

**Text: Mark 8:34-37**

**Title: “The Mission ... Follow Christ”**

**ILLUSTRATION – “The Mission ... Why We’re Still Here.”** This past week we’ve helped my mother-in-law move to a new senior living apartment. Most of you have moved so you know it usually requires taking things off the wall or out of the closet and putting them into boxes. Some of those things you may have not looked at or thought about for years, and they bring back memories. Next thing you know you’re sitting down looking through an old photo album and reminiscing about old times. Meanwhile the moving truck is not loading itself. In times of change if we aren’t clear about and focused on what the mission is it’s easy to get sidetracked and end up not accomplishing what we’re supposed to be doing. One of the first things we did in the Re:Vision process is to make sure we understand the mission Jesus has given us. We looked at the Scriptures and developed a statement that will hopefully keep us focused: **MISSION STATEMENT – “We exist to know, follow and share Jesus Christ.”**

For this to be a reality in our church ... not just a motto or a slogan but a reality ... I’m challenging us to pray this **ONE PRAYER** for ourselves and for one another: “Lord Jesus Christ give me ... a hunger to know You intimately ... the faith to follow You fully, and ... a passion to share You fearlessly.”

What did God have in mind for us when He sent His Son to this earth to die for our sins and to be raised from the dead? What did God envision when He saved you and you were born again and indwelt by the Holy Spirit? Did He envision making you just a good church-goer? Did He envision you just getting a little more religious and just doing your best to be a better person? Did He envision you just being able to answer when people ask you, “Yes, I’m a Christian.” Or was it something far more than that?

The NT makes it clear what God envisions for His people...

**Ephesians 4:13 - until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.**

**Ephesians 4:15b - we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.**

I don’t know all that means, but I have an idea it’s a whole lot more than what we expect to happen when we are saved and united with the church. Open your Bibles this morning to Mark 8:31-38. When Jesus came to this earth and began to call people to Himself, His call was consistent ... follow Me. **Read Mark 8:31-38.**

Now there’s a pattern here that is repeated in the other Gospels. Jesus called His shot. Starting in v.31 Jesus is saying, “I will suffer, die and be raised from the dead so you can have a new life. For Me, going down this road will mean literal death; but on the other side My Father will raise Me up. For you, going down this road will mean death of another kind ... death to your old way of life ... death to your right to rule your own destiny ... death to self. But on the other

side of that decision you make to go down that road, My Father will perform the same miracle. He will raise you up to walk in a new life and one day even to a resurrection of your body to something glorious.”

Jesus then issues a bold challenge to everyone listening that day:

**Mark 8:34 - Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.**

Jesus’ words cut through all of the misconceptions people have about being a Christian. Look at how Jesus lays it out:

## **1. THE CHOICE**

**“IF ANYONE WOULD come after me... (Mark 8:34).**

Jesus called “the crowd along with His disciples.” At times there were hundreds, sometimes thousands of people around Jesus who heard His amazing teachings, watched Him work miracles and sensed that He really cared about them. And they admired Him ... but they didn’t all follow Him.

But then there were those whom He called “disciples.” What is a disciple? A disciple is a learner, an apprentice, and a follower committed to be like his or her teacher. And Jesus is calling people out of the crowds and into a relationship with Himself where we are committed to follow Him wherever that leads us.

**ONSCREEN STATEMENTS** – You see, an admirer is awed; a follower is committed. An admirer applauds; a follower surrenders. An admirer approves; a follower obeys.

So Jesus describes the choice, the decision, we are all called to make. Then He describes ...

## **2. THE COURSE**

**“If anyone would COME AFTER ME... (Mark 8:34).**

These words “come after me” are essentially the course, the way, of a disciple of Jesus. Last week we talked about the fact that eternal life is knowing God and His Son Jesus Christ. A disciple is someone who has come into such a union, such a relationship, with Christ that they routinely do what Jesus taught.

To come after Jesus means our lives are lashed to His life. It means we take His every command seriously. To follow Jesus is to walk as Jesus walked in holiness before His heavenly Father ... to live as Jesus lived in constant communion with the Father through prayer and fasting ... to

think as Jesus thought, guided by Scriptural truth ... to serve as Jesus served ... to love people sacrificially as Jesus loved ... to act as Jesus acted ... to witness as Jesus witnessed.

But for many people who carry that label “Christian,” their relationship to Jesus goes like this: “I want to use Jesus to get into heaven when I die ... to give me peace ... to soothe my guilty conscience ... to be there for me.” And the fact is that Jesus makes all of that available to us. But the problem is that we want all the perks without being willing to follow after Him in the life He calls us to live. And that’s why for many church-goers in America there is no real difference between the way they live their lives Monday to Saturday and the way the guy lives who makes no claim to be a Christian.

So the challenge to our church is this: Are we making and developing followers of Jesus Christ? After all, that’s one of the last things Jesus said before He departed this earth.

**Matthew 28:19-20 - Therefore go and make disciples of all nations (of all kinds of people), baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,<sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”**

The fundamental business of the church is bringing people into the fullness of life in Jesus Christ. How much of what we do is dedicated to that? This is the life God has in mind for us all.

Jesus describes something else in this statement in Mark 8:34:

### **3. THE CONDITIONS**

**“If anyone would come after me, HE MUST DENY HIMSELF AND TAKE UP HIS CROSS... (Mark 8:34).**

Notice the word “if” at the beginning of the verse. It implies that conditions exist. You see, Jesus has the right to define what it means to follow Him. We come after Him on His terms. Jesus was not and is not desperate to have a large crowd following Him no matter the depth of their commitment. Rather than compromise the truth, he was willing to see the crowd thin out. And Jesus never recruits followers under false pretenses.

**ILLUSTRATION** - The Lord is not like a recruiting officer who says to a young man, "If you will join the Air Force, the Army, the Navy or the Marines, you'll get to wear a cool uniform and you'll get to line up and march in all of those glorious parades." But the officer doesn't go on to tell him that he might have to be away from his family for periods of time, and he will have to live in less than comfortable surroundings, and he may even be in dangerous situations. The Lord Jesus never recruits followers under false pretenses.

Now there’s something we lay down and something we take up.

## **SOMETHING WE LAY DOWN – “He must deny himself.”**

Any obedience usually requires self-denial. For example, religious people in Jesus’ time thought it was fine to be religious and still retaliate when they are hurt by someone ... an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Jesus taught that the standards were higher for His followers. When you are slapped on the cheek, turn the other cheek. There would be some who might say, “Not me. I’m not going to let someone disrespect me like that.” Jesus would say, “You will if you’re going to follow Me. You must lay down your rights to your own self-respect and dignity.” We have to deny self. But there’s also ...

## **SOMETHING WE TAKE UP - “He must ... take up his cross.”**

If you were in a city like Jerusalem, controlled by the Romans, and you saw someone carrying a cross through the streets of the city, you immediately knew where it was going. This person was on a one-way trip to someplace from which they would never return. When the Romans crucified someone, the victim was often forced to carry his own cross part of the way to the crucifixion site. And it was always done in clear sight of everyone. The Romans wanted everyone to know what happened to people who broke the laws.

And, of course, this would be how Jesus died ... by crucifixion. Isn’t it interesting that in calling people to be His disciples He would use this image? I’m sure a marketing expert would pull their hair out at the thought of trying to get customers with this kind of image. And that’s the point. Jesus was not after religious customers. He was after passionate followers who will never turn back.

**ILLUSTRATION** - When Julius Caesar and his army invaded Great Britain his legion was shocked to look out in the English Channel to see their ships had all been set aflame. Now there was no possibility of retreat! There was nothing left for them but to advance and conquer! And that is exactly what they did. No turning back.

Jesus said later in this passage that if anyone is ashamed of Him or His words in this generation, Jesus would be ashamed of them when He comes in His Father’s glory. So in taking up your cross you are saying, “I am doing whatever is required of me to identify my life with Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection.”

Of course, we’re not talking about sacrificing our way into eternal life. No, Jesus made the complete sacrifice for our sins when He died on the Cross. But when we put our faith in Christ we trust that He died and rose again to make us new people who no longer live for our own agenda, but for the will of God.

So Jesus has in mind a life for us that is only possible when we follow Him.

**Mark 8:35 - For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.**

Can I just say that this doesn't just apply to individual believers? It also applies to us as a church. We can't be just concerned about "saving" our church. If our motivation is only to "save" our financial resources, or "save" our buildings, or "save" our past, or "save" our reputation then we have the wrong motivation. Our motivation has to be to lose our life for Jesus and the Gospel, whatever that requires of us, so others may come to know Him. Jesus said whoever tries to save his life will lose it. But the one who loses his life for Christ and the Gospel will save it.

Now Jesus ends this great statement with ...

#### **4. THE CALL**

**"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and FOLLOW ME" (Mark 8:34).**

It is a call, a command, to continually follow Christ.

You see, whenever Jesus taught something happened in the hearts of a few of them that went way beyond admiration. Their hearts started pounding ... their minds started racing. Something deep inside them said, "This is it. This is what I've been longing for my whole life ... to have my sins forgiven and my life cleansed of the mess ... to know God ... to have courage ... to be free of constant worry, fear and anxiety ... to not be a slave anymore to sexual desire, or money, or people's approval, or success ... to be a small part of God's work in this world ... to have confidence beyond death. I must have this! I would rather have what this Man has, and give up everything else in the world, than to have everything else in the world, and give up Him. Therefore I will pay any price; I will do whatever He wants me to do. I will go wherever He tells me to go. I will be whatever He says I should be. I am leaving the crowd of admirers. I will live my life as a passionate follower of this Man." The crowds admired Jesus; but every once in a while someone wakes up and crosses the line and says, "I will follow Him."

I'm not sure the Christian life was explained to you in those terms when you were saved, but that's it. Jesus is still calling us to that incredibly full life that is truly life!