

Sept. 12 2021—Kick Of Sunday
Follow Me into the Good Life
Matthew 16:24

I was blessed with good parents. My dad was a restaurant manager and my mom was a school teacher. They worked hard for their modest salaries, and they saved when most people of my generation would have spent-- with one memorable exception. They wanted my brother and me to have what they didn't have. They splurged on great vacations and they sacrificed so we could have wonderful birthday and Christmas presents. They wanted us to have the good life. I did learn the good life from them. Ironically though, it wasn't from the presents and vacations. It was from the generosity and sacrifice. Let's talk about the good life.

When Jesus announced to the crowd that He would build His church upon Peter and give to Peter the keys to God's realm, Peter must have felt that he had fallen face forward into the good life. Can't you see Peter's chest swelling with pride too wonderful to disguise? He had left his livelihood to take on a new life with Jesus. He had left the simple comforts of home to take on a tough life on the road. He had left a familiar well-worn routine to take on the uncertainties of a whole new life. And, now, finally, the payoff comes as Jesus rewards him with his own set of keys. Ah, at last, the good life.

Then Jesus ruins the moment. He tells Peter and the other boys, "Look, the road to Jerusalem is filled with nails. They'll pierce me and put an end to me, but after three days God will reclaim my life." Peter takes Jesus aside and says, "Come to your senses, man. Don't you remember I just pronounced you the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God? These things don't happen to God; and God forbid, they must never happen to you." What goes unsaid is, "Because, of course, that would mean that they would also happen to someone who followed you. Someone like me."

Seemingly, Peter's brief taste of the good life came to an embarrassing halt when Jesus barked back at Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a scandal, a stumbling block, to me for you have set your mind not on divine things, but on human things." The rest of the air escapes from the balloon of the good life as Jesus goes on to say, "You want these keys? Then deny yourself. Take up your cross and follow me. Those interested in saving

their lives will lose them and those willing to lose their lives for my sake will find them."

Peter and the disciples are ready for a taste of what everyone else knows to be the good life. But Jesus gives them an ad hoc lecture in God's economic plan. As theology professor Tom Long says so well, *"A life that is spent soothing the pain of the sick, caring for children in need, hammering nails in houses for those without shelter, sharing bread with the hungry, visiting those in prison, and denying oneself may seem like a squandered life in the economy of a self-centered age, but in the storehouse of heaven, it is a lavish treasure."*

Some said then and some say now that God's economic plan just won't work. They say that people want to get rid of pain, not take it on. People want to accumulate assets, not give them away. People want to know their own minds, not bother trying to know the mind of Christ. With due respect to Jesus, they argue that the good life is a measure of what we have, how easily we can get what we want, and how seldom we are inconvenienced.

But I'd hold up a bit on jumping to that conclusion. I suggest that we don't give up on God's economic plan too soon. Notice that Peter never had any hope of understanding the good life until Jesus told him to get behind him. That's the only position from which you and I will ever learn about the good life that Jesus intends for us and models for us by standing behind Jesus, listening to him, watching his every move, and trusting in God's economic plan despite the liveliest critics within and outside the church.

Do you want the good life? Let me ask that question a different way. Do you want to follow Jesus? I don't mean, "Do you want to go to church?" "Do you want America to be a more Christian nation?" "Do you want to feel better so you can live your life?" or "Do you want to conform to your family's religious heritage?" I mean, "Do you personally want to be a follower of Jesus Christ?"

Before you answer, here's what doing so would look like according to Jesus in Matthew 16:24:

*Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and **follow me.**"— Matthew 16:24*

Step 1: Deny Yourself

The word translated “deny” in the original language is built from two words which mean “from” and “deny.” It means to disable and run away from. In other words, Christianity is not self-enhancement, self-modification or even self-suppression. Christianity is self-abandonment.

This can be difficult for us 21st century Americans who live in a culture of self-confidence, self-esteem and self-discovery. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and TikTok give each of us a platform to revel in ourselves and invite others to do the same. Pop psychology and new-age gurus teach us to look within ourselves for the strength to live abundantly.

Freedom from the tyranny of the self is a primary facet of Christianity. Since we are designed to worship God and serve other people, a key component of Christ’s work must be to unlock us from ourselves. We cannot stretch upward and outward while shrinking inward.

Do you want to follow Jesus? If so, deny yourself.

Step 2: Take Up Your Cross

Choosing to follow Christ is choosing to die.

I like to say that weddings are “death ceremonies.” It gets a chuckle from the old married folks – but more importantly it captures the essence of the transaction. During the wedding ceremony, the groom says to the bride, “I am now dead to myself and living for you.” The bride says the same thing to the groom. When you say you follow Jesus, you are saying that you are dead to yourself and living for him.

Paul wrote in Galatians 2:20:

“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Following Christ requires a cross. It requires dying to self in such a real way that you can say with Paul that “it is no longer I who live.” It means giving up your life so completely that Jesus’ life is able to fill you. It means the old you is dead and the new life you lead is emptied of “you-ness” and filled with “Jesus-ness.” This is good because *you* are a sinking ship (see [Romans 3](#)). You must escape yourself into Jesus.

Do you want to follow Jesus? If so, deny yourself and take up your cross.

Step 3: Follow Jesus

You would think this one would go without saying – but it doesn't. Sadly, many church folks could define their version of Christianity without mentioning Jesus.

If you want to follow Jesus, you must FOLLOW JESUS. You must picture Jesus looking at you now, addressing you specifically and directly: "Do you want to follow me? Do you want to listen to my teaching? Want to live by my way and be one of my people? Do you want to do what I do and love what I love? Do you want your heart broken by what breaks mine?"

Do you want to follow Jesus? If so, deny yourself and take up your cross and follow Him.

A Closing Word to Church People

Many get involved in church thinking it will be like Netflix. Netflix conforms to your individual preferences as you choose the shows and movies you like. It learns your tastes and presents options tailored to you. However, Christianity is not like Netflix – it's like a cross.

Some reading this may be frustrated because their church is not conforming to their preferences. It never will. **Nothing in Christianity is about our preferences – it's about our death.** It's about Christ's life filling us and changing us.

So, instead of getting involved in church motivated by personal preferences and expectations, follow Jesus. Be a self-denying, cross-carrying Jesus follower.