

Christianity in a Nutshell

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[0 : 00] If you could turn back with me then to Mark's Gospel, chapter 8, and I'm reading again from verse 34.

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Is it possible that Christianity can be summed up in two words? And someone has said it can, and these two words that sum up Christianity are the words that we've just read, follow me, the words of Jesus. Who or what do you follow?

Are we not all followers of someone or something, whether films, soaps, music, sports, fashion, icons, celebrities, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and so on? Following and being followed by others seems to matter to us, does it not? The need to be a follower can even happen within the church, as we learned when we were going through Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, I follow Paul. I follow Apollos. I was reading recently about a 12-year-old boy who is going to Graceland in America. That's the home of the late Elvis Presley. And the reason he was going there, he sent a video of his impersonation of Elvis Presley, and it went down very, very well. And he's invited to come over to Graceland. And this is what the 12-year-old lad said, I wish to look like, act like, and feel like Elvis. This is my life ambition.

[2 : 56] Just as an aside, I can actually do quite a good impersonation of Elvis myself, but I'll not bother doing it tonight. Now, if we replace Elvis in the words of that young lad with Jesus, that's okay, isn't it? I wish to look like, act like, Jesus Christ. Follow me.

I'm going to look at three things from this passage. I'm going to look at the context of the summons to follow Jesus. And secondly, I'm going to look at what the disciples needed to know about Jesus before that summons was issued to them. And thirdly, what does it mean to follow Jesus?

Before I do that, I just want to make one other comment as rapidly as I can.

I take the view that Christianity is a faith of paradoxes. And a paradox is a seemingly contradictory statement, comment, or proposition that may well be true.

So, for example, and this is just one I made up. My granny is 100 and she runs marathons every week.

[5 : 08] Seems a bit self-contradictory, but it's not impossible. The poet who wrote the poem, Death Be Not Proud, John Donne, he finishes that poem with these words, Death, thou shalt die. Seems a bit contradictory, doesn't it? Death, we're talking about death, thou shalt die. I said Christianity is full of paradoxes. There's one God, yet there's three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is Jesus, he's fully human, but fully God.

There is the Bible, it is the Word of God, offered, if you like, by the Holy Spirit, but there's also human offers. There is election and there is free will. And there is even grace and Christian duty. For example, when Paul says, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, then he adds, for it is God's that works in you, both to do and to will of his good pleasure. So, there is so many of the great pillars of Christianity. I'm glad the paradoxes, by the way, because I would expect paradoxes when we're dealing with God and his mission and his will and his truth. So, it doesn't faze me at all. I'd be very worried if there weren't paradoxes.

There's also a paradox in the heart of the passage I read. I wonder if anybody spotted it. It's at verse 35.

For whoever would save his life will lose it. And whoever loses his life, for my sake and the gospel, will save it.

When we go through this passage, I believe we're going to see a connection between the real identity of Jesus and the conditions of discipleship that he lays down.

[7 : 43] If I could put it another way, the conditions of discipleship make sense only when we realize who Jesus Christ is. They would make no sense if he was a mere prophet.

They would make no sense if he was a John the Baptist. They only make sense when we realize that he is the God-man.

Jesus was well aware that his disciples needed to be clear about the nature of his person and the nature and destiny of his Messiahship.

And I believe that it is for this reason that Jesus ventured away up to Caesarea in Galilee.

Now, before that, Jesus had been in a place called Bethsaida. And Caesarea Philippi was probably about 30 or 40 miles from Bethsaida.

[8 : 58] So, in these two verses, you're already traversing about 30 or 40 miles. And Jesus has gone very, very far north. And he's gone to a place that is a citadel of the world's religions.

religions. We're thinking here of the context of the call to follow me to the call for discipleship.

And here is Jesus has taken his disciples very far north to Caesarea Philippi, a great place of the world's religions.

Christians. He's within months of being crucified at this point.

He is about to make his way down to Jerusalem. And he's determined that the disciples will know certain truths that they really, really do need to know before he reaches Jerusalem.

[10 : 10] It's near the Golan Heights. It's near Mount Hermon. The place was awash with temples of ancient religions, of Baal, of the Greek god Pan, meaning god of nature.

Israel's history was there from its golden era of David. And there was a marble temple in honor to the Roman emperor built by Philip, hence the reason, Caesarea Philippi.

And that temple would have been glistening in the hot sun. And then there was that apocalyptic buzz that was in there. You have to understand most of us have never read the intertestamental books. That's the books between the end of Malachi and the beginning of Matthew. These books, although they're not part of the canon, are utterly critical for picking up the mood, the ideas, and what was happening at the time of Jesus.

And what was happening at the time of Jesus is that people were expecting a mighty warrior Messiah, and we must not forget that.

[11 : 30] and they were expecting that this mighty warrior Messiah would not only put out the Romans, that he would be conquering all the nations, and that all the nations would come and worship the God of Israel.

That's exactly the mindset of the people at the time. So, Jesus takes these people away up to this prestigious place, and he asks them the \$64,000 question, who do men say I am?

And notice, Elijah, they said, and one of the beliefs at the time was that Elijah somehow or other would return to, as a precursor of the Messiah's coming.

They said one of the prophets, some of the people think you're just a prophet, and it's like today, people can have lofty enough views of Jesus, but if they're not the Jesus, that is, that's the real Jesus, they're never going to heed, I don't believe anyway, his words follow me.

If they don't really believe that he's the Christ of God, that he's the God man, I doubt that we would heed his words follow me. And Jesus, therefore, is interested in teaching the disciples, and that's why he's taking them away far north, to be away from the crowd, he's now about to make his way to Jerusalem, he's only got months to live, and he wants them to be in possession of critical truths.

[13 : 40] And he wanted to hear what the word on the street was regarding who he was. But then, secondly, what the disciples needed to know about Jesus, in verse 31 there, he began to teach them after Peter had confessed him as the Messiah.

Ah, so, you are indeed the Messiah. This was a remarkable confession by Peter. Can you imagine it? A wandering preacher with no army, in that culture, in that place at that time, with all the military might and power of Rome, so controlled and so organized.

Can you imagine what this might have been for Peter or any of these apostles, having been with Jesus and seeing that he's a wandering preacher, performing healings and showing compassion and so on.

And here he is, and he doesn't look like any world-conquering Messiah, but worse has to come to their ears.

He strictly charged them to tell no one about him. Wonder why? Possibly because he did not want the whole situation to get out of hand, where people might think, because remember he called the

crowd to him, and the crowd was there, and the crowd heard this, and the crowd may well have then become a national movement that would have scuppered the purpose of God, that Christ would become a sin offering for you and me, and be our redeemer.

[15:50] And so, he wants to say to them, firstly, tell no one about this. Authors have called this the messianic secret. And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer.

By the way, you perhaps know that the most favored self-description Jesus had of himself is Son of Man. He must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed.

This was like saying to these people something bizarre and strange that could never have processed itself really in their minds.

And I want you to notice the word must. That's a very important word there in verse 31.

He began to teach them that the Son of Man must. It is an absolute necessity. By the way, you don't need to invoke, I don't believe anyway, the divinity of Jesus to account for his knowing that he was going to be crucified.

[17:23] Jesus, the man Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth, whose body sweated, he knew very well that the writing was on the wall and that the leaders were after him and plotting and scheming to get him out of the road.

And yet, he decides this is the moment that I have come to do the Father's will. This is the eye of the storm and I'm making my way there.

Must. It's utterly necessary. It's inescapable. There is no salvation for the world. there is no redemption for you and I if I become a political savior.

here. What right has Jesus of Nazareth to say to men and women, to kings and queens, to Mozart, the Einsteins, to you and I, follow me?

Who is this imperious man who dares to say such things? Who is this that dares to say, I forgive your sins? What manner of man is this?

[18:57] There were glimpses, you see, that even the wind and waves obey him. Never man spoke like this man. These are testimonies from people who heard him, some of whom may not have been Christians.

He seemed to speak with authority. The regular phrase for the prophet was, thus saith the Lord. But the regular talk of Jesus is, I say unto you.

The summons to follow Jesus make sense only when we know his true identity. Jesus is asking each one of us tonight, who do you see I am?

Because that's the \$64,000 question. It's good coming to church. It's good meeting other Christians. It's good having fellowship with other Christians. But that doesn't get to the heart and pulse of what God is about. God is about saying and Jesus is about saying, follow me.

[20:26] we might believe that Jesus is a great ethicist, a great ethical, a great moral teacher.

His morals are lofty. We might believe that he's an amazing example to follow and to try nymity.

And Jesus is all of these things, but he is more. He is very God of very God. He is the God man.

He is the paradox. He is the incomprehensible, the inscrutable in many ways. Just remember that people see simply another human being standing in front of them.

The apostles performed miracles. The disciples performed miracles. The place was awash with healers.

[21:41] having sort of covered that area, Jesus has got them to realize he's not merely another prophet, he's the long-awaited Messiah.

But he's not the Messiah that they're hoping for, he's the Messiah that is heading for the cross, for shame and crucifixion and suffering and death.

It doesn't finish there, but also resurrection and exaltation and triumph of redemption for the world.

Opening up the floodgates of God's infinite love to every man, woman, boy and girl.

So, it's only then when Jesus has, if you like, sorted all of that out with the disciples. And by the way, if you read, that's the first time that he tells them that he's on his way to Jerusalem and he'll suffer and be crucified.

In this gospel and in most of the other synoptic gospels, Matthew and Luke, you see that three times as well. So, it tells them that three times. And by the way, the second time it says, and they didn't understand.

[23 : 13] They just didn't get it. They couldn't get their heads round his real messiahship. But they knew that he was the one and that he was more than a prophet.

But to follow Jesus, I finish with what does it mean to follow him?

Well, the first thing I'll say to you is that when we hear the word follow, we might imagine that somebody's walking in front and somebody's behind, and that's a fair and offy thought, but the Greek word behind our English word has the idea of walking alongside.

Is that not lovely? Accompanying Jesus, walking with him and walking in step with him.

Amen. Amen. He's with us every single step of our journey as believers.

[24 : 39] There isn't a step when he's not there. Remember words that Paul gave us in his letter to the Philippians.

let this mind be in you which was also in Christ. To follow Jesus is to cultivate the mind of Christ. It is to think as he thought. Remember the wee boy, Elvis boy? It's to act as he acts. it is to have the world view that he has.

It is to have the priority of thy will be done that energized and drove Jesus Christ all the way to the cross. Jesus puts it into two kind of statements for us and their radical statements.

By the way, I believe that follow me is one of the best descriptors of authentic Christians and Christianity that are found in the New Testament.

[26 : 13] But there's a precursor to that following. There is radical decisions that need to be engaged in as the presupposition of that following.

There is radical that need presupposition. He said, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself.

There's the first radical presupposition. And I want you to notice, he doesn't say deny something during the week or month of Lent. He doesn't say deny having a strawberry tart or notice what he's saying, deny himself or herself.

What does that mean? It means saying no to the greatest idol that every single human being has in a sense born with which is the idol of me first self.

he says, if anyone would come after me, here's the real business.

[27 : 46] Let him deny himself. And then the second radical decision that he takes that presupposes following Jesus is take up his cross.

Now, where that comes from is that in Roman law and justice, as you know, people were executed by crucifixion.

The criminal had to carry part of the cross to his place of execution. Okay, guys, are you up for execution?

take up the cross. I've quoted this before, but I love it. Bonhoeffer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who was executed in 1945, he knew what it was to take up the cross, but he famously said, when Christ calls someone to him, he bids them come and die.

Okay, I said Christianity is full of paradoxes, so Jesus gives us one at this stage.

[29 : 31] And why should I deny myself? Why should I say no to self? By the way, these radical decisions are in a form of verb that points to a radical, if you like, fundamental basic decision.

The verb follow me is in the continuous present. Keep following me.

keep following me. By the way, I believe that the denomination that is the most Christlike is the denomination that follows Christ most closely.

And I believe that the congregation that is most Christlike is the congregation that follows Christ most closely. And I believe that the Christian who is most Christlike is the Christian who follows Christ most closely.

The presupposition means we have to topple self from the throne of our mind and will and allow Jesus to reign where we were reigning.

[30 : 56] It means to make the will of God the driver of our life and be careful we can deny Christ with silence. The summons is to every human being.

The call to follow is to every human being. And sometimes I wonder, maybe I'm wrong, but sometimes I wonder that in the minds of some Christians there's a sort of two-tier Christianity.

One is sort of ordinary Christianity and the other is disciples. The word disciples is another word for Christian. And why should we say no to self in closing?

Why should we take up the symbol of execution? Well, Jesus answers that, he says, in verse 35.

Whoever would save his life will lose it. To hold on to our life without God and without Christ, an unforgiven, unfulfillable life is tantamount to losing it.

[32 : 35] Who are you following?

Are you a follower? Are you a follower of Jesus Christ?

A life lived following Christ is a life gained for time and eternity.

A life without God ends in loss, even eternal loss. Will you heed Christ's call to you this evening?

Follow me. Will you deny self? Will you take up the cross and be part of Jesus' eternal kingdom?

[33 : 51] For the alternative is a kingdom of self and separation from God. May God help each one of us to follow him.

Amen.