
THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

July 8, 2007
No. 3366

True Followers of Christ
Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma

Dear Radio Friends,

Our Savior, in Mark 3:34, places before us a most difficult requirement. We read there what it is to be a true disciple of Jesus Christ. “And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.” This is not an ideal, that is, something for which we must only strive but never are able to achieve. It is a requirement. In this statement of Christ we learn what it is to be a true disciple of Him.

In Jesus’ day, as well as in our own, there were throngs of people that followed Christ everywhere. For a while it had gotten to a point where every waking hour of the day Jesus had people surrounding Him. But in Jesus’ day, as well as in our own, we know that many of these people followed Jesus for carnal reasons. Perhaps they were amazed at His miracles, or they thought that He was the One who was going to be that great deliverer from the oppression of

Rome. There were few, precious few, who followed Jesus because He was the Christ, the Son of the living God, who had come to seek and to save that which was lost.

In the instruction that we receive, Jesus points out that to be His true disciple is not an easy matter. It places upon a person some very serious requirements. And to fulfill these requirements takes conviction of heart.

Following Jesus, to many, is merely preference. It is convenient. It might even be the popular thing to do. But when they find out that following Christ places them in some pretty difficult straits, they turn away from Him and take the easy road. Following Christ is a matter of conviction, that is, a heart that is willing to follow Christ no matter what the consequences might be personally. That is why we say that Christ places before us a most difficult requirement.

What is it, to be a disciple of Christ—not just any disciple, but a true disciple? What must we do if we desire truly to follow after Christ? That is

the question that we consider in today's broadcast.

Christ makes it clear: "Whosoever will come after me." He addresses all those who have the desire to come after Him, all those who will to come after Him or to follow Him. It must be remembered, however, that though there may be many people who desire to follow Christ, it is only those in whom God has worked by His grace that are true followers. In other words, in order for a man truly to come *after* Christ, he must first of all come *to* Christ.

Christ Himself had already declared to the multitudes in Matthew 11, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden." One cannot come after Christ, one cannot follow Christ as a true disciple, unless, first of all, he comes *to* Christ. And, again, it is only those who come to Christ that truly desire to follow after Him.

But this needs some explanation, because we know that there are many people who come *to* Christ as well, but under false pretenses. There are those who come *to* Christ because they see in Him the greatest of examples to follow. There are others today who come to Christ because to speak His name soothes their consciences while they con-

tinue to walk in their sin. There are those who come to Christ because it is lucrative for them, or because to come to Him gives them fame and power in this world. There are many who come to Christ for the wrong reasons. They have a terrible misconception of who Christ is and, therefore, come to Him wrongly.

There is only one right reason to come *to* Christ, and that is this: the burden of sin. Those who truly and sincerely come to Christ labor and are heavy laden with sin. They have been convicted of their sin, and, seeing their sin, they sorrow over it. They hate it. They fight against it. They are oftentimes overwhelmed by that sin, so that it becomes a burden to them. These come to Christ because they have come to believe in Him as the only One who will save them from sin and remove the burden that is upon them. They come to Christ seeking the forgiveness of sin and the blessed peace that comes with justification. They recognize that the cross of Christ alone covers their guilt and cleanses them from all iniquity. They consciously and willingly, therefore, come to Christ.

All other reasons for coming to Christ are wrong and will never pass the test. Yet this coming to Christ must also

be properly understood because it is so misconstrued by modern theology today. You see, modern theology today is free-willist. It foolishly maintains that man is somehow able of his own free will, of his own ability, to come to Christ. Christ has died, they say, to save everyone in this world, and now it is Christ's desire to save everyone. So He places before everyone who hears the preaching this desire. But Christ is powerless to save anyone unless that person, first of all, by his own free will, chooses to come to Him or to follow after Him. Salvation, therefore, according to modern theology, is left up to man. If he wants to be saved, then he will come to Christ of his own will, of his own power, to get that salvation. And if he does not want it, then he will go his way without Christ.

This conception of coming to Christ is wrong. It stands against the very teaching of Jesus Christ Himself. Christ informs us in John 6:44, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day." No man can come to Me unless the Father draws him to Me. And then, later on, in that same discourse in John 6, this time in verse 65, Jesus repeats that: "Therefore said I

unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father." For a man truly to come to Christ, God must draw that man to Christ. And this is true because no man himself is able to come to Christ. He has no spiritual ability to come. He is fallen into sin. That sin and unbelief have totally enveloped him. He walks about in the darkness of sin, and the blindness of unbelief has taken over his heart. When the light of salvation in Christ is placed before him, then he, in the darkness of unbelief, deliberately turns away from that light.

That is what Jesus tells Nicodemus in John 3:19-21: "And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh [there is that word 'come,' again) to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God." The only way, therefore, that a man will come to Jesus is when God, by the work of His grace and by His Spirit, draws a man to Jesus. Those, therefore, who truly come to Jesus are those

who are irresistibly drawn by the working of the power of God's grace. When the Spirit opens the eyes and the heart, then that man who is the object of God's grace is able to see Christ and is able to see salvation in Him alone. And, as a result of that salvation, he comes—or flees—to Christ. He embraces Christ and all His benefits in faith.

Yet, the whole process of being a Christian or a disciple of Christ does not cease there. That is Christ's point here in this passage. When a person comes *to* Christ, then he is also called to come *after* Christ. In other words, the person who desires to come to Christ must also desire to follow after Him. Christ says in this verse that one must "deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me." This becomes the true test as to whether one has come to Christ for the right reason and is drawn to Christ by God's grace, or whether that person follows Christ only out of preference and for the wrong reasons.

What we have here in this passage, in reality, is what constitutes true discipleship.

You see, to be a disciple of Christ very simply means to be a follower of Christ. A disciple is one who, in Jesus' day, attached himself to a specific leader and followed that teacher about everywhere learning from him. A disciple of Christ is one who attaches himself to Christ, follows Him in the way that He leads, and learns and becomes convicted of what Christ teaches. Now I realize that today we are no longer called disciples of Christ. But we are given another name that means exactly the same thing. We are called Christians. We are members of Christ's anointing, and therefore we become followers of Christ.

But all of that can be translated into the concrete. That is what Jesus does for us when He sets forth the requirements of this passage. Fulfilling those requirements will separate between those who are true disciples of Christ

and those who follow Christ merely for the sake of convenience. It will separate between those who follow after Christ out of preference and those who follow Him out of the conviction of their heart. It will separate between those

*The person who
desires to come
to Christ must also
desire to follow
after Him.*

who follow after Christ for carnal reasons and those who follow after Christ for the right spiritual reason.

Now, are you ready to hear the requirements? The requirements you will hear are not pleasant to the sinful flesh in us. Jesus informs us: he that will come after Me, let him (1) deny himself and (2) take up his cross. The only way to follow Jesus is to deny ourselves and to be willing to take up our cross.

Now, what does that mean? The first part of the requirement given us in this passage is that a true disciple is one who denies himself. To understand what is meant by this we must take a hard look at ourselves. I mean, every person who has come to Christ is called always to look deeply into what goes on within himself.

The child of God is within himself a battleground. We have within us the new man in Christ and, by that new man in Christ, we will to do the good. We want to walk in God's precepts. But we have the old man of sin in us, too. We carry with us this sinful flesh, a carnal nature. And that carnal nature wars against the new man and seeks

to satisfy its own wants and desires rather than God's. That old man is characterized by pride. Pride is a horrible thing, but also a powerful thing. Pride is that which seeks self. It places our own desires above those of anyone else, including God's. Pride puffs us up so that we begin to replace God's will with our own will. And then pride is very deceiving. We attempt to convince ourselves in pride that our will is in fact what God wills, in spite of what His Word says. Pride is that which does what is right in our own eyes rather than what is right in God's eyes. We all have that pride in us. It is the chief characteristic of our sinful flesh. And it is this flesh, with its pride, that stands opposed to the new man in Christ and its virtue of humility. These two battle against one another.

Now, Christ says, to be a

*Christ says, to be
a true disciple
of Mine,
you must be willing
to deny yourself.*

true disci-
ple of
Mine, you
must be
willing to
d e n y
yourself.
A true fol-
lower of
J e s u s
Christ is

one who is characterized by self-denial. He is ready to say "No" to himself and that sinful flesh—his own desires within

him. And that comes to reality in all kinds of concrete ways in the life of the child of God. Satan places before us many temptations. They come to us in all kinds of different ways, and through all kinds of different circumstance, and through all kinds of different people. These people and these circumstances test us sorely by putting us before the question: Would I

rather serve Christ, or myself? Would I rather satisfy my own desires, or Christ's will for me? These circumstances are placed before us by the wicked unbelieving world, temptations

that appeal so much to our sinful flesh. And we want to walk in those sinful ways so badly. Well, Christ tells us that a true disciple is one who is willing to deny those carnal lusts. Jesus says, a true disciple denies himself—he, by the grace of God, as difficult and sometimes as painful as it may be, says “No” to this sinful flesh, and instead follows in the ways of his Master, Jesus Christ.

Not so easy to be a true disciple of Christ, is it? Many

falter and fail in this. Many, at this point, turn away from Christ and say, “I do not care to follow a master who places such restrictions on me.” Just as the multitude of 5,000 forsook Christ when He told them that they followed Him for carnal reasons, so also the masses that call themselves Christians today, when they hear the demands of Jesus Christ,

turn away. When the church preaches obedience to the commandments of Christ, obedience to God's Word, then many turn away

*When the church
preaches obedience
to the commandments
of Christ,
obedience to God's Word,
then many turn away
because they are not
willing to
deny themselves.*

because they are not willing to deny themselves.

Do they turn away from the church, or do they turn away from Christ? Are we disciples of Christ? Are we truly followers of Him? Are we ready to deny ourselves in what we want, to follow after what Christ wants?

If you are ready, then hear the next part of the requirement. You must take up your cross. Denying oneself has its consequences, because it means not following along with

the activities and the people of this world. Whether they are outside the realm of Christendom or even within Christianity, we are not willing to follow after them when they walk contrary to the Word of God.

And when we do that, then we are called upon to bear a cross. A true follower of Christ must bear a cross. We have to understand what this cross that we must bear is.

First of all, the cross is the cross of Christ. We must bear the cross of Christ. No, this does not mean that we are called to pay, in part, for our sins. When Christ went the way of the cross, He did so as payment for sins. He suffered the agony of hell against sin. And while He was on the cross, the wrath of God was poured upon Him. And, therefore, the cross that Christ had to bear, He bore alone. But those of us who believe that we are covered in the blood that was shed for us on that cross bear another aspect of the suffering that Christ bore there.

The cross of Christ was a reproach. He was despised and rejected of men, Isaiah tells us. Christ was hated by men because, you see, Christ condemned sin. He was reviled, He was beaten, He was mocked, He was shunned, He was castigated—all for the

cause that He represented on the cross. So when Christ speaks to us of the need for us to bear our cross, that is what He refers to. We also must be willing to bear the reproach of that cross. Christ told His disciples, "Do not be surprised that this world hates you. It hates Me. And, because a disciple is not greater than his lord, if the world hates Me, it will hate you. If you are a follower of Me, then you can expect to be shunned, rejected, mocked, and persecuted." The point is, when we make a stand on the Word of God, and when we deny our sinful lusts and follow after Christ, when we refuse to walk with others in their sin, then that will have consequences in our lives. And the consequences will be that men will be offended at us. When we do not walk with them in their sin, men will be offended at us. They will be indignant, and they will cut us off from their friendship.

That is the hard part of being a disciple, because it is this reproach of men that hurts us so much, sometimes so much that it makes us weep. It is not pleasant to see friends turn away from us, or even family members, because we strive to remain faithful to Jesus Christ and His Word and not follow after them in their sin. Sometimes we even

despair when that happens. Christ tells us that if we are not willing to take up our cross and follow Him, we are not worthy of Him.

That, then, is the requirement of one who is a true disciple or follower of Christ. "Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross." In this way this requirement of a disciple becomes a test for all of us. There are many who come to Christ, not because God has worked in them by His grace, but for earthly reasons. They come because, well, it is easy to come to a Christ for carnal reasons. But the test is: Are these same willing to come *after* Christ? Are they willing to deny themselves the sins of this world and to bear Christ's reproach? Are they willing to walk according to what God commands them in His Word? That is the question. That is the standard, after all, of true discipleship. Are they willing? Many, to that, will say, "No." Then, according to Christ Himself, these people are not truly followers of Him. They may fool themselves into thinking they are, because they like to call themselves Christians, but they will have to ignore Jesus Christ Himself to do so. And they will have to ignore the Word of God. They have failed the test.

Not so, of those who have been drawn to Christ irresistibly by God's grace and Spirit. These come to Christ in their spiritual need. And in thankfulness they fall behind their Savior.

Let us go forth, therefore, unto the Christ, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

True discipleship. It has its consequences. It has its suffering. But all of that is worth it for the sake of Christ and the continuing city that we seek.

Let us pray.

Gracious Father and God in heaven, we come unto Thee one more time as Thy children because we know that we are called upon not simply to come *to* Thee in faith, but to follow *after* our Lord Jesus Christ. We realize that it is a difficult thing for our sinful flesh. Give us the grace, Father, to deny ourselves and to follow after our Savior. May we be willing to bear His reproach in this world, all for His sake, in making a stand in this world. Forgive us where we stumble and fail. For Jesus' sake, Amen.