



Following Jesus in the Age of Twitter

The average Twitter account has 709 followers, a statistic which means ... well, almost nothing. Why? Because Twitter requires no relationship. Communication involves only 140-character tweets. If a person tweets a command, none of his 709 followers are required to obey. On Twitter, inviting someone to “follow me” means little.

But in Jesus’ world, “Follow me” meant much more. “Follow me” meant, “Be my disciple” and being a disciple changed everything. A disciple went where the teacher went, ate what the teacher ate, and did what the teacher did. Following Jesus required total commitment.

Mark 1:16-3:12 records Jesus’ early ministry in Galilee. Mark alternates accounts of the teaching and miracles of Jesus with his call of the disciples. Imagine an itinerant teacher, walking through the small villages of Galilee, preaching and healing people and occasionally approaching someone with the invitation, “Follow me. Be my disciple.” How would you respond?

Following this call, Peter, Andrew, James, and John will spend three years with Jesus. Little by little, they will learn what it means to be a disciple. They will learn that discipleship is more than a one-time commitment. It is more than singing “I have decided to follow Jesus” at the end of a powerful sermon. It is a daily surrender to his will.

As the time of His death draws near, Jesus teaches a lesson about the cost of discipleship. Following Peter’s great confession of faith, “You are the Christ,” Jesus begins to teach about his coming suffering. Jesus knows that Peter does not truly understand what it meant to say, “You are the Christ.”

To disciples who expected the Messiah to reign in power and authority, a suffering Christ was incomprehensible. They thought they were following the one who would overthrow Rome; they could not imagine that they were following the one who would be killed by Rome.

Jesus tells his disciples that he will suffer, be killed, and then rise again. Mark 8:32 says, “*He said this plainly.*” Thirty years later, as Peter shares this memory with John Mark, he says, “He said this plainly. I should have understood! He tried to warn me, but I was too dense to understand!” Instead, Peter has the audacity to call Jesus aside and rebuke him for his pessimism.

Then, Jesus says something that is even more shocking. “*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*” (8:34). Not only will I suffer and die, but all of you who follow me will suffer and die.

A Roman cross was not a religious symbol, a church decoration, a tie pin, or a bumper sticker. No one in the first century would have said, "I suppose my irritable husband/ cranky neighbor/ ingrown toenail is my cross to bear." A Roman cross was for one purpose only: putting people to death in the most painful means possible. What Peter would have heard Jesus say is, "If you want to follow me, you will die."

But then Jesus adds, "Do a cost-benefit analysis. In one column, list the cost: your life. In the other column, list the benefit: your soul. *What can a man give in return for his soul?*" The salvation of one's eternal soul is worth any price!

The gospel of Mark is a record of Peter's memories of Jesus' ministry. John Mark was not among the twelve disciples. But late in Peter's life, Mark traveled with the Apostle and recorded his stories about Jesus. This record became the source material for the Gospel of Mark.

As I read Mark 8, I picture Peter talking to Mark. As Peter remembers what Jesus said about the cost of discipleship, perhaps he began to weep. Surely as he narrated these words, Peter remembered that just a few weeks after Jesus' warning, Peter faced his own "cross." When a servant girl said, "You were with the Nazarene, Jesus" (Mk 14:67), Peter chose to deny Jesus instead of denying himself and taking up his cross.

As he listened to Peter, perhaps John Mark probably remembered his own failure. He had traveled with Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey. Coming from a well-to-do family, John Mark found traveling with Paul too difficult. When the cost grew too high, John Mark went home (Acts 13:13).

Thankfully, there is a coda to both stories! Peter's story does not end with his denial of Jesus. After the resurrection, Jesus restores Peter and commissions him to "Feed my sheep." Peter will preach for the next thirty years before he is arrested and crucified. This time he does not deny Christ. He faces the cross knowing, "*After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you*" (1 Pet 5:10). Peter's suffering will last "a little while," but his enjoyment of God's glory will be "eternal."

Likewise, Mark's story does not end with his failure. Barnabas takes John Mark as his assistant and disciples him. Later, John Mark serves both Peter and Paul. Thirty-five years after his disgraceful failure, Mark is serving as Bishop of the church in Alexandria Egypt. A group of idolaters is enraged when some of their members are converted and leave idol-worship. They grab Mark, tie a rope around his neck, and drag him through the streets until he is dead. This time, Mark does not give up. This time, John Mark faces death with the confidence that the eternal reward is well worth the short-term cost of discipleship.

And that brings us to today... Jesus is still looking for followers. Real, sincere, dedicated followers. Not Twitter-style followers, but men and women who commit to following Jesus no matter the cost. Will you be a disciple?