

Connection with Unit Theme: To complement the small group study of *Identity*, these sermon outlines will use the same Scripture passages as the small group study, so the pastor can reinforce the study from the pulpit.

Introduction: While watching a football game on television have you ever noticed someone holding a sign that reads “John 3:16”? It’s one of the most memorized verses in the Bible. It communicates a great truth. In that one verse we learn that God loves us, Jesus died for us, and we can have eternal life through Him.

Yet, interestingly enough, I’ve never seen someone holding up a sign that reads “Luke 9:23.” Luke 9:23 also records Jesus’ words. I can understand why no one would paint that verse on a sign and hold it up for all to see. It doesn’t make a very appealing advertisement for Christianity. In fact, it might make it difficult to recruit new Christians.

But the truth is that John 3:16 and Luke 9:23 go together in order for there to be an accurate understanding of the gospel’s invitation. John 3:16 emphasizes believing. Luke 9:23 focuses on following. Those two things are necessary and must go together. There is no believing without following.

This verse describes in expressive detail what it means to follow Christ.

1. An open invitation.

Jesus began this verse with these two words: “If anyone . . .” *Anyone* is a significant word because it makes clear whom Jesus is inviting. He was inviting anyone. Anyone is an all-inclusive word. Anyone means everyone. There are no qualifiers, no conditions, and no list of requirements.

Jesus offered an open invitation to anyone: “Whosoever will may come.” Yet we often feel like we have to clean up our act, get dressed up, get our lives straightened out, and then we can come to Christ. Not so. Jesus issued an open invitation.

2. A captivated heart.

Jesus continued, “If anyone wants to come with me . . .” *Come with me* is a phrase commonly used in the context of a romantic relationship. Jesus described a passionate pursuit of someone you love. So the best way to understand what Jesus was wanting from us as followers is to compare how we pursue Him to how we would pursue someone with whom we want to have a romantic relationship or deep friendship.

Do you remember what it was like when you fell in love? Fall is a good word. When you fall you can’t hold back, you go all in, you are reckless in your abandonment. Your mind is consumed, your heart aches, and your pocketbook is generous. Pursuing a romantic love will make us do some crazy things. Why? Our heart is captivated.

Jesus is looking for followers who are passionate about Him. They display a crazy love, a radical response. He is looking for captivated hearts.

3. A surrendered life.

Jesus continued, “If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself . . .” Jesus made it clear that if we are to follow Him, a casual no-strings-attached arrangement isn’t a possibility. You can’t “come with” Jesus without denying yourself. *Deny* is a strong term. It means to forget that one exists or to cease to consider one’s own interests in the slightest degree.

It is difficult to do, especially in this me-centered culture. But it was what Jesus did. Jesus left the glories and comfort of heaven to come to a cold and uncaring world to sacrificially die for its inhabitants. Jesus never asks us to do something that He was not willing to do.

Followers denying themselves say, “I choose Jesus. I choose Jesus over my family, over money, over career, over my freedom, over what people think of me.”

4. A committed walk.

Jesus continued, “If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily . . .” The cross was an instrument of torture and death. When Jesus said “take up his cross” it would translate in today’s vernacular as “take up his electric chair” or “take up his lethal injection.” He was saying “Come and die.” As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, “When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.”

To carry a cross meant certain death. “Dead man walking” is a phrase sometimes used to describe a person on death row, and the expression is certainly appropriate for a follower carrying a cross. Jesus took the most despised and rejected symbol of His time and said, “If you want to follow Me, take this up.” He invites us to die.

When Cortez landed at Vera Cruz in 1519 to begin his dramatic conquest of Mexico with a pocket-size force of 700 men, he purposely set fire to his fleet of eleven ships. His men on the shore watched their only means of retreat sinking to the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico. With no means of retreat, there was only one direction in which to move, forward into the Mexican interior to meet whatever might come their way.

That’s what Jesus asks: He wants us to move forward committed to Him.

5. An obedient pursuit.

Jesus continued, “If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” The most literal definition of a Jesus follower is “someone who goes where Jesus goes and does what Jesus does.”

In Jesus’ day, it was a big deal to be a disciple of a rabbi. Jesus’ first disciples were honored that a Rabbi would have asked lowly fishermen to follow Him. But a follower is more than someone who tags along; they are people who recognize and accept Jesus as Lord, submitting to His authority. Jesus said, “Follow me . . .” which means that He leads; we follow. A disciple is one who is following Christ, hearing His voice and obeying His commands. Disciples make Jesus their authority.

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