

Follow Christ or Go to Hell

By [Jason Jackson](#)

I suppose “The Bliss of Following Jesus,” would have been more of a positive title. Or maybe “The Benefits of Discipleship” would have been tactful. There is a time, however, for unmistakable clarity. Let me ask you this: if you have only three months to live without medical intervention, what do you want the doctor to say? If your child would surely die from a toxic bite by one of “Earth’s Most Poisonous Creatures,” unless you take the risk of potent anti-venom, do you want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but? Well, Jesus gives us the straight talk about heaven, hell, and following him.

“And he called unto him the multitude with his disciples, and said unto them, If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Mark 8:34).

The Lord said, “If any man desires, after me, to follow. . . .” (Mark 8:34). Discipleship involves a constant desire (present tense) — not a passing interest only. Indeed, following Jesus requires more than desire. It involves a heavy price. The Lord weighed the cost of discipleship against the consequences of self-centeredness. He balanced the sacrifice of following him against the rewards of walking in his steps (Mark 8:35-38).

The cost involves three decisive actions: self-denial, cross-bearing, and the continual following of Jesus (Mark 8:34). The verbs “deny” and “take up” are both in the aorist tense (i.e., indicating completed action in this usage, not a process). One must make up his mind. A prospective follower can not legitimately pursue the Christian life without self-denial and cross-bearing.

These three commands (they are in the imperative mood) picture sacrifice, selflessness, and service. A cross represented punishment and disgrace (cf. Galatians 3:13), but it represents far more since Jesus “became a curse for us.” His cross showed the shame and punishment for sin, but not his own (Hebrews 4:15). It displayed the love of God (Romans 5:8). It demonstrated selfless, sacrificial love, as Jesus served the needs of fallen man by giving his life a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28).

For the true disciple who tries to live according to the Lord’s example of sacrifice and service, “it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me” (Galatians 2:20). The Lord is his Polaris — the constant, guiding principle in life. Such an orientation means that habitual sin is incompatible with following Christ (1 John 3:8-10). Christ-following requires fruitfulness and servitude. The apostle’s declaration serves as a motto for disciples of Christ: “For me to live is Christ” (Philippians 1:21). Essential to the Christian’s lifestyle is “deny himself, and take up his cross daily” (Luke 9:23).

When we consider the body dead because of sin (Romans 8:10), we are prepared to follow him continually. It means to go where he leads. Concretely, it involves obeying his commands, duplicating his example, and yielding to his will in every way, in every day, and in everything we say. This is no mere formalism or Sunday-only mentality. It is genuine discipleship, and with Christ, is it either all or nothing.

The next four verses (Mark 8:35-38) all begin with the term for (*gar*). Each verse offers a reason as to why a person should die to sin and self and live as a servant of righteousness.

"For whosoever would save his life. . . ."
 "For what doth it profit a man. . . .?"
 "For what should a man give. . . .?"
 "For whosoever shall be ashamed of me. . . ."

This applies to everyone (i.e., whosoever). Some would rather “save his life,” because he has no interest in denying self and taking up his cross. He would rather “live,” or as some might say, “Live it up.” He would rather save his own skin and avoid the rigors of persecution. He would rather live with his own interests in mind, pursuing immediate gratifications over spiritual rewards. He might say, “Come now, you that say, Today or tomorrow we will go into this city, and spend a year there, and trade, and get gain.” He disregards “if the Lord wills” (James 4:13).

O fool! The very things he treasures will cost him his soul (Luke 12:20). Ironically, self-centeredness spawns self-destruction. D. Edmond Hiebert notes, “His self-preserving action will result in the destruction of his higher welfare” (*The Gospel of Mark*, p. 239).

In that light, Jesus teaches, the sacrifices of discipleship are worth it. If you do hold your soul dear, learn that the most fulfilling and satisfying existence shall be eternal life. Save your life by losing it for Christ’s sake and the gospel’s.

In saying that, the Lord further defined what following him involves. It is no mere emotion, and certainly not lip-service. Following him is accomplished through the gospel. In other words, the redemptive acts of Jesus (i.e., the death, burial, and resurrection, cf. 1 Corinthians 15:1-3) form the basis for the plan of God, revealed in the gospel. That revelation includes the requirements for the forgiveness of sins and Christian living and worship. One cannot separate the Lord from his teaching. If one will follow him, he must follow his teaching (cf. 2 John 9).

Jesus draws us into his thoughts with two rhetorical questions: “For what doth it profit a man, to gain the whole world, and forfeit his life? For what should a man give in exchange for his life?” (Mark 8:36-37). Ponder these spiritual equations. Is cross-bearing worth it?

Nothing is as valuable as a man’s life. Nothing is more precious than his soul. As Moses weighed the fleeting pleasures against the reproaches of Christ, he saw the immeasurable value of that which would last into eternity (Hebrews 11:25-26). Faithful service is indeed a small price to pay for eternal reward. What a bargain! Let the buyer beware! Self-centeredness and self-indulgence come at a high eternal price.

To that Jesus adds a fourth statement of consequence in Mark 8:38: “For whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of man also shall be ashamed of him, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”











This applies to everyone, the Lord says, and all ought to consider the importance of true discipleship.

Some have no interest in swimming against the current. Masses traverse the broad way to destruction, and if you don’t allow yourself to be squeezed into the mold, you are sure to be ridiculed. Ashamed of Christ and his words! If one is more concerned about what this adulterous and sinful generation thinks of him, more than what the Son of man thinks, then Jesus will be ashamed of him when he returns.

In the words of Matthew, Jesus will render to every man according to his deeds (Matthew 16:27). It must matter, then, how one lives. The Lord will scrutinize our thought, motives, and decisions. He will know if we have lived aloof from the expectations of Christianity and have gravitated towards worldliness, hoping to assimilate into a comfortable, non-confrontational life. Self-centered, one did not seek and save the lost, for fear of what others might think. He did not seek first the kingdom, for that would require too much time and money. He did not uphold Christian morality, for that would invite ridicule from the scoffers. He took the “safe” course, yet such will not be safe in judgment.

For the first time in Mark, we read of the Lord’s return explicitly. He will come. This is asserted with certainty. He will come in the glory of his Father. His deity and exalted accomplishments will radiate unobscured. He will come with his holy angels who “shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the righteous, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be weeping and the gnashing of teeth (Matthew 13:49-50). That is a bad deal. Follow Jesus, no matter the cost, for it is worth it — more than worth it.

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Scripture References

Mark 8:34; Mark 8:35-38; Galatians 3:13; Hebrews 4:15; Romans 5:8; Matthew 20:28; Galatians 2:20; 1 John 3:8-10; Philippians 1:21; Luke 9:23; Romans 8:10; James 4:13; Luke 12:20; 1 Corinthians 15:1-3; John 9; Mark 8:36-37; Hebrews 11:25-26; Mark 8:38; Matthew 16:27; Matthew 13:49-50

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