

“Take It Up and Follow”

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We live in a day of "casual Christianity." Someone recently said that the average church could drop one fourth of its members from the membership roll and neither the church nor the dropped members would notice any difference. Casual Christians are those who want to be numbered among the Flock, but could care less about following the Shepherd. They want the forgiveness the cross of Christ brings but never intend to carry their own cross. They want warm, fuzzy moments on Sunday mornings but offer no commitment to Jesus on Monday mornings. In short, they want the crown without the cross.

Open to Matthew 16. This is truly a sad commentary on what has happened to faith in so many lives. Verses 24-26, *“Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone 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, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?”*

Jesus says if you’re going to *“come after me”* here’s what you have to do. True disciples are called to lay something down, to deny themselves. It’s important to understand that Jesus doesn’t mean what we usually think of as “self-denial.” By this we usually mean that we’re giving up something. It’s like how some Christian’s observe Lent, perhaps by giving up a bad habit, or something important.

My Detroit neighbor said every year on Ash Wednesday talking about denial for Lent, *“I’m going to give up eating watermelon!”* Watermelon in February in Detroit just doesn’t happen! That’s not what Jesus talking is about. He’s not only concerned with what we do, but even more importantly who we are! He’s not talking about denying ourselves luxuries, but about “denying self” with is entirely different. It sounds hard because it is!

I have a book on my desk a member gave me to read called *“Not a Fan”* by Kyle Idleman God isn’t looking for fans but for true followers! Listen to what he says about those who want to follow Jesus, but don’t want to follow Him too closely.

“One way fans try to follow Jesus without denying themselves is by compartmentalizing the areas of their lives they don’t want him to have access to. They try to negotiate the terms of the deal. ‘I’ll follow Jesus, but I’m not going to sell my possessions. Don’t ask me to forgive the people who hurt me; they don’t deserve that. Don’t ask me to give a percentage of my money; I worked hard for that cash.’ And instead of following Jesus with their financial life, they follow Money magazine. In their relationships, instead of Jesus they follow Oprah. In their sex lives, instead of following Jesus, they follow Cosmo. They follow Jesus, just not with every area of their lives.”

True Disciples are called to pick something up. *“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him take up his cross.”* Your cross isn’t your difficulties, your health or the bad situations you face in life. We say “that’s my cross,” but it isn’t! That’s not what Jesus meant.

Open to Philippians 2. The cross isn’t just a place of suffering, it’s a place of death! Verses 5-8, *“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be*

grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

We're called upon to take up our cross, and follow Jesus. We're not to back out, turn around, or lay down the cross. We're to die on that cross, just like Jesus did, giving His all for us!

True disciples are called to live something out. Jesus is calling us to follow Him day after day. To be a disciple of Jesus is to be continually following Him. It's a way of life. It's your pattern for living.

If a disciple is a "follower" it means they're willing to be led. We need to be willing to be led into places that we don't understand; even places that are dark and scary and even painful and unpleasant; because we trust and follow Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd!

The call to follow Jesus requires much. Following Him Requires Complete Commitment. When we commit to something, we make a promise to do it. To follow means more than blindly playing "follow the leader". Follow means, "To go after, to pursue, to abide by."

Philippians 3:14 says, *"I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."* God gives the "press on power", through the Holy Spirit. He's telling us to commit to keep pressing on!

Following Him Requires Absolute Obedience. Romans 6:16 asks us the question, *"Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?"*

God has a plan for our lives. I don't believe things happen in our lives accidentally. Remember, "God's never taken by surprise." His plan's fulfilled when we're obedient to Him. When we obey God, we're slaves to Him. When we're disobedient, we're slaves to sin. It's just that simple!

To follow Him means we're obedient to His Word, His voice, and to His plan. Jeremiah 29:11, *"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."*

Look at Jesus even in the Garden of Gethsemane. He prayed, *"Not my will, but Thy will be done."* He was obedient even to death.

Following Jesus Requires Personal Sacrifice. Our priority must be in fulfilling the plan of God in our lives. That means we might not get to do some of the things we want to do in life. Being a true "disciple," or "follower of Christ," takes sacrifice. God's calling us to make sacrifices—sacrifices in our time, in our talents, in our giving, in our relationships, in every area of our lives.

Are we willing to do that today? Are you willing to lay down your life and deny yourself? Are you willing to pick up your cross and follow Him? Are you willing to live your life in such a way that everything you say and do gives glory to Jesus Christ?

Take up your cross! Be willing to stand firm in your faith! Follow the King of kings and Lord of lords, Jesus Christ! Trust Him with all your heart! He'll never let you down! He's always there!