

What Does God Expect for Me, Anyway?



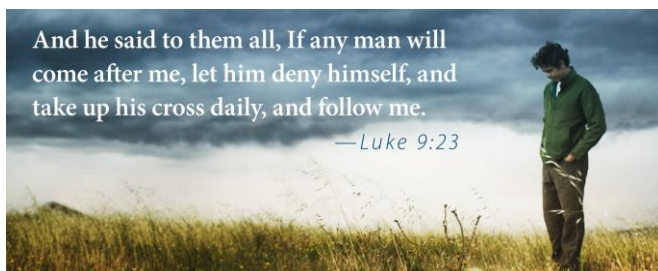
Modern religion has attempted to make Christianity “user-friendly” by taking a marketing approach to recruiting new members. Popular TV preachers make it a matter of policy to never use the “S” word—*sin*. Churches openly trumpet a “come as you are” approach (and they mean both casual lifestyle and casual dress). Today’s pulpit mutes repentance and trumpets self-esteem. Hell is old-fashioned. Feel-good is in; life-change is out. God is remade in man’s image.

Jesus took a different approach. His religion is high stakes: Whoever “forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple” (**Luke 14:33**). We risk everything to gain everything.

Christ was up front with people. He put nothing in the fine print—hid no “gotcha clauses” to be discovered later. He said simply, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it” (**Luke 9:23–24**).

At the same time, He gives us an incredible offer. He promises to help us! We can do all things through Christ which strengthens us (Philippians 4:13). The good news is not that if we straighten ourselves up we will be saved—that would be bad news, since we cannot do it (**Ephesians 2:9**). The good news is that Jesus enables us to become like Him (**Philippians 2:12–13**). His power, manifested through His Word, works in us and gives strength to accomplish all He asks of us (**Ephesians 3:14–19; 6:17**). In light of this, consider this passage.

If any will come after me



Jesus’ invitation is both voluntary and universal. He forces no one to be His follower. His is an all-volunteer army (**Matthew 11:28–30**).

The requirements are universal. No exceptions. No favors. No waivers. We cannot stay where we are and go with God at the same time.

- Noah could not continue life as usual and also build an ark (**Genesis 6–9**).
- Abraham could not stay in Ur and father a nation in Canaan (**Genesis 12:1–3**).
- Moses could not both enjoy the solitude of the desert and deliver God’s people from Pharaoh (**Exodus 3:10**).
- David had to leave the sheep to become the king (**1 Samuel 16:11; 17:20**).
- Peter, Andrew, James, and John had to leave fishing to follow Jesus (**Luke 5:11**).
- Jesus had to exit heaven to visit earth (**2 Corinthians 8:9**), and leave the carpenter shop to preach glad tidings.

What adjustments may be required?

We may have to change our thinking. If we were reared to hate those of another race, social standing, or political party, we must lay aside such thoughts and “judge righteous judgment” (**John 7:24**).

We may have to change careers. If we have a job inconsistent with Christian principles—drug dealer, false teacher, bartender, exotic dancer—we must look for new employment. If money—making, hoarding, spending—is too important to us, we must do as the rich young ruler (**Luke 18:18–27**).

We may have to change relationships. If a relative forbids true religion, we must choose Christ (**1 Corinthians 7:15**). If friends constantly tempt us to sin, we must find new friends (**1 Corinthians 15:33; Mark 14:54–72**). If we are in a sexual relationship that violates God’s Word, we must cease it (**Galatians 5:19–21**). We must cut ties with business partners who have trouble seeing black and white (**2 Corinthians 6:14**).

We may have to change commitments. If we are spread too thin to worship God and to do our part in building His kingdom, we need to take irons from the fire (**Ephesians 5:16; Hebrews 10:25**).

Let him deny himself

Self is best defined as an individual’s own welfare, interests, advancement, and agenda (**1 Corinthians 10:24; Philippians 2:4**). To deny self then is to refuse to fulfill personal interests ahead of others or manipulate others to our own advantage. We must surrender our will to Jesus’ will (**Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34**).

Denying self literally means “to turn one’s self off.” When Peter denied Jesus, he said, “I know not the man” (**Matthew 26:74**). This is what denying self means. We say to self, “I don’t know you.” Paul did this: “What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord” (**Philippians 3:7–8**).

This is first tested by our willingness to submit to the gospel. This involves studying enough to learn of Jesus (**John 6:44–45**), coming to faith that He is God’s Son (**John 3:16**), turning away from sin in repentance (**Luke 13:3, 5**), confessing faith in Christ before others (**Matthew 10:32–33**), and being baptized (**Mark 16:16**). Have you submitted your will to Christ’s and been baptized for the remission of sins? (**Acts 2:38**).

Take up your cross

“Take up the cross” was a strange thing to say in Jesus’ time. To update the language, we might say, “To follow Jesus, take a seat in the electric chair.” We think of a cross as an ornament to display or admire, but in that day a cross was something to die on.

Crucifixion was shameful. Before being crucified, a condemned prisoner had the upper beam of the cross tied to his shoulders and was shamefully paraded to the crucifixion site. As he passed, the crowd mocked him, spit on him, and threw things at him. Some today want to follow Jesus when others applaud, but we must be willing to go with Him even when others mock or persecute (**Matthew 5:10–12**).

Crucifixion was painful. Ken Kersten wrote about seeing an ad for a drive-in passion play. One could watch the story of Jesus without getting out of the car. Kersten said, “I’ll never forget the ad. It said: ‘Come and experience the life of Christ all from the comfort of your own car.’” We cannot follow Christ without leaving our comfort zones. It can be painful to give up sin, but it is worth it (cf. 1 Peter 4:16). A dry-cleaning and dyeing business sign read:

We dye to live, we live to dye; the more we dye, the more we live; and the more we live, the more we dye.

So it is with a Christian—we die to live, and live to die.

And follow me

Jesus’ statement “follow me” is recorded eighteen times in the Bible (e.g., **Matthew 4:18–22**). Henry Ward Beecher, a preacher who led the antislavery movement in the 1800s, commented, “The strength and the happiness of a man consists in finding out the way in which God is going, and going in that way too.” Jesus’ way is found in the pages of the New Testament. By reading it, we can go that way too.

Some might venture that Jesus’ approach will never work, but we might point out that it has worked for two thousand years for millions of people. It needs no improvement; it only needs teaching. It needs no marketing, only practicing.

A religion that costs nothing is worth nothing. A religion that costs everything is worth everything.

“Come and follow me” (**Matthew 19:21**).