

# What Does Jesus Say About Following Him? Part 1

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Over the years, I've talked openly about the home where I grew up. Both my mom and dad were solid Christ Followers. Not only were they both outspoken about their faith in Christ, they both also made sure that their love for God was evident in what they treated other people. I remember seeing my mom sitting on the edge of the couch with her Bible in her hand every day. The margins of the pages in her Bible were filled with notes. There was always a little, stubby #2 pencil sitting nearby. As I kid I was always amazed at how sharp she kept it, which is probably why it was so stubby! Mom would sit in that spot and prepare her Sunday School lesson. She taught a Sunday school class for years and encourage scores of people in their relationship with Christ.

My dad also loved the Lord. He built his small-town medical practice around serving those in the greatest need. I would sometimes go to work with my dad. I'd play in the little office area where the filing cabinets were. There was a little sticker on the filing cabinet drawers that had a simple 3 color code to be used for filing. If the name on someone's file was on a red label, it meant they didn't pay anything for their care. If their name was on a yellow label, it meant that they were charged at 50% and if their name was on a green label, it meant they were charged at 100%. I remember as a kid looking at those drawers as they stood open while the office staff worked and wondering how it made any sense for there to be so many red labels on files in the drawers.

I know that was a long time ago and the practice of medicine has changed greatly over the years. It's not possible for doctors to conduct their practices in the same manner that my dad was able to operate his. But to this day my dad stands out as a model of generosity and compassion for the way he conducted himself.

It was no wonder that my mom was the person who explained to me what it meant to begin a relationship with Christ. I'd been talking with my mom off and on for weeks about becoming a Christian. So one night, my mom and I knelt by her bed and she took out this very 1970s looking Bible. I remember that Bible to this day. **I found a picture of it online!** Doesn't it just scream the 1970s! Anyway, we knelt by the bed and mom helped me understand what it meant to begin a relationship with Jesus. John 3:16 just laid it out. **JN 3:16 "For God loved the world in this way: He gave His One and Only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.** Without a doubt, these are the most famous words ever spoken by Jesus. You almost certainly have heard that verse of Scripture. If you break that wonderful verse down it makes a couple of things crystal clear. One, it makes it clear that everyone faces the possibility of perishing. It's a terrible thing to consider, but Jesus himself wants us to know that the possibility of eternal separation from God is a truth each one of us needs to take seriously.

But in this verse, Jesus also gives us good news. Rescuing people from an eternity separated from God and bringing them into a eternity with God is absolutely paramount to both the Father and the Son. God has seen us in our condition and he has sent Jesus to save us. Jesus makes it possible for everyone, everywhere who places their confidence in him to have eternal life.

I remember my mom making this incredibly clear to me and as a young boy, I accepted Christ's offer. It was a good day!

Maybe you had people in your life like my mom and dad. Maybe it was your parents or maybe for you, a grandparent played a critical role in helping you understand who Jesus is. A few weeks ago, we had baptisms in our Celebration church family. Because of all the social distancing requirements we have right now we held them outside in swimming pools around the community so everyone could be safe outdoors.

It was a mix of kids and adults being baptized. I was so proud of all of them! It's a big deal to take the step of identifying with Christ. I was also really proud of the parents! It was so great to hear stories of how parents had led their kids to Christ and then to see them celebrate together with a baptism. Man, that's a huge moment for a parent. I love stories like that!

Maybe your story is totally different. Maybe you grew up in a home where Jesus was seldom if ever mentioned. You went to church on occasion with a few friends. Maybe you went to youth group a time or two and that was the extent of your exposure to church.

Or maybe for you, you grew up in a home that professed to be Christian but you saw some really ungodly things there. What was modeled for you wasn't Christian at all and it's left you wondering if you want anything to do with Christianity or not. You're still recovering from your exposure to people who by all appearances were Christians in name only.

Regardless of your story, regardless of what you know or don't know about accepting Christ, you may not have much of an idea of what it means to actually FOLLOW Christ.

For decades in America, we've talked a great deal about making a decision for Christ. We've rightly talked about the reality of our need to accept Jesus' grace and mercy. But very little is ever said about the demands of what it means to be a Christ follower, and that is to our great disadvantage and it explains why 70% of Americans claim to be a Christian when there's so little evidence to support such a claim.

When you look at the teaching of Jesus, a different pattern emerges. While Jesus encourages people to make the choice to become a Christian, He also talks openly about how hard it can be to follow him. He fully expects everyone who calls on his name be in the trenches following him from the first moments they profess to believe in Him.

Let me show you what I mean. In MT 28:18-20, Jesus gives instructions to his followers about their responsibility to take the gospel around the world. Take a look at it: **Matthew 28:18–20** **18 Then Jesus came near and said to them, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”**

Pretty straight forward isn't it? Jesus says to his followers that he is sending them out, under the authority of God, to go and raise up people who want to be Christ followers. They are to baptize these new believers – that means lead them to identify with the body of Christ through the symbol of baptism. Then teach them to observe everything I've commanded you. Now let's reverse engineer that statement so we can see what Jesus expects future Christ followers to do.

Future Christ Followers are to receive those who have been sent, identify with Christ by being baptized and then learn and do everything Jesus has commanded.

Nowhere does it say that someone should think of themselves as a Christian just because they have heard about Jesus from someone who's been sent to talk about Him. Nowhere does it say that it's a good thing for someone to be baptized and then just stop making any forward progress. Nowhere does it say obeying the commands of Christ is somehow optional.

Jesus command to his disciples was to go, baptize and teach to obey everything. It makes it pretty clear that his new followers would be those who receive the gospel, get baptized, then learn and obey all of Christ's commands.

But for many people in the church, that's not their experience. They hear about Jesus. They accept what they hear and they are baptized, but they never actually fulfill what Jesus intends. They never follow through and follow Jesus. Because the job is left incomplete, many people are left wondering if they are really Christians or not. They're left to wonder why their experience with Christ seems so empty.

If that sounds like your experience, I want you to pay attention over the next two weeks. Over the next two weeks, we're going to hear from Jesus about what he expects from someone claiming to be a Christ follower. Next week, we'll look at how following Christ influences the ways we treat other people. After all, following Jesus is something that isn't done in isolation. It has influence in every relationship we have.

But today we're going to listen to the words of Jesus himself and learn what He expects from me personally as His follower. What's the personal cost?

Jesus talks a great deal about what it means to follow him, but so often when he's on topic, he uses the same basic language over and over. It's like he's got something really important for us

to get, so he keeps repeating the same idea in a variety of contexts so that we will finally understand.

So what does he say over and over again when he's describing what it means to follow him? Here it is reduced down to just one verse: **Luke 9:23 . . . "If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me.** Pretty straight forward: if you want to come after Jesus, you deny yourself, take up your cross daily and follow him. So what does it mean?

Well to understand this, we have to understand the way people would have received this statement in the days Jesus spoke it. Today we look at the cross as a piece of jewelry to be worn around the neck. Everybody gets in on this! Here's Justin Bieber, Selina Gomez and The Weeknd all sporting crosses. Clearly, wearing a cross can mean a lot of things! Maybe it's a statement of faith or maybe it's just a fashion statement. It really depends on who's wearing it. But in Jesus' day, picking up a cross and following someone only meant one thing. It meant you were convicted to die. A person who was to be executed by crucifixion would be forced to lift the crossbeam across his shoulders and then follow the soldiers who were leading him to be executed.

If you're carrying a cross, everyone who saw you would know your life was over. You're a dead man walking. Your identity was no longer found in your job. Your identity wasn't found in your net worth. Your identity wasn't found in your family. Your identity wasn't found in your hopes and dreams. Your identity wasn't found in your hobbies or your favorite sports team. All of those things were lost to you. By the time people see you carrying your cross, you've been stripped of your pride and position. You have effectively been reduced to a nobody. Your time on this earth is short. Your time on this earth is dangerous.

So when Jesus connects the reality of the cross with following him, everyone would have understood what he meant. Taking up your cross meant to lose everything in favor of following Jesus. You die to yourself. You say goodbye to your hopes and dreams. You say goodbye to all of your plans. Those things are dead to you and you are dead to them. You give up everything about yourself in order to follow Jesus completely. In a sense, you die to yourself and you live for Christ. Galatians 2:20 affirms this. It says, **I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.**

And Jesus says this isn't a one off. This is something that you do every single day. Meaning, this decision will upend everything you might think should be ordinary about your life. Nothing in your experience will ever be processed the same way again.

Look at how Jesus talks with a series of people who come to him saying they're ready to follow him once they have taken care of other day to day priorities and concerns first. **Luke 9:57–62 57 As they were traveling on the road someone said to Him, "I will follow You wherever You go!" 58 Jesus told him, "Foxes have dens, and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head." 59 Then He said to another, "Follow Me." "Lord," he said, "first let me go bury my father." 60 But He told him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and spread**

the news of the kingdom of God.” 61 Another also said, “I will follow You, Lord, but first let me go and say good-bye to those at my house.” 62 But Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

None of these requests are unreasonable. The first guy doesn't sound as if he has any reservations at all. He just wants to follow Jesus. But for some reason as Jesus sizes him up, it sounds as if he's talking the would-be follower out of it. Jesus says, *Before you jump on board, I want you to think about the life I'm living. I'm camping out a lot. I'm rejected a lot and spend a lot of time outside. This is a hard life.*

Another guy comes up and says, *I've got to make funeral arrangements for my dad.* Some scholars think this man's dad was in the last few days of his life and this guy just wants to spend those last few days with him. That's perfectly understandable. Being there for the last few moments of life with a loved one is a painful, but treasured opportunity nobody would want to miss out on.

Others say that this man's dad had already died and he just wanted to make sure all the funeral arrangements were taken care of so his dad would have a proper burial. Either way, these are decisions that people make every day. It's extraordinary to think that anyone would miss out on this.

But how does Jesus respond to this seemingly reasonable request? Jesus says that following him and making disciples is more important.

Then another person comes to Jesus and says, *Let me properly say good bye to my family and show them some love before I take off.* But Jesus shuts him down, telling him there is no turning back when you follow Him, not even for family. Ouch!

This isn't the only time that Jesus makes it clear that taking up your cross and following him is more important than your own family: **Matthew 10:37–38** <sup>37</sup> **The person who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; the person who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.** <sup>38</sup> **And whoever doesn't take up his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me.**

This seems really harsh doesn't it? I think this is particularly hard for Americans because we've made so much out of the idea that to be Christian is to be all about your family. It's absolutely true that our family is important. We have a Biblical obligation to do everything in our power to raise our kids to be Christ Followers in their own right. It's hard to do and it's critically important.

But Jesus teaches us here that while loving our family is very important, it isn't more important than loving Him. Again, we see Jesus using the idea of taking up our cross and following him even if it means placing Jesus ahead of them.

If we're going to understand this one, we need to take a look at **Matthew 22:37–40** <sup>37</sup> He said to him, **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.** <sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and most important command. <sup>39</sup> The second is like it: **Love your neighbor as yourself.** <sup>40</sup> All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.”

Jesus is asked by someone which of the commands in the Old Testament was most important. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:5, our first priority is to love God. We love him with all of our heart, soul and mind. Nothing can compete for our affections with God. Then Jesus quotes Leviticus 19:18 and says that second only to loving God should be our love for others.

Jesus lays these two commands out with great attention to detail. He doesn't say, *Here are two really important commands and I'll give them to you in no particular order!* Jesus doesn't say that! He's teaching us something important here: love God first, then love others more than yourself. Why that order? Because we can't love others rightly until we love God rightly. Now bring this home. If we love our family more than we love Jesus, we've upset the entire concept of loving God supremely. You can't carry the cross of Christ if you don't understand this.

In my home, we use the words *I love you* all the time. I want Pam to know how I feel about her so I tell her. I want my son and daughter to know how I feel about them so I am always telling them that I love them. It's just really common to hear those words in the Emmert house. Now I know that my wife loves me because she tells me, but she also reminds me that she understands this principle of Jesus. From time to time Pam will look at me all sweetly and she'll say, *I love you most next to Jesus!* She's saying, *I love you, but I'm also going to keep you in your place! You're awesome and you're important, but you're not Jesus!* She wants me to know that her affection for me is second to her affection for Jesus. Amen. That's God's will! That's what Jesus is calling her to do. It's never felt so good to be told that I'm a distant second!

What is she saying? She is saying, *My priorities are right. I love God with all my heart, soul and mind and because I love him rightly, I can also love you rightly.*

It's mission critical that we get this right, because if we love anyone or anything more than Christ, there's always a possibility that person could come back to interfere with our allegiance to Jesus.

Jesus talks about this very possibility. Look back at Matthew 10 and let's get more of that passage. **Matthew 10:34–38** <sup>34</sup> Don't assume that I came to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. <sup>35</sup> For I came to turn **a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;** <sup>36</sup> **and a man's enemies will be the members of his household.** <sup>37</sup> The person who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; the person who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. <sup>38</sup> **And whoever doesn't take up his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me.**

When you face opposition for the sake of the Gospel, especially when it comes from those who are close to you, it's tremendously tempting to turn away from following Christ, but you can't allow your affections for your family knock the cross of Christ off of your shoulders.

Over the years I've met a lot of people who have faced opposition from their families. In Ethiopia I worked with young men and women who had been thrown out of their home because they accepted Christ. Others had been shut out of the local economy because they while still others were rendered homeless and friendless all because they accepted Christ. I've been stunned to watch how they faithfully clung to the cross of Christ. They've moved in with friends, slept on the floor of the church and lived off of the hospitality of strangers for His name's sake.

Because we live in the Deep South, we miss this. In our region, it's still very acceptable to be a Christian. But even here, if you're passionate for Christ, pushback is all but guaranteed.

Years ago, I was a youth pastor in a small church. While I was there I worked with a young girl named Sylvia who had recently come to know Christ. For this girl, there was no disconnect between accepting Christ and following him by taking up her cross daily. This young girl's life was transformed. She was hungry to learn the Bible. She was hungry to be around other Christians. She ran hard after her new-found faith. It was exciting to watch.

But there was a problem. Her mom and dad were Christmas and Easter Christians. You know what I mean. They were the kind of people who showed up at church two times a year then they were done with Jesus until the next holiday rolled around. In their view, life made perfect sense if you just kept Jesus in his place.

So when their daughter showed all this passion for Christ and suddenly wanted to be in church all the time, they told her to knock it off. They become unsupportive, even hostile toward her. Soon after she became a believer, I noticed that Sylvia would always show up early any time there was an event or Bible study at church. It was hard for me because I was a young single guy and I didn't want to be alone with this girl. It just wasn't appropriate. So finally, I just asked her, *Sylvia, why do you always get here so early?* She said, *Because the only way that I can get here to church is to walk 5 miles from my house. My family has begun to refuse to bring me because they say I've gone overboard with this Jesus stuff. So I leave early so that I arrive on time. I don't want to miss anything.*

That was Sylvia's story. The opposition she faced in carrying her cross and following Jesus came from in her own household. But Sylvia set out to be worthy of the affections of Christ.

But Jesus doesn't just call us to only endure hardship from those who are close to us. When you look across history, you see people who faced life and death situations because of the Gospel. Jesus response to them is the same: No matter the cost, keep on taking up your cross and following me. **Matthew 16:24–25** **24 Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me. 25 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of Me will find it.**

Just a couple of weeks ago, I received an email from a friend of mine who works with church planters in several African countries. Here's a part of what he had to say: *Recently, in an area not to far from my home, Churches were burned and Christians were persecuted. Just a couple of months ago in an area just west of here, pastors were killed in the pulpit. But God has done so many amazing things in these places. Some have come to know Christ because of men who are willing to die for the gospel . . . These guys want to die doing something for Him. But most of them are protected by God and are still doing God's work. His protection for them is amazing. I recently learned that they have baptized 23 people.*

*The Militia in the area weren't happy about this. They gave these men a warning not to preach any more, but two of the guys told them boldly, We will not stop preaching and baptizing; we'll stop when we die. But as long as we have life, we can't quit because His love is burning inside of us.*

*The soldiers were surprised at their boldness, but some became very angry. They wanted to shoot them, but their leader told them, leave them alone for now, we'll kill them when we come back next week. The militiamen left, but they have not returned and it's now been 3 months.*

When I read my friend's email, I felt so incredibly small. I've had the honor of meeting and working with a lot of African evangelists. I know their boldness and I know their passion for the gospel. Most of these men and women live on pennies a day. They have endured untold hardships. They face constant opposition. They have been kicked out of their homes by their own families, they have been shot at and had grenades thrown at their homes. They have been beaten and stoned because they profess Jesus. They exemplify what it means when Jesus says take up your cross daily and follow me.

Our circumstances are not like theirs. By God's grace, we are not facing persecution such as they are. I pray that we never will. But I must never forget that as a Christian, my mandate, my command from Christ is no different than theirs.

Jesus says to me, . . . **"If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me.** Just as he says to them, and just as he said it to Sylvia who had to stand up for her faith against her family.

I hope by now it's clear what Jesus had in mind when he invites us to follow him. Jesus is telling us that when we become Christ followers, nothing is to prevent us from following him with singular passion and focus. We don't let ourselves become distracted. We don't let ourselves compromise. We don't allow our own priorities, hopes or dreams knock us off of being his disciple. We don't let our affections, even our affections for our family, slow us down. Even death itself isn't a big enough threat to lead us to reconsider following Christ with intensity and passion.

We live in a world that is filled with competing ideas and philosophies. We live in a place where we have tremendous comforts made available to us. We are a people with a great deal to loose.

So when you hear that following Jesus means taking up a cross, die to self and making everything and everyone you know a distant second to him, it sounds outrageous.

But I also believe that at this moment, Jesus has been calling to you. And many of you know it. You know that he has been preparing your heart and soul for this very time and I want to challenge you to abandon everything just as we have been talking about and truly follow him. For some of you this is the first time you've ever seriously considered this. Now you've got a clearer picture of what following Jesus is all about. Let me just encourage you. This is a good day to make a life changing decision. You don't need me to tell you that your life isn't heading where it needs to be headed. You don't need me to tell you that even by your own standards, let alone by god's standards, your life falls short.

Maybe you're sitting there right now thinking, *I decided to accept Jesus when I was a kid, but I haven't done anything with that decision since. By no measure have I taken up my cross and followed Jesus.*

I'm just asking you to be honest with yourself. There are some of us who have been through the church thing for a long time, but somewhere along the way, our hearts grow cold. If that's your story, today is the right day to reengage with the call of Christ in your life. Today is the day to make the decision to abandon everything and place the cross of Christ squarely on your shoulders. So I want for all of us to take some time right now and just allow the Spirit of God real access to what's going on inside.

Let's just push back from the busyness of the week and take some heart time. I want you to know, Jesus is worthy of your love and your affection. He made you, loves for you, died for you and stands as a risen Savior who makes a real relationship with God possible.

So let's just pray together and say, "God, here's my trust, here's my plans and dreams, here's my affections. I pour it out before you. You can have everything I have, every possession, every relationship, my family, my girlfriend or boyfriend, I make them all secondary to you and you alone. So Jesus I trust you and I ask you to live in me, lead me and accomplish your plans through me. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.