

# *Follow Me!*

Dear Friend,

If you were asked to describe the Christian life in two words, how would you respond? For my part, I would have no hesitation, I would simply say: *Following Jesus*. That is the essence of the Christian life.

This is vividly illustrated by the conversion of Matthew the tax collector.<sup>1</sup> As he sat in his tax office, Jesus passed by and simply spoke two words: *"Follow Me."* Matthew's eternal destiny depended on his response. He arose and followed Jesus.

## **Two Essential Preconditions**

If we decide, however, to respond as Matthew did, we discover that there are two essential preconditions before we can begin to follow: *"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."*<sup>2</sup> First, we must deny ourselves; second, we must take up our cross.

To deny is to say "No!" We must say "No" to our insistent, demanding, self-assertive ego. We must echo the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane: *"Not My will, but Yours, be done."*<sup>3</sup>

Only after we have denied ourselves can we go on to take up our cross. Someone has defined our cross as the place where God's will and our will cross. It is, in fact, the place of execution.

In Romans 6:6 Paul tells us that *our old man was crucified with Him* (Jesus). The old man is the rebellious, self-pleasing nature which each of us has inherited by descent from our common ancestor, Adam.

God has only one solution for our old man. He does not send him to church or Sunday school, He does not teach him the golden rule, or direct him to a class on self-improvement. God's solution is simple and final. It is execution.

The good news of the gospel is that the execution took place when Jesus died on the cross. Our old man was crucified at that time in Him. This is a simple historical fact. It is true whether



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or not we know it or believe it. But to benefit from it we must both know it and believe it.

### Challenged by God in a Dream

Nearly fifty years ago I used to conduct regular evangelistic meetings in London at Speaker's Corner, Marble Arch. One night during that period I had a vivid dream in which I saw a man preaching at Speaker's Corner. The man's message was good, but there was something about his appearance I did not like. His body was somehow crooked and he seemed to have a clubfoot. However, I did not attach any particular importance to my dream.

About a week later I had precisely the same dream. I concluded that God was saying something to me. "Lord," I asked, "who is that man? His preaching was good but there was something I didn't like about his appearance. Who is he?"

The Lord's answer was immediate and direct: "You are the man!" God was clearly requiring some important changes from me, but I did not know exactly what.

The Easter season was at hand and I found myself meditating on the crucifixion. I had a mental picture of three crosses on a hill. The central cross was higher than the other two.

"For whom was that central cross made?" the Holy Spirit asked me. But then He cautioned, "Be careful how you answer."

I thought it over for a while, then I said, "The central cross was made for Barabbas—but at the last moment Jesus took his place."

"So Jesus took the place of Barabbas," the Holy Spirit continued. "But you have said that Jesus took your place."

"Yes, He did," I responded.

"Then you must be Barabbas!"

At that moment I saw it with absolute clarity: I was exactly the criminal for whom the cross was prepared. It was made to my measure. That was where I should have been.

I was compelled to identify with Paul's assessment of himself in Romans 7:18: *For I know that in me* (that is, in my flesh) *nothing good dwells*. . . . Every area of my personality was permeated, I saw, by the corruption of sin. There was nothing in me that was pure, that was good, that could merit God's favor.

But how was I to respond?

In Romans 6:6–13 I saw that Paul sets out four successive steps.

Verse 6: First of all, I must *know* that my sinful nature had been put to death when Jesus died on the cross. This was the essential first step from which all the rest followed.

Verse 11: I must *reckon*—consider—myself dead, just as Jesus was dead.

Verse 12: On that basis I must resolutely refuse to let sin continue to dominate me.

Verse 13: I must present myself to God like someone raised from the dead and I must yield my physical members as instruments—literally, weapons—of righteousness. The use of the word *weapons* alerted me that I would face opposition from Satan.

### **God's Threefold Provision**

To provide complete deliverance from the tyranny of sin required a threefold provision of God. First of all, He had to deal with our *sins*—the sinful acts we have all committed. Because Jesus on the cross has paid the full penalty for our sins, God can forgive us without compromising His own justice. His first provision, therefore, is *forgiveness*.

But then God had also to deal with the corrupt nature within us that caused us to go on committing those sinful acts. His provision was *execution*—to put that sinful nature to death. But the good news is that the execution took place more than nineteen centuries ago when Jesus died on the cross.

However, that is not the end. God's purpose is to replace the sinful old man with a new man of His own creating. This provision is explained in Ephesians 4:22–24:

*that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man . . .  
and be renewed in the spirit of your mind,  
and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in righteousness and  
true holiness.*

We should not assume, however, that the old man will passively accept his sentence of execution. On the contrary, he will at times struggle fiercely to regain his control over us. This explains Paul's words of warning in Colossians chapter 3.

In verse 3 he says, *For you died. . . .* But then in verse 5 he says, *"Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth. . . .* We must stand in faith that the death of our old man is an accomplished fact and we must actively resist his attempts to regain control over us.

### **A Personal Spiritual Inventory**

Unfortunately many sincere Christians have never understood or availed themselves of this complete provision of God. They claim—and continue to claim—the forgiveness of their sins, but they do not know that God has also made provision for the old man to be put to death and for a new man to take his place. Consequently their Christian life is a wearisome repetitive cycle: sinning — repenting — being forgiven — and then sinning again . . . They never experience release from the domination of the old sinful nature.

This analysis of God's total provision for sin should lead us to make a personal spiritual

inventory, in which we ask ourselves the following questions:

**Am I completely sure that all my sins have been forgiven?**

**Have I been freed from the domination of my old carnal nature?**

**Have I put on the new man who is created in righteousness and true holiness?**

**Am I following Jesus?**

### **A Glimpse of the Future**

Let me close with a brief glimpse of the future, taken from Revelation chapters 7 and 14.

At the close of this age God is going to provide for Himself 144,000 Israelite followers of Messiah. He will send them forth into a world that is reeling under the impact of *the great tribulation* and they will reap a harvest of souls so vast *that no one could number it*.

Revelation 14:1–5 depicts these 144,000 after they have triumphantly completed their task and—in all probability—sealed their testimony with their lifeblood. With the names of the Father and of the Son written on their foreheads, they are worshiping God with a song that sounds *like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder*<sup>4</sup> — a song that no one else could learn.

What kind of people are they?

Their character is clearly delineated: they are sexually pure; in their mouth is no guile; they are without fault. How have they attained to such a faultless character? There is one simple answer: they *follow the Lamb wherever He goes*.

Does that inspire you—as it inspires me—with a longing to follow Jesus more closely?

Yours in the Master's service,



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<sup>1</sup>Matthew 9:9

<sup>2</sup>Matthew 16:24

<sup>3</sup>Luke 22:42

<sup>4</sup>Rev. 14:2 (NIV)