

# I Really Can't (Choose Not To) Follow

From the series: God in the Mirror of a Human Face

*Text: Mark 8:34; 1 Peter 2:21*

Richard A. Rhem  
Christ Community Church  
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*Transcription of the spoken sermon*

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My contention: We must get Jesus right, the historical Jesus, because Jesus' face is the human face that mirrors the nature and character of God. If we get Jesus right, we will get God right, and if we get God right, we will be right. The God we imagine and worship determines the kind of people we become. In the Gospels we have two very different images of God:

That of John the Baptist who, with many of his contemporaries, was living in the expectation of the dramatic in-breaking of God to end the world as it was organized, a world of oppression under the heel of Imperial Rome. God would come in fiery judgment to throw down the social structures of oppression and human abuse; the wicked would be burned as chaff, the righteous established in God's kingdom of righteousness. That final solution involved God in counter-violence to the violence that God's people had suffered from imperial power.

Though beginning with John, at some point Jesus distanced himself from John, moved north to Galilee and inaugurated a ministry of grace whose keynote was the nearness of God to all, the unbrokered presence of God accessible to all, symbolized in the open table, the shared meal. Jesus' vision was not apocalyptic; it was, to use the designation of John Dominic Crossan, "ethical eschatology."

Jesus, like John, believed the normal way the world was organized and run was fundamentally wrong, for the organizing principle was power - political, military, economic, religious— *power* that, said Jesus, is not reflective of the nature and character of God, nor of God's intention for Creation.

*Not Power, but Justice.* But not simply justice: rather, *non-violent justice*; that was the key.

John wanted justice, too, and he wanted God to level the playing field any way God could - let wrath roar, but square the accounts of the world.

Not so Jesus; *he came to see that justice by coercion fails to create a new world.* "One convinced against one's will is of the same opinion still," claims the old adage.

As we gather, an emergency meeting of the Defense and Security people in Washington are gathering with the President about the situation in Kosovo. What are you guessing will be the decision? How would you make the call?

Here is one of those terribly difficult decisions that this government is called on to make - not alone, of course - but nonetheless as the lone superpower. I mention that because, should we take military action, we may avert a human slaughter, diminish human suffering, halt an aggressor. Force can do that. But will we change anything? There would be service to some semblance of justice, but a coerced semblance of justice holds in check a greater evil while failing utterly to effect the kind of transformation that is reflective of the world order that was envisioned by Jesus.

Jesus went another way - *the way of non-violent protest*. He did that in a very concrete cultural situation - in rural Galilee under Roman rule. Commercialization was driving peasant farmers off their land. He did not need to call those who followed him to leave all. They had lost all. And if on occasion a person of wealth inquired about what he should do to enter the kingdom of which Jesus spoke, he said, "Sell all, give it away and follow me if you want to be part of this movement. Get out of the system; let your known, familiar world cease to be and join us in a "companionship of empowerment." That's Crossan's descriptive term, not teacher-disciple. That would still be a structure of domination, not a fellowship of equality.

The best example I can give you in our century is Gandhi, who recognized that somehow or other British rule in India was focused around salt and the fabric industry. Remember Gandhi's march to the sea? Well, they began to make their own salt and they began to spin their own cotton, and when a mass of people opt out of the way a world is running, that world collapses, it breaks down. You remember in the film the moment when the masses were there in front of the British guns and the guns began to bark and then had to be called off, because any oppressor with a modicum of humanity cannot just mow down human beings. Unfortunately, our world has known instances of those who could do that, but anyone with a grain of humanity within cannot simply gun down a mass of people who offer their bodies because they will no longer play the game that way.

That's really, I think, what Jesus was about, and if our world had known more people who would have followed the radicality of Jesus such as a Gandhi, our world just might be farther along in this emerging evolutionary movement toward humanization.

Oh, it's not easy - I really can't follow, nor can I choose not to follow. That's the Lenten dilemma, when I'm faced starkly with Jesus' call to take up my cross. To take up my cross is not to buy a bathrobe and sandals and give away everything I have and go out on the street. That's imitating Jesus in a literalistic fashion and it makes no sense.

Let me be clear - following Jesus is always a culturally specific action. It is an action in light of my concrete situation. It is not the imitation of Jesus; it is doing what Jesus would do, were Jesus in my shoes, for Jesus' enemies are not my enemies, and Jesus' concrete instances of injustice are not mine. I've got to determine what it means to follow Jesus in an economy where the stock market is nudging 10,000. I have to determine what following in Jesus' steps means in a world that is driven into consumerism by PR, advertising firms that encourage me to acquisition. I have to learn what following Jesus means in a world that is under threat of pollution, a world that is marked still by terrible racism that obtrudes itself occasionally in the disastrous brutality of the police slayings of recent times. I have to decide what it means to follow Jesus in a world of gay bashing and neo-Nazi manifestation. I have to decide what it means to follow Jesus in a world where the most shrill voice and meanest spirit - I say in the presence of God - I find in the representatives of the religious right. That's how I have to determine the shape of following in his steps, and it's not easy. It's very complex.

The Church should have known long before it did that it belonged on the side of the civil rights struggle of the sixties, of the feminist issue in the recent decades, and the present era of homophobia. The Church should know long before it finally comes kicking and dragging into the kingdom where it ought to be on issues like that. But, it's not always clear.

I can never get through Lent without going to my dear Bonhoeffer who was convinced in his heart of hearts that Jesus called us to non-violence, who was essentially himself a pacifist, and yet who left the safety of this country in 1939 returning to Germany, finally to be joined up by a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler, a conspiracy which failed and which resulted in his incarceration and his martyrdom. Eduard Bethke, his biographer, was asked when he came to this country on a speaking tour how Bonhoeffer, with his convictions about pacifism, could have gotten involved in that violent solution, and Bethke said, "What do you do when someone is going up and down the street killing people?"

It's not easy, you see. Because we live not in the kingdom of God. It has dawned, but it has not fully arrived and, consequently, there's light and shadow and it's all intertwined and we are all caught up in it, all heavily invested in the way things are. There are often situations that are not clear-cut, and we need to be patient with one another and in conversation with one another. But finally, finally I am called to follow in his steps because I do believe that the heart of God is mirrored in the face of Jesus. I believe that what Jesus was about is what God was about

and that it has cosmic, historical, human implications all the way down the line. The possibility of the realization, the dream of God, that dream of a human community, of humane existence, of the humanization of society - that that is what Jesus was about because he believed that was what God was about and I do believe that is the grain of the universe moving that way.

But God, with infinite patience, waits. Not full of wrath ready to bubble over, saying to us, "It's your only possibility. Power won't do it. Violence, even my violence, will defeat the very purpose with which I said 'Let there be ...' I only wait until finally here and there, now and again, someone catches the dream, the vision, the impossible dream for this world that I love, and I can imagine that when Jesus moved from Gethsemane to the judgment hall, he might well have written the words from *The Man of La Mancha* –

To dream the impossible dream,  
to fight the unbeatable foe,  
to bear with unbearable sorrow,  
to run where the brave dare not go.

To right the unrightable wrong,  
to love pure and chaste from afar,  
to try when your arms are too weary,  
to reach the unreachable star.

This is my quest:  
to follow that star,  
no matter how hopeless,  
no matter how far.

to fight for the right  
without question or pause,  
to be willing to march into hell  
for a heavenly cause!

And I know, if I'll only be true  
to this glorious quest,  
that my heart will lie peaceful and calm  
when I'm laid to my rest.

And the world will be better for this:  
That one man, scorned and covered with scars,  
still strove with his last ounce of courage  
to reach the unreachable stars! (Joe Darton) –

because God so loved the world.