

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 25”
Matthew 10:32-42

They don't seem to come around so much now – presumably they use the 'phone and the Internet – but there was a time when, as soon as I lifted up the first forkful of food at dinner time, there would be a ring at the bell and someone would be standing on the doorstep offering me a better deal on my gas and electricity. A fairly lengthy presentation would ensue, extolling the virtues of whichever provider they were representing, and finally there would be an invitation to sign up for a deal which would, according to the salesperson, result in my saving hundreds of pounds a year on my bills. Then I'd look at the small print and realise the actual cost was not going to be anything like I'd just been promised – and it might even end up costing me more.

Jesus is getting to the end of his teaching to his twelve apostles in which he commissions them to go out and share the good news of the Kingdom of God. He has called these twelve men to take part with him in his mission as he preaches, teaches and demonstrates the values and ideas of this kingly rule of God, and he has started to explain to them just what it is going to entail. He has told them they have his authority and told them what is the message they are to announce – that the Kingdom of God is here. He has given them some idea of the arrangements that they need to put in place for this to happen. Already he has spelt out some of the potential dangers of this task, but told them not to be afraid because of the help of the Holy Spirit and the ongoing protection and love of God.

Now he closes this section of his teaching with the small print. He makes it very clear to these apostles – and to everyone who thinks about following him – just what the implications of this are to be and just what their priorities should be. If you've been a bit fearful over the past couple of weeks when we've been looking at what Jesus says to his potential disciples, then this isn't exactly going to make you jump to sign up for the task, but you do need to get clear before you start what this is all about. And, be encouraged, things get a bit more positive in the next chapter. As we'll see, though, Jesus is eager to let people know what they're letting themselves in for. If we are to **accept the challenge**, we need to **acknowledge Christ**, be **aware of the conflict** and **agree to the cost**.

1. ACKNOWLEDGE CHRIST (vv32,33)

Clearly, this is at the very heart of all that we're called to do. If you are following someone, you need to acknowledge who it is that you're following. You cannot be a Christian, a disciple of Jesus, and keep it a secret. Yes, there are places in the world where life does get very difficult if you claim to have faith in Christ, but even there people are prepared to confess to being followers of him when pressed. Living as a disciple of Jesus should mean that your life is somehow different – there's something about your attitude, your conversation, your behaviour – and people may well ask you about it. You cannot deny who it is you're following.

Acknowledging Jesus is to be part of the very fabric of our lives, both in word and action. And the two must always be in sync. You cannot talk about being a follower of Jesus if your life doesn't match up to your words. And you cannot try and live in the way Jesus wants without acknowledging the influence that Jesus has on you. Don't deny Jesus or try to find ways around it. It will always end in tears – just think about Peter in the courtyard outside Jesus' trial when he loudly and profanely denied that he had anything to do with Jesus.

Jesus forgave Peter when he realised his folly, but he says here that the time will come that he will not acknowledge before his Father those who refuse to acknowledge him in their lives here. That's quite a thought. You think you've been following Jesus, but you haven't been prepared to let others know of your allegiance to him – and then, standing before your Creator when this life is over, you find Jesus saying that he has no idea who you are. That's fairly stark and really brings you up short. Jesus is saying, effectively, why should I stick up for you before my Father when you haven't been prepared to

stick up for me amongst your friends? You cannot be a follower of Jesus if you don't acknowledge him in your life.

2. BE AWARE OF THE CONFLICT (vv34-37)

Unfortunately, Jesus says, it's not all going to be sweetness and light if you do take that seriously. Jesus, the Prince of Peace – “*gentle Jesus, meek and mild*” – is going to stir up a bit of trouble. We talk a lot about Jesus' mission to reconcile and to bring harmony and, yes, that is his ultimate aim, but he also says here that he will bring a sword. Harsh words – and unexpected words. Jesus isn't talking here about warfare and weaponry, but he is using the image of a sword to communicate something about division. (In fact, in other reports of these words in the other Gospels, “*division*” is the word that is used.) The sword divides, slices apart.

You see, following Jesus means courting controversy. That's as true in our culture, our society as in any other. It might not lead to fighting or physical persecution, but it can mean that there are very clear lines drawn between the followers of Jesus and those who have other allegiances, other agendas. You cannot claim to follow Jesus and remain neutral when issues of faith, morality and worldview come up. J P Mahaffy was a scholar and a bit of a man of the world from Trinity College, Dublin. When asked if he was a Christian, he replied, “*Yes, but not offensively so.*”. Now, of course, we don't go out of our way to be offensive, but we will come across situations where our acknowledgment of Christ and his teaching does lead to offence being taken. That's always going to be the case when we stand on what the Bible teaches in the face of a society that flagrantly turns against it.

And that's always been the case. Jesus quotes here from the Hebrew Scriptures, from the book of the prophet Micah, where he says that obedience to God will cause even families to split apart. The late, great John Stott, one time rector of All Souls', Langham Place, wrote a book called *Christ The Controversialist* and that sums up exactly what we're talking about here. If you decide to follow him, then there will be controversy. It won't be all the time. It won't necessarily lead to physical persecution or death, but it could mean that life becomes difficult for you. So be prepared. Be aware of the potential for conflict. Pray for the help of the Holy Spirit, as Jesus said earlier in this chapter.

3. AGREE TO THE COST (vv37,38)

Following Jesus is a costly business – and that's not just about what you put in the offering bag each week. It will mean making some important decisions, decisions that could alienate others and that will certainly test your resolve. That's because Jesus asks for complete allegiance. He is to be at the very top of your list of priorities. And here's the shocking bit – he is to be up there above your closest family. In the other Gospels, Jesus is reported as talking about “*hating*” your family members, which is an idiom really inviting you to rank your allegiances. Here Matthew reports that he says that you need to love Jesus more than your father, your mother, your son, your daughter. That is a very costly and difficult commitment to make. But, in the end, it will have consequences in eternity.

R T France points out that “*Jesus does not come to poison family relationships, but rather he brings a division, regrettable but inevitable, between those who respond to his mission and those who reject it.*” Jesus is not saying that we should give up on or reject our families. It's clear from the teaching of the rest of the Bible that we are to love those who are part of our family, to love them and provide for them and protect them and respect them. These first apostles had their families and they loved them – some of them travelled with their wives and families, you will find, if you read on into *Acts* and the letters. But when the time comes and you have to make a choice, then it's in Jesus' direction you are to look. If you're not prepared for that, then forget it, says Jesus.

And there's more, would you believe? It's not just other people and your relationship to them which you are to subordinate to the overriding demands of following Jesus – it's your own life that is to be held lightly in the cause of the Kingdom. Jesus uses this image here of *“taking up your cross and following him”*. Clearly, at this point the apostles don't know what lies ahead. They are unaware of the way in which Jesus' life will end three years or so from this point. Matthew's first readers would have known, though. And the people listening to Jesus here would have a very good idea of what it meant to carry a cross. They would know that anyone seen carrying a cross was going to die. The criminals who were seen carrying crosses through the streets of towns and cities were carrying those crosses to the place of their execution. There was no way they were going to be able to escape that fate. So those who hear these words and take up their metaphorical cross know that they are metaphorically putting an end to control over their own lives. They are yielding their lives to Jesus.

You see, following Jesus, the Kingly Messiah, means following in the footsteps of Jesus – through controversy and conflict, focussed on him as he walks ahead, and following him into death. It means being aware of the possibility of conflict. It means agreeing the cost. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus talks about going into this with your eyes open, about counting the cost in advance:

‘Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you saying, “This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.”

‘Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won't he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.

4. ACCEPT THE CHALLENGE (v39)

So, are you ready for that? Jesus says here that those who follow him must be ready to *“lose their lives for his sake”*. They need to give themselves over entirely to him, in the knowledge that it would all be OK in the long run, the eternal run. That's a tough challenge. The small print on this commitment is not so small, but it's very, very important. Are you ready to accept that challenge – to give up your own priorities and concerns and put Jesus and his priorities at the very top of your agenda? Are you ready to take a step that means metaphorically – and possibly literally – laying down your life for him and for the message of the Kingdom of God.

In the end, you have to make a choice – neutrality is not an option. Now that is, as we've said, a very hard message. I wish I could have softened it, but it's what Jesus says here. We might try and find ways around it, ways of re-interpreting it for ourselves so that we can get away with it a bit more, but there really is no way we can do that and treat this passage with any integrity. The great thing is that, if we are familiar with the rest of Jesus' teaching and with the rest of the Bible, we know there are amazing spin-offs from all this. We will get to spend eternity in the presence of Jesus if he doesn't disown us before his Father. We will know a sense of peace and joy and fulfilment in this life, even though the going may well be very tough. We will be living with a real purpose to our lives, the purpose that God originally intended us to have.

Are you able to go along with these first apostles and acknowledge Christ, even as you are aware of the conflict that might entail? Can you agree to the cost of this Christ-centred life? Are you ready to accept the challenge that Jesus lays down before you? Let's reflect on that quietly for a moment, then I will lead us in a prayer that may be familiar to some of you – it's the Covenant Prayer that is used in the Methodist Church at the beginning of each new year. I'll say it slowly so that you can quietly repeat each phrase if you want to accept this challenge.

*I am no longer my own but yours.
Put me to what you will,
rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing,
put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you,
or laid aside for you,
exalted for you
or brought low for you;
let me be full,
let me be empty,
let me have all things,
let me have nothing:
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours.
And the covenant now made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.*

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Questions for discussion

1. In what ways can we disown Jesus? Reflect on the story of Peter and his denial – and the aftermath.
2. Has Jesus really come to bring a sword? What do you understand by that?
3. How can we reconcile our love for Jesus with love for our families? Should we leave our families and live in a commune together?
4. What you think v39 really means?
5. Do you find this passage hard? Why/why not?

6. What are the particular challenges you find in this passage? How will you deal with them?