

NCBC Youth Group
January 26, 2020

FOLLOWING CHRIST
MARK 8:34-38

Introduction

It is prudent to count the cost before you undertake any project. If you are going to college, you want to count the cost of doing so. What will it cost, can you afford it, and how much time will it take to complete the degree? If you fail to count the cost, you might not be able to finish. If you are building a house, you also want to know how much it will cost. Failure to plan and count the cost may result in the building not being completed. What good is a house that is only partially complete—a house with the foundation and the walls but no roof?

Jesus says, “[28] Which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? [29] Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him... [31] Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand?” (Luke 14:28, 29, 31).

Those who fail to count the cost are considered foolish and are ridiculed. In our text today, Jesus tells us the cost of following Him. We read in verse 34 that following Jesus requires denying yourself, taking up your cross, and following Christ. It will cost you everything to follow Him, including being willing to die for Jesus.

Many Christians today will tell you that being a Christian is easy. Believing is easy. You just say a prayer, get baptized, and you’re a Christian. They preach messages to boost self-esteem and self-confidence. They tell you that you that as Christians you can achieve big things, follow your dreams, and have unlimited potential. Jesus taught the opposite. Following Christ comes at a high cost. It is not “easy believism.” It requires self-denial and total obedience to Him. It is all about Him and not about you. Nothing in our passage today indicates that being a Christian is the easy route.

I want to give you a three-point outline as we study this text. First is the invitation to follow Christ. Second is the cost of following Christ. Third is the folly of not following Christ. Let’s begin with the invitation to follow Christ.

Invitation to Follow Christ

In the previous passage, Mark 8:27-33, Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” (29). This is the most important question anyone has to answer, and the disciples answered it correctly. Peter said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (29).¹ They recognized Him as the Messiah, the Savior, and in their minds, they probably expected the Messiah to overthrow Roman rule and occupation of their land and establish a earthly kingdom. What they did not expect was Jesus telling them that He must “suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (31).

They were so surprised that Peter rebuked Jesus (32), telling Him that this shall never happen (Mt. 16:22). While Peter probably said that out of love for Jesus, they failed to grasp the plan of redemption, that Jesus was the sacrifice for sin.²

Not only did Jesus say He must suffer, be rejected, and killed, we are told in today’s passage that His followers—true Christians—will also suffer, be rejected, and some will be martyred. We are told in Romans 8:17 that “we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.” Jesus told His disciples in John 15:20 that “if they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.” Second Timothy 3:12 says, “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

The invitation to follow Christ is not a promise of an easier life but one of difficulty. The cost of discipleship is high, but the reward is also great. The disciples already knew that. They left everything to follow Jesus—their careers, businesses, families. They witnessed hatred, hostility, and rejection against Jesus, and it is likely that they themselves experienced the same kind of rejection when they were sent out in pairs (Mark 6:7-13).

We, too, are invited to follow Christ. We should also expect difficulty, rejection, suffering, persecution, and even martyrdom. The gate that leads to life is small, the path is narrow and difficult, and few are on this path (Matt. 7:13-14). But the destination is eternal life. Luke 13:24 says, “Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.” Acts 14:22 says, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”

¹ “... the Son of the living God” is quoted from the parallel passage of Matthew 16:16.

² Isaiah 53:10-12; John 1:29.

Cost of Following Christ

Following Christ—the life of a Christian—is costly. Now, let’s look at Jesus’ instructions to His followers in verse 34. We see three things: “He must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.”

Self-Denial

The first is self-denial. The word “deny” in Greek means “To say no” or “To disown oneself.”³ It has the idea of turning away from the idolatry of self-centeredness.⁴ As humans, we do a very good job of putting ourselves first. It has always been that way. Christ calls us to self-denial, or to disown oneself. We are to put Jesus first. We fully submit to His will and His word.

We must start by abandoning all self-righteousness, which is the idea that somehow we can earn heaven or earn favor with God. Salvation does not depend on how much good I am or the good that I do. I can’t even do enough good to earn a small fraction of righteousness. It is all given to us by Christ. We then must abandon sin. When we repent, we turn from our sins. Is there any sin you love more than Christ? If so, you cannot follow Christ. Do you have ambitions, goals, and plans for your life that you put above Christ? If so, you must abandon those and submit to His will.

In essence, self-denial is to follow Christ on His terms, not on our terms. When we turn to Christ, we become slaves of Christ (1 Cor. 7:22; 1 Pet. 2:16). As slaves of Christ, we seek the desires of our Master, and we do so willingly because He is a good Master.

Take Up Your Cross

We must not only deny ourselves, we must also take up our cross. When Jesus talked about the cross, His audience knew exactly what it meant. The cross is a symbol of suffering, torture, and agonizing death. We can expect a life of suffering, persecution, and even death for Jesus. Of course, not everyone will be martyred, but the point is that even death is a price that is not too high to follow Christ.

Now, it is important to say three things about suffering. First, we are not talking about suffering for doing something wrong. We are talking about suffering for righteousness. First Peter 2:20 says, “What credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you

³ Cleon Rodgers Jr. and Cleon Rodgers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 85.

⁴ Cleon Rodgers Jr. and Cleon Rodgers III, 85.

patiently endure it, this finds favor with God.” Peter later says, “It is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong” (1 Pet. 3:17). Second, suffering and persecution may be heavy at times, but there may also be times of respite. Third, when suffering comes and we are unwilling to suffer for Christ, it is evidence that there is no true salvation. In the parable of the sower and soils, Jesus talked about four kinds of soils. One of the bad soils is the rocky soil. The seed springs up, but it dies when the sun rises because the soil is shallow. The sun represents persecution and affliction (Mark 4:1-25). The good soil is the one that produces a plant that does not wither when the sun rises.

Enduring trials is one evidence of the genuineness of your faith (1 Pet. 1:6-7), but only when you suffer for doing right rather than wrong. So, what does it cost to follow Jesus? It costs everything, even your life.

Follow Him

First we have to deny ourselves, second, we take up our cross, and third, we follow Him. We must obey Him and His word. True Christians are His sheep, and as sheep, we hear His voice and we follow Him (John 10:27).⁵ His Word is given to us in the Bible. You cannot live obediently without knowing His Word. I don't just mean reading it. I mean reading it, studying it, understanding it, treasuring it in your heart, and obeying it. Jesus said in John 14:15, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.”

Just as enduring trials and hardship are evidence of true salvation, another test of genuine faith is obeying His Word (Luke 6:43-45). If you don't obey it, you are not a true Christian. This is not perfect obedience or perfect endurance of afflictions. But do you have a desire to obey know His Word and then to obey it? When you sin and fail to keep His Word, do you confess your sins? If you say no to both of those questions, you may not be saved at all.

Not Saved by Meritorious Deeds

Before we move on to our third point, I need to say that denying yourself, taking up your cross, and obeying Him are not things you do to earn salvation. It is not a checklist of things to do to earn God's favor or to earn your righteousness. I don't want you to view this as a list of works you need to do. True salvation is accompanied by a new heart (Ezekiel

⁵ Same word for “follow” appears in John 10:27.

36:25-27). We willingly and eagerly deny ourselves, suffer for Christ, and obey Him. This is not something you begrudgingly do.

Folly of Not Following Christ

Finally, let's talk about the folly of not following Christ. We are given the invitation to follow Him, but many people will reject the invitation and not follow Christ. Verse 35 warns us that "whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it." If you love the world and are unwilling to give up your life, your desires, and your ambition, you will lose your life eternally.

Jesus tells a parable in Matthew 13:44: "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." Are you willing to give up everything you have to follow Him? Obviously, this is not a charge to divest ourselves of everything. God gives us money, some more than others, and gives us property. We are not all called to a life of poverty, but do you value God more than everything you own? And are you willing to give up everything to follow Him?

Verse 36, "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?" The world is temporary. You take nothing with you to heaven (Ps. 49:17). Why would you gain the whole world only to lose your soul? The parable of the rich fool is a good illustration in Luke 12:16-21. No matter how much you amass on this earth, it cannot pay your way into heaven. Mark 8:37 asks, "For what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" The answer is nothing. There is nothing that you can give to buy eternal life. No money in the world can do that.

Finally, if you are ashamed of Christ here, He will also be ashamed of you, verse 38. There are many people who are unwilling to lose social status, popularity, fame, fortune, and power for Christ. You're afraid people will make fun of you for your belief, and you are ashamed of the gospel. Indeed, the gospel is offensive. No one likes to hear they are sinners and can't do anything to earn salvation. We live in a society that puts labels on true Bible believing Christians. We may be the subject of mockery, but we trust in His protection.

Conclusion

As we conclude, I realize that I emphasized suffering, rejection, and persecution. That is what Christians should expect as we follow Him. The cost of following Him is high. However, the blessings are also great. Eternal life is worth the troubles here on earth. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18, "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an

eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, [18] while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” Even on earth, we receive many blessings from God. Yes, we expect difficulty, but we also experience joy and blessing beyond compare.

Paul was a man who had many achievements and accomplishments. He could boast of many things, but all his achievements and accomplishments before becoming a Christian was loss to him. He says this in Philippians 3:7, “But whatever things were gain to me, these things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.” Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was a well-known physician in London in the 1920s. He sensed God’s call to him to enter the ministry. He left everything—his career and much of his wealth—and began pastoring a small church. In the world’s perspective, this is absolutely foolishness. Why would he give up all the money and fame that came with his career? To that, he said, “I gave up nothing” and “I received everything.”⁶ Not every Christian is to give up their careers, but are you willing to follow Him at all cost?

⁶ Iain H. Murray, *The Life of Martyn Lloyd-Jones 1899-1981* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 99.