

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 him and does what he does. They follow the leader.

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 do what he does. This is the Christian life to which all of us have been called. Jesus is the leader. We are to be the followers.

Today is the last Sunday of 2008; next Sunday will be 2009. I think this time of year provides a great opportunity for some personal reflection. I want to invite each of you to do a little personal reflection this morning and hopefully this week. Here's the question that I want to have you consider: Am I following the leader? As you reflect back on this past year, have you been following the leader?

We have just celebrated the reality that God sent a baby into the world. And we are grateful for that truth 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 He is not only to be our Savior, he came to be our leader. Are you following the leader?

This morning, as we consider this question, I want 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 he 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 the disciples who the people said he was. And then he asks them what they said and Peter gives his great confession that Jesus was the Christ (8:29).

And so as Jesus sets his eyes on Jerusalem it provides an opportunity for him to explain what following him looks like. 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 again. ³² And He was stating the matter plainly.

The disciples had been following him 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. He is not just calling them to follow him in the sense that I might say, "Hey, follow me out to the backyard." He means follow as my 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. It has been a great ride up to this point. Following Jesus had been amazing.

But now Jesus is talking about suffering and being killed. This didn'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 20-20 hindsight like we have. 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. But a suffering Messiah 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 interests, but man's."

Jesus, in the presence of all the disciples, strongly rebukes Peter. Jesus saw in Peter's rebuke satanic opposition. It was Satan's desire to turn Jesus away from his saving mission. And so he forcefully 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.

Verse 34:

³⁴ And He summoned the multitude with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."

We are told that Jesus not only addresses the twelve, but also the multitudes. 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, for anyone who wants to follow the leader – *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 means to renounce self. If a person is going to follow Jesus, then self cannot be the object of one's life. God, not self, must be the focus and center of one's life.

So to follow Jesus one must deny himself. Then Jesus says, he must also *take up his cross and follow Him.* Sometimes we will hear people say, I guess my back ache or that difficult person I work with is just my cross to bear. Bearing one's cross is seen as some kind of irritant in life, but that isn't what Jesus means. In first century Palestine the metaphor would have been clear. A person who was carrying his cross was a dead person. It was someone condemned to death heading to their crucifixion. Jesus is saying to the 12 and to the multitudes and to us that if we want to follow Him, we've must die to self.

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. And so you deny self, you die to self and you choose to moment-by-moment follow Jesus. 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:

³⁵ "For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's shall save it.

Jesus makes it clear that ultimately in dying to self we save our lives.

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 not just to be our Savior, he is to be our leader. We are to follow. We can only follow as we deny self, take up our cross and follow him.

And so I ask you again, are you following the leader? As you reflect back on this past year, have you followed Jesus like he describes here?

To help you continue to reflect on this question, I'd like to make four 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 super committed few; it is for all Christians. As Bill Hull says,

. . . Following Jesus is for the person who hasn't read a book in thirty years, for the homemaker with four children underfoot, for the seasoned saint who has all the information but needs stimulation, and for the teenager who just committed his life to Christ. It doesn't matter if you're young or old, if you're healthy or you have to call 911 paramedics to help you out of bed. Jesus calls us to follow him (*The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 120-21).

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.

Secondly, **following the leader requires a fundamental decision to follow.** 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.

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 even shared my faith with others from time-to-time, 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 fundamental 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. 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 left that conference wrestling with this question. Would I yield my life to Christ? Would I irrevocably 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, I got on my knees and I yielded my life to Christ. I made a fundamental decision to follow him. This is what I wrote in my Ryrie study 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 bondsman. 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 decision to follow Jesus?

Third, **following the leader requires a daily decision to follow.** Yes, we make a fundamental decision to follow, but we need to renew that decision every day. The old hymn says it well, “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it; prone to leave the God I love.” We are prone to get distracted. We are prone to get our eyes on other things and before we know if we slip from following Jesus. And so we need daily to renew our commitment.

I’m currently reading a book called *Soul Revolution*. The writer is encouraging his readers to do what he calls the 60-60 Experiment. In the 60-60 Experiment, you have some kind of reminder every sixty minutes for sixty days to turn your attention to God. He recommends using the beeper on your watch.

I’ve been doing this now for about four weeks. Maybe you’ve heard my watch beep. It has been an interesting experiment. So often when my watch beeps I realize that God has been far from my thoughts and so it is a good reminder to return to a more prayerful walk with Him; a more diligent following.

When my watch beeps, I will pause and reflect for a few moments about God and what He is up to and my own experience of awareness or lack of awareness of God. I’ll ask him to lead me; to empower me; to guide me. That hourly reminder helps me keep my eyes on Jesus and to follow him.

I don’t think we have to do the 60-60 Experiment to follow Jesus, but we do need to daily renew our decision to follow.

Finally, **we are not left alone in following the leader.** Unlike the disciples in Mark 8, we don’t have Jesus physically with us to follow. But that doesn’t mean we are left without help in this journey. Let me mention at least three things that God has given us to help.

First, we have been given the **Spirit** of Jesus to live within us (Rom. 8:9). Paul writes this to the Galatians:

If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit (Gal. 5:25).

To *walk by the Spirit* means to follow the Spirit – keep in step with the Spirit as the NIV says. Jesus’ Spirit lives within every believer and He seeks to guide and lead us in the ways of Christ. We can trust Him to help us. We can grow in our sensitivity in hearing from the Spirit and how He is leading us. He leads us in following Jesus.

God has also given us the **Church**. He has given us examples of others who have followed Jesus that we can look at to see what following Christ looks like. There are biblical examples and there are historical examples of men and women who have followed Jesus from whom we can gain insight and encouragement for our own journey.

But there are also models around us that we are instructed to look to. Hebrews 13:7 says this:

Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.

Or Paul said to the Corinthians

Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ (1 Cor. 11:1)

We don't just follow Jesus in a vacuum. God intends that we follow Jesus by following others who are following Jesus. We are to look to them and seek to imitate them even as they seek to follow Christ. This person might be a parent, a friend, a teacher, someone in your small group.

Who are the examples to whom you look? Do you have them? If not, you are missing one of the helps God has provided for us in following Jesus. Maybe one of the steps you might want to take this next year to follow Jesus more fully is to be more intentional about finding those examples. Maybe that means joining a small group or one of the men's or women's studies. Maybe it means taking the risk to go to someone and asking them if they would be willing to get together for coffee once a week so that you can learn from them. God has provided the Church to help us follow Jesus.

Finally, God has given us the **Word**. The disciples had the Living Word walking around on earth to follow; we have the written Word. And the written Word, the way of Christ is revealed. We learn here what it looks like to follow Jesus. And so, if we intend to follow Jesus, we will be people of the Word. We will go here for wisdom and insight, for guidance and counsel. We will see spending time in the Word, not as just something I'm supposed to do because I'm a Christian, but rather we will see it is one of the main ways we get to know Jesus and learn to follow Him.

I'm sure God has given us other resources to help us follow Jesus, but these three are critical – The Spirit, the Church and the Word. We are not left alone in the journey.

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. And, we are not left alone to follow the leader.

And so, I return to the question, are you following the leader? Has that been the pattern of your life this past year? Or would you say there is a need to be more intentional about it?

I mentioned earlier that my junior year in college I made a fundamental decision to follow Jesus. And as a result of that decision, He has led me to do things with my life that I never had in my own plans. Life has turned out different than what was on my agenda. Following Him has not always been easy. And I don't always do so perfectly. But twenty-three years after making a 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 and I've gone my own way for a short time. Then I've had regrets. But I have no regrets in following the leader.

Are you following the leader?

Let's pray.