

William Frey, retired Episcopal bishop from Colorado, told this story:

When I was young, I volunteered to read to a student named John who was blind. One day I asked him, “How did you lose your sight?”

“A chemical explosion,” John said, “at the age of thirteen.”

“How did that make you feel?” I asked.

“Life was over. I felt helpless. I hated God,” John responded. “For the first six months, I did nothing to improve my lot in life. I ate all my meals alone. One day my father entered my room and said, ‘John, winter’s coming and the storm windows need to be up – that’s your job. I want those hung by the time I get back this evening or else!’

“Then he turned, walked out of the room, and slammed the door. I got so angry. I thought, who does he think I am? I’m blind! I was so angry, I decided to do it. I felt my way to the garage, found the windows, located the necessary tools, found the ladder, all the while muttering under my breath, ‘I’ll show them. I’ll fall, then they’ll have a blind and paralyzed son!’”

John continued, “I got the windows up, and I found out later that never at any moment was my father more than four or five feet away from my side.”

That’s a great story. Being a father can be hard, and sometimes it appears we are hard, and maybe sometimes we have to be hard, but just like illustrated in this story, I hope it’s because we are committed to seeking the very best for our children. This morning we are going to look at some hard words from Jesus who is more than committed to seeking the very best for those who follow Him.

In his book, “Not a Fan,” Kyle Idleman dives into this subject of commitment, particularly as it relates to those who call themselves Christians. In essence, he asks the question: *“Are you a follower of Jesus or are you simply a fan?”* In his question, Idleman expresses concern that many churches are filled with fans rather than committed followers of Christ, and let me explain the difference.

A *follower* of Christ is a person who has a relationship with Jesus and is committed to live their lives according to His teaching. In the early church, before the word “Christian” was accepted, all followers of Christ were called “*disciples*.” A disciple is a student who learns from someone else, and today we might describe a disciple as an apprentice who studies and learns by working alongside their

teacher, and applied to Jesus, it is doing what He says and going where He leads, taking Him at His word, and putting His ways into practice in our lives.

A *fan* of Jesus on the other hand is merely an admirer – I mean they cheer for Jesus on Sunday because He’s a really great guy, they connect with Jesus from time to time when it’s convenient or more likely when they need something. They want the benefits – they want salvation and a heavenly inheritance, but they’re not interested in following Him because that might require something from them or it may interfere with their life. A fan would prefer to have a “no strings attached arrangement” with Jesus so He doesn’t change how they live their life. For a fan, they don’t want to truly commit to Jesus, but they have no problem claiming His name – calling themselves Christian.

So, back to the question posed to you, *“Are you a follower of Jesus or are you simply a fan?”* I want to explore this subject of being a committed follower of Christ, so if you have your Bible, turn to **Luke 9** and we will begin with **verses 18-19**.

¹⁸ And it happened that while He was praying alone, the disciples were with Him, and He questioned them, saying, “Who do the people say that I am?”
¹⁹ They answered and said, “John the Baptist, and others say Elijah; but others, that one of the prophets of old has risen again.”

Jesus had just feed 5000 men, not counting women and children, with five loaves of bread and two small fish. If you recall, Jesus commanded His disciples to distribute what they had to the crowd – which must have seemed crazy to the disciples, but they took Jesus at His word and did what He said, and as they were handing it out, it kept multiplying, so much so that twelve baskets of leftovers were gathered after everyone in the crowd had their fill. It must have been amazing for the disciples to take part in this miracle, but there was no doubt that Jesus was the source of this miracle. They trusted Jesus, they took Him at His word, they obeyed Him even though His command seemed crazy, and they witnessed a mighty work of God, where thousands of hungry people were fed.

Afterwards, we are told elsewhere, that because of what Jesus did, He perceived the people were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him their king, so Jesus withdrew to the mountain – He slipped away alone to pray, but the disciples find Him, so Jesus turns this opportunity into a teaching moment and He asks the disciples a question, *“Who do the people say that I am?”* *“What do the crowds say about Me?”*

Well, the disciples reported that there were several ideas being floated amongst the people. Some suggested that Jesus was John the Baptist who had come back to life after being executed by Herod. Others thought He might be Elijah or another prophet of old. The people had no problem of thinking that Jesus was somehow a man “sent from God” and they even considered that God might bring a hero back to life to carry out His divine plans – but the people did not aim high enough in their thoughts about who Jesus really was, for no one in the crowd suggested that Jesus just might actually be the Messiah.

Then Jesus sought to hear from those who had been with Him – so Jesus asks His disciples a personal question. Look at **verse 20**.

And He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” And Peter answered and said, “The Christ of God.”

“Who do you say I am?” This simple question may be the most important question in their lives and in our lives because what people think about Jesus should influence their how they live their lives, and even more importantly, what people think about Jesus also determines their eternal destiny. In other words, you can’t be wrong about Jesus and be right with God. It just can’t happen.

Well, as usual, while the others were thinking about it, Peter spoke up and said, *“You are the Christ of God.”* In other words, *“You are the Anointed One, God’s Messiah.”* Jesus was the One the Old Testament was talking about and pointing to. He was the One for whom all Israel had hoped. He was the source of deliverance for God’s people.

Peter gave the correct answer, but Jesus gave a surprising response. Look at what He said in **verses 21-22**.

²¹But He warned them and instructed them not to tell this to anyone, ²²saying, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised up on the third day.”

Jesus was pleased that His disciples were coming to know who He really was, but He still didn’t want His identity becoming public knowledge before the proper time, because the disciples couldn’t proclaim that Jesus was the Messiah until they first understood what being the Messiah actually meant – and He tells them something hard to swallow.

Jesus says, because He is the Christ, because He is the Messiah, He *must* suffer, He *must* die, and He *must* be raised to life.

This is not what the disciples had in mind for the Messiah. It's not what the Jews expected. They pictured the Messiah bringing deliverance and victory and national domination. They envisioned the Messiah leading them into battle over their enemies like the Roman Empire. They had the notion of the Messiah as being the reigning King who would set up His earthly kingdom. They expected the Messiah to be a ferocious and powerful Lion so to speak, and here Jesus tells them the Messiah is actually a Sacrificial Lamb, the Lamb that God has sent who *must* suffer, who *must* die, and who *must* be raised to life. This is not what anyone had envisioned, this is not what anyone had expected for the Messiah, and this explains why Jesus warned them not to tell anyone because they did not fully understand that the Messiah was actually sent to save sinners with His own life.

From this we learn – that *who* Jesus is, determines what Jesus *must* do. Jesus was on a rescue mission, sent by God to purchase our salvation, and it was a necessity that He suffer and die for our sin, becoming our substitute as a sacrificial Lamb on our behalf, and three days later – resurrected – proving His rescue mission was complete, bringing a lost people back into a right relationship with a Holy God.

The disciples needed to know that Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah and what that meant He *must* do, and they would only come to understand this after Jesus was raised from the dead. The disciples needed to accept this hard truth about Jesus because they would not fully understand what *they* were meant to do until they first knew what Jesus was meant to do, and that brings us to **verse 23**.

And He was saying to them all, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me.”

This is a fairly well-known passage – a passage with some hard teaching, as Jesus gives the conditions to be His disciple, which quite frankly, don't appear to be very appealing. As we already covered, Jesus had told His disciples what He must do, and now He tells them what they must be willing to do.

In this verse, Jesus gives an open invitation to anyone who wants to be His disciple, and He points out three things they must do – the first being, as His disciple, they must **deny** themselves.

In context, that word “**deny**” means to *disown someone* and later it will be Peter who gives us a great example of what that actually looks like when he denies Jesus

by claiming, “*I don’t know the man.*” In a sense, Peter disowned Jesus, and here Jesus tells us that we also have to disown someone and that someone is yourself. That’s hard, and for many, that teaching is completely backwards – it goes against our natural grain, and we live in a world which tells us to “*put ourselves first.*”

It reminds me of the story of the older and younger brothers whose momma was cooking pancakes. Both boys wanted to be first to eat those hot, butter melted pancakes. Seeing a teachable moment, the mother said, “Now boys, what would Jesus say if he were here?” They stopped, looked a little confused, and then their mother says, “Jesus would say, “My brother, you have the first pancake. I’ll wait.” The older brother looks at the younger brother and says, “Hey John, you be Jesus.”

Many of us are too focused on looking out for ourselves, but Jesus challenges us to deny ourselves – to realize it’s not about me and my will and my wants and my desires. It’s about Him. Jesus wants us to stop living self-centered and self-absorbed lives, because if we don’t, we will ignore God and start loving things and using people. He wants us to stop making a big deal about ourselves and start making a big deal about Him for He is the Lamb that God has sent who will suffer and die for mankind and be raised again. He is our only Savior – there is no other.

The Apostle Paul tells us in **2 Timothy 3:2**, that in the last days – and these are the last days, people will be lovers of self, and what Jesus tells us is to say “*no*” to you and to say “*yes*” to Him. Those who want to be disciples of Jesus must surrender their right to control their own lives and willingly give that right to Jesus, exchanging their will for God’s will – because there is room for only one Master.

At the same time that we deny ourselves, there is something that Jesus wants us to do – to **take up our cross**. Jesus tells us that to be His disciple, we must take up our cross daily. So, we know that to deny ourselves is hard because it’s unnatural, but to take up the cross sounds really harsh, and the only way to understand what Jesus is saying here is to see it from the perspective of the original hearers.

When Jesus spoke these words in His day, everybody knew what He meant. People saw scores of criminals being crucified by the Romans, some even being crucified by the side of the roads that led in and out of the cities. In Jesus day, before a man was crucified, he was forced to carry his cross or at least the horizontal beam of the cross to the place of his execution. Before hanging a man on the cross, the cross was first hung on him, and when seeing a man carry his cross, it meant one thing – death, a humiliating and torturous death.

The first hearers of these hard words didn't need an explanation of the cross, for when someone took up his cross, it was a one-way journey that always led to death.

So, for you and me, who are not subject to first century torture, **what does it mean to take up the cross?** First, let me explain what it does not mean. For instance, some might say, *"My neighbor or my spouse is giving me a hard time. Oh well, that's just my cross to bear."* Others may say, *"I have pain and arthritis, but this is just the cross I'm called to bear."* This is not what Jesus is talking about when He says, **"take up your cross."**

Taking up our cross refers to giving your whole life to God, just as Jesus was about to give His life for us. It is a total commitment of turning our lives over to Him and to do His will every day – no matter what, no matter the cost. Whatever He wants with my life is what must be done with it.

Somebody asked A.W. Tozer what it meant to take up your cross, and Tozer told this story:

"One time, a young man came to an old saint who taught the deeper life, the crucified life, and said, 'Father, what does it mean to be crucified?' The old man thought for a moment and said, 'Well, to be crucified means three things. First, the man who is crucified is facing only one direction.' That's good. When you're crucified, you're only facing one direction. 'The old man scratched his scraggily head and said, 'One thing more, son, about the man on the cross. He is not going back. He has said his final goodbyes. Thirdly, he said, the man on the cross has no further plans of his own.'" **Did you get that?** *He's facing one direction. He's not going back. He said goodbye, and he has no further plans of his own."*

To take up your cross means that you have made the choice that you are going to do the Lord's will – no turning back, no matter what, no matter the cost. What I want no longer matters, but I give myself to Him, just as He gave Himself for me. Jesus willingly laid down His life, and He calls you and me to do the same.

Lastly Jesus says **"follow me."** The most literal way to define a follower of Jesus is *"someone who does what Jesus does and goes where Jesus goes."* A follower of Jesus might ask Him, **"What would You do in this situation Lord?"** and given the answer, the follower responds, *"Then that's exactly what I will do. I will do what you do."* Simply put, a follower of Jesus follows Jesus – they do what He says and they go where He leads; otherwise, the follower is not really a follower. I

hope that makes sense. I don't know how a person can say they are a follower of Jesus if they aren't or they refuse to follow Jesus.

When Jesus called his first disciples, He called four ordinary fishermen to join Him on His journey. Jesus gave a simple invitation to follow Him, and all four men immediately left their work, left their belongings, and left their people to follow Jesus. Everything else was secondary to Jesus, and this serves as a powerful example of what it looks like to follow Him and it offers another point. When Jesus calls you to follow, He wants to be with you. Jesus wants us to experience a relationship with Him and that only comes by following Him.

Putting it all together – **what do you hear Jesus saying to you?** For me it sounds like Jesus is saying: *“If you want to be My disciple, give up the rights to your life to Me – surrender to Me, give Me your life and come with Me on a life-changing, one-way journey – no turning back. Follow Me, follow My example, do what I say, go where I lead because I want you to be with Me, and I want to be with you. And in this relationship of ours, you will find life just as I have planned it for you. I will most certainly interfere with your life, I will turn it upside down and inside out, and honestly – there's no fine print, it will be hard for you, but nothing could be better for you.”*

When we quit fighting for control and surrender everything to Him – when I die to myself and live for Him, I will find life that is truly worth living.

And so, the invitation hasn't changed. Jesus still says, **“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me.”** Don't overlook that word **“anyone.”** No matter your story – no matter what you've done, no matter what you've become, anyone means everyone, and Jesus wants to have a relationship with you and asks you to follow Him.

Alan Redpath had two daughters who loved to swarm him as soon as he came home at night. As he came in the door one evening, his little girls ran to be the first to hug Daddy. One grabbed his leg and hugged him with all of her might. He snatched the other daughter up in his arms.

The girl squeezing her father's leg said, “Now, I've got all of Daddy!” and she smirked at her sister.

The daughter in her father's arms replied, “Well, you may have all of Daddy.....but Daddy has all of me!”

That's the real issue when it comes to being a disciple of Christ.....**Does Jesus have all of me?** That's what He wants – all of you and me.

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