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## If Anyone Would Come After Me

*Jesus is no ordinary master. And what he asks of his disciples is no ordinary commitment.*

by Steve Clark

### ***Jesus invites us to follow him***

“Come follow me.” Jesus says these words many times in the gospels. He says them to Peter and Andrew, and they leave their nets to follow him. He says them to Matthew the tax collector, and Matthew leaves his post. He says them to Philip, to James and John, and to others. Those who accept his invitation become his disciples.

Jesus also invites *us* to follow him. And while we want to say yes and follow, it is not always immediately obvious what following him means. We call ourselves disciples of Jesus, but we may not understand exactly what being a disciple involves.

In the time when Jesus lived, the master-disciple relationship was a familiar one. It was the most common way to train or educate people for their life’s work, and it was very different from education today in the typical classroom.

To begin with, you would actually go to live with your master. There would be a much more personal connection than the average university student has with any of his professors. You would, in fact, be entering into a personal relation that would last for the rest of your life. The training you would get from your master would also be more personal than today’s student receives. It would include training in how to handle all the situations that arise in normal life. You would learn these things primarily by modeling yourself on your master. One of the purposes of living with him would be to watch how he handled various situations so that you could imitate him.

At the end of the process, when the master was satisfied that you were fully trained, he would commission you to do the things he had trained you to do.

### ***A different kind of master***

Jesus followed this model in his relationship with his disciples. They lived together. He gave them personal training, and the disciples modeled themselves on him. At a certain point, Jesus sent his disciples out to do the work he had

trained them for.

Yet being a disciple of Jesus involved – and still involves – something beyond discipleship to any other master. First of all, this particular master is not just another wise man. He is the Lord himself, the Son of God. Those who become Jesus' disciples become disciples of the Lord of all creation. Such a master expects of his disciples a personal loyalty and dedication that go beyond just getting some personal training.

The first disciples, of course, did not fully realize all this when they decided to follow Jesus. The gospels tell us that gradually over the course of Jesus' ministry they learned who he was and what he was asking of them. As we reflect on the things Jesus taught them about being disciples, we learn what it means to be disciples of Jesus today.

### ***If anyone would come after me***

One of the passages in the gospels that speaks most directly about being a disciple of Jesus is in the gospel of Mark:

“And he called to him the multitude with his disciples and said to them, ‘If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it’” (Mark 8: 34-35).

It is important to notice the context in which Jesus is speaking. The disciples have just witnessed the multiplication of the loaves and fishes; they have seen Jesus walk on water; they have seen him heal. They have begun to realize that they have something more than an ordinary master. When Jesus asks them, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answers, “You are the Christ” – in other words, the Messiah sent by God (Mark 8:29-30).

At that point, Jesus begins to teach his disciples what being the Messiah means. Contrary to what they and most Jews of their time believed about the Messiah coming as a glorious king, he said “the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31). The disciples are clearly taken aback; Peter even earns himself a strong rebuke when he takes his master aside to tell him not to say such things.

It is in this context, then, that Jesus calls together his disciples and the multitude, the whole crowd of people who followed him. Some of these followed him with belief and commitment, others just thought he was the most interesting thing they had seen in years.

To all these people Jesus says, “This is more serious than you realize. You cannot just tag along with me to benefit from my miracles and healings. That is not an option. If you want to follow me, it is going to involve commitment and some real cost.” He spells out what that cost will be: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” What are these three demands Jesus makes on his disciples?

### ***Let him deny himself***

The word we translate “deny” has a specific meaning as it is used in the New Testament. Along with the word “acknowledge,” it speaks of a particular kind of relationship. The meaning can be seen in Matthew’s Gospel, when Jesus says, “So every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 10:32-33).

In other words, when a disciple is brought before authorities who are hostile to Jesus, he has to say either, “Yes, I belong to this man,” or, as Peter would do during Jesus’ trial, “No, I don’t know him.” He either acknowledges or denies having a relationship with Jesus. In the same way in heaven when we stand before the judge of all, Jesus will either acknowledge or deny us. He will say, “Yes, he belongs to me,” or, “No, I don’t know this one.”

To deny one’s self, in this context, means more than what we sometimes talk about as works of self-denial – fasting or other kinds of personal sacrifice. It means to deny a certain relationship with one’s self. It’s saying, “I’m not my own man or my own woman. I don’t belong to myself; I’m not my own master. I belong to the Lord Jesus.”

## **Take up his cross**

When we read the words “take up his cross,” we understand them in terms of centuries of Christian spirituality that focuses on the cross of Jesus. A cross has come to mean for many any kind of suffering that we bear in union with the Lord. The disciples, to whom Jesus was speaking, however, did not yet attach any spiritual significance to the cross. They were familiar with it in only one context – as a common instrument of execution, like the gallows or electric chair today.

In fact the cross would have represented something far worse to them than what the electric chair represents to us. Crucifixion was a particularly painful, degrading kind of execution. The Romans reserved it as a punishment for the most serious crimes, especially the crime of rebellion against the government. When there was a rebellion in any part of the Roman Empire, the Romans would seize the people involved and hang them on crosses along the roads outside the cities of the region to make of them a warning. Usually they would have the upright pieces in place and make each prisoner carry the crossbar with him to the place of execution.

The Palestine of Jesus’ day was the scene of many uprisings, and we can easily imagine that Jesus and his disciples had walked along roads lined with crosses. And now Jesus tells them, “Take up your cross.” It is like saying, “If you are going to be my disciple, you might as well get ready for execution. You have to be ready to die for my cause, and to die a painful, degrading death. Go ahead and get your piece of wood and start carrying it, because that is what we are headed for.”

## **Follow me**

The disciples have already responded once to an invitation to follow Jesus. As disciples, they had walked behind their master in his journeys, as was the Jewish custom for disciples. But now they know how the journey will end. To follow Jesus means to share his fate, to die as he will die. This is no pleasant stroll or business trip. It is an all-or-nothing proposition. In saying, “Follow me,” Jesus is demanding of his disciples total dedication, total commitment, and an almost reckless disregard for their own lives.

It is the type of dedication expressed in the following letter, written not by a Christian but by a young man in Mexico who had recently become a Communist. He is explaining to his fiancée why he is breaking their engagement.

“We Communists have a high casualty rate. We’re the ones who get shot and hung and lynched and tarred and feathered and jailed and slandered and ridiculed, fired from our jobs, and in every other way made as uncomfortable as possible. A certain percentage of us get killed or imprisoned. We live in virtual poverty. We turn back to the party every penny we make above what is absolutely necessary to keep us alive.

“We Communists don’t have the time or the money for many movies or concerts or T-bone steaks or decent homes or new cars. We’ve been described as fanatics. We are fanatics. Our lives are dominated by one overshadowing factor: the struggle for world Communism.

“We Communists have a philosophy of life which no amount of money could buy. We have a cause to fight for, a definite purpose in life. We subordinate our petty, personal selves to a great movement of humanity, and if our personal lives seem hard or our egos seem to suffer through subordination to the party, then we are adequately compensated by the thought that each of us in his small way is contributing something new and true and better for mankind.

“There’s one thing about which I am in dead earnest, and that is the Communist cause.”

This young man followed his cause, Communism, with the dedication and seriousness which Jesus demanded of his disciples. The Christian cause, however, often lacks such disciples. There are not nearly enough people willing to leave the crowd and follow Jesus with total dedication.

## **The reward**

Even in Jesus’ time, there were people for whom the price of discipleship was too high. One was the rich young man

who asked Jesus the way to eternal life. Jesus said, “Sell all that you have and... come, follow me” (Luke 18:22). The rich man says, intelligently enough, that is a steep price; and he turns away.

Then Jesus’ disciples say, “Lord, we have given up everything. We are really on your side.” And Jesus says to them, “Truly, I say to you, there is no man who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God who will not receive manifold more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life” (Luke 18:29-30).

The Book of Revelation gives us a glimpse of the fulfillment of this promise (see Revelation 14:1-5). It speaks in picture language of a company of 144,000 who have the name of the Lamb and his Father written on their foreheads. One hundred forty-four thousand is a symbolic number, representing a vast multitude of God’s people. The name written on their heads is a seal, the sign of God’s protection. It is the way God says, “These belong to me.”

They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. In other words, they are the disciples, and they follow Jesus on his path. They are in the middle of the great final conflict, about to suffer persecution, but Jesus is with them.

This great company of disciples sings a new song, a heavenly song that they alone can learn. In the midst of the persecution they are able to sing the song of heaven. That is, they are able to experience the very life of heaven.

Only those who are truly disciples of Jesus can live the life of heaven here on earth. Only they can experience the protection of God and the Lamb in the midst of them as they deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him.



Steve Clark is President of the Sword of the Spirit. This article was originally published in *New Covenant Magazine*, June Issue, 1991.

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## Revelation in the Boundary Waters

*Grandmothers be warned and girls watch out for Amazon Woman!*

by Linda Luginbill

The Work of Christ Community, Lansing, Michigan, USA

I imagined an unspoiled wilderness filled with crystal clear lakes, waterfalls, and streams teeming with fish, wildlife, and fauna to dazzle the senses. No McDonalds or Pizza Hut in sight, or Krispy Kreme donut shops, in fact no stores, no roads, no cars, no bicycles, no shelters, no toilets, no showers, no hot water.

But I am not an extreme sports enthusiast nor am I inclined to attempt survival exercises in remote jungles, deserts, and wilderness parks. What was I getting myself into? How did I talk myself into joining a canoe camping trip in a remote nature preserve with 15 teenage girls and several adults?

I didn't exactly volunteer for this wilderness excursion. My husband and I were invited to come along as helpers on a Sword of the Spirit junior high school girls trip to the Boundary Waters Wilderness Canoe area in Minnesota. The Boundary Waters, located on the USA boundary with Canada, are a pristine, protected park with hundreds of lakes. Visitors must carry in (and out) everything to camp with, ideally leaving no trace of their visit.

Our friends and fellow community members Rick and Yvonne Comstock had organized the first trip several years ago. Rick had been taking junior-high-aged boys to the Rocky Mountains for a summer challenge excursion, and his wife thought a similar trip for the same aged girls would be good. They had done two Boundary Waters trips already when, in the planning stages of the third trip, one of the leader couples had to cancel.

Since it was rather last minute, they asked Dave and



Boundary Waters Wilderness Canoe Area in Minnesota



"Grandma" Linda, left center, with some of the teenage girls



Happy smiles after the trip - a total of 27 people, including 15 teenage girls, and adult leaders for the three expedition groups

me to accompany them on the ten-day trip, since we could get the time off work fairly easily. The park only allows nine people in any one campsite, and Rick and Yvonne like to have four adults or experienced young adults per group, with each group having at least one man. So we were part of the third group with five teenage girls.

At first, Dave and I said “no”, but then, after hearing a word from the Lord at a prayer meeting and both my husband and I getting the same message from the Lord independently to say “yes”, we signed on.

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