

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Marks of the Committed Christian

Scripture: John 13:31-38

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The Marks of the Committed Christian

John MacArthur

Historically, Christians have displayed a number of different kinds of symbols to mark their identity as believers. Lapel pins and neck chains with gold crosses are nothing new. They have been used almost since the beginning of Christianity as marks of identification for believers. In recent years, bumper stickers, posters, tee shirts, decorated Bibles, and jackets with embroidered insignia all have been used by people trying to identify themselves as Christians. I don't have any argument with such symbols, except that they are totally superficial--only as deep as the surface they are attached to.

As a Christian, whether you wear a button, display a bumper sticker, or use any other kind of visible symbol is of no real consequence. (In fact, the way some Christians drive, they would be well advised to take off their bumper stickers.) More important, and infinitely more definitive than all the pins and stickers and buttons, are the internal, spiritual signs of a true believer.

In John 13:31-38, Jesus gives three distinguishing marks of a committed Christian. Remember, Jesus' earthly ministry was coming to an end. It was the night before His death. And He was spending those last hours with His disciples to prepare them for His leaving. He had just dismissed Judas to leave His presence eternally. With Judas gone, Jesus turned to the eleven remaining disciples and gave them a valedictory address, a farewell speech.

Therefore when [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him; if God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and will glorify Him immediately. Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, now I also say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, where are You going?"

Jesus answered, "Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you shall follow later."

Peter said to Him, "Lord, why can I not follow You right now? I will lay down my life for you."

Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for Me? Truly, truly, I say to you, a rooster will not crow until you deny Me three times."

That passage introduces Jesus' last commission to His disciples before He went to the cross. His farewell message, which continues through John 16, contains every ingredient we need to know about discipleship. In fact, the basics of Paul's teaching on the subject of discipleship come right out of this portion of John. Thus these concluding words of our Lord on His last evening with His disciples are strategic to our understanding of what Christ expects of us as believers. Here Jesus gives three distinguishing marks of a committed Christian. These ingredients should be evident in the life of every disciple.

An Unending Preoccupation with the Glory of God

First, the committed Christian is preoccupied and absorbed with his Lord's glory. The very purpose for which we exist is to give glory to God, so it is right that this is the first mark of a committed Christian. He is concerned only with living to give glory to God. He's not concerned about himself. He's not preoccupied with his own glory. He's not worried about what brings honor to him. He's not on a popularity binge. He's not trying to climb the ladder, to get something bigger and better for himself.

His greatest concern is His Lord's glory. He lives so that whatever he does brings glory to his Lord. He realizes that it doesn't matter what people think of him, but only that they glorify God. His motive, his theme, his goal, his reason, his purpose is to give the Lord glory in everything he does. His life reflects the attributes of God, and God is praised by the way he lives.

Jesus taught His disciples that perspective both by example and by precept:

Therefore when [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him; if God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and will glorify Him immediately. Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, now I also say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'

Reading that first phrase, we can almost sense a sigh of relief from our Lord. Now that Judas was gone, He could speak freely to His disciples. God incarnate, Jesus Christ, had come to earth in humility. He had restricted the full manifestation of His glory and subjected Himself to human frailty, though He never sinned. For thirty-three years His glory had been shrouded in human flesh. By tomorrow He would be in His glory again. All the attributes of God would be on display in Him.

With His coming glory in mind, Jesus makes three distinct statements. Each is unique and important.

Now is the Son of Man glorified. The first is in verse 31, a great statement of anticipation: "Now is the Son of Man glorified." Judas had already begun to set everything in motion. He had already initiated and been paid for the betrayal, and he was out moving about, getting everything set. In just a few hours, Jesus and the disciples would go into the Garden of Gethsemane, where Christ would continue His teaching. There Judas would march in with the soldiers and set in motion the events that would lead to Jesus' death. It was right around the corner, and Jesus was ready to die--to be glorified.

Even though the cross looked like shame, disgrace, and disaster, it was glory. At first it may seem difficult to understand how death can be glory, especially death by crucifixion. In His death our Lord experienced the deepest kind of shame, humiliation, accusation, insults, infamy, mockery, spitting, and all that men could throw at Him. He died hanging between thieves, receiving the agony of sin and separation from God. Yet knowing He was facing all of that, Jesus could say, "Now is the Son of Man glorified."

How was there glory in the cross? There Jesus performed the greatest work in the history of the universe. In His death He brought to pass the salvation of damned sinners, destroyed sin, and defeated Satan. He paid the price of God's justice and purchased for Himself all the elect of God. In dying for sin, He rendered His life a sweet-smelling savor to God, a sacrifice more pure and blessed than any sacrifice ever offered. And when the offended justice of God and the broken law were fully satisfied, Jesus concluded His work by saying, "It is finished." He had accomplished the redemption of all who believe, satisfied the justice of God, repaired the broken law, and set believers free. In all heaven and earth, no act is so worthy of praise and honor and full glory.

And God is glorified in Him. Jesus makes a second statement about glory. Not only was He glorified, but God was also glorified in Him.

God is glorified through the details of the gospel. When Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him," He was speaking of His death, burial, resurrection, exaltation, and coming again. All the glory He was speaking of came through those things. And those things are the elements of the gospel message.

One of the greatest ways we can give glory to God is declare the gospel. The message of the gospel radiates the glory of God like nothing else in all the universe. When we declare the gospel, we are declaring the clearest and most powerful aspects of God's glory. Thus in a sense, witnessing is one of the highest and purest forms of worship, because it most clearly affirms the glory of God.

God's glory is wrapped up in His attributes. His love, mercy, grace, wisdom, omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence--all the attributes of God--reflect and declare His glory. We glorify God when we in any way praise or acknowledge or experience or display His attributes. When we are examples of His love, for instance, we glorify Him. When we acknowledge and yield to His sovereignty, we glorify Him. That is what it means to glorify God.

At the cross every attribute of God was manifest in a way that had never been manifest before. The power of God, for example, was made visible on the cross. The kings of the earth, the rulers of the earth took counsel together against God and against His Christ. The terrible enmity of the carnal mind and the desperate wickedness of the human heart nailed Jesus to a cross. The fiendish hatred of Satan put forth its best effort. The world and Satan and every demon in the universe threw all the power they had at Christ, and He had the power to overcome it all. In death He broke every shackle, every dominance of sin, and every power of Satan forever. His graphic display of God's power thus glorified God.

The justice of God is seen in the cross in all its fullness. The wages of sin is death, and if God was going to redeem sinners, someone had to die for their sin. The penalty of the law had to be enforced, or God's justice would be compromised. Isaiah says that as Jesus hung there on the Cross, "the Lord... caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him" (Isaiah 53:6). Even though it meant the slaying of God's beloved Son, God would not overlook justice. Thus by paying the greatest price, Christ glorified God on the cross by displaying His justice in the greatest possible way--more so than if every member of the human race were to suffer in hell forever.

God's holiness was also manifest at the cross. Concerning God's holiness Habakkuk wrote that God is "of purer eyes than to behold evil, and [cannot] look on iniquity" (Habakkuk 1:13, King James Version). Never did God so manifest His hatred for sin as in the suffering of the death of His own Son. As Christ hung on the cross, bearing the sins of the world, God turned away from His only begotten Son in the midst of His suffering. Even though He loved Jesus Christ with an infinite love, His holiness could not tolerate looking on the sins of the world. That's why Jesus cried out in agony, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46). All the cheerful obedience of the holy men of all ages is nothing in comparison with the offering of Christ Himself in order that every demand of God's holiness might be fully met. Through it, God was glorified.

God's faithfulness was displayed at the cross. He had promised the world a Savior from the beginning. When Christ, the sinless One, was offered on the cross to receive the full and final wages of sin, God showed to all heaven and earth that He was faithful. Even though it cost Him His only Son, He went through with it. When we see that kind of faithfulness, we are seeing His glory.

There are many other attributes of God that were displayed in their fullness at the cross, but the one that stands above all the others is the attribute of love. "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that

he loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). The human mind cannot comprehend the love that would cause God to permit His Son to die as an atonement for our sins. But He is glorified in the display of it.

God will also glorify Him. In His third and final statement about glory, Jesus emphasizes the truth that the Father and the Son are busily engaged in glorifying each other, and the greatest glory of the Son is subsequent to His work on the cross. "If God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and will glorify Him immediately" (John 13:32). There was a certain glory in the cross, but the Father would not stop there. The resurrection, the ascension, the exaltation of Christ in total glory are all important aspects of the glory that would be His. Even today, His greatest glory is yet future.

All this glory that was coming to Christ meant that He had to leave. So He says, "Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, now I also say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'" (v. 33). While His thoughts were on His glory and all the grandeur of it, He was also thinking about His eleven beloved disciples. He calls them "little children"-an expression He probably would not have used if Judas had still been present.

What did He mean, "As I said to the Jews?" In John 7:34, He told the Jews who sought to have Him seized, "You will seek Me, and will not find Me; and where I am, you cannot come." John 8:21 says, "Then He said again to them, 'I go away, and you will seek Me, and will die in your sin; where I am going, you cannot come.'" In verse 24, He adds, "Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins."

It is significant that Jesus gives no such warning to His believing disciples. Although they would not be able at this time to follow Him where He was going, there was no danger that they would die in their sins. Jesus was going to the Father, and they would miss His physical nearness, especially in times of trial and problems. In fact, in Acts 1, as Jesus ascended into heaven, they just stood there, gazing longingly into heaven. They didn't want Him to leave, and Jesus knew that. So here in John 13, He was reassuring them that although His glory would involve His leaving, He still cared for them. It is the introduction of a theme that will carry through the next few chapters.

Why did He tell them all this? Because He knew that as true disciples, their concern was for His glory. He wanted them to share the expectation and the excitement and anticipation of His coming glory. He wanted them to be preoccupied with thoughts of His glory.

A concern for God's glory, then, is one of the marks of a true disciple. It is the heart of the reason for our existences, a burning passion we inherit from our Lord Himself.

When Henry Martyn sailed for India, he said, "Let me burn out for God." Later, as he watched in a Hindu temple in India, he saw people prostrating themselves before images. He wrote in his diary,

"This excited more horror in me than I can express." He wrote, "I could not endure existence if Jesus was not glorified, it would be hell to me." Once somebody said to him, "Why are you so preoccupied with His glory?" And he answered, "If someone plucks out your eyes, there's no saying why you feel pain, it is feeling--it is you. It is because I am one with Christ that I am so deeply wounded." Every genuine disciple knows something of the feeling.

An Unfailing Love for the Children of God

Not only is the committed disciple preoccupied with his Lord's glory, but he also is filled with His love. Perhaps this distinguishing mark of the committed Christian is the most significant of all in terms of practical living.

And even though the disciples would no longer be able to rejoice in the visible presence of Jesus, they still would enjoy a full, rich experience of love, for they would have a depository of love in their own lives. In fact, love would be their primary distinguishing mark: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." Those words of Christ had such a profound impact on the apostle John that he made them his life's message. He repeated it in 1 John 3:11: "For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another."

As believers in Christ, we have a new God-given capacity to love. The love of Christ is shed abroad in our hearts (Romans 5:5), and Romans 13:8-10 tells us that love eliminates the necessity of a legal system. Because of love, we simply do not need to live by a set of rules and regulations. We don't need signs in our houses that say, "Don't bullwhip your wife"; "Don't smash your children with a hammer"; or "Don't steal, kill, or bear false witness." Genuine love makes all those rules superfluous.

What kind of love marks a true disciple? Jesus said, "Love one another, even as I have loved you." That sets the standard high, doesn't it? Jesus' love is selfless, sacrificial, indiscriminate, understanding, and forgiving. Unless your love is like that, you have not fulfilled the new commandment.

If the church existed in that kind of love, it would absolutely overwhelm the world. Unfortunately, that isn't the way the professing church operates. There are factions, little groups, splits, and cliques. People gossip, backbite, talk, and criticize. The world looks, and they don't see much love. So there is no way for them to know whether those who call themselves Christians are real or not.

One reason pseudo-Christian cults and false doctrines have so much influence today is that not many Christians are definitive disciples. It is often virtually impossible to distinguish a true disciple from a false one, for there isn't a lot of visible manifestation of God's love. Thus the world doesn't know to whom to go to find the truth. When the average person looks at the spectrum of "Christianity" and all that goes with it, he is baffled. Those around him who claim to be Christians seem to have no identifying marks, and if anything, they often seem to be more lacking in love than in any other character quality.

You'll remember that earlier in John 13, Jesus taught the disciples by washing their feet that the key to love is humility. Here is how closely love is tied to humility: If you don't love, it's because you're proud. And God hates a proud heart. Those who are proud have no capacity for love. In Philippians 2:3-4, Paul says, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others." That is exactly what Jesus did, and how He taught His disciples to love.

How can we manifest visible love? First, we can admit it when we have wronged someone. If you are not willing to go to somebody you have wronged and make things right, you don't want to be a committed Christian, and the whole body of Christ will be incapacitated because of your unwillingness to love.

Most of the bitterness within the visible church has nothing to do with doctrinal differences. It can be traced instead to a fundamental lack of love, and an unwillingness to accept the humility that love demands. A second way to show love is by forgiving those who have wronged us--whether we are asked or not. No matter how serious the wrong you have suffered may be, love demands that you forgive it. Christ forgave those who had mocked Him, spit on Him, and then crucified Him. The wrongs we generally suffer seem insignificant compared to what He suffered, and yet He was immediately willing to forgive.

Scripture is clear and unyielding on this principle of unconditional forgiveness. First Corinthians 6:1 says, "Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous?" (Some of the Corinthians were apparently suing other believers for wrongs that had been committed against them.) Verse 7 says, "Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?" No verse in all of Scripture is more practical and demanding than that.

Do you really want to maintain a testimony of love in this world? Then accept whatever comes your way, praise the Lord, and let His love flow through you to the one who wronged you. That kind of love would confound this world.

Real love is costly, and the one who truly loves will have to sacrifice, but while you sacrifice in this world you're gaining immeasurably in the spiritual realm. And you are displaying the most visible, practical, obvious mark of a true disciple.

An Unswerving Loyalty to the Son of God

A third mark of the committed Christian is loyalty. It is more implied than expressed in the context of John 13. Nevertheless it is included with a marvelous illustration of Peter, who faltered often but ultimately proved himself to be a genuinely committed believer and a true disciple. From him we learn a number of intensely practical principles that can make a difference in all our lives.

Discipleship is more than a promised loyalty. It must go beyond making a vow to God (which we tend to do glibly and frequently). Discipleship demands a practiced loyalty--an operating, functioning kind of loyalty that holds up under every kind of pressure. All this talk about Jesus' going away must have deeply bothered Peter. He couldn't stand the thought of Jesus' leaving. Matthew 16:22 vividly shows how intensely Peter hated the thought of Jesus' impending death. Jesus had foretold His crucifixion and resurrection, and Peter, always the self-appointed spokesman for the disciples, took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Him. This was a stubborn, selfish attitude on the part of Peter, who did not want Jesus to be taken from him under any conditions. Jesus "turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's'" (v. 23).

Jesus was completely aware of Peter's attitude, and He took the opportunity in John 13:36-38 to teach Peter a lesson about true loyalty:

Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, where are You going?"

Jesus answered, "Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you shall follow later."

Peter said to Him, "Lord, why can I not follow You right now? I will lay down my life for you."

Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for Me? Truly, truly, I say to you, a rooster will not crow until you deny Me three times."

Peter's heart was burning with love for Jesus. But while his love for Jesus was admirable, his boasting was foolish. His refusal to accept Jesus' words was merely stubborn pride. In essence, he was saying, "If all You're going to do is die, I will be happy to die with You." But he was speaking rashly, as a braggart. Perhaps he said it for the benefit of all the disciples, but he was saying it in the

flesh. Worst of all, the message to Jesus was, "I know better than You."

You can imagine what a shock it was to Peter when Jesus predicted that he would deny Him that very night. In fact, through the rest of the dialogue, Peter--contrary to his character--never said another word.

Nevertheless, we read in Matthew 26 that he repeated his boast again later that evening in the garden. This time all the disciples joined with him in affirming that they would stay with Jesus, even if it meant dying. But just a short time later, when their lives seemed truly to be on the line, "All the disciples left Him and fled" (Matthew 26:56).

There was a huge gap between their promised loyalty and their practiced loyalty. Peter, who had so loudly boasted that he would stand by the Lord, failed miserably. Instead of giving his life for Jesus, he tried to save it by denying Him. And he didn't do it in silence or by implication, he did it loudly with cursing, and before many witnesses. Four things made Peter fail the test of loyalty.

He boasted too much. First, Peter was too proud to listen to what Jesus was trying to tell him, and too busy boasting. Luke 22:31-32 records Jesus' admonition to Peter: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." Implied in that warning is the prophecy that Peter would fall, and that he would later repent of his failure.

But Peter missed the whole point. "Lord, with You I am ready to go both to prison and to death" (v. 33). Reading those words, I think of 1 Kings 20:11: "Let not him who girds on his armor boast like him who takes it off." Peter was boasting in his flesh, but he wasn't in a position to boast about anything.

He prayed too little. Peter failed also because his praying was not what it should have been. First he was boasting while he should have been listening; and later that evening, he slept when he should have been praying. Sleep is a good thing, but it's not a substitute for prayer. While Jesus was praying in agony in Gethsemane, Peter and the other disciples fell asleep. Luke 22:45-46 tells us that Jesus "came to the disciples and found them sleeping from sorrow, and said to them, 'Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not enter into temptation.'"

That rebuke must have made a profound impact on Peter, for many years later he wrote, "Be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer" (1 Peter 4:7, King James Version). "Watch" means "stay alive," "stay awake," "stay alert." That is not some kind of abstract theological reasoning; Peter is talking out of his own life.

He acted too fast. Another reason Peter failed the test of loyalty is that he was impetuous. Acting without thinking was a perennial problem in Peter's life. When a group of officers from the priests and

Pharisees came into the garden to take Jesus, Peter grabbed a sword and cut off the high priest's slave's ear (Luke 22:50). His motive, however, was selfishness or perhaps fear or pride, but not loyalty. Jesus rebuked him for his action and healed the man's ear.

God's will is not always easy to accept, but those who are truly loyal will be sensitive to what it is. Peter might have thought he was helping the cause of God, but he was totally oblivious to all that God was doing in this, and his impetuous actions actually were getting in God's way and leading to his own downfall.

He followed too far away. A final reason to Peter's great failure is that he left Jesus' side and began to follow him from a distance. Luke 22:54 says, "Having arrested Him, they led Him away and brought Him to the house of the high priest; but Peter was following at a distance." That was perhaps the greatest disaster of all. Here was the logical consequence of all of Peter's weaknesses: cowardice. He had foolishly boasted of his willingness to die; now when he had that opportunity, for the first time in their relationship, Peter drifted from a closeness with Jesus.

"After they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter was sitting among them" (Luke 22:55). Suddenly he was sitting in the seat of the scornful. Verse 56 tells us that a servant girl recognized him as a follower of Jesus and pointed him out. Peter, who had bragged so forcefully of his loyalty, now began to deny just as forcefully that he had ever known Jesus.

There he was, within sight of the Lord, denying Him, even cursing and swearing that he had never known Him, according to Matthew 26:72. When the cock crowed, Jesus turned around and looked at Peter (Luke 22:61), and Peter remembered. He was so ashamed that all he could do was run away and cry his heart out (v. 62). What about your loyalty? What have you promised Jesus? That you would love Him? That you would serve Him? That you would be faithful, not deny Him, forsake sin, live or die for Him, or witness to your neighbor? How have you done? Did you boast too much? Pray too little? Act too fast? Follow too far away? How many promises have you made to God and never kept?

It wasn't too late for Peter, and it is not too late for you. Peter finally passed the test of loyalty. He finally preached, suffered, and died for his Lord, just as he had promised. He proved himself to be a genuine disciple. The first part of his story may be sad, but beginning with the book of Acts, we can see a different Peter.

Perhaps this is the most significant thing we learn from Peter: God can turn a life around when it is finally yielded to Him. What kind of a Christian are you? Are you everything you promised Jesus Christ you would be when you first believed? Are you everything you promised Christ you would be perhaps more recently, when you re-evaluated your life and recommitted it to Him? Are there visible,

distinguishing marks that show you are a deeply committed believer?

You may lack the marks of a committed Christian, but God can transform you into a true disciple if you simply surrender and let Him have your will. The life of a committed Christian may be costly, but it is the only kind of life that really counts for eternity.

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