

UNEDITED DRAFT

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Our country is very much a culture that idolizes and glorifies extroverts and leaders. In fact, many people would consider it an insult to be called a follower. If I took a poll and asked if you would like to develop your leadership skills or your following skills, I imagine 100% would choose the leadership track.

The cultural bias in 21st century America can make it hard for us to understand a fundamental truth that we really need to know. The truth is, God created every human being to be first and foremost a follower. In fact, every one of you, and everyone on the planet is a follower of someone or something. Even the strongest leader has mentors and people whose advice they almost always follow. ... those who have guided them and shaped them to be who they are today.

In addition, it is simply a fact that everyone is pursuing something. We Americans believe in the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. You can only pursue something that is in front of you, or that you believe to be in front of you. So if you believe happiness is before you, you will follow after it in an attempt to catch it. You might pursue a *degree*. It's there before you, but it's not yet yours. You follow a path to get it. Many people pursue a *career*. They follow a path that will help them achieve career goals that still lie ahead. Some pursue a *relationship*. You want your relationship with another to be a certain level, but it's not. So you pursue it. You follow a path that to achieve a certain goal. You are a follower.

We are all inherent followers. What I'd like you to consider today is "What are you following? Who are you following? What are you pursuing and why?"

It is vitally important that we bring this to surface and consciously understand and acknowledge what we are following and what we are pursuing. Because what or who you follow and pursue determines the direction of your entire life. It determines your path. It determines ultimately where you end up. What or who you follow and how determines how you spend your time, how you expend your resources, how you invest in relationships. So the truth is: you are a follower. You will follow. Following defines your life. So let's honestly consider what / who we follow and how.

This is exactly the question Jesus put before his disciples in the reading we're about to look at. Jesus has been working hard. He's been teaching and healing and doing miracles. He tried to get away and rest with his disciples, but the crowds followed him. It's go, go, go. But as we pick up our text, Jesus finally has a chance to rest. He's just with his 12 disciples. And it says Jesus was praying in private.

Can I just go off on a brief tangent? Time and again, the Gospels tell us that Jesus took time for prayer and meditation. Often before significant events, Jesus prays. Before he began publicly preaching and teaching, Jesus fasted and prayed for 40 days (and was tempted too.) Before Jesus picked his disciples, he privately prayed. Before Jesus was arrested he prayed earnestly in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was with his disciples, but he also prayed apart from them.

So consider this: If quiet time in prayer and meditation was necessary for the Son of God, how much more is it necessary for you and me? Time in God's Word and prayer is not something optional. It's not something for the just the weak (otherwise Jesus wouldn't have needed it.) It's not something to fit in once in a while when you have time. If you are going to grow in faith, grow in your walk with God, grow in your connection to Christ, then you absolutely need to make time for reading the Bible and prayer. And the greater the challenges you face in life, the greater your need to carve out that quiet time with God in prayer and Bible study. Make the time to do it, and you'll come to treasure that time as something essential to stay recharged, focused, at peace and filled with God's strength for life.

Okay, back on topic:

Luke 9:18-24 Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?"

Jesus asks the question that every person must answer. Who is Jesus? Jesus eases them into it by first asking them about what others think. So he asks, "What's the word on the street? What rumors are flying about me? Who do people say I am?"

The disciples know. They answer.

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life."

So the crowds can't figure out Jesus. They don't have a category for Jesus. There was no one like him. So they tried to define him by what they already knew.

John the Baptist had been arrested for confronting Herod about his sin. His wife saw to it that John was beheaded and had his head brought to her on a platter. That's where the phrase came from, "I'll have your head on a platter." Maybe you didn't know that comes from the Bible. John was somewhat famous in his own right. He had quite a following. Although he pointed many to Jesus, many kept following John. So when John died, people started listening to Jesus more, and they realized that he sounded a lot like John. Both spoke about the Kingdom of God and sin and repentance and God's forgiveness. So some started to say that Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life.

Others thought he might be the great prophet Elijah come back to life. Elijah had done some amazing miracle and preached God's truth boldly. So did Jesus. Maybe he was Elijah.

Some said he was one of the other great prophets. Seems the crowds had a reincarnation in their heads. At best, though, people were thinking Jesus was a prophet sent by God.

What if Jesus appeared to us today and asked the same question? Who do people say I am? How would you answer? *Some say you are a great teacher.* They say there is a gap between the Christ of faith and the historical Jesus.

Some say you are a *myth*. Some say we can't know who you are, because you have been reinterpreted for so many generations. Some people say you're useful to have around in case they need something. Some say you have some decent advice on how to live. And some people hate you and want nothing to do with you!

Then Jesus asks the real question he wanted to ask them:

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

This was the critical question Jesus' disciples needed to answer. This is the critical question that you need to answer. Who is Jesus? How you understand Jesus determine if and how you will follow him. The people of Jesus reduced him. They took him down to just a prophet. We sometimes do the same thing!

What you believe about Jesus determines whether or not you will follow him, and how you will follow him. If you believe he is a *teacher*, you will only go to him when you need instruction. If you think he is only a *helper* for you in your times of need, then you will not follow him when times are good. If you believe that Jesus is only *an example* of how to live, you will follow him when you feel like living right. If you only think Jesus is *useful for eternal life*, then you'll only follow Jesus when you are faced with your own mortality.

What about you? Who do you say that he is? Who is Jesus for you? How is Jesus compared to all else in your life?

Peter, the bold and outspoken one, answered Jesus' question. Peter was usually the first to respond. He often put his foot in his mouth. But not this time. Here he nailed it:

Peter answered, "The Christ of God." In Matthew 16 we have a few more details about this incident. You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." It could also be translated: "God's Messiah." Either way that doesn't make a lot of sense to the modern reader unless you know what "the Christ" or "Messiah" is all about. Both words mean "the Anointed One."

Jesus is the fulfiller of all of God's promises. He is the one and only way, truth and live. He is more than a great teacher, is the unique and only Son of God. He is a prophet, priest and king. We're not familiar with anointing. It was an Old Testament rite in which oil was poured upon the head of someone who was going to serve God in a special way. And the special offices into which someone was anointed was: prophet, priest and king. *Elisha* was anointed as a prophet. *Aaron* anointed priest. *David* was anointed king. But there was one foretold who would be the Anointed One of all anointed ones. One whose service to God would include all three of those great offices. A **prophet** who would not just speak the Word of God but be the Word of God. A **priest** who wouldn't just sacrifice animals for the people, but would offer himself as a perfect sacrifice for the people once and for all. A **King** that would protect God's people and defeat her enemies. And we're talking real enemies... on that do kill eternally. Enemies that separate us from God. The promises Prophet, Priest and King would come to rescue God's people, save God's people, redeem God's people.

And so Peter's answer was absolutely the right answer! You are the Christ / Anointed one of God!

But just because Peter used the correct term didn't mean he and the others properly understood the term. For some the "Anointed One" (Christ) they were expecting was one who would rescue them from Roman rule. He would be one who would establish an earthly kingdom and rule in glory on earth. So Jesus explains further who he is and who they follow.

Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."

Jesus often spoke in parables, but not here. He wants his disciples to know plainly what his mission is all about. He didn't come to rule an earthly kingdom in glory. Jesus came to suffer. He came to die. He came to rise again. Jesus wanted his disciples to know and remember: *Suffering before glory.*

Jesus came to meet our greatest need. The things I talked about before are all needs. We need instruction. We need help. We need an example. We need eternal life. But above and beyond all of this: we need our broken relationship with God restored. We need to acknowledge that we have thoroughly broken that relationship with God by following everything under the sun EXCEPT our great God in heaven. We follow all sorts of people first and maybe God second.

We pursue money. We pursue fame and recognition. We pursue a name for ourselves. We follow a path that will end in our glorification.

God tells us bluntly. That path ends in eternal destruction. As you pursue all of these things you are running further and further from God. And the final end of all of these rabbit trails is death. Eternal death forever separated from God. All vain pursuits end with an angry God.

So who is Jesus really? He is the exact Messiah that you need. He is the only one who restores your relationship with God. He is the only one that can forgive us for all our vain pursuits. And he fixed our relationship with God by staying on the narrow path of perfect dedication to his Father. He fixed our relationship by accepting the blame for our trivial pursuits. He went to a cross in Calvary in order to face the anger of God that we should have faced.

What we need first and foremost is a Substitute. That is Jesus. We need a Savior. That is Jesus. We need a Redeemer. That is Jesus. Follow him!

Now, we have one more important point to think about, and that is: “How? How do you follow Jesus? What does it mean to follow Jesus?” Listen carefully, because we find that we not only need to know who to follow, but how to follow:

Then Jesus said to them all: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.

Jesus taught his disciples about himself: Suffering before glory. Now he says that when they follow him, it will be the same story: suffering before glory.

Deny yourself, Jesus says. That’s pretty clear. It’s also pretty hard. We don’t like to deny ourselves. We want what we want when we want it, and woe to the restaurant server who doesn’t bring it! Deny yourself simply means Jesus first in your heart and life. He rules, you don’t. He decides what’s good and bad, you don’t. Credit goes to him, not you. All you do is for him, not you. Deny yourself.

This is so countercultural, because all you here in the media is “Indulge yourself.” You’re worth it! No you’re not. You’re not worth it. You are a sinful human being who has disobeyed almighty God countless times. All you are and all you have is from him, and you think you can use it selflessly to indulge yourself. Jesus says, “No.” If you know your sin, and you know your Savior, then deny yourself and indulge Jesus.

“Take up your cross daily” Jesus say. That’s not quite as clear as “deny yourself.” Cross-bearing is something we don’t really get, even though it was a powerful ancient image. Bearing our cross means simply that we know and are willing to suffer before the glory of eternal life. We will suffer, and we don’t avoid this fact. Jesus first, and it will mean suffering. So it means we die to the world, it’s views, it’s pleasures, it’s goals and values, it’s lifestyle. We die to self and live for Christ.

Take up your cross, and follow Jesus.

I’m afraid we have done a disservice when we define following Christ as *learning a set of teachings*. Others say to *do certain things* and you are a follower. Acts of obedience are most important. But that’s not all of it either. Surely they follow when someone is a follower, but they’re not what make you a follower.

To be a follower of Christ means you pursue him. He is it. He is all. You yield to him and his will. You trust him in all and for all. You trust he is your perfection and life. Following Jesus means that the pursuit of all else lines up behind your pursuit of Jesus. If your *career path* is at odds with your pursuit of Jesus, you give it up. *Relationship. Your wealth.* If you have to give up

your freedom and even your life as you pursue / follow Jesus, then you give up your freedom. You give up your life.

Following Jesus means we align ourselves with God will and humbly give up our own agenda.

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.

If you try to save your life by preserving yourself from opposition in this world, pursuing the things of this world, accommodating yourself to this world, becoming a chameleon to this world... then you lose real life. You lose true meaning and purpose.

If you gained the whole world: prosperity, power, influence, fame, but you lose your soul, you made a horrible investment that resulted in a total loss.

Our pursuit of Christ is not something that can take place on automatic pilot. It takes work. Keep on following! This means intentional effort on our part so we don't veer from the narrow path onto other wider paths. Spiritual labor / hard work is essential. It's not easy! We work daily at seeking his kingdom, not ours. At renewed mind so it's like his mind. We daily renew our commitment to Christ.

We're all followers. What are you following? Would you give that some serious thought this week. Morning, noon and night this week, stop yourself and ask, "What am I following?" Then remind yourself: your biggest need is to be right with God. That right relationship is established through Jesus Christ alone. So follow him. Pursue Jesus with a passion. Lose your life for Jesus and to Jesus, and Jesus promises that in so doing your life is saved. Follow him! Amen.