

Follow Me

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Just about every Christian is familiar with the idea that they are supposed to follow Jesus. If we need some evidence for our assertion, we don't have to look any farther afield than our hymnals. *Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs* lists "following Jesus" as an entire category in its topical index, just as *Hymns for Worship, Revised* did before it. This category contains 16 hymns, and there are probably others that apply that don't use magic words like "follow" and "footsteps".

Now, it's all well and good for hymnists to write hymns about following Jesus, and for us to sing them, but what does it actually mean to follow Him? What does it mean if we find ourselves "holding up His banner in the thickest fight"? What are we getting ourselves into if we "follow all the way, yes, follow all the way"? A lot of those hymns have a nice, cheery bounce to them, but somehow, I don't think Jesus wants us to understand following Him in a cheery, bouncy way. There's a lot more to it than that, and we can only learn the truth if we listen when He Himself says, "Follow Me."

Jesus' Call

In point of fact, Jesus says "Follow Me" remarkably often. The phrase appears more in the four gospels than it does in the whole rest of the Bible put together, and only as we look at the context in which Jesus utters this call can we understand what He is talking about. One of the first things we learn about "Follow Me" is that by it, Jesus is calling us to **BE A SHEEP**. This is plain from His words in John 10:27. As most have you know, I enjoy medieval history a lot, and back in the good old days, knights commonly incorporated pictures of animals into their coats of arms. They did so because they believed that particular animal possessed a trait that they valued. You put an eagle on your shield if you believed that being swift was important, you put a bear on your shield if you aspired to being strong and powerful, and so on. However, as much study as I've done of the era, I can't recall any instance when a knight made a sheep part of his coat of arms. A ram, maybe, but definitely not a sheep. There is nothing inspiring about sheep.

And yet, it is sheeplike that we are supposed to be. Sheep are not tough. Sheep are not brave. Sheep are not smart. However, sheep do have one trait that Jesus values. They follow without question. That's the way Jesus wants us to be. He doesn't want us applying our human wisdom to His teachings and example, deciding what parts we like and what parts we don't like. He wants us following, no matter where He appears to be leading us.

Second, Jesus wants us to **DENY SELF** to follow Him. Let's read together from Luke 9:23. This passage, and the parallel passages in Matthew and Mark, are familiar to just about any Christian. We'd have to sleep through a lot of sermons to remain ignorant of this one. Interestingly, though, in Luke's version, Jesus says that we have to take up our crosses and deny ourselves daily. I never noticed that before I wrote this sermon, but it's an extremely important idea. We don't do our cross-carrying and our self-denial in some dramatic, spectacular event. Instead, self-denial is something that we must practice every single day, quietly, without praise or commendation from anybody, if we want to follow Jesus. Every single day of our lives needs to have a cross in it someplace, and if it doesn't, we aren't walking in the footsteps of our Lord. That's rough! There are no days off. There are no opportunities for us to coast. Instead, Jesus tells us that every morning when we wake up, there's a cross leaning against our bedroom wall, and our job is to pick it up. Before our feet hit the floor, we need to be asking ourselves, "Where does Jesus want me to serve Him today instead of serving myself? What in my life am I happy with that He isn't?" We have to ask and come up with answers to follow Him.

As this should imply, following Jesus means that we must **ENDURE HARDSHIP**. Look with me at the exchange recorded in Luke 9:57-58. Notice, friends, that this text, along with the other two texts we're going to look at in the remainder of this section, are found in the same chapter of Luke as the cross-carrying verse. This is not an accident. Luke clearly put these here as examples of what denying ourselves while following Jesus looks like. First, if we're going to follow, yes, follow all the way, that's going to mean leaving behind our nice comfy homes behind to go sleep outdoors in all kinds of weather, just so we can be near the Son of Man. This was true literally 2000 years ago, and it's true metaphorically today. Being a disciple means that we never get to stay in our comfort zones. There is always going to be some work that the Lord needs done that we don't want to do. There is always going to be a brother whom we don't naturally feel drawn to whom we are responsible to love. Like a good personal trainer pushes his clients to their limits, God is going to make sure that there are enough challenges and difficulties in our lives to push us to our limits. Some days, we might wish that God didn't think so highly of our capacity for growth, but His goal as our Father is not to coddle us. It is to teach us to be like Christ. The question is whether we will use the trials He provides to follow Jesus.

Next, Jesus points out that following Him means that we have to **LEAVE FAMILY**. He emphasizes this in Luke 9:59-60. Our first reaction on reading this verse is, "Man! That's harsh! Jesus won't even give this guy time to go to his own father's funeral?!" I think this is one of the places in Scripture where Jesus is being intentionally shocking. He is highlighting that next to Him, literally everything else is unimportant, up to and including our own families. It's almost like one of those spy movies where the spy has been living in deep cover for 20 years, he's got a wife, kids, a business, but then he gets the call, and he walks out the door to do spy stuff and never comes back. Maybe we never get the call.

Maybe serving God means that we get to spend the rest of our lives living happily with our families. However, our mindset has to be that if the conflict between God and family ever comes up, we choose Him without a second thought.

If we do this, though, we have to do it willingly, because Jesus says that following Him means we **DON'T LOOK BACK**. This is from the last of our three follow-Me conversations, and it appears in Luke 9:61-62. This guy doesn't even want to spend a couple of hours at the funeral. He just wants to say goodbye, but for Jesus, even that's too much. Not only do we have to leave everything behind, but we have to leave it without even a glance over our shoulders. I've never so much as laid a hand on a horse-drawn plow that was still in use, but as our older members will tell you, it's impossible to plow a straight furrow if you're constantly looking behind you. In the same way, we can't take the straight path to heaven if we dwell on the things we've left behind. All of us have done things that God didn't want us to do. All of us have sinned. All of us can think of times when it was a whole lot of fun to do evil. It's funny. I've noticed in my own life that time has a way of blurring the disastrous consequences of sin, but the memory of the sin itself remains as sharp and inviting as ever. It's all part of Satan's repertoire of deceptions. He knows that if we keep on thinking about Egypt, soon we'll be wanting to go back to Egypt. Jesus knows that too. He tells us to follow without looking back.

Jesus and Peter

All of this seems relatively straightforward, if not easy. However, for pretty much all of us, the journey of following Christ has a lot of twists and turns in it. Before we partake of the Lord's Supper this morning, we're going to look at perhaps the most famous of these journeys, the journey that Peter took, and what it says to us.

This story begins with **PETER'S CALL**. This story is simply related in Mark 1:16-18. This is not Peter's first meeting with Jesus. We see that in the first chapter of John. Peter probably already believes that Jesus is the Messiah, and so when Jesus overawes him with the miracle of the great catch of fish, which we learn about from Luke's account, it's natural for Peter to drop his nets and follow. However, Peter has no idea where Jesus is leading him. He's a devout Jew, so he's probably expecting Jesus to become the great war leader who will drive out the Roman occupiers. Peter probably hopes to benefit materially from following Jesus. Regardless, he's completely unprepared for what Jesus has in store.

The same thing is true of us when we listen to the Lord's call to follow. I've heard people wonder if they obeyed the gospel too early because they didn't understand very much about being a Christian when they were baptized. In reality, friends, nobody understands very much about being a Christian when they're baptized. All of us come to the Lord with a whole lot of hope and a whole lot of ignorance. Even if we were "raised in the church", even if we've been around Christians all our lives, we still don't get discipleship when we start out. To understand it, we have to live it.

In Peter's walk with Jesus, he soon encounters some things that throw him into **CONFUSION**. The foremost of these incidents appears in Mark 8:31-32. There Jesus is, surrounded by all of His disciples, and He starts spouting all of this nonsense about how He is going to be captured by His enemies and killed. This astounds Peter, and not in a good way. The only thing that I can think to compare it to is if we were worshiping with a preacher we really respect, and it's time for him to speak, and he takes the pulpit drunk out of his mind. Peter's instinct is the same as ours. He wants to get Jesus off that stage, as quickly as possible, before He embarrasses Himself further. In reality, of course, the clueless one isn't Jesus. It's Peter. What Peter thinks is a delusional rant is actually Jesus prophesying His death for mankind. The problem is that the Messiah that Peter was expecting isn't the Messiah that he got.

In the same way, friends, once we start to follow Jesus, it doesn't take very long for Him to confuse or embarrass us. Through His word, He tells us to do something, and we think, "No way! That can't possibly be right!" We realize that if we want to follow Jesus, we aren't going to be able to run with our worldly friends anymore. We see something we really want to do, and Jesus tells us it's sinful. The experience of being a Christian is never going to conform to our expectations. Sooner or later, Jesus is going to ask us to decide between following our wisdom and following Him.

Next in the narrative of Jesus and Peter, we encounter **PETER'S PROMISE**. We find this story in John 13:36-37. Jesus is once again discussing His crucifixion and death, this time only hours before the process begins. He tells the disciples that He's going away, and that none of them, not even Peter, can follow Him where He is going. Later, Peter will be able to follow, but not yet. Peter is offended by this. He thinks he loves Jesus more than he loves even his own life. He proudly asserts his faithfulness. Jesus, however, knows that Peter isn't as ready as he thinks he is.

Isn't this such a part of our discipleship too? All too often, we unthinkingly declare our absolute love and absolute loyalty for Jesus, without knowing ourselves well enough to know whether we will be able to stand the tests that the devil will throw at us. We think we can do this great work for God, we think we can resist the temptations that some situation is going present to us, and so we go charging boldly on, not at all prepared for what will happen next.

As we all know, Peter's promise was quickly followed by **PETER'S FAILURE**. Let's look at Mark 14:71-72. Peter said that he was willing to meekly lay down his life for Jesus. However, when the test came, Peter failed twice. He attacked the high priest's slave with a sword when the mob came to arrest Jesus, and in order to save himself from punishment, he denied both his identity and his Lord three times. It only took him 12 hours to wipe out completely.

We too are bitterly aware, or ought to be, of the times in our lives when following Jesus brought us to a big test, and we failed the test as spectacularly as Peter did. The devil loves nothing more than a proud, cocky Christian, because those are the ones he has an easy time getting. Just about all of us can think back to times when we were got, when our lives were nothing like the life to which Jesus called us. Those aren't pretty memories, but we need to remember them.

However, the story of Peter, Jesus, and "Follow Me" has a happy ending. We see it in **PETER'S CALL, PART 2**. Let's read about this in John 21:18-19. Just in terms of sheer coolness, I think that John 21 is my favorite chapter in the whole Bible. Jesus has recreated, as closely as possible, the circumstances in which Peter heard His original call. All the details are the same. The disciples are out fishing on the Sea of Galilee, they catch nothing, Jesus tells them to let down their nets one more time, and they bring in a massive catch of fish. Even Jesus' words to Peter are the same. Once again, He says, "Follow Me." Same words, but Peter hears a totally different meaning. After he failed so completely, Jesus has offered him the chance to reboot his entire discipleship. This time, he can be like Jesus.

This is one of the most beautiful things about being a Christian. God gives second chances. Today is our second chance, or third, or fourth, or fiftieth. Here we are again, in a familiar situation, gathered around the Lord's table, and once again, Jesus is saying to us, "Follow Me." Hopefully, we understand a little bit more about what that means than we did last week, or five years ago. Through the grace of Christ, our past failures, the ones that so painfully bought us that understanding, don't matter anymore. What matters is what we do from here on out. This is the first Sunday of the rest of our lives. Let's use it to re-dedicate ourselves to following our Lord as we partake of His supper.

What Following Means

For the final portion of our study this morning, we're going to look at what a wiser, more spiritually mature Peter had to say about what following Jesus means. First of all, it means that we have to rest our **HOPE IN GRACE**. Peter makes this point in 1 Peter 1:13. This is one little verse, but it has a host of powerful implications. In the first place, if we are hoping in God's grace to make us righteous, that means that we aren't placing our trust in ourselves and our ability to become righteous on our own. People who trust in themselves are quite common outside the church. That's the attitude that leads people to say, "God will accept me if I'm a good person." They think they can be righteous enough on their own that they don't need Jesus' help to make it to heaven. However, Christians can fall prey to this delusion too. It's all too easy for us to forget that we're sinners, that we rely on the grace of Jesus every single day to be justified before God. This might make us feel better when we think about ourselves, but it will keep us from finding true righteousness in Him.

Second, if we are hoping in the grace that will be revealed when Jesus returns at the end of time, we are not hoping in this life. Sure, there are all kinds of temptations to invest ourselves in the here and now, to spend our lives pursuing the happiness that we can see and touch. However, all such attempts are doomed to failure. This life doesn't end in happiness. It ends in death. Only hope in things that are eternal will keep us from disappointment.

This hoping in grace ought to manifest itself in our determination to **BE HOLY**. Peter stresses this in 1 Peter 1:14-16. As was true of hoping in grace, when we follow Jesus, that will inevitably lead us to be holy too. In everything that He did, He Himself was holy, which is no less than we would expect of One who was God made flesh. Throughout His life, Jesus was sinless. Throughout His life, He was dedicated to God's purposes and not His own, and He lived that way because He knew that this life was NOT all there was. God will forgive us our sins, but He still wants to see a striving to be sinless in our hearts and in our lives. We can't be people who read *Fifty Shades of Gray* or watch "A Game of Thrones" or "Magic Mike". We can't spend our lives seeking happiness through our next shopping trip. We can't lie and deceive our way through life to avoid situations we think will be unpleasant. We have to be holy in everything.

Instead of longing for what is corrupt, we must **LONG FOR THE WORD**. Peter famously insists on this in 1 Peter 2:2-3. I'd never really appreciated it before I was writing this sermon, but I love the way that these things connect with and reinforce each other. How can we do a better job of hoping in grace? We can spend more time with the word that reveals that grace to us and explains the glories of the life to come. How can we do a better job of being holy like God is holy? Once again, the answer is in the word. Only the Scripture can tell us what God's holiness should look like in us. If those first two goals are important to us, they will drive us to the Bible. Conversely, the more we love the word, the better job we will do at hoping in grace and being holy. Longing for the word doesn't mean that we show up at church services twice a week, although it certainly should express itself that way. Longing for the word means that our delight is in the law of the Lord, and that we meditate on it day and night. Jesus loved the word like that. We should too.

Because our hope is set on Christ, because we seek God's holiness rather than our own pleasure, and because our hearts have been instructed in these things by God's word, we will be able to **BE SUBJECT** in everything. Peter begins a lengthy discussion of this topic in 1 Peter 2:13-14. This verse is specifically about being subject to the government, but the text goes on to explore subjection to masters, even harsh ones, subjection to spouses, and subjection to other Christians. In all of these different situations, though, the underlying principle is the same. Because this world is not our home, the things of this life are always going to pale in comparison to the things of the life to come. If my heart is where it should be, I won't say disrespectful things about the President on my Facebook page. Instead, I'll remember that I am a

citizen of heaven first, and a citizen of the United States second. I will serve my employer cheerfully, even if he's mean to me, because I know that my Master in heaven will treat me generously if I do. I won't fuss with my wife or my brother in Christ about every last little thing, because next to eternal life, everything on this earth IS a little thing. As a rule, we don't argue about things we don't care about. Christ's example should teach us that everything belongs on that list but God.

Last of all, we follow Christ in our **LOVE**. Let's read about this in 1 Peter 4:8. At first glance, this verse makes us a little uneasy. We're so used to talking about how the blood of Christ washes away our sins that when Peter says that love covers a multitude of sin, part of us wonders if that's false doctrine even though it's in the Bible. However, this text makes a great deal of sense when we think about it. First of all, the wording tells us that Peter isn't proposing some alternate means of salvation. This is a "one another" passage, so it's addressed to Christians only, people who already have a covenant relationship with God. Second, we must remember that under our covenant relationship, God judges us not according to our perfect law-keeping, but according to our hearts, our desire to do good even though we so often fail. In our hearts, the essential thing that God must see if we wish Him to find favor with us is love. If we don't love God and one another, we have failed at Christianity as completely as it is possible to fail. On the other hand, if we do love God and one another, God will overlook our sins, because our hearts are basically what He wants them to be.