

Follow the Leader

Mark 8:31-35

Growing up most of us probably played some version of the game *Follow the Leader*. If not, I'm sure I could bring up any of these kids here and they could explain the game to us. It's a simple game where a leader is chosen and then everyone else lines up behind the leader. As the leader moves around everyone else follows the leader and does what he does. If the leader walks, they walk. If the leader turns around, they turn around. If the leader hops, they hop. The followers focus on the leader and seek to do exactly what the leader does, or they are "out." The last child still following at the end is the leader for the next round.

In a sense this game is a picture of what God calls us to in the Christian life. There is a leader, and his name is Jesus. We are to line up behind him, keep our eyes on him and seek to do what he does. This is the Christian life to which all of us have been called. Jesus is the leader; he is ALWAYS the leader. And we are to be the followers.

On this first Sunday of the New Year, I want to invite you to do some personal reflection. Here's the question that I want you to consider: "Am I following the leader?" As you reflect back on the past year, have you been following the leader? And as you think about the year ahead, is it your settled determination to follow Jesus?

We have just celebrated the reality that God sent His son into the world as a baby. And we are grateful for this because that baby grew up to be the Savior of the world. Through him, and only through him, our sins can be forgiven. And so, we rightfully worship him as our Savior. But Jesus came not only to be our Savior, but he also came to be our leader. Are you following the leader?

This morning, I want us to look at Mark 8:31-35 and see what Jesus says about following the leader. This passage marks a transition in Mark's Gospel. Up to this point Mark has focused on Jesus' teaching and healing ministry in Galilee. But from this point on the focus becomes Jesus' movement towards Jerusalem where he will be crucified.

Right before this passage, there is the discussion where Jesus asks his disciples who the people said he was. And then he asks them what they say, and Peter gives his great confession that Jesus was the Christ (8:29). It is after this confession that Jesus begins to speak very clearly about what going to Jerusalem was going to mean for him. And so, let me read starting in verse 31:

³¹ And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise from the dead. ³² And He was stating the matter plainly.

The disciples had been following Jesus for some time. Earlier in the Gospel we read of Jesus calling the fishermen, Simon and Andrew, to follow him and they leave their nets and follow him (1:16-18). He calls James and his brother John, who were also fishermen, and they leave their father and go to follow Jesus (1:19-20). In Mark 2, Jesus calls Matthew, the tax collector, to follow

him and Matthew rises and follows Jesus (2:14-15). In each of these calls, Jesus is calling them to follow him as his disciples and they have been doing this.

Up to this point the disciples' experience of following Jesus has been amazing. They've seen Jesus heal. They have seen him cast out demons. They've heard his amazing teaching. It was with authority unlike anything they had ever heard. They've seen him calm the sea. They've seen him walk on water. They have seen him feed the five thousand. They have even been sent out by Jesus to preach the good news of the kingdom and to cast out demons and to heal people themselves. Following Jesus had been amazing.

But now Jesus is talks about suffering and being killed and this doesn't exactly compute with what they had experienced so far in following Jesus or with their view of the Messiah. And so,

And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him.

We look at this encounter and can't believe that Peter would do such a thing. But Peter doesn't have hindsight like we do. The popular and theological view of the Messiah at the time was one of strength and power and victory. That is what they had experienced in following Jesus so far. That is what they expected for the future. But a suffering Messiah who would be killed was not part of that picture. And so Peter begins to rebuke Jesus, but he doesn't get very far. Verse 33:

³³ But turning around and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's purposes, but on man's."

Jesus, in the presence of all the disciples, rebukes Peter. The fact that Jesus looks at all the disciples as he says this probably suggests that they all shared Peter's view and so the rebuke was for all of them. Jesus saw in Peter's rebuke satanic opposition. It was Satan's desire to turn Jesus away from his saving mission. And so Jesus rebukes Peter and tells them that he is thinking in a worldly way. He is thinking about his interests not God's.

At this point, Jesus takes the opportunity to remind those who have been following Him what it looks like to follow the leader.

³⁴ And He summoned the crowd together with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me."

We are told that Jesus not only addresses the twelve, but also *the crowd*. This, in addition to the fact that he begins by saying, *If anyone*, indicates that what he is talking about here is for anyone who intends to follow him. Jesus says, *if anyone wants to come after Me*, in other words, if anyone wants to follow Jesus as a disciple then here is what that person must do – *let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me*.

When Jesus says that a person must *deny himself*, he doesn't mean deny oneself of something. He is not talking about some ascetic practice of giving up things like we do sometimes at Lent when we give up sweets or caffeine for a time. Rather, he is saying that we must renounce self. He is calling us to turn away from self-centeredness where all our decisions are determined by self-interest. God, not self, must be the focus and center of one's life. This is required if we are to walk as Jesus' disciples.

But Jesus also says that the one who wants to walk as his disciple, must *take up his cross*. Sometimes we will hear people say something like, "I guess my difficult work situation is just my cross to bear." Bearing one's cross is seen as some kind of irritant in life that one must put up with. But this is not at all what Jesus means. In first century Palestine, the metaphor would have been clear. A person who was carrying his cross was someone who was demonstrating publicly their submission to Rome. They were on their way to crucifixion. They were in fact a dead person.

Jesus is saying to the 12, to the multitudes, and to us that if we want to follow Him, we must die to self. We must choose submission to God. To deny self and to take up one's cross is basically to say that you give up the right to run your own life. You are no longer in charge. God is. It is only when we do this that we can obey Jesus' final command, which is to *follow Me*.

This is a present imperative. He is calling us to an ongoing, moment-by-moment following of him. The only way anyone can follow Jesus is to give up the right to be in control of one's own life. This is the call of discipleship. This is what it looks like to follow the leader. The cost of this might seem so great, but in verse 35 Jesus says:

³⁵For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.

Jesus makes it clear that ultimately in dying to self we save our lives. That's where we find true life.

The disciples had been called to follow Jesus. They had heeded Jesus' first call and they had followed him as disciples for some time. But here in Mark 8, we see Jesus giving them a fuller explanation of what it means to follow him. It means yielding all and choosing to follow him. In this call to follow him, we see a pattern for all of us who are believers in Jesus Christ. We too are to follow like this. Jesus is not just to be our Savior; he is to be our leader. We are to follow him moment-by-moment. We can only follow as we deny self, take up our cross, and follow him.

As you reflect on this past year, have you been following Jesus like he describes here? Are you following the leader?

To help you continue to reflect on this question, I'd like to make a couple of observations about following Jesus. First, **following the leader is the normal Christian life**. This call to follow Jesus is not just the way of life for a special committed few; it is for all Christians.

The Bible doesn't present two classifications of Christians – those who are saved and those who are disciples. Biblically speaking, to have faith in Jesus means to follow Jesus. Any believer who does not follow Jesus is not living the normal Christian life, because following the leader is the normal Christian life.

This is for everybody. If you have no desire or urge or inclination to try to follow Jesus, then I would caution you. Have you truly trusted Jesus for salvation? Is he your Savior. Have you been reborn spiritually? I'm not saying that we won't have struggles to follow Jesus. We all do. None of us follows him perfectly. But if you simply have no desire to follow Jesus and to seek to do what he says, I'd encourage you to make sure of your salvation because following the leader is the normal Christian life.

Secondly, **following the leader requires a fundamental decision to follow.** This is what Jesus is calling for here. Jesus says that if anyone wants to follow Him then there is a choice to make. It is the choice to give up the right to run our own life. It is the choice to give up our agenda. It is the choice to put Jesus at the center of our lives and to follow Him regardless of what that requires.

I've shared this a few times over the years. Over the Christmas break of my junior year in college I attended a conference where one of the speakers challenged us to make this fundamental decision to follow Jesus. At the time I had been a Christian for a long time. I went to church weekly. I read my Bible. I shared my faith with others from time-to-time and led a bible study, but I had not truly made this fundamental decision. I was still in charge of my life. I was still calling the shots. I was still holding on to my life. In so many ways, I was still setting my mind on my own interests and not God's – just like Peter.

But this speaker challenged us to give up control of our lives – to commit to Jesus that we would go anywhere He wants us to go and do whatever Jesus wants us to do. He was asking us to commit to following Jesus fully. At the end of his talk, he invited all who were ready to make that decision to follow Jesus to stand. All around me people stood up, but I could not. I knew that I was still holding onto my life. I knew that I still wanted to hang onto my agenda for my life. I knew that I wasn't ready to displace self from the center of my life. And so I sat there in honest assessment of what was true of me. But even as I sat there, there was something deep within that wanted to be able to stand and say, "Yes, Jesus, I will follow you without any conditions." I was essentially being confronted with Jesus' call to discipleship.

I left that conference wrestling with this question. Would I yield my life to Christ? Would I commit to follow him regardless of what that meant? Over the next few days God gently continued to pursue me and on Jan. 7, 1985 (39 years ago this very today) I got on my knees in my bedroom in my duplex in Kearney, NE and I yielded my life to Christ. I made a fundamental decision to follow him. This is what I wrote inside the front cover of my Bible on that day:

Lord, today I make you Lord of everything. Take my life and use me. I will go anywhere and do anything that you want me to. I am not my own, but I am your

bondslave. I choose this as a response to your love and grace towards me – which brought me to salvation in Christ.

Following Jesus requires this fundamental decision to follow. Have you made this decisive decision to follow Jesus? Be honest about this. You can't fake God out. He knows your heart.

If you have not made this fundamental decision to follow Jesus, do you want to? What would keep you from it? If you have not made this decision, but want to get there, I would encourage you to call out to God. Ask him to work on your heart. Ask Him to bring you to this place where you willfully submit to him. Ask him to bring you to a place where you understand that this decision is give up the right to run your own life is what is truly good and satisfying.

Third, **following the leader requires a daily decision to follow.** Yes, there needs to be this fundamental decision to follow. There can be no daily decision to follow if we haven't settled the fundamental issue of who is in charge of our lives. But having made that decision, we need to renew it every day. The hymn says it well, "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love." We are prone to take back control of our lives. We are prone to want to act in our own self-interest. The life of following Jesus is the better life, but it is not an easy life. It is a life the comes with difficulties and challenges and sacrifices. Sometimes it is a life of being misunderstood or even mistreated. And so there is a need to renew our commitment to follow Jesus every day.

Following the leader is the normal Christian life. Following the leader requires a fundamental decision to follow. Following the leader requires a daily decision to follow. Are you following the leader.

I mentioned earlier that during my junior year in college I made a fundamental decision to follow Jesus. As a result of that decision, Jesus has led me to do things with my life that I never had in my own plans. Life has turned out differently than what was on my agenda. Following Him has not always been easy. And I haven't always do so perfectly. But 39 years to the day after making that decision to unconditionally follow him, I can say with full conviction that there have no regrets. Not one. I have truly experienced that in giving up my life, I have found my life. If I have had any regrets over these years it has been the times where I have not chosen to follow Him daily, when I've gone my own way for a short time. Then I've had regrets. But I have no regrets in following the leader.

Today, we are celebrating communion. As we eat the bread and drink the juice, we remember that Jesus gave his life for us. His body was broken, his blood was shed, that our sins might be forgiven. Compelled by love, Jesus offered his life for us. If he has loved us like this, at such great cost, doesn't it make sense that we would truly follow him?

As we take communion today, I invite you to exam yourself. Are you following Jesus? Or are you running your own life? If you are not truly following him, take these moments to call out to God to change your heart. To bring you to a place where you make a fundamental decision to follow.