

ARE YOU A COMMITTED FOLLOWER OF JESUS CHRIST?

By Paul R. Shockley

~ Mark 8:34

INTRODUCTION:

“Many years ago a small Jewish boy asked his father, “Why must we surrender our Jewish faith and start to attend Lutheran services here in Germany? The father replied, “Son, we must abandon our faith so that people will accept us and support our business adventures!” The young lad never got over his disappointment and bitterness. His faith in his father and in his religion was crushed. When the lad left Germany he went to England to study at the British Museum where he formed his philosophies for life. From those intensive investigations he wrote a book that changed the world called, “*The Communist Manifesto*.” From that book one-third of the world fell under the spell of Marxist-Leninist ideology. The name of that little boy was Karl Marx. He influenced billions into a stream that for 70 years ruined, imprisoned and confused many lives. Today, that system of thinking is crumbling, but only after people got a good look at its tragic consequences. The influence of this father’s hypocrisy multiplied in infamy. Without godly faith, all of us are subject to distortions in our perspectives (*Net Bible.Org*)”

Ladies and gentlemen, our commitments in life reveal our true convictions, and those convictions formulate our life’s story, and impact the legacy we leave behind to our children.

Consider a Barna Survey conducted this year (www.Barna.org)

Barna group says that most American adults consider themselves to be not merely “religious,” but “deeply spiritual.” That’s the claim of 62% of all adults interviewed in the annual religious tracking survey conducted by The Barna Group, of Ventura, California. However, when the religious and spiritual commitments of Americans were studied more closely, those outcomes question the meaning of being “deeply spiritual.”

In particular, the research discovered that when adults were asked to identify their single, most important priority in their life these days, commitment to their faith placed second – but was listed by just one out of every six people.

The survey also noted that among those who say their faith has ‘greatly transformed’ their life, just one out of four positioned their faith practices and pursuits as their highest life priority.

Barna notes that the relationship between people’s perception of their religious commitment and their reticence to make faith their top priority points to a significant disconnect.

Barna says: “Spirituality is in vogue in our society today,” he commented. “It is popular to claim to be part of a ‘faith community’ or to have a spiritual commitment. But what do Americans mean when they claim to be ‘spiritual?’ The recent Grammy awards were perhaps indicative of this breakdown between self-perception and reality. The members of the group that won the award for best song thanked God for the victory then immediately followed with profanities that had to be bleeped from the broadcast. It seems as if God is in, but living for God is not. Many Americans are living a dual life – one filled with good feelings about God and faith, corroborated by some simple religious practices, and another in which they believe they are in control of their own destiny and operates apart from Him.”

In another survey from this year, Barna notes: Among evangelicals, 1 out of 5 believers firmly believes that a congregational church is a critical element in their spiritual growth.

Only 57% of evangelicals strongly affirm that they are committed to personally making the world and other people’s lives better.

“These figures emphasize how soft people’s commitment to God is,” Barna explained. “Americans are willing to expend some energy in religious activities such as attending church and reading the Bible, and they are willing to throw some money in the offering basket. Because of such activities, they convince themselves that they are people of genuine faith. But when it comes time to truly establishing their priorities and making a tangible commitment to knowing and loving God, and to allowing Him to change their character and lifestyle, most people stop short. We want to be ‘spiritual’ and we want to have God’s favor, but we’re not sure we want Him taking control of our lives and messing with the image and outcomes we’ve worked so hard to produce.”

But I have don’t have to look to Barna but my own life to determine how soft my commitment is to God. In fact, as I looked into the faces and heard the stories of those dear Christians as we studied the Gospel of Mark together in my recent mission experience in Indonesia governed by Islamic law, I saw and heard what commitment to Jesus Christ really means. And so it is from my experience there that I would like to share my observations of Jesus words regarding what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of Mark. Afterwards, I will consider how we should then live in view of this passage, and offer a conclusion.

CONTEXT:

The Gospel of Mark may be summarized in one statement: Mark was written to show that Jesus, as the Christ and the Son of God, was also the Son of Man who came to serve, suffer, and die (10:45).

It is in a growing setting of hostility and opposition in Jesus’ earthly ministry that we find Jesus speaking these words Although He had previously hinted at His death (John 2:19; 3:14), Mark 8 is the first time that Jesus clearly taught His disciples that He was going to die and be raised from the dead. (See 9:30–32; 10:32–34.). In fact, three times in the Gospel of Mark does Jesus offer a predictive prophecy, what we call a passion prediction, involves a prediction his suffering, death, and which may also include the resurrection. But one of the most interesting aspects of these passion predictions is what immediately follows. In every case where a prediction is made regarding his suffering, dying, and or/ resurrection, it immediately follows with teaching regarding what it means to be a committed follower of Jesus Christ:

1st Passion Prediction is 8:31-33; Requirements of discipleship, 8:34-9:1;

2nd Passion Prediction is 9:30-32; Pitfalls of Discipleship, 9:33-50; Lessons Concerning Self-Sacrifice, 10:1-31.

3rd Passion Prediction is 3rd Passion Prediction; 10:32-34; Jesus’ Teaching about Serving, is 10:35-45.

Following his first passion prediction, Jesus summons the crowd with the apostles and in Mark 8:34 Jesus makes the following statement:

*“Whoever desires to come after Me,
Let him deny himself, and take up his cross,
and follow Me.” ~ Mark 8:34*

EXPOSITION:

I. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A FOLLOWER OF JESUS CHRIST?

From this context we are able to make the following four observations:¹

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe’s *Expository Outlines on the New Testament*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1997, c1992, S. 123. I am indebted to Wiersbe’s insights on this portion.

1. Jesus addressed both the crowds and the disciples. This is reaffirmed in stating “*Whoever desires.*” The conditional sentence implies that there were those people who had the desire to follow Jesus Christ. By using the word “*whoever*” makes the invitation to discipleship is both personal and open to anyone. To be sure, this invitation is not a reference to salvation but commitment.
 - a. This word “**desires**” *thelō* (θέλω) is present tense, infinitive verb and denotes a continuing desire to follow him. The emphasis on “*desires*” implies being consciously willingness to accompany Christ.
 - b. “**Come**” is *erchomai* (έρχομαι). This word is also used in John 5:40 where our Lord speaks of the fact that certain people will not come to Him that they might have life. The word is used here in the sense of becoming a disciple of Jesus, one who follows His instruction and enters into His fellowship. Likewise, to come after Jesus means to become His disciple, follow His teachings, and enter into His fellowship discipleship. Once again, the reference is not to salvation but discipleship.
 - c. The word “**follow**” (*akoloutheō*; third person, singular, present, active, imperative) in Mark 8:34 is a command to be a disciple. This implies that the follower will immediately let go of his or her former activities and embrace the priorities, plans, purposes, and skills of the one whom he or she is going to follow; the leader is the teacher and the follower is the pupil who seeks to walk in the ways of His master. This same nuance is used in Mark 1:18 when “*they immediately left their nets and followed him.*”

2. Jesus establishes three conditions for becoming a disciple. The first two conditions are decisive actions whereas the third emphasizes a continuing commitment. Let’s take a closer look at those obligatory conditions if one is to consider being a committed follower of Jesus Christ:

- a. **The first condition:** “*Let him deny himself*” *aparneomai* (ἀπαρνεομαι). When used with the reflexive pronoun as it is here, it means “to forget one’s self, lose sight of one’s self and one’s interests.” The verb is ingressive aorist, speaking of entrance into a new state or condition. It is “Let him at once begin to lose sight of himself and his own interests; it is a definite act that abandons, discards, and relinquishes the claims of self as no longer the supreme object of regard. In fact, the aorist imperative stipulates this act as an obligation or responsibility. In other words, disciple must no longer make his own interests and desires the supreme concern of his life. He must “turn away” from the idolatry of self-centeredness.
- b. **The second condition:** “*And take of up cross*” is an aorist imperative which again demands the acceptance of the cross as a definite act. I wonder how present His own cross must have been to Christ’s vision, since the thought is introduced here, though He had not spoken of it, in foretelling His own death!!

To be sure, it is not Christ’s cross that we have to take up. His sufferings stand alone, incapable of repetition; but each follower has his one to bear. Nevertheless, as Charles Ryrie states, “this reference to a cross needed no explanation, for the Jews had seen thousands of their countrymen crucified by the Romans. Allegiance even to death is demanded of Christ’s followers.” *Ryrie Study Bible*, 1531.

“The reference is not to the common sufferings experienced in life but to that shame and suffering which the disciple assumes because of his love- relationship, his or her identity to Jesus.” In other words, it is a willingness to suffer for Jesus even if it costs us everything. What commitment! The one who is volunteering be a disciple is committing himself to a

predisposition that will never give in, let up, give up, let go, or be compromised. The allegiance Christ is asking is unwavering-no matter the circumstance. The world will reject you for turning to Jesus and following him. Lastly, may I say, there is a certain irony here; there is pain in slaying the life of self, but in doing so, there is joy, freedom from destructive behaviors and habits that are so self-centered. We may term it as the “doing and undergoing.”

“The believer who lives absorbed in the miserable care for his own well-being falls short to that which is God-honoring.”

And even clean,” respectable selfishness is not enough to be a committed follower of Jesus Christ because it too falls short of committed discipleship, and may even aggravate the sin of the believer who exhibits, because it shows what treasures he or she could lay at Christ’s feet, if he or she would.”

What we are saying is that we want to be followers on our terms, not His. But Jesus instructs these disciples unto commitment, that if they want to be hard followers after God, they must take up the cross. For if we do, we too will one day exchange our cross for a victor’s crown.

- c. **The third condition:** “*And follow me.*” The present tense denotes a continuing relationship. Christian discipleship centers in this personal relationship to Christ, expressed in persevering obedience to His leadership.

Consider: If Jesus is the leader where did that lead Him? As He did only what the Father willed for Him, His commitment led Him through mockery, suffering, death, resurrection, and glorification (Phil. 2:5-11). There is an abiding cost and reward to being a disciple (2 John 8).

3. In summary: to be a follower of Jesus Christ involves both a negative requirement and a positive requirement:
 - a. **Negative requirement:** self-denial i.e., exchanging one’s own plans, preferences, and priorities for God’s plans, preferences, priorities, and purposes. It is only as we consistently harmonize our mind, heart, and will with God’s mind, heart, and will can we honestly say that we are committed to Jesus and His ways. Said a different way, you and I are to decisively reject any motive or desire that swells up from our sin nature, habits, and propensities, and choose instead to follow Jesus.
 - b. **Positive requirement:** faithfulness no matter the circumstance which includes the possibility of humiliation, suffering, and even death; no cost is too much to pay to reverently uphold the plans, preferences, priorities, and purposes of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let’s translate the passage again after considering these words (Wuest):

And having called the crowd, together with His disciples, to Himself, He said to them, If, as is the case, anyone is desiring to come after Me as a follower of mine, let him at once begin to lose sight of himself and his own interests, and let him at once begin to take up his cross, and let him start taking the same road in company with Me, and let him continue to do so moment by moment.²

APPLICATIONS:

²Wuest, Kenneth S.: *Wuest’s Word Studies from the Greek New Testament : For the English Reader.* Grand Rapids : Eerdmans, 1997, c1984, S. Mk 8:34

II. HOW SHOULD WE THEN LIVE?

Warren Wiersbe states, “Discipleship saves us from the tragedy of a wasted life. Yes, there is suffering in taking up a cross to follow Jesus; but that suffering always leads to glory.”³

Are we committed disciples? Do we even want to be committed disciples? How do I know if I am a committed follower of Jesus Christ?

I ask these questions because all too often we can deceive ourselves into thinking that we are committed disciples even though we are not. But the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit and even our own responses will not allow us to get away with thinking that we are even though we actually aren't committed followers:

1. The Holy Spirit alerts us to the sin of self-deception when we ponder the possibility; we have to ignore His warning signals to enter into self-deception. Here we have the “warning light indicator; the red light. We will yield, come to a sudden stop...or will we ignore it.
2. During and after we deceive ourselves, the Holy Spirit indicts us; we can hear the policeman blowing the whistle.

The aftermath can be brutal as we are brought before D.A. We try to defend ourselves, but we already know that the Holy Spirit knows everything; no defense ploy will work. He demands that we confess and change...but all we want to do is strangle Him, put masking tape with the thick residue over his mouth, and tell him, “Look, I am the one who is above the law.”

3. Nevertheless, we indict ourselves in our self-deception, saying we are committed followers of Christ, but in reality, living the way we want to live. This is why the 5th Amendment doesn't work in the court of the Holy Spirit; our actions speak more loudly than our words.
 - a. Rather than being authentic we will proceed to feed ourselves lies, trying convince ourselves that we are committed followers of Jesus Christ even though we don't meditate on God's Word, have intense periods of prayer, or sacrifice our daily planner to minister to those who are in need.
 - b. We will try to atone our self-deception by welcoming the consequences of our self-deception as if that will make things right...admitting, okay...the pastor knows really what kind of a person I am., so I will never be qualified to serve as a deacon or elder; I can live with that. But still, we will never confess our sin and change our commitment to Him.
 - c. We will even simulate a renewal, a new-found resolve to be a committed follower by serving the Lord even though we know our hearts are not right before Him. We know this to be true see when we go from church into our homes.
 - d. We will seek relationships with others who say being a committed follower of Jesus Christ is impossible, making some excuse that experience has taught us that this truth is only reserved for the apostles, the pastors, and the missionaries...we are just members! We've got families to support, mouths to feed, and a schedule that will never allow me to make Christ preeminent, not prominent; God will honor it.

But let's consider this last statement for a moment. If we found out that our spouse was only 85% faithful, would we be pleased? What if we found out that our spouse was 90%, 95%, or even 99% faithful, would you be able to say that you have a faithful spouse?

³Warren W. Wiersbe's *Expository Outlines on the New Testament*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1997, c1992, S. 123.

- e. Finally we become judgmental of others who are not doing it in order to convince both ourselves and others that we are committed followers.

As I mentioned earlier, I looked hard into my life and found my commitment to be lacking. I want to want to change that. As a result I've put together (along with the seminary students I ministered to in Indonesia) sixty-two indicators to assist us in critically pondering whether we really are followers of Jesus Christ, striving each day to do only that which will give God the most glory. They are on my website at prshockley.org under the tab, "spiritual life."

To be sure, these indicators should be viewed as road signs, like other lists I have provided from the pulpit in times past. Some of these road signs are related and some are more important than others. Nevertheless, each of these indicators is designed to provoke critical self-evaluation that may motivate us with resolved and determination, by His enablement and our yieldedness-- to be committed followers of Jesus Christ.

You (we) may be a follower of Jesus Christ when...

1. Jesus is your singular passion in whom you delight in more than anyone or anything else.
2. You immediately, determinately, and consistently let go of any activity, priority, or plan that does not clearly and unilaterally reflect the person and activities of Jesus Christ.
3. You believe that your "*time schedule*" or "*daily planner*" no longer belongs to you but to Jesus. This is realized in that you are willing to drop whatever you were doing to allow Jesus Christ through you to minister to others.
4. You commit all your resources to God; you have the mindset that your resources no longer belong to you.
5. You are willing to endure the cost of self-denial in order to practically minister to the needs of others (1 John 3:16-17).
6. You are willing to endure the cost of your family rejecting you in view of your love-relationship to Jesus Christ.
7. You are willing to endure the cost of mockery, even by those who love you the most.
8. You are considered to be a fool for committing yourself to a life of servant-hood for the sake of Jesus Christ.
9. You are willing to endure public humiliation and torture because you are identity with the purposes, plans, and priorities of Jesus Christ.
10. You experience personal pain by others, whether mentally or physically, because of your devotion to Jesus Christ.
11. You realize and accept the fact that you may very well lose your family, your home, your income, your job, your social status, and any possibility for an education.
12. You see sin as God sees sin.
13. You unashamedly and proactively share, proclaim, and advance the Good News of Jesus Christ.

- 14. Your singular ambition in life and ministry is to magnify Christ. Thus, you will consistently make decisions that will maximize this principle in your life.**
15. You are not “double-minded”.
16. You are capable of making a decision that will give God the most glory even though it may hurt someone else’s self-centered plans.
- 17. Your home life is truly Christ-centered, Christ-focused, and Christ-purposed.**
- 18. Your leisure activities are even God-honoring.**
19. You consciously seek to promote God’s priorities in your daily life.
20. Your life reflects unquestionable humility.
21. You don’t tolerate sin in your life.
- 22. You proactively minister to others in view of where they are and patiently take them where they need to be.**
- 23. Your daily life is described as being a godly servant-leader who actively pours his or her life into others.**
- 24. You strive to go outside your comfort zone. For example, you look at a new church visitor as a genuine opportunity to make an authentic friendship in order to share the gospel message or motivate them deeper into the things of God. You don’t see this responsibility merely as a duty, but as a pleasure because you can’t help yourself in wanting to know others with a Christ-like passion.**
25. You set aside your own privileges to minister to others, even those of whom you dislike or are high-maintenance.
26. You truly love with God’s love *and* will allow others to love you in return.
27. You are authentic, transparent, and openly honest about the person that you are and are repulsed by “*false humility*.”
28. You actively strive to know God’s Word for the purpose that you may know rightly in order to worship reverently in your daily activities.
- 29. You are a follower of Christ when you take the initiative to actively contribute as member of Christ’s local body, the church; ego is not involved and “territories” are not marked.**
30. You are actively dependent upon the Holy Spirit.
31. You protect God’s interests, God’s truth, and God’s people.
32. You consistently exemplify the fruit of the Spirit.
33. You pro-actively and consistently minister to others using your spiritual giftedness.
34. You consistently and actively disciple others.
35. You redeem the opportunity God has set before the local church body.

36. You are able to consistently, regularly, and diligently disregard the temptations of the flesh.
37. You don't flirt but flee from the schemes of the devil.
- 38. You are able to actively and routinely resist the influences of the sinful world that surrounds you.**
39. You are able to really consider yourself to be a pilgrim, a sojourn, passing through a foreign world as a citizen of God's kingdom; you are not worldly.
40. Your focus is on eternal matters of God's kingdom rather than temporal pleasures or activities.
41. You maximize your talent for the glory of God.
42. You consistently demonstrate contentment no matter the circumstance (whether you have much or have little).
43. You consistently seek to know, grasp, and apply the deep things of God disclosed in His Word.
44. *You don't consistently run away from but face your problems in the strength of Jesus Christ.*
45. Your predisposition is "joy" no matter the circumstance.
46. You always hunger to know more biblical and theological doctrine so that you may know Him and His ways better.
- 47. You run to and not run away from God's calling on your life.**
48. You are consistently patient, waiting for God's timing.
49. You make church decisions that maximize opportunities to fulfill the Great Commission of Jesus Christ.
50. You make church decisions that maximize spiritual growth in your church body.
- 51. You come to the honest appraisal and declaration that life is not about you but about magnifying the Lord Jesus Christ in your daily activities.**
- 52. You as a spouse proactively partners with your mate in whatever will give God the most glory, even if that means you as the spouse will be uncomfortable and have to carry extra burdens.**
53. You have taken ownership of God's vision for your local church.
54. You are grieved to see others worshipping false gods.
55. You are grieved when you witness dysfunctional church leadership whose vision is self-preservation and short-sighted.
- 56. You are grieved to see Christians who claim to have adopted God's priorities, plans, and purposes, but who in reality, are only serving God when it is convenient to their schedule, their interests, and their likes and dislikes.**
57. You are grieved to see Christians who are miserable in their sin, are unwilling to acknowledge their sinfulness, and change their ways.

58. You have a missions-mindset and ever seek to give more to missions.
59. You consistently and diligently meditate upon God's Word.
60. You have intense periods of devout prayer (e.g., Jesus rising in the early hours of the morning to pray unto the Father).
- 61. You embrace change as a positive opportunity to make a dynamic impact upon and into the lives of others. Jesus and the apostles didn't just minister to those things or areas where they felt most comfortable. Rather, they embraced change no matter how difficult it was going to be and used that as a prospect to magnify His name and fulfill the Great Commission.**

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion: Be single-minded: Let me illustrate:

"One afternoon author Patsy Clairmont found herself on an airplane, sitting next to a young man. She writes, "I had already observed something about this young man when I was being seated. He called me "Ma'am." At the time I thought, 'Either he thinks I'm ancient, or he's from the South where they still teach manners, or he's in the service.'

I decided the latter was the most likely, so I asked, "You in the service?" "Yes, Ma'am, I am." "What branch?" "Marines." "Hey, Marine, where are you coming from?" "Operation Desert Storm, Ma'am." "No kidding? Desert Storm! How long were you there?" I asked. "A year and a half. I'm on my way home. My family will be at the airport."

I then commented that he must have thought about returning to his family and home many times while he was in the Middle East. "Oh, no, Ma'am," he replied. "We were taught never to think of what might never be, but to be fully available right where we were. *Focus on the Family*, July, 1993, p. 5

Christ's followers must follow, but we can choose whether we will be His followers or not. The conditions are fixed, but the choice as to accepting the position is free. But for those of us who do choose to be a follower of Christ, some very distinguishable characteristics will become evident:

1. You will only face one direction.
2. You will only go in one direction
3. You will never look back with regret.
4. You will no longer make plans of your own.
5. Joy will be your disposition, not anger, bitterness, discontentment, or sorrow.
6. As you follow His trail you will undergo a transformation where meaning, purpose, and fulfillment are authentically realized; you will know what it means to be a pilgrim in a foreign land. Selfishness will be marginalized and virtues like humility, loyalty, and forgiving others will take center-stage.
7. Grace will look more amazing and sin will look more evil.
8. Jesus Christ will be your legacy.

MAY WE CHOOSE WISELY!