

# Define the Relationship

LUKE 9:23

Baxter T. Exum (#1667)  
Four Lakes Church of Christ  
Madison, Wisconsin  
November 20, 2022



We are here this morning to worship God and to learn from his word. It is good to be together! If you are visiting with us today (either in person or online), we are glad to have you with us, and we would invite you to fill out an online visitor card by using the QR code on the bulletin or by simply going to [www.fourlakescoc.org/visitor](http://www.fourlakescoc.org/visitor).

One of the great blessings of assembling together is that we can invite and encourage each other to follow Jesus. For those of us who are already disciples of Jesus, this may involve recommitting our lives to him – perhaps we’ve drifted or wandered, and we need to come back; or maybe we’ve been trapped in some sin, and we need help turning away from it, we need the prayers and encouragement of our Christian family. But there’s also a chance that you have joined us this morning and you have not yet obeyed the gospel. If that’s the case, we invite you to believe that God is and that he rewards those who seek him. He sent his only Son as a sacrifice. He died in our place, he was buried, and he was raised up on the third day. We respond to that good news by turning to God in faith, by turning away from a life of sin, by publicly confessing our faith in Jesus as being King of our lives, and by allowing ourselves to be buried with him in baptism, an immersion in water so that our sins will be forgiven. At this point, we are born into God’s family, and the Christian life begins.

And we do have several examples this morning, the first one coming from Abanda Edwin, who preaches the good news in Cameroon. He posted several days ago and says, “Join us to welcome another soul that the lord has added to the body of Christ.” I’d like to point out a bit of an extreme between this example and the one that comes next, so I hope you notice how deep the water is. They have a baptistery, but to me it only seems to be about a foot deep, maybe 18 inches at the most. And as a preacher, I’m just noticing that this preacher gets his own feet involved here! To me, it looks like he’s stepping on the guy’s legs, just to help make sure that he’s all the way under! So, this was on my mind...

...when I found the next one, showing one of the deepest baptisteries I’ve ever seen! I couldn’t help but think this is for preachers with no upper body strength! This one comes to us from Freddy, who preaches in Querétaro, Mexico. He says (as translated by Facebook), “Today we returned to cause joy unto our Lord and God. Angel Gabriel Vega Sanchez was baptized for the forgiveness of his sins and to become a son of the Almighty. Continue to pray for the church [here], we yearn to continue to reap these fruits. Rejoice with us!” Great news out of Mexico this week!

And I'm hoping you will let me get away with sharing one more. This one comes to us from the Lord's church in Loris, South Carolina, and they simply say, "Welcome our new sister Maria Drost!" I wish I could get to know Maria: If not in this life, then hopefully in the next. And we share these three examples today simply to try to illustrate what it means to obey the gospel. We invite you to examine the scriptures on the wall up here. If you think we have misunderstood something, let us know; but, if there is some way we can encourage you to follow Jesus more closely, we hope you will give us that privilege.

This morning, as we think about what it means to follow Jesus, as we think about what means to be a disciple of Jesus, I would invite you to turn with me to Luke 9:23, as we take a few moments to think about one of the Lord's most challenging statements – Luke 9:23 (in our pew Bibles, the verse is found on page 1616).

The picture on the wall, by the way, is of Hidden Lake in Glacier National Park and was taken on my way home from Washington about a month and a half ago. It was quite the hike in, and I had the privilege of swimming here, in some of the coldest water I've ever felt that wasn't a solid. But we are just using this as a background today. We don't have time to read the whole chapter this morning, but to try to put this in context, we just look back at the first part of Luke 9, and we find that Jesus and his disciples are proclaiming the kingdom of God, they are healing, huge crowds are following, and in a private moment, Jesus wants to know, ***"Who do the people say that I am?"*** The apostles give various answers, but Jesus wants to know who THEY say he is, and Peter answers and says, ***"You are the Christ of God."*** This is huge! These men are starting to get it! Jesus, though, immediately tells the apostles that the time is coming when he would ***"suffer many things and be rejected by the chief priests and scribes, and be killed and raised up on the third day."*** This is shocking! But Jesus doesn't stop there. According to the parallel accounts, Jesus then gets back to preaching to the crowds, and this is where we come to Luke 9:23, as Jesus gives a preview concerning what it truly means to be a disciple. Let's notice Luke 9:23, ***"If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me."***

This morning, I'd like for us to take a few moments to let Jesus remind us what it means to be his disciples. A disciple is a follower, a student.

I. **And this morning, the first thing I hope we notice in this passage is that following Jesus is A CHOICE THAT WE MAKE.**

And we notice how Jesus starts with an offer, a conditional statement. And this offer is not just for the apostles, but this is for ***"anyone."*** Remember: Jesus is speaking to huge crowds at this point. He's speaking to all of us. We aren't drafted as disciples, but we volunteer. This is an invitation. We can either follow or turn away, ***"If anyone wishes to come after Me,"*** Jesus says. The ***"if"*** in this passage is huge, and I would suggest that ***"if"*** is one of the first logical statements we learn as children, ***"If you eat your carrots, then you can have dessert."*** There's no physical force being used, but it's an invitation, an invitation with consequences. And this is a concept that continues on into adulthood, ***"If you take care of your car, it will last much longer."*** And this is a concept we see over and over again in the Bible, ***"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink,"*** ***"If you continue in my word, then you are truly disciples of mine,"*** and so on. And we see it here in the form of an invitation, ***"If anyone wishes to come after Me."*** Other translations have Jesus making the offer to anyone who ***"wishes,"*** ***"wants,"*** or ***"desires."*** Coming after Jesus is a choice that we make. Before we can follow Jesus, we must DECIDE to follow Jesus. Following Jesus, then, is a choice that we make.

And before we move on from this, we should also note that the choice is to ***"come after"*** the Lord. We are not leading him and asking him to put his stamp of approval on what we think, and believe, and do, but we are

falling in line behind him. But the first big idea is that we will never truly follow Jesus if we don't WANT to follow Jesus, because following Jesus is a CHOICE that we make. The Bible itself is an invitation. Believing in God is an invitation. Serving God is an invitation. Obeying his word is an invitation. Worshiping God is an invitation. Following Jesus is a CHOICE.

**II. This leads us to what comes next, as Jesus gives the first actual command – this is the choice we make: Anyone choosing to come after Jesus must DENY HIMSELF.**

To “*deny*” is to “contradict, disavow, or reject; to refuse.” One translation has Jesus saying that those who choose to come after him must “*disown*” themselves. Another says that you must “*turn from your selfish ways*.” And this, of course, is the exact opposite of what the world is telling us to do these days. The world today is a very selfish place. Forty years ago, if I had taken my own picture with that old Minolta SRT-100, standing in front of the full-length mirror in my parents’ bedroom, and if I had printed and mailed this picture to everybody I knew back then, the world might have said that I had a problem. Today, though, it’s totally normal, isn’t it? By the way, there’s no filter on this: This is the color the world actually was back in the mid-80’s. The world, though, has always been a very selfish place. The world says, “You do you.” The world says, “Believe in yourself.” The world says, “Do what’s right for you.” The world says, “Do whatever makes you happy.” The world says, “Follow your heart.” The Bible, though (in Jeremiah 17:9) says, “*The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick: Who can understand it?*” Or, as Jesus says in Mark 7:20-23, “*That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, sexual sins, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.*” The world, then, says, “Follow your heart,” “You do you,” but Jesus says that “*if anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself.*”

When we decide to follow Jesus, we make the choice to deny ourselves. We turn away from selfish or sinful behavior. We may need to step away from a relationship, or maybe an evil behavior. And it’s not that we can never do anything fun for the rest of our lives, but our own pleasure now moves into second place behind pleasing God. We take ourselves off of the throne and put Jesus there. He rules, and we turn away from anything that might keep us from pleasing him. We deny ourselves. Anything we are holding onto that might keep us from following Jesus has to go. And this isn’t some terribly oppressive burden, but this is something we do willingly. We might compare it to giving up something for the sake of our children. Sometimes, we make choices. I would like to do this thing over here, but because I love this person more than I love myself, I choose to give this up. It may be difficult, but it’s not a burden. In the same way, Jesus demands that we deny ourselves. He comes first.

**III. As we come back to the text, we have an “AND,” don’t we? Jesus is saying, then, that what comes next is connected very closely to what he’s just said, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, AND TAKE UP HIS CROSS DAILY and follow me.”**

The next step, then, is that we must take up the cross – not Jesus’ cross (he’s already done that for us), but the Lord says that anyone choosing to come after him must deny himself and take up “his cross,” in other words, each of us must take up our own cross. This is personal. And we should note here, that the cross is not placed up on us, but this is something we “take up.” Once again, then, we find that all of this is voluntary. Taking up the cross is a decision we make. Sometimes we sing a song written by Thomas Shephard back in 1693,

*Must Jesus bear the cross alone  
And all the world go free?  
No, there's a cross for ev'ry one,  
And there's a cross for me.*

Today, crucifixion is foreign to us – literally – it's a form of execution from another time and place, but it is truly one of the most horrific ways to die. And to add to the excruciating torture and shame of being nailed (often naked) to a piece of wood, the Romans would have the person carry his own cross from the courtroom to the place of execution. It was their way of making it as public and as humiliating as possible. It was their way of saying, "Follow the law, or this may happen to you." And along the way, people would often taunt and harass the person carrying his cross. He was truly a "dead man walking." Everybody knew that this was a one-way journey. There was no turning back. The one being crucified no longer had any plans of his own. This was it. This was his last time to catch a glimpse of his family.

And this is the way Jesus pictures what it means to be a disciple, as he tells us to take up our cross. Later (in Romans 12:1), Paul will refer to ***"presenting our bodies as a living and holy sacrifice, which is our spiritual service of worship."*** We give ourselves to the Lord. We take up our cross. And this is something we must do ***"daily,"*** Jesus says. This is a decision we make again and again, day after day, year after year. We choose to follow Jesus every day. And this decision gives us the power to live for him. As Paul will write in Galatians 2:20, ***"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me."*** And, as Paul will go on to write in Galatians 5:24, ***"Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."*** And, in Galatians 6:14, ***"But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."*** We need to ask ourselves: Who are we living for? Am I living for me, or am I living for Him? When we pick up the cross, we are leaving the old life behind. And it may be uncomfortable. Repentance is hard. Forgiving people may be hard. Not taking revenge may be hard. Not whining may be difficult. Maintaining sexual purity may be difficult. Going to work and working as if we are working for the Lord may be difficult. Helping the poor and standing up for the widow, and the fatherless, and defending the defenseless (including the unborn, who are certainly the most oppressed and marginalized in our world right now) this may be difficult and may take great effort. But the Christian faith is not something we can do halfway. The Christian faith isn't like a buffet where we choose this and this and leave these other things behind. And I love buffets! This is on the list of terrible COVID consequences: We have lost some good buffets here in Madison. I miss the Indian buffet at Swad over on Monona Drive. I miss Jade Garden, the dumpy-looking Chinese restaurant on Park Street. It's gone; replaced by condos. I could get peanut butter chicken, and won-ton soup, and pick and choose and just ignore the stuff I didn't like. Christianity is not like that. When we take up our cross, we are dying to self and living for him – turning from sin, no excuses, no covering up, not defending our behavior, but leaving the old life behind completely. When we pick up the cross, we are confessing that we are deserving of death; we are acknowledging that he died in our place, and we are making the commitment to live for him from this point forward, using our talents and skills and passion for his kingdom, even when it's difficult.

**IV. As we come to the end of this passage, let's make sure we don't miss the end of it: If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and FOLLOW ME.**

We have quite a few books and a lot of advice on leadership out there these days. But when's the last time we read a book on how to be a good follower? By necessity, though, there are far fewer leaders than there are followers, but very seldom do think about what it means to follow more effectively. Jesus, though, invites us to

***“follow.”*** And to follow, we should probably start by making sure we trust who’s leading us. It’s hard to follow if the leader is sketchy. Jesus, though, has been where we are, and because of this, he can ***“sympathize with our weaknesses.”*** He ***“has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin”*** (Hebrews 4:15). Before somebody tells me what to do, I’d like to think that they’ve done it. Some of you may have supervisors at work who’ve never done what you do. I would imagine that could be pretty frustrating. Jesus, though, leads the way, and now he calls on us to follow.

To follow implies movement. Not necessarily literally, but we follow Jesus’ example. We do the best we can to treat people the way Jesus treated people – with love and respect, doing whatever it is that needs to be done. Maybe I look at the Lord’s example, and I realize that I really need to adjust my attitude about some situation – not complaining, but looking for ways to be thankful. Maybe I need to change the way I think about certain groups of people – challenging prejudices, making an effort to learn and to understand what others have experienced. Maybe I need to reevaluate how I think about the stuff in my life – making a point to do a better job helping others in some concrete way (or in some pineapple way). Maybe we look at Jesus, and we see how important it is to care enough about somebody to have a difficult spiritual conversation. Maybe we look to Jesus, and we decide to forgo a promotion at work to stay in an area where we can use our talents more effectively in his kingdom. The point is: We follow. This is an open-ended commitment. He leads; we follow; we go where he goes.

### **Conclusion:**

In 2,000 years, this invitation hasn’t changed, ***“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me.”*** As we close, I’d like to make sure we don’t miss that word ***“anyone.”*** This offer is for all of us – no matter what we’ve done, no matter how far we’ve run in the wrong direction, Jesus invites us back. But it is a decision on our part, maybe a really tough decision. If there’s something we can do to encourage you to take this step, we’d like to invite you take that step together with the rest of us. Let us know if we can help in some way.

Before we continue with our song before the Lord’s Supper, let’s pray together:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are a God who loves us. You made us. You know our hearts, and so we confess our sins to you – knowing that you will forgive, and knowing that you have promised to always provide a way of escape whenever we are tempted to sin. Father, we pray for wisdom and courage to find and to take the way to righteousness.

For those of us who are following in your Son’s footsteps, we ask that you would restore to us the joy of salvation. Help us to appreciate the amazing blessing in being a part of your kingdom. Help us to encourage each other along the way.

Thank you, Father, for hearing our prayer. We come to you through Jesus. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)