

## Eighty Seven Times He Said, "Follow Me"

Matthew 16:24; James 2:14-17

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*One Friday morning I observed a young, strong looking Ragman wandering through the streets of a certain city, pulling a cart filled with bright new clothes. As he walked he called out, "Rags! New rags for old! I take your tired rags! Rags!" As he wandered through the streets he came upon a young woman crying. He took her old dirty handkerchief and gave her his own. It was clean and new. As he left, her tears were gone, but it was noticed that he was now crying into her old handkerchief. In a little while he came upon another young girl, her head wrapped in a blood soaked bandage. A single line of blood streamed down her face. He untied her bandage and placed it on his own head. In its place went a new, fresh bonnet. The wound had gone with the old bandage and blood now streamed down his face. Next he met a man leaning against a pole, dressed in a ragged coat. "Don't you have a job," he asked the man. "Are you kidding," the man answered. He turned and showed him the empty sleeve of his coat. He had only one arm. The Ragman took off his own coat and exchanged it. With it went the Ragman's strong arm. The man now had two strong arms to work with, while the Ragman now pulled the cart with only one. Next, the Ragman found a drunk lying in the gutter. He exchanged his clothes for the drunk's and laid a new blanket over him as he slept. Now the Ragman struggled drunkenly down the street pulling the cart with one hand, bleeding, and weeping as he went. With tormented labor the Ragman entered a garbage dump, climbed up on a hill and cleared a small area. Then he laid down, covered himself with an old army blanket and died. The observer kept watch. On Sunday morning there was violence. Pure, hard, demanding light slammed into the face of the observer and a wonder was seen on that hill. The Ragman got up, healthy and fit, but still showing the scars. He shone in cleanliness! The observer fell at his feet and the Ragman stooped to dress the observer in new clothing. Then the observer went down into the town to be like the Ragman, the Christ!*

A fanciful parable? Of course, Walter Wangerin's "The Ragman" missed the centrality and power of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, yet his parable reflects the essence of a powerful message that becomes even more powerful when you realize that the Ragman, the Christ, in reality, freely gave Himself into the hands of the religious authorities—the Church—of His day and was tortured and crucified, all because He came to exchange our old rags for new – to cleanse us from sin, provide salvation and to show the world a new way, the way of the Christ.

Sadly, this is a message that many of us have missed and are continuing to **miss**—a message that should be front and center everyday of our lives because it should be an integral part of every Christian's life. **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."** (Matthew 16: 24-25, NIV) That says that he who follows Christ must, "sacrifice himself."

Are you following Jesus? Am I? I wonder...you see...only two Gospels mention Christ's birth—when he sacrificed his glorious position in heaven and came as a human. But all four Gospels devote nearly a third of their length to His climactic last week. His humiliating death formed the central mystery of Jesus. He would not have been remembered but for that bloody cross. All four Gospels devote a few pages to His resurrection, but each gives a very detailed account of the events leading up to His death. Philip Yancy points out that, "Nothing remotely like it had happened before. Celestial beings had slipped in and out of our dimension prior to the Incarnation (remember Jacob's wrestler and Abraham's visitors), and a few humans had even waked from the dead. But when the Son of God died on planet earth—how could it be that a Messiah should face defeat, a God get crucified? Nature convulsed at the deed: the ground shook, rocks cracked open, the sky went black. The might of the world, the most sophisticated religious system of its time allied with the most powerful political empire, arrays itself against the only perfect man who has ever lived."

So, as we examine these long accounts leading up to His death, what are we called to do? What does it really mean to follow Jesus?

I think we have to build our sense of followership around the words of James 2:14-17: ***“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”***

As we look around us today we decry the loss of time honored Christian values that form the very foundation upon which our organized churches and even our Nation have been built. We cry out – trying to take political action in our great church assemblies and in marches and campaigns to change our nation. We—so called followers of Christ—rant and rave and wave our posters and banners. We march on Washington and storm our legislative offices—to what affect? I'll tell you.

Our non Christian brothers and sisters simply see negative people who claim to be followers of Christ, but they see nothing they want to emulate. They do not see Christ within us. The message comes across as negative, even crazy. To them we draw lines in the sand and with our toes on the line or even over it we tell others that they must change to be like we are. We send the message that if they don't become like we are they are not welcome in God's Kingdom. And they think, “Why should I be like those people: negative, judgmental, preachy, overbearing.”

Now think for a moment. Who did Jesus condemn—the dregs of society: thieves, prostitutes and the like or was His wrath directed toward the super righteous, religious leaders who were constantly upholding their values for all to see and condemning everyone who was not as visibly righteous as they were? You know who He condemned (the church leaders) and you know to whom He revealed God's love and to whom He spoke the truth: the poor, the downtrodden, the sinners who lived in His society. He did not preach at them nor condemn them. He spoke to them in love. He reached out and exchanged their old rags for new and left them smiling. Check it out. Write it on your hand. Remember it.

The truth is that the negative image most of the established church is presenting today in our Nation is turning away the very people Christ came to reach. And...deep inside... my soul cries out that we are all missing the point. I, we—the Church—has failed to follow the Ragman, the Christ. We have become, largely a self serving, self preserving society unto ourselves with only a token outreach. We give only a token amount to help the needs of people less fortunate than we, but are we really there for them? Do we really sacrifice ourselves that they may live? The truth is that what we give is used by some proverbial “George” to do the work of Christ, usually somewhere far away, or in a place where we don't want to go in our own society and our personal sacrifice is almost negligible. There has been no visible sacrifice on our part like Jesus demonstrated over and over and over in His own life. We have failed to pick up our cross and carry it in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.

The Vineyard Community Church in Cincinnati has vision statement that is similar to the Ragman's Good Friday approach. It says, ***“Small things done with great love will change the world.”*** They find simple, positive, unexpected ways to show God's love to others. For instance: they distribute free bottles of water or soft drinks where ever there is a large, hot event with lots of people. If asked why they are doing it they simply say something like, “to

show you God's love." Several teams clean public toilets for free. Some people mow yards or wash cars—free. In doing so they are making a visible sacrifice of their own time and often their own money to help someone in an unexpected way. If people begin to talk they simply listen. They don't try to lead them to Christ using some established fine-tuned, memorized method—it seldom works in our modern society. They recognize that winning someone to Christ takes time and must begin with simple acts of love. They form friendships over time and even involve some pre-Christians in helping do these little acts of love. There are no strings attached, no strategies – just loving relationships. And they leave people smiling and wondering about the Christ they see in these people.<sup>3</sup> Brain storm it together sometime. What unexpected small acts of love can you do within your community? Think about it.

The Gospel challenges us to imitate the loving sacrifice of our Savior in simple, but visually sacrificial ways. The early Christians did and the Bible tells us they turned the world upside down! They went even further: they stood and died for Jesus. Today, few of us are called to lay down our life as Jesus did, but we are called to follow Him in sacrificing ourselves to help others. We can do small things with great love. And, if enough of us make this our lifestyle we can change this nation and this world much faster than we will with all our shouting, all our marching, all our boisterous Tea Parties and banner waving. Jesus lived under a government far more repressive and pagan than ours, yet we never find Him demonstrating in negative ways against it. But we do find the Good Shepherd doing things that show forth the love of God to ordinary people. You and I may not be able to perform great miracles but Jesus has given us the capacity to meet people's needs in other ways. "Small things done with great love will change the world" because the world will see Christ in action through us.

Bryon Sirchio put it this way in his poem, *Am I Following Jesus?*

*Am I following Jesus, or just believing in Christ  
'Cause I can believe and not change a thing  
But following will change my whole life.  
Jesus never said, "Come acknowledge my existence  
Or believe in me, I'm the second person in the Trinity"  
But 87 times he said... "Follow me."*

*Maybe that's the bottom line of what "Christian" means  
'Cause "I follow Jesus" means more than "I believe"  
'Cause it doesn't take much to mentally agree  
With a set of beliefs written down in some creed.  
Now don't get me wrong,  
We need to know what we believe  
But lately, I've been wondering...*

*Am I following Jesus, or just believing in Christ  
'Cause we can believe, and not change a thing  
But following will change our whole life.  
Jesus never said, "come, acknowledge my existence or believe in me,  
I'm your first class ticket to eternity"  
But 87 times he said, "Follow me."<sup>4</sup>*

Footnotes:

1 Paraphrased and condensed from, Walter Wangerin, Jr., *Ragman and Other Cries of Faith*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984, 3-6.

2 Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1995, p.199.

3 Sjogren, Steve; Ping, Dave; Pollock, Doug, *Irresistible Evangelism*, Group, Loveland, Co., 2004. p 8ff.

4 Bryon Sirchio, "Journey Into Freedom," as reproduced in "Sunrise" Feb. 2000, Presbyterian Women Shenandoah.