Following Jesus

Mark 8:34-38
Key Verse: Mark 8:34
“Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Back around 2005, I created an account on this new website called Facebook because we had student workers that created a Facebook page and I was tasked to find out what it was and make sure they weren’t doing anything to embarrass my workplace. So, I checked it out and didn’t think much of the site but what they were doing was fine so no problem. I quickly forgot that I even created an account. Fast forward about two years when suddenly I got an email saying that I was being followed by Aug Park on Facebook. At first, I freaked out wondering why someone was following me, and of course I didn’t even remember what Facebook was. After the initial shock of my first follow wore off, I began to have many other followers and I too began to follow others. Nowadays you can follow someone on Twitch, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook and many more apps. But I still laugh at how I reacted by my first follower.

The term “follow” is so common place in our society that we don’t even think much about it anymore because we follow and unfollow others all the time. Following someone, or an organization, doesn’t really mean too much, but back in Jesus’ day it was a whole different ballgame. For one, they didn’t have all the technology that we enjoy today. We can have meetings and see people from around the world right in our own home or office. And there is the police with their surveillance to follow people. And then there is also tail gating form of surveillance. Before this technology, to follow someone meant that you would have to get off your butt and literally follow them and meet them face to face. That might require relocation if you didn’t live near them. Even just visiting someone back then, could mean a difficult journey.

Not only was technology different, the meaning of following was also different. To follow someone meant a life of commitment, dedication and devotion. In a word, it was summed up as disciple which basically means “learner.” One who learns from another, but to do so meant the utmost dedication. This wasn’t an uncommon practice, for example, around 399 B.C. Plato was the disciple of Socrates and later in life Plato had his own disciple Aristotle. (And to tie this to our recent study of Daniel, Alexander the Great was a disciple of Aristotle.) So, the concept of following someone, or being their disciple, was nothing new by the time Jesus came around, but Jesus would bring it to a whole other level, one in which eternal life was on the line. With so much on the line, this is why I chose this passage as our key verse for the new year. My hope is that we can think about and meditate on what it means to really follow Jesus in 2018. Jesus never asked his followers to do something without giving a reason why. He did this so that we can see the importance of following him that inspires us to do it sincerely from our heart and that’s what I hope we can get from this passage today.

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According to Bible scholars starting from verse 31, the gospel writer Mark records a subtle new section (no new chapter heading) with a geographical shift from Galilee (where Mark recorded most of Jesus' public ministry) to Jerusalem during the closing days of Jesus' life on earth. In this section, Jesus defines the true meaning of "Christ" and how the title applies to him along with three predictions of his death. In the section that we'll look at today, Jesus teaches what it means to follow him and be his disciple. Let's take a look at verses 34-35. "Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it." In these verses, we see Jesus core disciples around him. By this time, the disciples have been with Jesus for more than three years. During this time, they have seen him calm the storm, drive out demons, heal the sick, raise the dead, walk on water, and feed the five thousand and Peter comes to the conclusion that Jesus is the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah. And in response to Peter's confession, Jesus tells them what's about to happen to him when he gets to Jerusalem. But Peter rebukes Jesus not wanting to hear about his death. Jesus proceeds to harshly rebuke Peter in return, for wanting to follow his own way and not God's. Jesus sees this as the perfect opportunity to teach what it means to follow him and be his disciple.

Jesus begins by calling, not only his current disciples, but also the larger crowd around him. Jesus opened his invitation to whoever wanted to come to him. He wasn't exclusive, however not all those who followed Jesus were his disciples and not even all his disciples were saved in the end. Merely following Jesus was not a guarantee for salvation. Jesus wanting to be clear on the what it means to be his disciple taught the basic principle they needed to grasp. Before we get into verse 34 we see Jesus' motive in verse 35, Jesus mentions life four times, what this shows is he's appealing to our desire for life. Jesus knows that deep down inside, each of us has a strong desire for life. Jesus said that he came for the purpose that we may have life to the full. (Jn 10:10) Knowing his appeal, he gives us several imperatives. First, you must be willing to deny yourself. This implies that each of us have more than one self, inside of us, otherwise how could we deny one over the other. With this dual nature within us, one "self" desires to be accepted, to be honored and comforted, and to live in safety. Who here likes the sound of that? I know that personally I like the sound of those things. It's appealing. This is our natural self. Our natural self-desires these things, thinking they will make us happy in life. However, Jesus says that we are going to have to deny one of our selves. Why? Because there is conflict between these two selves. One self, sees life through following Jesus and the other sees life following its own way. We can't have it both ways, as the saying goes we would like to have our cake and eat it too but, in this case, we can't because they are opposites.

To understand the other self, the self that follows Jesus, we have to know what he went through. Jesus faced opposition- not only personally but officially from the government, he was shamed, stripped naked and mocked, he suffered mental pain but extreme physical pain being beaten severely which lead to his eventual death. So, to follow Jesus, he says that we must be willing to endure all of these if we are to be his disciple. He doesn't say that everyone is going to have to go

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through these, but we have to be willing to do so if we are to follow him. This is what taking up our cross looks like. We have to be willing to deny our natural self which longs for acceptance, glory, comfort and safety and be willing to endure opposition, shame/ humiliation, suffering and even death follow Jesus and imitate his life.

To deny oneself doesn't mean to go without something or even many things. Denying oneself is not asceticism (A voluntary abstention from the satisfaction of bodily and social needs, including food, drink, sexual activity, sleep, clothes, wealth, and social interaction.) nor is it self-rejection or self-hatred, nor is it even the disowning of particular sins. It is to renounce the self as the dominant element in life. It is to replace the will of God before our own self-will.

In the first Christian century, take up your cross could only have referred to martyrdom, dying for your faith in Jesus. It reflected the practice of compelling a condemned person to carry the horizontal piece of the cross on which he was going to die. This is what Jesus actually did and that is what Jesus called on his followers to be willing to do. Many of his early followers did in fact die by crucifixion and in other ways. When martyrdom ceased to be common, cross bearing became a symbol of following Jesus in sacrificial service. The concept should never be cheapened by applying it to enduring some irritation or even a major burden. It is closely related to self-denial, involving a willingness to give up everything dear in life and even life itself for the sake of Jesus. It is a willingness to suffer for Jesus and for others. Such a concept of discipleship is so radical that many Christians nowadays have trouble relating to it.

The last imperative Jesus said is, "to follow me." Jesus was just beginning to teach His disciples what following meant. Soon, Jesus' disciples were going to see that following Jesus was not the road to glory and a mighty earthly kingdom, but a humiliating road to mockery, false trial, and death. Mark's audience already knows that following Jesus means death, but He also is trying to make them understand that while following is both humiliation and service, it is also ultimate glory.

Tertullian famously wrote that "the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church." History has proven him right. The witness of Christians willing to die for Jesus exploded the growth of the early church to be the biggest in the world. I'm not so sure we have this same spirit of following Jesus here in America. We love our self too much. In verse 35 we see the paradox of life, "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it." Suffering is not random, but for the sake of Jesus and the gospel. John 12:25 – "Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." This is forever, eternal. Those who lose their life embrace opposition, shame suffering & death, for Jesus' sake save their life forever. Those who devote themselves to getting accepted by people, like going after all the earthly glory you can, pursuing as much comfort as you can, being as safe as you can, you won't have eternal life. However, if place Jesus and the gospel in the foremost part of our lives and truly live to love God and love others, this leads to eternal life.

Looking at verses 36-37 we see the value of our soul, "What good is it for someone to gain the

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whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?" Here Jesus is asking a rhetorical question. In reality, there is no profit in gaining all the acceptance, glory, comfort and safety in the world because you can't buy a soul out of hell no matter how much money you have. Every one of us come into this world the same way, naked, and all of us leave it the same way, we die. This is a universal truth. Now, some of us will have very different lives in between those two events, but no matter how much wealth, power or glory we acquire in between will affect the outcome of those events. Those who have more wealth may have a more glorious birth or funeral, but once we die we leave it here on earth. The ancient Egyptian kings thought that they could take some of their wealth with them when they died, so they had all kinds of treasures buried with them when they died. But all of them left it behind for grave robbers to steal or archaeologists to find and put it in a museum. All of them left this world like every other person, with empty hands. Judas may be an example of one who forfeited his soul trying to gain the world. He sold Jesus for 30 silver coins thinking that would make him happy, but in the end, he regretted what he did and tried to undo it but couldn't. His regret went so deep that he ended his life because he couldn't live with what he had done.

In verse 38 we see the cost of shame, it reads "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."" To be ashamed of Jesus means that we don't want to be identified with him or his words because you think it will make you look foolish, stupid or weak. We prefer the approval of the world (an adulterous & sinful generation) or even ourselves more than Jesus. We will miss out on the Father's glory. This will result in Jesus' final rejection and our soul perishes in the end.

When Jesus taught his disciples what it meant to follow him, his words were not empty. He knew what lay in store for him. He would put his actions where his mouth was. When Jesus came into this world, he did so with one purpose, to **rescue the perishing**. To do so, he would completely and utterly deny himself. Jesus was fully God and fully man, His natural self didn't want to follow God just like us, but he denied himself. Here are some examples of how Jesus would deny himself. Jesus denied his riches, becoming poor for our sake. (2 Corinthians 8:9 "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.") Jesus denied himself the throne in heaven and became a servant for our sake. (Philippians 2:6-8 - "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; 7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!") Jesus denied his own will to follow God's will. (Matthew 26:39 "Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."") And since Christmas just passed, we remember how Jesus came to be born in a manger, in such a humble way because of his love for us.

Let's summarize this in conclusion, Preferring the approval and reward of adulterers and sinners

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(this whole unbelieving generation) more than we prefer the friendship and approval and affirmation of Jesus will result in Jesus' final rejection and our soul will perish in the end. Absolutely nothing, no amount of approval or reward in this world, can or will be accepted as a payment to buy our soul out of hell. There is no profit in gaining the whole world (with all of its approval, glory, comfort and safety) since not even owning the whole world can prevent the loss of our soul. All our efforts to save our soul by pursuing human approval, honor, comfort, and safety will only result in losing our soul, while accepting the cross (opposition, shame, suffering, and death) because you love Jesus and the gospel, will save your soul forever. Therefore, in light of Jesus' action and love for you, won't you take up the cross of opposition, shame, suffering, and death, and deny the old self that lives off of the approval of others, and human honor, comfort and safety, and in your new self, the one that loves Jesus more than life, and follow him.

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