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What Does It Mean to Be a Christian?
Mark 8:31-38

Have you asked any good questions lately?

We do have a lot of questions in life, don't we?

Right now, a lot of us are asking what in the world has happened with our economy. We're wondering how all the government intervention in the economy is going to affect our country long-term. And even more pressing, how is all this going to affect us and our families directly?

Some of our students will soon be graduating from high school or college. The high school seniors are probably asking, "What am I going to do next? College, vocational training, military, a job?" College seniors are probably asking, "With the way things are now, am I going to be able to find a job when I graduate? If I can't, do I go to graduate school? How in the world will I pay back all my student loans?"

Sometimes, especially when we're facing suffering through sickness or injury or tragedy or grief, we ask the bigger questions, don't we? Questions like, "Why am I here? Why is this happening? Is there any meaning in what's going on? Does God have anything to do with any of it?"

The most important question

In the midst of all this, the most important question we can ask is, "*What does it mean to be a Christian?*"

Now you might think that most people would know the answer to that question. But I'm afraid that there's a lot of misunderstanding and even misinformation about it out there.

Some people think that it simply means that you're a decent person and do some good things. Like a man in one of my early pastorates. Rodney was a decent fellow. He wasn't married and was in his late 60s. He had lived with his mother and taken wonderful care of her in her later years. Now she was gone. Rodney would come to church occasionally. One day I had the opportunity to talk with him about his spiritual condition. When I asked him about his relationship with the Lord, he said, "Well, I've always been a pretty good fellow. I've always tried to treat other people right, and I took real good care of my mother. So I think that when my time comes, the good Lord will look at everything I've done, and say, 'Come on in.'" I couldn't convince him otherwise. When I conducted his funeral service some time later, it was with no confidence about his eternal state.

Some people think that being a Christian means that you follow certain rules, doing certain things and not doing certain other things. Now Christians should live a definite lifestyle, but that's the *result* of being a Christian rather than what it means to be a Christian.

And some think that being a Christian means that sometime, somewhere, you made a profession of faith in Jesus, and maybe you were baptized. And whether there's any change that takes place in you or not, even if you go on living like the devil—that's what it means to be a Christian.

But somehow *that* doesn't square with what Jesus said about it here in our text that we're looking at this morning.

What did Jesus say?

It seems to me that if we want to know what it means to be a Christian, we should find our answer in what Jesus Christ Himself said!

Now many of the Jews regarded Jesus as a *rabbi*, a teacher like the rabbis of the Pharisees.

The rabbis of Jesus' day had their followers, and they had some pretty strict requirements for them. Their disciples petitioned to study with them, and had to have certain abilities and meet certain standards. If the rabbi thought the applicant was of sufficient quality, he would take him on as his student and teach him the law.

Jesus *called* His disciples. And they weren't the kind of people the Jewish rabbis would have agreed to have as their disciples. So in one sense, His standards were lower than theirs. But Jesus was calling for far more from His disciples than what they called for from theirs!

After He had asked His disciples who people were saying He was, and Peter had answered, "You are the Christ" (Mark 8:27-30),¹ Jesus told them what He was facing—how He would suffer, be rejected, be killed, then rise again. He told them all this very clearly, and made no bones about it! Peter rebuked Him for such talk; He in turn rebuked Peter (8:31-33). Then He told them what those who wanted to *follow Him* must do.²

First, the person who wants to follow Jesus must **"deny himself"** (8:34). The grammatical form of this statement in the Greek (aorist imperative) indicates that what Jesus was saying was a command, not a suggestion or exhortation!

It's a matter of renouncing our claim to self! It's disowning oneself, giving up one's rights to God! It's not just denying certain things to ourselves, but giving up our claims to our own self to live under Christ's claims! It's saying "No!" to self, to self-will, to idolatrous self-worship, and even to self-preservation in order to say "Yes!" to God, to His will, to His kingdom and purpose.

Have you ever seen a little child who's first learned to say the word "No!"? He (or she) uses it frequently to his parents, doesn't he? Parents have to help the child learn to say "No!" to self rather than to them!

It's the same with us! If we want to follow Jesus, we have to say "No!" to our sinful self, and say "Yes!" to Jesus Christ and His claims over us. He said "No!" to sin and self-preservation and "Yes!" to the Father's will. So to follow Him, we must say "No!" to self and sin and "Yes!" to Him! The fact is that unless we're willing to deny ourselves, we *can't* follow Jesus!

Along with this denial of self, the person who would follow Jesus must **"take up his cross"**

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

² Malcolm Tolbert's commentary on the parallel passage in Luke 9:22-27 in the *Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970), 82-83, and Charles Talbert's commentary (revised edition) on the same passage in his *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 111-112, have been helpful in my interpretation of this passage.

(8:34). Again, it's cast as a command. Cross-bearing is *not* optional for those who would follow Jesus. But what did Jesus mean?

First, you have to remember that in the ancient Roman world, a cross was for one thing only—execution! A person who was about to be crucified carried the cross-beam to place of execution. So Jesus is talking here about living as a condemned person.

To put it another way, those who would follow Jesus must constantly be willing to give up their lives to and for Him—spiritually, and if necessary, physically—rather than be unfaithful. In other words, like Jesus, they must *die rather than sin!* As Charles Talbert puts it, we must live life free of any attachments to anything other than God! Jesus Christ must be ultimate to us.

The Romans crucified those who were seditionists. And to confess Jesus as Lord could be considered just that! Jesus carried His cross, though innocent, to give His life for us. Those who would follow Him must be willing to give up their lives for Him.

Make no mistake about it—Jesus calls for our *absolute loyalty*, pouring out our life for Him, even dying for Him, if necessary. He calls for *radical commitment!*

Now you may be saying, “That’s a little much, isn’t it?”

Millions of Christians over the past two thousand years haven’t thought so. Maybe it was summed up best by Polycarp at his martyrdom in A.D. 156. When the Roman official was trying to persuade him to recant his faith in Christ, Polycarp replied, “For eighty-six years I have been His servant, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King, who has saved me?”³

When a person denies himself and takes up his cross, he or she will be doing the third thing: **“continually follow Me.”**⁴ The form of the Greek verb here has the continual force with it. Those who want to follow Jesus must follow Him *continually*, saying “No!” to themselves, bearing their cross. They must walk as Jesus walked in the way He walked—in self-giving servanthood, radically committed to the Father’s will. Remember that in 8:27-33, Jesus had showed His disciples His way of being the Messiah. So whoever would follow Him must choose this same way!

I like the way Malcolm Tolbert put it when he said that following Jesus is “a way of life—a daily offering of self to the will of God . . .”

Following Jesus is a journey, a daily walk characterized by self-denial, willing sacrifice, and absolute loyalty—giving ourselves up totally to and for Him! It’s a journey of faith, like that of father Abraham, who took God at His word and went to the land He would show him!

Now at this point, Jesus stated a paradoxical but undeniable truth: “If anyone wants to save his life, he will lose it; but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it” (8:35).

Things really do work that way, don’t they? Look at the miser who hoards everything but never really enjoys it versus the generous person who enjoys sharing what he or she has.

What Jesus is talking about here is a reference to *real life*, the life of the soul, eternal life here and hereafter—to one’s very self or being (*psyché*). To keep self for self is ultimately to lose self. If one loses self, what good is anything else he or she may have gained? What is one’s self worth?

³ “Martyrdom of Polycarp” 21.1, in *Apostolic Fathers II*, trans. K. Lake, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 325.

⁴ My translation.

Jesus says that to be ashamed of Him now, trying to save our self, especially if called on to give up our life for Him, means He will be ashamed of us at His coming. And friends, that is the *ultimate* loss of self!

And so . . .

It's not an easy word to hear, but the point of this text is clear: **Jesus taught that being a Christian means being radically committed to following Him as Lord.**

It's just that simple—*to be a Christian means to be radically committed to following Jesus as Lord.* Have you ever made that kind of commitment to Him?

You see, God loves us. Because of sin, we're separated from God, and we could never do enough to make things right. But God loves us in such a way that He sent Jesus, His only begotten Son, to show us how to live in a right relationship with Him. Rather than disobey the Father and sin, Jesus died. In dying, He offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice for our sins, and conquered sin, Satan, and death. He arose victorious and vindicated, promising that because He lives, those who trust in Him will also live. His death and resurrection have made it possible for us to be forgiven and have a right relationship with God. To experience that right relationship, we must repent and put our faith in Him—we must make that commitment that I've been talking about this morning. Have you made it? Will you?

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

Jesus, I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow thee;
Destitute, despised, forsaken, thou from hence my all shalt be;
Perish every fond ambition, all I've sought or hoped or known;
Yet how rich is my condition: God and heaven are still my own!

– *Henry F. Lyte*

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