

One of the great things about being on a team is that you have a group of people that share a common purpose, a common goal. That is why many athletes will tell you that their best friends are their teammates. We all need friends. Rich Mintzer of *Entrepreneur Magazine* wrote an article about “The 4 People Every Business Owner Needs.” He identifies these four people as

- The Cheerleader, positive thinking people who provide encouragement,
- The Role Model, who shows the way and serves a mentor,
- The Expert, people who know more in areas of weakness, and
- The Techie, people who provide needed technical support and advice.

Jesus had his own team, too. Jesus surrounded himself with people to help him fulfill his mission. Jesus’ call was simple and clear. ***“The time promised by God has come at last! The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!”*** (Mark 1:15 NLT) Jesus wasn’t looking for Volunteers then or now. He didn’t preach a sermon and ask for volunteers to raise their hands or put their name on a signup sheet. (I wonder why we do it that way in the church.)

Listen to what Jesus said to one man who volunteered. ***“As they were walking along, someone said to Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go.” But Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head.”*** (Luke 9:57-58 NLT) Then there was the case of rich young ruler who thought he was living an exemplary life. He came to Jesus looking for approval and said that he had kept all of God’s laws. Then Jesus said to him, ***“There is still one thing you haven’t done. Sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”*** (Matthew 18:22) Jesus told His disciples, ***“You didn’t choose me. I chose you.”*** (John 15:16)

Jesus isn’t looking for volunteers. He is looking for followers, people who are willing to follow Him regardless of the cost. Jesus didn’t look for cheerleaders to be part of his entourage or experts in religion. He had his major conflicts with the religious experts of his day. He didn’t need a role model or technical support. Jesus looks for followers. He called Peter, Andrew, James and John to follow him. They left their boats and their fishing business behind to follow Jesus. They gave up their livelihood for a new purpose in life. Jesus called them to follow Him in a life of service, a life of reaching out to others, a life of helping and healing.

Following Jesus is not easy. It wasn’t for the disciples. The religious elite made it very difficult for anyone who wanted to follow Jesus. They even threatened to throw Jesus’ followers out of their Synagogues, their places of worship (John 9:22). Following Jesus isn’t easy today, either. It is ok to be spiritual. It is ok to talk about “God,” whoever he may be. But following Jesus, believing his exclusive claim that no one come to the Father except through him is something

else. Christians are looked upon by many as being narrow minded, judgmental. Jesus even said that it would not be easy to follow him. ***“If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross daily, and follow me.”*** (Luke 9:23 NLT) Following Jesus gives us a different direction, a new set of priorities in life. Jesus doesn't want us to lead the way; he wants us to follow him. He calls us to repent. To repent means to change our ways: to stop doing things our way and to start living God's way. That requires following Jesus.

Jesus is also looking for commitment. A vast majority of Americans call themselves “Christians.” They probably have a Bible, even if they don't read it. They may have a cross that they wear around their neck or have tattooed on their arm, but they may not realize what the cross of Christ means. They call themselves Christians, but their lives are no different than the people around them. Unfortunately too many people who claim to be Christians have religion, but not a relationship with Jesus. They get their “attendance card” punch when they go to church. They are more faithful to the rules and rituals of their religion than they are to the Lord. Jesus still doesn't want religious experts, he wants followers.

Following Jesus calls for a commitment. You can't follow Jesus and do your own thing. You can't follow Jesus when it is convenient. Following Jesus is a 24/7 proposition. If you are married, you know that marriage calls for a total commitment. The marriage vows say “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer.” That is commitment. The New Testament talks about Christians being the ‘Bride of Christ.’ That means that we have to be committed to Him. And we can be because we know how much God in Christ is committed to us. Jesus gave up everything for us. He left the throne of heaven for a barn in Bethlehem. He gave up His life for us. His commitment calls for a response. He is not willing to accept a half hearted commitment. The Christians in Laodicea had gotten that way. So Jesus warned them, ***“I know all the things you do, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish that you were one or the other! But since you are like lukewarm water, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth!”*** (Rev. 3:15-16)

Following Jesus will disrupt our lives. Moses didn't want to answer God's call to return to Egypt so that God could use him to set the Israelites free from slavery. His life was never the same. Jeremiah said “No Way!” to God when he was called. He faced some tremendous challenges trying to bring God's word to people who had turned away from God. Mary's life was turned upside down when God chose her to be the mother of Jesus. She said yes to God knowing that her very life would be in jeopardy. Saul was so dead set against Jesus that he persecuted the early Christians. But after God called him to be the Apostle to the Gentiles, Saul's life change. Instead of persecuting Christians, the Apostle Paul was persecuted for his faith. Listen to how Paul's life was disrupted by following Jesus. ***“Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea.”*** (2 Corinthians 11:24-25 NLT)

If your life hasn't been changed by following Jesus, then maybe you're not really following him. If you don't have a different standard, a different set of priorities than the non-Christian people around you, then maybe you're only part of the Jesus entourage, but not really a follower. When you follow Jesus, you're going to take a different path. But that is ok, because Jesus knows the right way. He leads on the path to peace with God. He guides us past the valley of guilt and shame to the mountain top of forgiveness. He is always with us. Nothing can separate us from His love.

One final thought. Jesus is leading us into the world, to proclaim the Gospel message, to help those who are in need, to make a difference for the good in His name. People who think that Christians are negative, judgmental people won't know that they are wrong until they meet real Christians who make a positive difference in their lives and show Christ like love to them. We can't just follow Jesus to church. We have to follow him into our world. And when we do that, people can see the real difference that following Christ makes in our lives. Amen.