

FOLLOW ME

A Pulpit-Ready Sermon for New Hope Baptist Church

Sunday, July 19, 2026

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Primary Text: Matthew 16:24–25 (KJV)

Supporting Texts: Luke 9:23; John 10:27; Hebrews 4:15–16; 1 Peter 2:21; Romans 8:18

OPENING SCRIPTURE — MATTHEW 16:24-25 (KJV)

Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.

INTRODUCTION — WHEN THE SONG BECOMES OUR STORY

Church, the song we have just heard is more than an old gospel song. It is a conversation between a tired traveler and the Savior. It begins on a lonely road. The traveler is weary. The load feels heavy. He looks around and concludes that nobody sees, nobody understands, and nobody cares. If we are honest, most of us have walked some stretch of that road.

There are roads we travel surrounded by people and still feel alone. There are burdens we carry with a smile on Sunday because we do not know how to explain them on Monday. There are nights when the house is quiet, the phone does not ring, and the questions in our mind become louder than anything in the room. We love God, but we are tired. We trust God, but we hurt. We believe, but we still wonder how much farther the road goes.

The power of this song is that the weary traveler tells Jesus how hard the road has become. He speaks as though Christ might not fully understand. Then the Savior answers—not with a shallow speech, not with a quick promise that every problem will disappear, but by pointing to what He endured. The answer of Jesus is, in effect: I know the road. I know the wounds. I know the cross. Keep close to Me.

That is the gospel picture before us today. Jesus never promised that following Him would remove every hill. He promised that no hill would have to be climbed without Him. He never said the cross would be weightless. He said, “Follow me.” He never said discipleship would always be comfortable. He said it would lead to life.

So the question this morning is not whether the road has been difficult. The question is: Who are we following while we walk it? When pain speaks, when disappointment speaks, when fear speaks, and when weariness speaks, can we still hear the voice of Jesus saying, “Follow Me”?

THE SONG'S COMPLAINT IS HONEST — BUT IT IS NOT THE WHOLE TRUTH

The emotional power of this hymn comes from an honest complaint: the traveler interprets a lonely road as evidence that nobody cares. That conclusion feels true, but Calvary proves it is not true. This is where mature faith must distinguish between what pain reports and what the gospel reveals. Pain can tell us that we are hurting. Pain cannot finally tell us whether we are loved.

Scripture never commands believers to lie about sorrow. The Psalms contain lament, protest, tears, and unanswered questions. Jesus Himself said in Gethsemane that His soul was exceeding sorrowful. Biblical faith is not emotional pretending. We are permitted to say, “This hurts.” We are permitted to ask, “How long?” But lament becomes unbelief when a temporary feeling is promoted into a final verdict about the character of God.

The traveler says, in effect, “No one cares.” The wounded hands of Christ answer, “Look again.” The cross is God's permanent contradiction of the suspicion that He is indifferent. We may not understand the road, but we cannot honestly say that God remained distant from human suffering. In Jesus Christ, God entered it.

That does not mean our wounds are imaginary because His were greater. Jesus is not competing with us for the title of who suffered most. He is establishing His credibility as the One who can lead wounded people. He does not answer from a balcony. He answers from a cross and then from an empty tomb.

There is a dangerous form of spirituality that says, “Someone else has it worse, so I have no right to hurt.” That is not the message. Christ does not use His wounds to silence ours. He uses His wounds to assure us that ours can be entrusted to Him. His suffering gives Him moral authority to say, “Keep following,” and His resurrection gives Him power to bring us through.

The song therefore moves us from interpretation by circumstance to interpretation by Christ. Circumstance says, “This road is proof that I am forgotten.” Christ says, “This road is a place where My faithfulness will be revealed.” Circumstance says, “The burden means the story is ending.” Christ says, “The cross is not the end of the story.” Mature discipleship learns to let Jesus interpret the road.

THE TURNING POINT AT CAESAREA PHILIPPI

Matthew 16:24 does not fall out of the sky as a pleasant inspirational sentence. It comes at the turning point of the Gospel. Peter has just confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. That confession is correct. But immediately afterward, Jesus begins to explain that He must go to Jerusalem, suffer, be killed, and be raised again.

Peter can accept the identity of Jesus, but he cannot accept the itinerary of Jesus. He wants the Christ, but not the cross. He wants the kingdom, but not suffering. He wants victory as he imagines it, not victory through sacrificial obedience. Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes Him. Imagine the audacity: the disciple tries to correct the destination of the Master.

Jesus responds with severe language because Peter's proposal repeats the old temptation: glory without obedience, a crown without Calvary, the kingdom without the cross. Then Jesus turns from Peter to all the disciples and says, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.” In other words: You cannot follow a crucified Messiah while refusing a cruciform life.

This exposes a central temptation in modern Christianity. We often want Jesus as Savior from consequences but not Lord over choices. We want comfort without correction, promises without commands, resurrection without dying to self, and a crown that has never rested beside a cross. We may confess the right title for Jesus while resisting His authority over the road.

Peter's problem was not lack of affection. He loved Jesus. His problem was that his love was still attempting to manage Jesus. It is possible to be sincere and still

be surrendered to the wrong vision. Peter wanted to protect Jesus, but in doing so he stood against the very mission by which Jesus would save him.

That should make us examine our prayers. Sometimes we call something spiritual because it asks God to preserve our plan. We say, “Lord, lead me,” when we mean, “Lord, approve the route I already selected.” True discipleship begins when Jesus is allowed to contradict us.

The command “follow Me” therefore is not sentimental. It means Jesus determines both direction and definition. He defines success. He defines faithfulness. He defines life. A disciple does not place Jesus in the passenger seat as a consultant. A disciple yields the driver's seat because Jesus alone knows where resurrection is found.

1. THE ROAD CAN BECOME LONELY

The first picture is a lonely road. Scripture does not pretend that faithful people never feel lonely. Elijah stood on Mount Carmel and saw fire fall from heaven, but shortly afterward he sat beneath a juniper tree convinced that he was by himself. David had soldiers around him, yet he wrote psalms from places of deep isolation. Job had visitors sitting near him, but their words made him feel more alone. Even Paul testified that at one season of trial, no man stood with him.

Loneliness is not always the absence of people. Sometimes it is the absence of being understood. You can sit in a crowded sanctuary and carry a grief nobody knows. You can lead a family, hold a job, answer everybody's questions, and quietly wonder who would know what to do with yours. You can encourage everyone else while your own strength is running low.

Here is the truth we must hold: feeling alone is not the same as being abandoned. Psalm 23 does not say that the believer never enters the valley. It says, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.” The valley is real, but so is His presence. The shadow is real, but so is the Shepherd. The road is real, but it is not empty.

Notice that David says, “I walk through.” The valley is a passage, not a permanent address. The enemy wants you to unpack your faith in the valley

and decide that this must be where your story ends. God says, Keep walking. You may not be able to run. You may not feel like shouting. But if you can take one faithful step, take it. If all you can pray is, “Jesus, help me,” pray it. Heaven understands short prayers prayed under heavy loads.

Somebody needs to hear this plainly: the silence of people is not the silence of God. The absence of applause is not the absence of approval. The fact that others do not recognize what you are carrying does not mean Christ has overlooked it. Hebrews tells us that we do not have a High Priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities. He is not standing far away from your pain. He is touched by it.

When Hagar believed she and her child would die in the wilderness, God saw her. When the disciples fought a storm in the darkness, Jesus came walking on the water. When Mary wept outside the tomb, the risen Christ called her by name. God has a history of meeting people on lonely roads.

Church, loneliness can distort our vision. It whispers, “Nobody cares.” Faith answers, “The Shepherd is here.” Loneliness says, “You have been forgotten.” Faith answers, “He knows my name.” Loneliness says, “This road goes nowhere.” Faith answers, “I am following the One who knows the end from the beginning.”

PULPIT REFRAIN: “When the road is hard, keep following Jesus.”

2. JESUS UNDERSTANDS THE COST

The second great picture is the wounded Savior. When we tell Jesus that following is difficult, we are not speaking to someone unfamiliar with suffering. Isaiah called Him a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He knew rejection in His hometown. He knew betrayal from a friend. He knew misunderstanding from His own family. He knew false accusation, public humiliation, physical pain, and the crushing weight of the cross.

Jesus does not minimize our wounds; He interprets them through His own. His scars declare that pain does not mean God has lost control. His resurrection declares that suffering does not receive the final word. The hands that were pierced are still strong enough to hold you.

Consider Gethsemane. Jesus told His closest disciples that His soul was exceeding sorrowful. He asked them to watch with Him, and they fell asleep. Three times He prayed. Sweat fell as great drops of blood. He was not acting. The agony was real. Yet His prayer ended with surrender: “Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.” That is not weakness. That is holy obedience under pressure.

There are times when faith does not look like feeling strong. Sometimes faith looks like saying, “Father, I do not want this cup, but I still trust Your hand.” Sometimes faith is tears and obedience in the same sentence. Sometimes faith trembles but does not turn around.

Because Jesus understands, we can come boldly to the throne of grace. We do not have to polish our pain before we pray. We do not have to pretend we are fine. The Lord can handle the honest truth. Tell Him where it hurts. Tell Him where you are tired. Tell Him what you fear. Then stay long enough to hear His answer.

His answer may not be an immediate escape. Sometimes His answer is sufficient grace. Paul asked three times for the thorn to leave, and the Lord said, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” Paul wanted removal; Christ supplied endurance. Paul wanted the burden gone; Christ made sure the burden could not destroy him.

We often ask, “Lord, why did You allow this?” The cross reminds us that God can take what looks like defeat and make it the doorway to redemption. On Friday, Calvary looked like the end. On Sunday morning, the grave was empty. If God transformed the darkest day in history into the foundation of salvation, He can work redemptively in the dark places of our lives.

Do not measure the love of Jesus by the ease of your road. Measure it by the cross. Do not measure His power by the speed of the answer. Measure it by the empty tomb. He understands the cost, and He has already proven His love.

PULPIT REFRAIN: “When the road is hard, keep following Jesus.”

3. EVERY DISCIPLE HAS A CROSS

Jesus said, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.” He did not say this only to preachers, missionaries, or unusually strong believers. He said, “If any man.” The call is universal. The cross is personal. The following is continual.

We sometimes call every inconvenience a cross. A difficult coworker is not automatically your cross. A slow line at the store is not your cross. The cross is not simply anything we dislike. In the world of Jesus, the cross represented death, surrender, and the end of self-rule. To take up the cross is to say: My life belongs to Christ. My will bows to His will. My plans are submitted to His purpose.

Self-denial is not self-hatred. It is refusing to make self the center. The culture says, “Protect yourself at all costs.” Jesus says, “Lose your life for My sake, and you will find it.” The culture says, “Follow your heart.” Jesus says the heart must be transformed, and then the transformed heart must follow Him.

A cross may look like forgiving someone who never apologized. It may look like remaining faithful when nobody congratulates you. It may mean telling the truth when dishonesty would be easier. It may mean serving when you feel overlooked, giving when it costs, apologizing when pride objects, or walking away from something your flesh wants because Christ has called you to holiness.

Luke records the call this way: take up the cross daily. Yesterday's surrender cannot substitute for today's obedience. We cannot place the cross on our shoulder during Sunday worship and set it down when Monday becomes inconvenient. Every morning, the disciple must decide again: Jesus is Lord here too.

Peter heard this teaching immediately after confessing that Jesus was the Christ. He understood the right title, but he resisted the road of suffering. He wanted a crown without a cross. Jesus corrected him because the kingdom cannot be received on our terms. We follow Christ on His road, not ours.

But hear the hope: Christ never asks us to carry a cross He was unwilling to carry first. First Peter 2:21 says Christ suffered for us, leaving us an example, that we should follow His steps. Our cross does not purchase salvation; His cross did that completely. Our cross is the shape our gratitude and obedience take because we have been saved.

The cross is heavy, but it is not empty. It produces patience, maturity, compassion, and a testimony. It teaches us that we are stronger in Christ than we were in self. It strips away what cannot last so we can hold more tightly to what is eternal.

Church, some burdens are not signs that you missed God. They may be evidence that you are following closely. Do not throw down a God-assigned cross simply because it became uncomfortable. Ask for wisdom. Ask for strength. Ask for help. Then keep following.

PULPIT REFRAIN: “When the road is hard, keep following Jesus.”

THE CROSS IS NOT A NAME FOR EVERYTHING HARD

We must be precise because church language can become careless. Not every hardship is a cross. Some pain is the ordinary consequence of living in a fallen world. Some pain comes from another person's sin. Some comes from our own poor decisions. Some suffering is persecution for righteousness. Some is discipline that corrects us. Wisdom asks which kind of suffering we are facing, because the response may be repentance, endurance, resistance, forgiveness, treatment, boundaries, or help.

A cross, in the teaching of Jesus, is specifically connected to self-denial and allegiance to Him. In the first century, nobody heard the word cross and thought of a minor inconvenience. They saw public shame, loss of control, and death. A condemned person carrying a cross announced that his old claims were finished. When Jesus tells us to take up the cross, He is not romanticizing pain; He is demanding the death of self-rule.

That means cross-bearing cannot be reduced to tolerating avoidable harm. Remaining in abuse is not automatically faithfulness. Refusing necessary help is not holiness. Creating chaos and then calling the consequences “my cross” is not

discipleship. The cross is not an excuse for passivity or foolishness. It is the costly obedience required when the will of Christ collides with the throne of self.

Denying self is deeper than denying ourselves an occasional pleasure. It is not merely skipping dessert, giving up television, or enduring something unpleasant. It is denying self the right to be lord. The decisive question changes from “What do I want?” to “What does faithfulness to Christ require?”

This death to self may involve a thousand concrete decisions: truth instead of image management, purity instead of secret appetite, forgiveness instead of revenge, generosity instead of possession, service instead of recognition, courage instead of approval, and obedience instead of endless delay.

Yet Christian self-denial is not the erasure of personhood. Jesus does not destroy the self He created; He liberates it from false lordship. The paradox of the gospel is that the life surrendered to Christ is not diminished but finally discovered. We lose the counterfeit life so we can receive the true one.

4. FOLLOW CLOSE ENOUGH TO HEAR HIS VOICE

The command is not merely to carry something; it is to follow Someone. Christianity is not primarily a list of burdens. It is a relationship with Jesus Christ. The cross only makes sense when our eyes are on the One walking ahead of us.

Jesus said in John 10:27, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” There is hearing, knowing, and following. His sheep learn His voice. He knows them personally. Then they respond with movement.

We live in a noisy age. Fear has a voice. Politics has a voice. Social media has ten thousand voices before breakfast. Old wounds have a voice. Other people's expectations have a voice. If we are not careful, we will follow whatever speaks the loudest rather than the One who speaks the truth.

We recognize the voice of Jesus through Scripture. He will never lead contrary to His written Word. We recognize His voice through the Holy Spirit, who convicts, comforts, and consistently points to Christ. We recognize His direction

through prayer, godly counsel, and providence. But the closer we walk, the clearer His voice becomes.

Following is active. Jesus did not say, “Admire Me.” He said, “Follow Me.” Many admire His compassion but will not follow His holiness. They admire the cross as jewelry but resist the cross as surrender. They appreciate His promises but avoid His commands. A disciple does not merely agree that Jesus knows the way; a disciple puts his feet where Jesus puts His.

When Jesus called Peter and Andrew, they left their nets. When He called Matthew, he left the tax booth. When He called the rich young ruler, the man walked away because possessions held his heart. Every call to follow exposes what has been leading us.

What must be left behind for you to follow more closely? Is it bitterness? Pride? A secret habit? The need to control every outcome? The approval of people? You cannot follow Jesus forward while gripping everything He told you to release.

Following closely does not mean understanding every turn. Abraham went out not knowing where he was going. Israel followed a cloud by day and fire by night. The disciples stepped into a boat with Jesus without knowing a storm was ahead. Guidance often comes one obedient step at a time.

We want God to show us the whole map. He often gives us enough light for the next step. If He revealed every valley at once, fear might paralyze us. If He revealed every blessing at once, pride might ruin us. So He says, “Stay close. Trust Me today.”

The safest place is not the easiest road; it is the place nearest Jesus. If He is in the valley, I would rather be in the valley with Him than on a mountaintop without Him. If He is in the storm, the boat with Jesus is safer than the shore without Him. Follow close enough to hear His voice.

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5. GRACE IS GIVEN FOR EVERY STEP

A weary believer may hear this message and think, “Pastor, I know I should follow, but I do not know whether I have strength for another step.” The good

news is that Jesus does not merely point down the road; He supplies grace for the journey.

Second Corinthians says we are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed. Notice the honesty and the hope. Troubled—yet held. Perplexed—yet not hopeless. Cast down—yet not finished.

Grace does not always keep us from being knocked down. Grace keeps being knocked down from becoming the end of us. The righteous man falls seven times and rises again. Not because he never hurt, but because God's mercy met him on the ground.

God often sends grace through people. When the cross became physically heavy on the road to Calvary, Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry it behind Jesus. There is no shame in accepting help. Some of us make our road harder because pride will not let anybody know we are struggling. The church is a body. Burdens are meant to be shared. Let somebody pray with you. Let somebody bring the meal. Let somebody sit beside you. Let somebody help carry what has become too heavy for one set of shoulders.

Grace also comes through remembrance. David faced Goliath by remembering the lion and the bear. When today's road frightens you, remember yesterday's faithfulness. The God who brought you through then has not weakened. The same Christ who saved you is keeping you. The same Spirit who comforted you before is present now.

Grace comes in daily portions. Israel could not store manna for a month because God was teaching daily dependence. We want strength for next year. God gives strength for today. Tomorrow's mercy will arrive tomorrow morning. Lamentations says His mercies are new every morning. That means you have not used up the supply.

Do not despise small steps. A small step of obedience is still obedience. Getting out of bed, opening the Bible, returning to prayer, coming back to church, making the call, seeking counsel, forgiving again—these may not look dramatic, but heaven sees movement.

Isaiah says they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. Sometimes they mount up. Sometimes they run. Sometimes they walk. We celebrate the eagle and the runner, but there is holy victory in walking without fainting. If you cannot fly today, walk. If you cannot walk quickly, walk slowly. Just keep facing the direction of Jesus.

You do not have to carry tomorrow's cross with today's strength. You only have to follow Christ in this moment. Grace will meet you at the next step.

PULPIT REFRAIN: “When the road is hard, keep following Jesus.”

THE KINGDOM PARADOX — LOSING LIFE TO FIND IT

Jesus follows the command to take up the cross with a paradox: whoever saves his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for Christ's sake will find it. This is not a call to despise life. It is a revelation that life cannot be secured by making self-preservation its highest purpose.

The tighter we clutch control, the more anxious we become because control was never truly ours. The harder we chase human approval, the less stable our identity becomes because the crowd changes its mind. The more we build life around possessions, position, comfort, or reputation, the more terrified we become of losing them. A life organized around saving itself becomes imprisoned by what it fears.

Jesus offers freedom through surrender. When my life belongs to Christ, failure cannot finally name me, success cannot own me, criticism cannot destroy me, and death cannot keep me. I have already placed my life in hands stronger than mine.

This is why martyrs could sing, why Paul could worship in prison, and why ordinary believers can remain faithful through extraordinary grief. They are not people with no attachment to life. They are people who have discovered a Life that death cannot reach.

The phrase “for my sake” matters. Losing is not automatically holy. Sacrifice becomes Christian when it is offered in allegiance to Christ and shaped by His will. God is not glorified by pointless misery. He is glorified when love for Christ becomes more valuable than the idols we are asked to release.

So the question is not merely, “What have I lost?” The deeper question is, “Into whose hands did I place it?” Anything entrusted to Christ is never finally wasted. He may return it transformed, use it to bless another, or reserve its reward for eternity. But resurrection teaches us that surrender to God is never the final chapter of loss.

6. THE ROAD ENDS IN GLORY

The road of discipleship has a destination. We do not follow an uncertain guide toward an unknown ending. Jesus walked through death and came out alive. Because He lives, every road traveled with Him is moving toward resurrection.

Romans 8:18 says the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. Paul does not call suffering imaginary. He weighs suffering against glory and declares that glory is heavier.

There will be a last lonely night. There will be a final tear. There will be a day when the cross is laid down and the crown is received—not because we earned heaven by suffering, but because the Lamb purchased us with His blood and kept us by His grace.

Revelation gives us the picture: God wipes away all tears. There is no more death, sorrow, crying, or pain. The former things pass away. The road that seemed so long will appear small in the light of eternity.

Until then, we follow. When the road is bright, follow Him. When the road is dark, follow Him. When friends walk beside you, follow Him. When others turn back, follow Him. When the body is strong, follow Him. When the body grows weak, follow Him. When you understand, follow Him. When you do not understand, follow Him.

One day faith will become sight. The voice we have followed through Scripture and prayer will welcome us home. The hands marked by Calvary will wipe away every tear. The Savior who walked ahead of us will stand before us.

Then we will understand that He was present in every valley. He was steady in every storm. He was working in every delay. He was holding us on every lonely road. Not one surrendered step will have been wasted.

So do not quit in the middle of the story. Friday is not the whole gospel. The grave is not the final address. The cross points toward resurrection. Keep walking until faith becomes sight.

PULPIT REFRAIN: “When the road is hard, keep following Jesus.”

CONCLUSION — THE CALL IS STILL THE SAME

The hymn gives us a weary traveler, a compassionate Savior, a cross, and a command. Scripture gives us the same picture. Jesus does not shame the weary traveler. He shows that He understands, and then He calls the traveler forward.

Maybe you arrived this morning tired of the road. You have asked why the burden is so heavy and why the way feels lonely. Jesus is not angry with your honest question. But He does not want you to build a home in despair. He stands before you as the crucified and risen Lord and says, “Follow Me.”

Do not follow your fear. Fear does not know the destination. Do not follow your pain. Pain can describe the wound, but it cannot direct your life. Do not follow the crowd. The crowd that shouted “Hosanna” later shouted “Crucify.” Follow Jesus. His voice is true. His scars prove His love. His resurrection proves His power.

For the believer, the call today may be to renew your surrender. Pick up what you laid down. Return to prayer. Release the bitterness. Obey the instruction you have delayed. Take the next step.

For the person who has never trusted Christ, the first step is salvation. Jesus carried the cross you could never carry. He died for your sins and rose again. You are not saved by becoming strong enough to follow. You are saved by grace through faith, and then His Spirit gives you strength to follow.

The invitation is simple and serious: Will you follow Jesus? Not merely when the music is moving. Not only when the road is easy. Will you follow when obedience costs something? Will you trust the One who already walked through suffering and came out victorious?

INVITATION

As we prepare to sing “Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus,” let that be more than the title of a hymn. Turn your attention away from the size of the burden and toward the strength of the Savior. Turn from the voice that says you are alone and listen to the Shepherd. Turn from sin and self-rule. Turn your eyes upon Jesus.

If you need salvation, come. If you need to return to the Lord, come. If you need prayer for strength to carry what is before you, come. If you simply need to kneel and say, “Lord, I will follow,” come.

The road may still be long, but you will not walk it alone. The cross may still be heavy, but grace will be sufficient. The call is still clear: Follow Me.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, thank You for walking the road before us. Thank You that Your scars prove Your love and Your empty tomb proves Your victory. Forgive us for listening to fear, pain, pride, and the crowd more closely than we listen to You. Give strength to every weary traveler. Help us deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and follow You. Save the lost, restore the wandering, comfort the grieving, and steady those who are close to giving up. Keep our eyes upon You until faith becomes sight. In the name of Jesus, Amen.