2Pe 2:2). The Bible tells us without empowerment from the Spirit to follow him we follow the desires of the flesh in its many forms (Jn 3:6; Ga 5:19; 1Jn 2:16), and then bear bad fruit and tragic consequences for our sins (Ro 8:13; Ga 6:8). Following Jesus in self-denial and cross-taking sets us free from the passions and desires of the flesh (Ga 5:24), and helps us to use our life for doing much good and bear good fruit.

Another way of understanding self-denial is that it is the way to make room for God. In our society of consumption and focus on material and temporal things, there is the danger of blocking God out and subtly worshipping idols (Ps 24:4). Denying the self and following Jesus makes room for Jesus to come into our hearts. We deny ourselves temporal joys for everlasting, spiritual joys. King David said, “*Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more*,” (Ps 16:4) but “*You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence*,” (Ps 16:11). As we deny ourselves and follow Jesus, his presence fills our heart. For example, Jesus told us to not to follow or pray for superficial things but for “good things” like the Holy Spirit (Lk 11:13).

When Jesus stated that a follower “*must deny himself*,” Jesus was giving a lifelong direction for the follower, a direction that would mark every aspect and season of a follower’s life. We cannot get away from our old or new “self.” After new birth the Holy Spirit works in our hearts like an excavator in a coal mine. Even when denied or crucified in Christ, the “old self” is certainly not annihilated for good. The old “self” is ever there ready to spring back to life when temptations arise, and opportunities are given for it to live again. It is never easy to deny one’s self, and to keep denying one’s self in a world full of enemies of Christ and his gospel, and especially of the gospel way of life and of all that is good and holy! Every day the “*Enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour*” (1Pe 5:8). His territory is the realm of the flesh where men are weak. But a true follower of Christ who abides in Christ’s words, who lives in Christ and in whom Christ lives (Jn 15:5,7) makes it his resolve to live a humble life of repentance because he understands that the Lord’s words, “*he must deny himself*,” weren’t meant for obedience only once, but were meant as a lifestyle!

**Take Up His Cross**

According to Mark 8:34, the second fundamental criteria to following Jesus is “*taking up one’s cross*.”

When Jesus said that a follower must “*take up his cross*,” he was alluding to the way of life Jesus himself already chose of appointed sufferings. For Jesus, a Jew, to die on a Roman cross meant immense shame, opposition, suffering and death. It was God the Son’s mission to taste death for us and to save all those would believe in him from an eternity in hell. It was the will of God that Jesus should live a life marked from the beginning to the end by the way of the cross. It was the will of God that Jesus should become the Lamb of God and shed his holy blood for the redeemed, by taking up crosses which marked his life as a servant of God and Savior of his people.

Jesus has shown the way for every Christian to “take up his cross” by participating in God’s mission and overcoming obstacles in following Him. Sometimes the cross can mean following Jesus despite the opposition of family or friends. Taking up the cross has produced 2,000 years of Christian missions and outreach to the lost and unreached peoples of the world. In the same way, many of our Bible teacher and mission families in UBF carry the burden of reaching a lost world. For many this has meant giving up opportunities in one’s home country to plant themselves in world mission. There are crosses to overcome like language study, culture shock and adaptation. In addition to work, school and family missional families willingly take on the extra burden of meeting students on the campus and in general reaching out to people around them at work or in community. Sometimes the cross can mean personal things like physical or economic disadvantages we live with. For example a person with a physical disability may serve God in a very fruitful way but may not experience healing of his or her disability during this lifetime. He or she then has to live with the agonies and limitations of that disability during earthly life. Jesus was limited in human form with its associated agonies, yet through his life he saved many (Mk 10:45) and brought us eternal life. The strains of mission on family and other relationships are many, and any follower of Jesus will at times question the value of bearing the cross of Jesus. One might think that a cross-bearing lifestyle is an impossible burden that cannot end well. However, whenever we contemplate the meaning of the cross of Jesus we see light beams of everlasting hope, new strength and joy for the salvation of all peoples. Jesus has transformed the symbol of the cross from bitter shame to glory, from darkness to light, from opposition to victory, and from from death to life. Jesus called his followers to carry the cross with joy, willingness, obedience, servantship, and sacrifice as he did.

The cross of Jesus has special meaning for his followers. The cross reveals the mystery at the heart of Christianity. Through the cross God defeated evil in us and saved our souls. The cross is God’s power, not ours. As we take up the cross of Jesus in different ways we feel hard pressed, while others seem to enjoy an easy life. We shoulder extra burdens for the Lord’s sake that demand attention and sacrifice. Sometimes we feel like dying. Life itself is marked with days of darkness, suffering and sorrows. Then how can we live a cross-taking life to the end? The result of taking up the cross of Jesus is living with God’s all surpassing power. Paul said, “*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body*” (2Co 4:8-10). Sometimes as we do God’s work, we find ourselves in a new low point of life that we never expected. Our own sins and weaknesses keep us tied to the ground. We find life much harder and more complex than we can handle, and we feel like giving up. But the cross of Jesus is an ever present source of light, power, guidance and inspiration because on the cross Jesus died for our sins. When we take up the cross we make this world a little less like hell and a little more like heaven. Christians around the world take up the cross and share the gospel in hopes to alleviate others’ suffering and save them from eternal suffering. Taking up the cross moves people from misery to everlasting happiness, which is found only in Christ.

The main challenge to our faith is that in our wealthy North American society there are so many alternative lifestyles to the way of the cross. Instead of “take up your cross daily” we hear a daily call to enjoy our lives in our own pride, wealth, comfort and security. With the technological advances we are even more distracted from a cross-taking life. When we do we slowly lose spiritual power and fall into meaninglessness and despair. It is during these times that we need to hear Jesus call again to “follow him” and to “pick up the cross” and come back to the narrow road to fight the good fight of faith.

When Jesus said that a follower must “take up his cross,” we should never think that we are in some way paying for our own sins. Our forgiveness and grace was paid by Jesus once and for all. Yes, taking up the cross of Jesus can make us feel unrighteously proud. Especially when we may not see or notice others who take up the cross daily. Perhaps with God’s help we conquered a sinful attitude, habit or addiction. Then pride sneaks up on us and makes us think that we somehow accomplished it on our own. Pride tell us lies, steals our contentment in God, and leads us to destruction (Prov 16:18). Humility in taking the cross gives us peace and makes us men and women of broken hearted compassion. Paul said in Galatians 6:14, “*May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*” Taking up the cross of Jesus should never lead to pride. Rather Jesus commanded his followers to walk in his own footsteps, to take upon themselves the same lifestyle as Jesus did, to tread the way of the cross together with Jesus, and to willingly participate in carrying their own crosses in life, especially in serving God’s world salvation plan as Christ did.

It is impossible to enumerate all the elements that define or describe what taking up one’s cross involve, but we may be sure that taking up one’s cross requires an attitude of obedience, one of servantship, of sacrifice, and oftentimes require a follower to fulfill a mission the Holy Spirit has called us to.

**Follow Me**

Jesus ended his words in Mark 8:34 with these immortal words: “*and follow me*.”

On the calvary road with Jesus. The importance of our response to Jesus’ command, ‘Follow me!”cannot be underestimated. Jesus’ call is very personal. It solves the dilemma of what we can know about the outcome of our lives. We often sense that there is a greater meaning to life than what we ordinarily know. This is the importance of Jesus’ words and our response. Saying, “I will follow,” saying “Yes!” to Jesus ties our destiny to His. It solves our dilemma of living for ordinary, temporary human purposes versus living for God. This call is for everyone who believes!

Jesus is the one who declared himself to be the “The way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6), and the only one who came with the authority to lay down his life and the authority to take it up again. Jesus’ command he received from God the Father, a command he gladly and willingly obeyed (Jn 10:18). It was evident that the road Jesus was called by God to walk in his life was a difficult road eventually leading to the cross. It was a road laden with all kinds of sorrows and sufferings, but also with the joys of serving God’s glorious purpose of rescuing a sinful world under God’s wrath. But it was the road God had set before him, a road Jesus was called to obey regardless of how difficult it may have been, and a road he gladly walked. Eventually, the road Jesus took led to the cross, and the cross led to eternal life and the kingdom of God. In other words, the road Jesus walked and called his followers to walk, saying “*Follow me*” led Jesus to his rightful place in heaven at the right hand of God, and every faithful follower to a fruitful victory as they followed Jesus here on earth, and a glorious crown at the end of the journey. Follow me in the way of the cross may taste bitter to the mouth but tastes like honey to the soul.

When Jesus said: *“Follow me”* foremost, he was saying that no human being would be able to return to the Father in any other way (Jn 14:6). It was the only way to fulfill the salvation of one’s soul. But Jesus was also saying that self-denial and cross-carrying are also moot unless a follower actually commits to following Jesus all their lives. More than that, no one can experience an inner transformation to become more Christlike unless they follow Jesus not one day or two days but follow Jesus all the days of their lives as a lifestyle. A follower of Christ learns the secrets of self-denial and cross-carrying, thereby growing and changing in their inner person by learning of Jesus and from Jesus and being with Jesus (Mk 3:14). Thereby they mature and transform within from day to day and produce the fruit of a Christlike lifeand achieve the victory that blesses others in the community. Only then can one say he or she is truly wise.

For example, 1 Peter 2:21 says, “*To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps*.” Jesus is worthy of following because he showed us the way to nobly bear the sufferings of injustice. More clearly, Jesus suffered because of us, our sins and injustice, yet he bore it with humility, meekness, and patience borne out of love. In our fallen human nature we quickly retaliate when we are misunderstood, treated unreasonably or taken advantage of. By the empowerment of the Spirit to believers, our new nature is shown when we accept sufferings in the name of Jesus. When we can remain calm, trusting and faithful to God in difficult situations it shows that there is something at work inside us. We change because in Jesus we have an example to follow and a Savior who died for our sins.

“Follow me” means that Jesus will always be with us and will take care of us. His words “Follow me” are an invitation to come to Jesus throughout one’s lifetime, to enjoy his company and to be in his presence. Jesus once said: “*Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be*” (Jn 12:25). Because we identify as servants of God we will suffer. However, we are not alone in trials of suffering because Jesus is steadfast in supporting his servants. The more we suffer the more he intensifies his presence and helps us bear up under suffering. There are many promises in the Bible about following God. Matthew 6:33 states, “*But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*” Jesus also guides us through life, through disappointments with his precious promises. The greatest may be his enduring presence to the end of the age as we carry out the worldwide spread of the gospel and making disciples (Mt 28:20).

Following Jesus leads to maturity in the faith. The Bible teaches that Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:2) because he himself walked that road he calls us to follow; and he walked that road of faith in obedience to God and he would also have his followers follow together alongside him. That road is often as difficult, and pains ridden as the one Jesus himself took (just look at Hebrews 11; just look at the book of Acts), but like Jesus, in the end the road that is walked by faith and obedience to Christ and to his word always leads to a fruitful life and to the kingdom of God, our eternal home. In this generation, living by faith, trusting God, obeying God’s word all seems naive, unsophisticated and just plain dumb.. But if one really wants a meaningful life, there is no other way to start except following Jesus in faith and obedience. In other words, we can only enter heaven by faith in Christ. We can only deny ourselves by faith in Christ. We can only take our cross by faith in Christ. We can only follow Christ during our lifetime by faith in Christ. And we can only grow and mature and be transformed by faith in Christ and by the work of the Holy Spirit who works in our hearts when we surrender to Christ.

For example the apostle Paul was transformed as he walked in Jesus’ footsteps by faith and obedience. Once God’s enemy, the resurrected Jesus confronted Paul on a Damascus road. Paul called himself as, “*the worst of sinners*”(1Ti 1:15) and “*a violent man*” (Ga 1:13). In Jesus he had such a profound experience of the grace of God that he never wanted to go back to his old life (Ac 20:24). When he committed his life to following Jesus, he followed Jesus not partly nor half way, but all the way, in all things, and he did so from beginning to end. Near the end of his life he said, “*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness*” (2Ti 4:7-8). Though he had such acute powers of reason, and was so resolute in his life of mission Paul is most known for imitating Jesus’ life and lifestyle. And so, he became an influence in the Christian world. In other words, he had the authority to influence others to follow Jesus. Paul could boldly advise his own Christian converts to imitate him, because his own life closely resembled that of the Lord Jesus as witnesses would even attest to it (1Co 4:16-17). Therefore, we see clearly that when he committed his life to “following Jesus,” he not only gained eternal life for himself, but his “following Jesus” bore the fruit of a transformed life which in turn became the influence on others to follow Jesus themselves. This is a great truth that modern Christianity needs to learn and uphold because it seems to have been lost in the watered-down version of “discipleship.” Paul as well as the rest of the followers of Christ became influential and fruitful leaders of the church because they were first serious and committed followers of Christ. For sure the apostle Paul has been a favorite example in our UBF ministry. In addition, many missionaries have taken his example of tent-making missions to the world.

Finally, following Jesus is personal and frees us from comparison with others.At Jesus’ and Peter’s final meeting in John’s gospel chapter 21, Peter was caught by surprise when Jesus predicted that he would die as a martyr. So when Peter saw his friend, John, nearby he asked, “Lord, what about him?” Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me” (Jn 21:21-22). Consciously or unconsciously, human beings have the tendency to find their identity, direction, values and meaning in comparison with others. Oftentimes when we don’t sense God’s will directly we find ourselves desperately comparing ourselves with others. Whether in a small town, or connected by the internet to millions, comparing ourselves to others is never good. Other people don’t hold the destiny of our lives or the future; Jesus does. Comparison with other people results in either feelings of inferiority or superiority. Neither of these are good for us. Other people may be examples but not standards for us. Only Jesus knows how to make us humble without demeaning us, or to build us up without spoiling us. So we must look to him whenever we have questions about faith or about the future. Jesus had a clear purpose and direction for each of the disciples and they were all different. Jesus is saying each of us must carry our own cross and we must respect our fellow disciples as Jesus’ chosen servants. This ability to avoid comparison is even more important as we enter into Christian ministry, as the amount of Christian ministries has multiplied--but many for different purposes. Each of us must obey God’s will personally and trust him for the grace to do it.

**Followership: Following Jesus in Community**

Other chapters of this discipleship manual have been created to describe how following Jesus is a model for servant-leadership. However this chapter will make an application to how following Jesus in community is important for work in missions and church life as well.

When we look at church organizations we can see that there have been many books produced to describe servant leadership. However, there are not many books written to say how the average member of a church can contribute to the church’s vision, outreach and the health of the church environment. Recently Christian ministries have taken note of the concept of “Followership.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Followership is a concept from institutional psychology that “describes the actions of someone in a subordinate role.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Is it only leaders that determine the outcome of a church’s vision from God? Is it not also the followers in a church that advance many areas of the ministry? Also the cooperation between leaders and followers is integral for many evangelical efforts and of course church unity.

What does the Bible tell us about the kinds of attitudes and spiritual qualities we need to be good followers of Jesus in community, and under godly leadership? In the NT we read verse such as Hebrews 13:7, “*Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith*”; 1 Peter 5:5, “*In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, ‘God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble*’”; and Hebrews 13:17, "*Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account*." Some regular church members and “followers” will become godly appointed church leaders in the future. Under Christ and by his Word and Spirit churches recognize and affirm leaders whom God calls. Then the congregation puts those people in positions of leadership and voluntarily supports that leadership by learning from their teaching and following their initiatives. For God to accomplish his vision for a church, for God’s kingdom to reign in new places, for healthy Christian community we need good quality spiritual leaders and followers working together. This kind of followership is not passive but a very active and important process. Younger leaders and members must make an effort to understand how God is working in the leadership and specific leaders. They must be spiritually ready, show humility and have momentum so as not to put out the flame when, through a godly leader, God calls members to run with obedience and enthusiasm with the vision for which God has called them together. Jonathan was the son of King Saul and in charge of about 1,000 men (1Sa 13:2). He and his armour-bearer scouted a Philistine outpost with about 20 men mounted on a cliff at Mikmash. When they were close to the outpost Jonathan announced, “Come, let’s go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised men. Perhaps the Lord will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few.” With these God-inspired words the armour bearer responded, “Go ahead. I am with you heart and soul.” What was the secret ingredient to the success of Jonathan and his armor bearer? Shared passion, loyalty under God, and giving their hearts together to God led to a important victory that encouraged the rest of the people. We can pass on God’s blessing by simple things such as a good attitude, a team spirit, respecting church guidelines and any other way we know of making the gospel of our Lord Jesus attractive.

There are many benefits to good followership. Psalm 133:1-2 describes the beauty of believers who live for Christ and contend for the gospel together in close association. “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron’s beard, down on the collar of his robe.” Unity comes from God like an anointing that flows to both weak and strong, the poorest and most spiritual in the body of Christ. This beautiful picture comes in contrast of what we often see in the world: a divisive place with fragmented lives and relationships. People not talking to each other and living in isolation. One of the most problematic issues of contemporary and historic Christianity is its’ divisiveness. These days kids grow up in broken homes. They then attend churches and see different parties of believers offended by each other and fighting in the church. If unity is “good and pleasant” then surely disunity is ugly and disgraceful. We don’t enforce outward uniformity but the greater our unity in the Spirit, the more pleasant and beautiful our Christian communities will be. Followership is our expression of walking together imperfectly with the vision to “reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). Christians are bound together by a new covenant that Christ paid to give us life. Christian communities become like an oasis, or a sanctuary from the strife, anxiety and discontent of modern society. Ephesians 4:4-6 says, “*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all*.” This happens when we as followers “clothe” ourselves with humility (1Pe 5:5), look out for each others interests (Php 2:4), and bear with one another and forgive each other; as the Lord has forgiven you (Col 3:13). Biblically-based followership is embracing those who are called to lead you by sharing their vision with loving honor (Php 2:29; 1Thess. 5:12,13), ready obedience (Php 2:12,14,18,29, 3:1; Heb. 7:17,27), humble service, (Php 2:22,25,30), all in devotion to Christ (Php 2:29).

In summary, following Jesus leads to a blessed life though it is hard and confusing at times. An obedient, faith-filled life leads to inner transformation, joyful fellowship with God, and followers who bring God’s blessing to others.

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