

# Whoever Wants to Follow Jesus

Luke 9:18-26 on September 10, 2023

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*Please read Luke 9:18-26 before going further in this transcript.*

Today's sermon title is "Whoever Wants to Follow Jesus." At first blush, this sounds fairly unassuming. It seems welcoming enough; the invitation is open to whoever wants to. However, when we read the context from which this sermon title is taken, we get some much-needed clarity as to the full ramifications of this invitation. Luke 9:23 says, "Then he [*that is, Jesus*] said to them ALL: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." So... **Whoever wants to follow Jesus must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow Him.** Verse 23 clarifies for us, that Jesus' invitation, while certainly open to "whomever," is not as unassuming as we might have first thought. When verse 23 mentions that Jesus said this "to them ALL," who exactly is included in the all? We can get some help here from the parallel passage in 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." So this "all" is all-inclusive: Jesus is speaking to everyone in the crowd, along with His closest disciples. So we don't need to wonder if maybe Jesus gave this as a limited challenge, just to the 12. Jesus' words: "whoever wants to be my disciple" were directed to anyone and everyone who was considering the possibility of following Him.<sup>1</sup> This begs the question: given Jesus' clarification here, of what it costs, how many of us still want to follow Him? When Jesus uses the word "must," He means that these things aren't optional. It's optional whether or not we follow, but if anyone wants to follow, then he or she must deny themselves and take up their cross.

At the time in history when Luke recorded these words, everyone had a vivid understanding of what the cross meant: death. The Roman government ruled with an iron fist. At a minimum, everyone in that day had at least heard about these brutal crucifixions. A good number of them had likely witnessed, in person, the actual horrors of crucifixion firsthand. They'd heard the screams of pain with their own ears, smelled the scent of blood and sweat with their own noses, and seen the battered bodies of those hanging on the cross with their very own eyes. It's difficult for us today to understand quite as fully, just how gripping Jesus' words must have been. Jesus' call, to take up their cross daily, was a call to suffer daily, and to willingly take up this reminder of their death daily. It must have been absolutely *stunning* to Jesus' early disciples when He first said these words. Now Jesus doesn't force anyone to take up their cross; He doesn't personally put it on anyone's shoulders except His own. But He does require that His followers must personally take up their own cross, their own death, in order to follow Him. Taking up our cross is a daily decision; it's done

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to William Hendriksen for pointing this out in *The Gospel of Luke*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1978, bottom of p. 497.

voluntarily, and intentionally, fueled by our love and devotion to Christ.<sup>2 3 4 5</sup> And since taking up our cross is something that's done daily, that means that there may be some days when we're tempted to skip it, or to leave our cross at home, so that we can go to work or school or play, without it reminding us of the life to which we're called. But as we continue becoming more deeply devoted followers of Jesus, we realize that we really shouldn't take any days off, in our walk with Christ. Our Lord and Savior is worthy of our deepest devotion; He is worthy of our daily diligence to serve Him above all other things.<sup>6</sup>

For most of this year, we've been studying the book of Romans. We've been enjoying a deep dive into the gospel, learning more about what the gospel truly is, and what it is not. One of the things that we need to recognize about the gospel, is that it has significant implications for our daily lives.<sup>7</sup>

> The gospel is filled with incredible PROMISES of hope and life, for this life and for the life to come.

> The gospel is also filled with incredible EXPECTATIONS for how a Christ-follower ought to live, how we ought to steward our lives.

Jesus makes His expectations abundantly clear in Luke 9:23, "Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." Jesus doesn't just say, whoever wants to go to heaven and avoid hell. Nor does He say whoever wants to get together once a week for some nice music and an encouraging message. No, what Jesus says is... "whoever wants to be my disciple," "whoever wants to follow me." Following Jesus comes not only with many benefits and blessings, but also with a great cost.

In fact, the immediate context for Jesus laying out this expectation is found in the immediately preceding verse. In Luke 9:22 Jesus says, "...The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."<sup>8</sup> And while just about everyone in the world would be delighted to identify themselves with being raised to

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<sup>2</sup> See discussion by William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1978, p. 498.

<sup>3</sup> To be clear, Jesus expands the meaning of the crucifixion in His day beyond just the literal physical punishment and death, to include more broadly daily self-denial, and losing one's life for the sake of Christ.

<sup>4</sup> This daily, continual action is not emphasized as explicitly in the parallel accounts in Matthew 16:21-28 and Mark 8:31-9:1. *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1723 footnote on Luke 9:23.

<sup>5</sup> I appreciate how William Hendriksen says it: "He must be willing to say with Paul, 'Such things that once were gains to me these have I counted loss for Christ....' See Philippians 3:7-11." *The Gospel of Luke*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1978, top of p. 498.

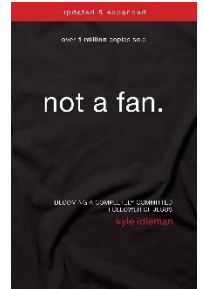
<sup>6</sup> Now, perhaps it goes without saying, but it's vital that we note two key distinctives that make this kind of devotion even possible. First of all, we must be genuinely saved and transformed into a new creation through our faith in Jesus Christ. We must first trust in the finished work of Christ on the cross for our salvation, and be declared righteous by God Himself. Secondly, we must have the Holy Spirit living inside of us. We need Him to make it possible for us to navigate the process of daily sanctification. If we try to follow Jesus in our own strength, we'll fall short every time, and we'll end up in frustration and despair. So it's a combination of our personal responsibility to take up our cross daily, and our complete reliance on God's Spirit to help us carry out Jesus' discipleship commands. See discussion by William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1978, p. 498.

<sup>7</sup> Read the inspiring article by Rev. Aaron L. Garriott in the July Tabletalk magazine, p. 60, "Improve Your Baptism."

<sup>8</sup> After explicitly predicting His own impending physical death in verse 22, in verse 23, Jesus then teaches His disciples that they are expected to take up their cross daily.

eternal life, not as many of us will fully embrace an identification with His suffering, and rejection, and death. We've seen this gospel distinctive highlighted multiple times throughout our journey through the book of Romans: we share in both His glory and His suffering.<sup>9</sup>

One of the most impactful teaching curriculums that I ever used as a youth pastor was a series called, "Not a Fan," by Pastor Kyle Idleman. In fact, the series was so good that I recently bought his updated book and I'm reading through it again as part of my personal quiet times. In Pastor Kyle's book he uses an engaging combination of witty illustrations<sup>10</sup>, real-life testimonies, and solid Bible teaching to make his readers really think. His main point is that there's a vital difference between just being a FAN of Jesus, and being a sold-out, all-in, deeply devoted FOLLOWER of Jesus. In the introduction to his book, Pastor Kyle points out an essential truth: "it wasn't the size of the crowd Jesus cared about; it was their level of commitment."<sup>11 12</sup> Later in the book, Kyle goes on to define a fan as an enthusiastic admirer: "It's the guy who goes to the football game with no shirt and a painted chest. He sits in the stands and cheers for his team.... But he's never in the game. He never breaks a sweat or takes a hard hit in the open field.... He yells and cheers, but nothing is really required of him. There is no sacrifice he has to make.... He is an enthusiastic admirer.... But Jesus was never interested in having fans. When he defines what kind of relationship he wants, 'enthusiastic admirer' isn't an option. [Kyle goes on...] My concern is that [in] many of our churches in America... every week all the fans come to the stadium where they cheer for Jesus but have no interest in truly following him. The biggest threat to the church today is fans who call themselves Christians but aren't actually interested in following Christ. The want to be close enough to Jesus to get all the benefits, but not so close that it requires anything from them."<sup>13 14</sup>



Friend, there's nothing carnal, casual, or nominal, about Christianity. An in-depth study of what the Bible actually says about discipleship reveals that Christ-followers are

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<sup>9</sup> For example, consider Romans 8:17 and following.

<sup>10</sup> Although I admit that a number of his illustrations are outdated for anyone under about 35 years old. :)

<sup>11</sup> Kyle Idleman, *Not a Fan Updated & Expanded*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2016, p. 13. He goes on to say, "what it really means to follow Jesus [is]... more about repentance than forgiveness, more about surrender than salvation, more about brokenness than happiness, and more about death than about life." Kyle Idleman, *Not a Fan Updated & Expanded*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2016, pp. 14-15.

<sup>12</sup> Read John 6:25-71, and especially note verse 66, "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him."

<sup>13</sup> Kyle Idleman, *Not a Fan Updated & Expanded*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2016, pp. 24-25.

<sup>14</sup> One thing you never see in the New Testament is Jesus trying to make following Him convenient or trouble-free. (Although Jesus does offer us a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light - see Matthew 11:28-30). The fact is, later on in Luke 9, verses 57-62 describe the high cost of following Jesus, "As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.'" 58 Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." 59 He said to another man, "Follow me." But he replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." 60 Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." 61 Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family." 62 Jesus replied, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

intended to be a remarkably *distinctive* people.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately though, some approaches to Christianity promote a sort of “easy believism,” which pitifully waters down what it truly means to be a sold-out follower of Jesus Christ. Too many churches have been lowering the bar for far too long. The awe-inspiring devotion and purity of following Jesus, has been cheapened into something that first-century followers of Christ wouldn’t even be able to recognize.<sup>16</sup> <sup>17</sup> A recent article in *The Atlantic* seems to be asking the right question: “What if the problem isn’t that churches are asking too much of their members, but that they aren’t asking nearly enough?”<sup>18</sup>

Jesus further explains what He means in verse 23 by going into greater detail in the following three verses:<sup>19</sup> **Following Jesus means...**

**1 We need to lose our lives for Jesus.** In Luke 9:24 He says, “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.” What does it mean to *lose* our lives? For some of us, it may mean literal martyrdom, but for most of us, it means surrendering our own will and our own selfish ambitions. It means giving up our prideful choices and submitting ourselves to God’s will. It means being like Jesus, by taking on the very nature of a servant, putting the needs and interests of others before our own.<sup>20</sup> According to Jesus’ own words, we save our lives by losing them in this way. By taking the gospel to heart, and putting into practice.<sup>21</sup> Following Jesus also means...

**2 We need to beware of this world’s distractions.** In Luke 9:25 He asks, “What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?” “Gaining the whole world” has to do with the temporary things that this world has to offer: pleasure and power, fame and fortune. Any of the worldly gains that we may come to own and enjoy, even in great quantities, or of the most luxurious quality, can only be temporary and short-lived. So what good are they really, if they cause us to forfeit our very selves? Last week Pastor Eric preached a timely message on Mary and Martha, and the importance of prioritizing our discipleship. He pointed out the warning from Luke 10 that we not allow ourselves to be distracted by lesser things. Instead, we need to choose the good. (*If you missed that message, I highly recommend that you go into our sermon archives and give it a listen.*<sup>22</sup>) Thirdly, following Jesus means...

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<sup>15</sup> For some reason 1 Peter 2:9 sticks in my head from the *King James Version*, “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.”

<sup>16</sup> Consider Acts 5:40-42.

<sup>17</sup> In the words of Timothy Keller: “American Christianity is due for a revival.” Read his article at <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/02/christianity-secularization-america-renewal-modernity/672948/>

<sup>18</sup> Read Jake Meador’s full article at <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/07/christian-church-community-participation-drop/674843/>

<sup>19</sup> Note the *English Standard Version* translation of Luke 9:24-26. Verses 24-26 all begin with the word “for” in the original Greek, so they essentially form 3 bullet points which further explain what Jesus means in verse 23 by following Him. See William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1978, pp. 498-499.

<sup>20</sup> See Philippians 2:1-8.

<sup>21</sup> Consider Mark 8:35, “loses their life for me and for the gospel.”

<sup>22</sup> Pastor Douglas also preached a great sermon from Luke’s Gospel the week before Pastor Eric. Both of these messages are available at <https://efcbemidji.org/sermons/sermon-list/>.

**3 We need to be unashamed of Christ and His words.** In Luke 9:26 Jesus states it directly, “Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.”<sup>23</sup> <sup>24</sup> <sup>25</sup> Our love and devotion to Christ is not meant to be kept secret.<sup>26</sup> It’s not meant to be compartmentalized so that we only let it show on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights. Romans 1:16 comes to mind,<sup>27</sup> “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes....”

Many of us took a break from serving during the covid pandemic. And during that break many of us realized that we were pretty tired from serving faithfully for so many years. But Brother or Sisters in Christ, there is further gospel work to be done. There is further maturing needed in our own personal discipleship and there is further need for us to serve in the discipleship of others. Break time is over!<sup>28</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 calls us to action, “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”

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<sup>23</sup> In Luke 12:8-9 Jesus says, “I tell you, whoever publicly acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God. 9 But whoever disowns me before others will be disowned before the angels of God.” “The same Greek word is used in Peter’s denial” in Luke 22:34 and 22:61, “denied” and “disowned” (*NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1730 footnote on Luke 12:9). Clearly this is something we can potentially recover from though, see John 21:15-19.

<sup>24</sup> See Mark 8:38. “Those who are more concerned about fitting into and pleasing their own ‘adulterous and sinful generation’ than about following and pleasing Christ will have no part in God’s kingdom.” *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1671 footnote on Mark 8:38.

<sup>25</sup> See 2 Timothy 2:11-13, but also consider Matthew 7:21.

<sup>26</sup> I can’t help but think of the classic Newsboys song, “God is Not a Secret to be Kept.” Read the lyrics here:

<https://www.google.com/search?q=god+is+not+a+secret+lyrics> Listen here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaRFFE\lhbl>

<sup>27</sup> Luke 9:26 and Romans 1:16 use the same Greek word: ἐπαισχύνομαι “to experience a painful feeling or sense of loss of status because of some particular event or activity, be ashamed.” (William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 357.)

<sup>28</sup> It’s been said that ships are safe in harbor, but that’s not what ships are for.