

*Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"*

<sup>28</sup> *They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."*

<sup>29</sup> *"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"*

*Peter answered, "You are the Christ."*

<sup>30</sup> *Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.*

<sup>31</sup> *He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup> He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.*

<sup>33</sup> *But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."*

<sup>34</sup> *Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. (Mark 8:27-35)*

### **What Does it Take to Follow Jesus?**

I spent my vicar year at a large congregation that had a Saturday night service. One Saturday, just as I was starting my sermon, I saw a woman way in the back of the church stand up with a baby and take him out. And I thought to myself that she sure looked like the wife of my best friend. Sure enough, that's who it was. Well, after church, the family followed me back to my apartment. On the way, I saw a light was changing and I hurried through it just as it turned red without thinking about the fact that they were behind me. You know what my friend did? He ran that red light. Later I apologized and told him I was about to stop to wait for them. But he said, "Whenever I'm following someone, I just do whatever they do."

I wouldn't recommend that practice when you're driving. But doesn't it speak to the very nature of following someone? You go where they go and do what they do. So it's no accident that God describes the life of faith as following Jesus. We see that today. Jesus was not talking about coming to faith. He was talking about what it means to live as a Christian in a sinful world. We all want to follow him. But how do we do it?

#### **What does it take to follow Jesus?**

##### **I.**

Our Lord answers that question for us today: **it takes a clear confession.** Jesus asked his disciples, **"Who do people say I am?"** They rattled off several things that they had heard people say: that Jesus was John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets. John the Baptist was a very popular preacher who began his ministry just shortly before Jesus did. The whole city of Jerusalem had walked down the mountain to the Jordan River to hear him and be baptized. He was a true celebrity. But he was also dead. Yet, a fair number of people apparently believed that Jesus was John come back from the dead. Elijah was a little different. He did not die physically. He ascended bodily into heaven centuries before this. But there was a prophecy in the Old Testament that said that the Messiah would not come until Elijah came – meaning John the Baptist. Many people thought Jesus was the Elijah who was to come and prepare the way for the Christ. A third option was that God had sent another great prophet, like he had done in the Old Testament. Some people even seem to have thought he was one of those ancient prophets come back from the dead.

The thing that all these opinions have in common is that they missed the point. None of them recognized Jesus for who he really was. But all of them sounded very religious. They all spoke in biblical language. They all gave a reasonable opinion that would've been acceptable to a religious person except for the technicality that they were wrong. They *were* wrong. You couldn't follow Jesus with that kind of confession. So Jesus asked the disciples, **"But what about you? Who do you say I am?"** Peter gave a wonderful confession of faith: **"You are the Christ."** Notice, he said *"the Christ."* Christ was not Jesus' last name. Christ is a title. Jesus is the Christ which is exactly the same as saying Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the one God chose to send into this world to save it. Matthew tells us that Jesus commended Peter's answer.

What we say about Jesus matters. To make that even clearer, once Peter had given his good confession, Jesus gave an even better one: **“He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.”** This is a pivotal moment in Jesus’ ministry. From this moment on, Jesus taught this point again and again. He made it so clear that you couldn’t mistake it for a parable or a figure of speech. His words underline for us what a good confession of Jesus includes: confessing that he died and rose to pay for our sins.

We live in an age that does not understand Christ or his work, an age when people make terrible, confused, confessions of Christ and then imagine that they’re following him. Many people today think that as long as you talk about Jesus, you’re following him, no matter how far from the scriptures your conversation gets. If you convince yourself that Jesus is leading you to quit your job or to buy your house or to make this or that decision, then you’re following him. But Jesus never says one word like that. This conviction that Jesus is telling us what to do through our feelings is just not part of the Bible’s confession of Christ.

But it gets worse. Someone sent me an e-mail this week. They were listening to the pope reading the account of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. Pope Francis went on to use the poverty of Jesus’ birth to call our society to address hunger and poverty and homelessness through charity. Certainly, the Bible talks about helping the poor. I would go so far as to say that a Christian who does nothing in this area is not living his or her faith. Helping the poor is part of following Jesus. But the writer of the e-mail pointed out that the pope didn’t say one word about what that humble birth in the stable of Bethlehem really meant: the Son of God took on human flesh to die and rise in our place and save us from our sins. The pope spoke in biblical language and even touched on biblical themes. But he did not give a clear confession of Christ. In the end, he called us to work our way to heaven.

More and more, we are going to feel pressure to speak of Jesus as a great leader of social change. People today claim that Jesus calls us to accept homosexuality, because, they say, “Jesus accepted everyone.” Even in our synodical schools, some young people are wrestling with that very issue. We are being dragged down to the devil’s message by clever, biblical sounding words and by twisting real biblical concerns and issues into a wrong confession of Christ. But that is not following Jesus. Our Lord gave his own confession: the Son of Man would be betrayed and killed and on the third day would rise again. Our Lord commended Peter’s confession: he is the Christ, the chosen Savior, the one God sent to redeem us from death and hell and give us a new and better life, not in this world, but in the world to come. No matter how much “good” we do in this life, without that clear confession of Jesus, we are not following him.

## II.

But at the same time, a confession that is not backed up by a Christian life, is an empty confession. But when we talk about a Christian life, what are we talking about? Are we talking only about what you do? What about people who do a lot of good but are really only doing it for themselves, so that people will applaud them and maybe even elect them to political office? Obviously attitude matters. Jesus points us in a different direction. **What does it take to follow Jesus? It takes a clear heart.**

What do I mean by a clear heart? A heart that is clear about who Jesus is, what he did and what he calls us to be. Peter made a wonderful confession: **“You are the Christ.”** But then when Jesus spelled out for him what it meant to be the Christ, then Peter took him aside and rebuked him. Jesus was downright harsh in his reply: **“Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”** Jesus called Peter “Satan.” That had to hurt. Why did he do that? Because Peter’s heart was confused. He didn’t want a Savior who dies. He didn’t want a Savior who lets his enemies win in this world and then triumphs over them through the gospel. He wanted to march into Jerusalem and set up a messianic kingdom and rule the world. But that’s not what Jesus wanted. He knew that we needed him to die so that our sins would be paid for. He knew that the only way to eternal life for us was by him humbling himself and dying the most horrible death any human being ever had to suffer.

Make no mistake, Jesus could have stopped that death any time he wanted to. He could’ve wiped out the mob in the Garden of Gethsemane and blasted Annas and Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate out of their judgment seats. He could’ve burned the soldiers alive who scourged and mocked him. He could’ve come down from the cross and sent the Pharisees who stood there mocking him straight to hell. But he didn’t do any of those things.

Instead, the Son of God humbled himself. He offered his life on the cross as the sacrifice that pays for the sins of the entire world. He paid for you and for me.

He called us who know that to follow him. He was speaking to believers, to people like us who already trust in that death and resurrection. He told us to have hearts that are clear on what it means to follow our Lord in this sinful world. Jesus said, **“If anyone would come after me,”** that is, if anyone wants to follow me **“he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.”**

What is following Jesus in this sinful world? It’s denying ourselves. Our sinful hearts want popularity. They want comfort and wealth. They want to be served and honored and appreciated. But Jesus says that the Christian life is about denying ourselves all that. Asking when it’s my turn, when is it going to be about me, is simply not a Christian question. It’s never about me. Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow him. The cross is all the hurts and sorrows that go with being a Christian. It’s every price the world makes us pay for confessing our faith – and in the last year, it’s become dramatically clear how much more our American society is going to make us pay for confessing Christ. The cross is our struggle with hurts and sorrows here. It’s the pain that comes from crushing our ego and putting others first. It’s the disappointment when no one notices or appreciates our efforts. The cross is everything that challenges our faith here. And we take it up gladly and we follow Jesus.

Whoever wants to save his life will lose it. By “saving our lives,” does Jesus mean things like seatbelts and smoke detectors? No. He’s talking about wanting to have the best of life. That’s not supposed to be our goal. Our goal is supposed to be serving Christ by serving others. When we sacrifice all the blessings and good of this life so that we can serve others, Jesus will preserve us to eternal life where he will give us every good thing. We can even say that in heaven, Jesus will serve us – as hard as that is to imagine.

Are we able to sacrifice our lives here for Christ and his people? Do we trust Jesus enough to stop asking when it’s my turn and to simply dedicate every day to serving him? Are we faithful enough to put everyone else’s needs ahead of our wants? Don’t we have to admit that we aren’t? The sinner in our hearts hates the very idea of it. He comes up with excuse after excuse for us to be greedy and lazy and self-centered. That sinner deserves God’s punishment in hell and if he wins in our hearts, he will kill our faith and we will lose eternal life. The man that wants to save his life in this world will lose his real life.

But that’s why Jesus came. That’s why he died. That’s why he rose. He has taken our place in life and in death and God has wiped all that pride and sin away. We are forgiven and loved. God calls us perfect because Jesus was and promises to keep our faith alive. Now, to us who know that, Jesus says, “Follow me.” He tells us to make our lives all about service, just like Jesus made his life all about service, to sacrifice just like Jesus did. He promises that he will take us home to heaven where we will never suffer or sacrifice again.

Be clear in your own heart what it means to follow Jesus. It means a clear confession in a world that does not want to hear it. It means a clear heart, a heart that knows who Jesus is and what he did for us and trusts that Savior. Then that heart understands that the Christian life is really service and sacrifice for God through service and sacrifice for each other. And the miracle here is that through the power of the gospel, Jesus will change our hearts and make them clear. He will give us a good confession and he will lead us to serve him by serving each other. He will do that through the promise of forgiveness and life that he has won for us. Hear that promise and live that new life. Amen.