

When Julius Caesar (**picture**) landed on the shores of Britain with his Roman legions, he took a bold and decisive step to ensure the success of his military venture. Ordering his men to march to the edge of the Cliffs of Dover, he commanded them to look down at the water below. To their amazement, they saw every ship in which they'd crossed the channel engulfed in flames. Caesar deliberately cut off any possibility of retreat. Now that his soldiers were unable to return to the continent, there was nothing left for them to do but to advance and conquer! That's exactly what they did. That's commitment!

During a corporate board meeting the CEO asked his board members, "Where can I find commitment?" One very honest board member replied, "In the dictionary!" Webster defines commitment as "*a pledge to do, the state of being bound emotionally or intellectually to a course of action or to another person or persons.*"

What we have witnessed together this morning, baptism, is a statement of commitment. It's a public statement of life's first and greatest commitment, a commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This commitment lays the foundation for all of life's other commitments.

Twenty times in the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke & John) we find Jesus saying these two words: "*follow me.*" Our Lord continually urges others to follow Him. If anyone else did that, we'd think that they were nuts. What if your neighbor pops over this afternoon, rings your doorbell, you answer and says, "follow me." Every time you see her, she says "follow me." You'd think that she was a few clowns short of a circus. Yet that's exactly what the Lord Jesus demands over and over again. He calls us to total commitment.

That's what we want to talk about today, commitment and work through just one of those incidents. Turn to Matthew 16:24-28 (p. 694). We want to answer that question provoked by Jesus' telling us to follow Him. **What does it mean to be committed to Jesus?** If you're taking notes...

**1. What does Jesus mean by "follow"?** A physician shared this story about her four-year-old daughter. On the way to preschool the doctor had left her stethoscope on the car seat. Her little girl picked it up and began playing with it. This doctor/mom tried to remain calm, but she was extremely excited. It seemed like her daughter was expressing a genuine interest in perhaps following in Mom's footsteps. Then the child spoke into the stethoscope: "Welcome to McDonald's, may I take your order?"

When Jesus said that we should "*follow*" Him, He wasn't talking about literally strapping on a pair of sandals and walking with Him along the dusty roads of ancient Palestine. No, He meant that we should follow His example; that we should live the way He lived; that we should obey His commands; listen to His teachings; look to Him as our teacher and guide. That's what it means to "*follow*," that's what it means to be a disciple, that's what it means to be a Christian. It means to be committed.

A follower is simply a "disciple." A psychiatrist might be called a *disciple* of Freud if he follows Sigmund Freud's (**picture**) theories and methods. A quarterback might be called a *disciple* of Aaron Rogers (**picture**) if he imitates his playing style. In medicine it's not called *discipleship*, but a residency. Residents learn the practice of medicine by observing and imitating an experienced physician. A beginning electrician or plumber learns the trade by becoming an "apprentice". They are a disciple of a more experienced electrician or plumber.

This word "*disciple*" is used in the gospels and in the book of Acts to refer to the Twelve; that dozen men whom Jesus selected to travel with Him, those whom He chose to teach and train personally. *Disciple* is used in Scripture as a synonym for a "Christian." When we refer to Christians as disciples, we're simply identifying them as followers of Jesus Christ.

But there's something more. The word also carries the idea of imitation. Disciples of Jesus Christ are those who are seeking, not just to understand Christianity in an intellectual sense, but who are seeking to be just like Jesus. They've accepted Him as their personal Lord and Savior. Disciples of Christ then are people who are modeling their lives after His, who are walking according to the example He gave us. "*Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.'*" (Mt. 16:24).

The purpose of discipleship is much more than the assimilation of knowledge through some class. Knowledge alone is not the pathway to becoming a disciple. The Bible says that there are some who are ever learning, but never coming to the knowledge of the truth (2 Tim. 3:7).

The purpose of discipleship is to know the heart of God and to know our own hearts in relationship with Jesus. God wants each of us to be rooted in Him, not just rooted in our ideas about Him. Those who are truly His disciples are committed to Him. Because they are, they're devoted to learning all about Him – Who He is, His likes and dislikes, what makes Him smile, His expectations, His purpose for us on this earth - to learn His heart and will and way and character - to evaluate every response not according to what we think we know but who we are in light of Who He is.

Country singer, Rodney Atkin's (**picture**) song, *Watching You* illustrates this. In the first verse of the song a man and his son are in the car and a sudden stop makes the boy spill his happy meal and drink into his lap which causes him to utter a profanity. The Dad asks his son where he learned to talk like that and the boy answers in the chorus which begins: "He said I've been watching you dad, ain't that cool"...and ends with "I wanna do everything you do, So I've been watching you."

In a very real sense we're trying to walk in Jesus "shoes" because He's our hero. He came to this earth and died, fully aware of the sins you and I would commit that would require His death on the Cross. To follow Christ is to seek to imitate Him and live as He did when He walked earth's paths.

**2. Who are we following?** He's called "The Jesus Guy." When Carl James Joseph (**picture**) left Toledo in 1991, he left on foot barefoot, wearing a robe and carrying only a Bible, a rosary, and a toothbrush. The long-haired, soft-spoken man is referred to as *The Jesus Guy* and has since walked his way through 47 states and 13 foreign countries. He wanted people to think of Jesus when they saw him. But he's not Jesus and that's not what Jesus is asking us to do when He commands us, "follow Me."

Because there have been so many attacks on the deity and divinity of Christ during the past century, many do not realize that the first theological battle of the Church, the first heresy Christ's Church had to combat was the denial of the humanity of Christ, *Gnosticism*. Gnostics believed that all matter was evil and rejected the idea that Jesus had a physical body. They taught that Jesus only appeared to be human. But we know that Jesus is the God-Man, both fully human and fully God.

When Jesus commands us to follow Him, He wants us to live out His life by the power of the Spirit in our humanity. We're to live with integrity, resist temptation, grieve without losing hope, be able to get angry without succumbing to sin, be able to deal with difficult people in a righteous way.

We're to be a living example of Joan Osborne's (**picture**) song, *What if God were one of us?* Commitment means we're Jesus in our world. Our Lord showed us how to live heavenly here. He modeled for us a godly life in the midst of the dirt and dust of common humanity. Think about it...

**a) He was born in a barn.** Jesus wasn't born in the White House or Buckingham Palace but a dirty, dusty stable in a food trough for animals. Talk about humble beginnings. Our nativity scenes that decorate the landscape at Christmas miss a vital point, none of them smell right. Think of the shame Joseph must have felt when the best that he could provide for his wife in labor was a barn?

**b) He was born in a little village.** Bethlehem was so small, so insignificant that it didn't have adequate inns. Today it probably wouldn't even have a McDonalds. Blink and you'd miss it.

**c) He had poor parents.** Mary was just a teen, maybe fifteen or sixteen. Though we know and believe what Scripture teaches about the Virgin birth, I doubt her neighbors did. To them Jesus was illegitimate. Under Old Testament Law an illegitimate child wasn't allowed in the Temple until the 10<sup>th</sup> generation. Joseph was a poor working stiff, a humble carpenter.

**d) His family had a checkered past.** Look at Jesus' genealogy and you'll see some rotten apples in His family tree. Some wicked and immoral people were as His ancestors. A couple of adulterers and even a prostitute were in His bloodlines. Talk about skeletons in the closet, Jesus had them.

**e) He was plain.** Isaiah 53:2 says, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him, nothing in His appearance that we should desire Him." Jesus was so common in looks that He was able to lose Himself in crowds. No one looked at Him and thought, "What a hunk!" or "What a hottie!"

**f) He was nearly homeless.** In Matthew 8, Jesus said of Himself, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head." Basically, all that Jesus owned He wore on His back.

**g) His advance man had flunked PR101.** John the Baptist was just strange. He wore clothes made out of camels' hair, and ate honey and grasshoppers. Not exactly the best representation for Jesus!

**h) He picked a lousy team.** Think about the disciples? Big mouth Peter. Thomas the faint heart. Matthew the IRS guy. Simon the Terrorist. The most capable and talented on His team was Judas, which is probably why he was the Treasurer.

**i) He died a violent criminal's death.** Jesus died violently. It was an execution reserved for the worst of criminals. It'd be like being sent to the electric chair today. It was a horrible and humiliating death.

**j) Jesus was at the bottom.** He was low class. Today some might say He was "white trash." It's why each of us can identify with Him. We're not being asked to follow in the footsteps of a prince or great athlete, but a common man. With His background we know that those who choose to follow Him have made an honest decision. All that our world values He didn't have.

The day before Thanksgiving of November 1982 I was more nervous than I think I've ever been in my whole life. I had a ring in my pocket as Jane Quick and I rode in a horse drawn carriage through downtown Chicago, and I asked her to be

my wife. Fortunately, she agreed. I could have done it another way. I could have held a ring in one hand and a gun in the other and told her that she was going to marry me or else. Had it gone down like that, every meal that she fixed for me I would have made the dog taste first to see if he survived. Love only wants a genuine response.

We make few genuine decisions in life. Most of our choices are affected by outside forces, influences and demands. When it comes to the most important decision in life, our decision about God, Jesus seeks only a genuine one. That's why we're approached in a way that lovingly frees us to make that choice from our heart, a real, genuine decision. We can accept Him or reject Him. God refuses to violate our personhood and our power to choose. When we choose to follow Him, we do so freely in love. It's commitment, even more than a husband and wife have.

**3. What does it mean to be like Jesus?** The Apostle Paul summarizes it for us in Ephesians 4:22 *"You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."*

In his book, *Just Like Jesus*, Max Lucado (**picture**) makes this statement, *"God loves you just the way you are, but He refuses to leave you that way. He wants you to be just like Jesus."*

Let me give you a "What if?" What if for one day, Jesus were to become you? What if for 24 hours, Jesus wakes up in your bed, walks in your shoes, lives in your house, assumes your schedule? Your boss becomes His boss, your mother becomes His mother, your pains becomes His pains? With one exception, nothing about your life changes. Your health doesn't change. Your circumstances don't change, your schedule isn't altered. Your problems aren't solved. Only one change occurs. What if, for one day and one night, Jesus lives your life with His Heart? Your heart gets the day off and your life is led by the heart of Christ. His priorities govern your actions. His passions drive your decisions. His love directs your behavior.

Can you imagine that? What would you be like? Do you think people would notice a change? Your family, would they see something new? Your co-workers, would they think someone else had been hired? What about your friends? Would they detect more joy? What about your enemies? Would they receive more mercy from Christ's heart than from yours? What about YOU? How would you feel with God's heart in you? Would your stress level drop? What about your temper? Would you sleep better? Would you still dread what you're dreading? Better than that, would you still do what you're doing? Think about your schedule, what you have planned...with Jesus taking over your heart, would anything change? Can you just picture what your life might look like with Jesus leading your life?

That picture that you see, with Jesus leading your life, is what God wants. He wants total commitment. That's what it means to be like Jesus. The Bible says that we are to *"think and act like Christ Jesus."* Another passage says we are, *"to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."*

God's plan for you is nothing short of a new heart and life. If you were a car, God would want control of your engine. If you were a computer, God would claim the software and the hard drive. If you were an airplane, He'd take His seat in the cockpit. But you're a person, so God wants to change your heart and life. That's what it means to be like Jesus.

**Conclusion:** What does it mean to be committed to Christ? The first step is to accept Him as your Lord and Savior. It's being saved by God's grace through faith, and then be willing to walk in obedience to God and allow the very Spirit of Christ take hold of our hearts and perform His work in us. It means no holding back.

Are you a Christian this morning? You can know Jesus personally today. It's a simple prayer but it's a life changing one, asking Him to be your Lord and Savior, trusting that His shed blood on the Cross paid for all of your sins.

If you know Him, you must obey Him. You must follow Him and seek to be like Him. Salvation is both absolutely free and yet it costs you your very life. You receive it freely at no expense to you, but once you receive it, you've just committed everything you are and have to Jesus Christ. You may protest, "That's a contradiction! How can something be both free and costly at the same time?"

One of my favorite TV shows is *Seal Team* (**picture**). In a recent episode the team was rescuing hostages from Islamic terrorists. They were in a fire fight and a suicide bomber ran toward the team with a vest loaded with explosives. One Seal team member ran towards him, grabbed him, pushed him away from the team and threw himself on top of the suicide bomber, protecting the rest of his team from harm. That's commitment. That's what Jesus asks of us.

Taking up your cross means that I surrender all. When someone is baptized as Nadine and Chuck were today, that's what they were saying. They're saying, "We're totally committed to Jesus Christ." It's symbolic of what's already taken place in their hearts. It's why it's a picture of the body, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We die to the old and by the power of the Spirit, He resurrects us to new life.

In his wonderful book, *Don't Waste Your Life*, which every Christian ought to read, John Piper (2 **pictures**) wrote: *"The opposite of wasting your life is to live by a single, soul-satisfying passion for the supremacy of God in all things. If you want your life to count, if you want the ripple effect of the pebbles you drop to become waves that reach the ends of*

*the earth and roll on into eternity, you have to know one great all-embracing thing—and be set on fire by it. For example, the apostle Paul said that his life and ministry were riveted on a single aim: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 2:2).*

Are you committed? Do you have a single passion in your life, glorifying God? In order to get to that point you must surrender your life to Jesus. You must say, “Lord, I am no longer in charge, I need YOU to run my life.” Jesus said you can never be His disciple unless you “*deny yourself,*” that’s “Self” with a capital “S.” Think of self as your “ego” or the “Big I.”

Next, Jesus says we must take up our cross daily. The meaning is so simple it has often been missed. A person carrying a cross had only one destination: Death. It was always a one-way trip. For you to take up your cross doesn’t mean you carry a cross in your pocket or wear one around your neck. It doesn’t mean you carry around a large wooden cross as some have done. Jesus is talking about dying. It isn’t physical death, it’s death to self. That’s the surrendered life.

We’re human and sometimes we’ll fail in our commitment. That’s not Christ’s concern. His concern has nothing to do with our ability, He’s promised to take care of that. His concern is our willingness to follow Him with our whole hearts. My friend, are you willing? Will you surrender? Will you choose total commitment? Will you follow Jesus?