

Imagine that you are back in school. You are taking a class that examines the different religions of the world. You study ancient religions, like Greek and Egyptian mythology. You study eastern religions, like Buddhism and Hinduism. And, of course, you study one of the world's most popular religions: Christianity.

So, you take the class, and now it's time to take the test. You start by filling in some "Multiple Choice" questions about ancient religions. Who was the leader of the Greek gods? A. Hermes; B. Zeus; C. Apollo; or D. Mars. The answer is: B. Zeus.

Okay, now you move on to some "True or False" questions about eastern religions. True or false: In Buddhism, Buddha is God. The answer is: False. A Buddha is someone who has been enlightened with knowledge.

Okay, you're doing great so far. You're pretty confident in all your answers. You haven't had to look over at anyone else's paper even once. But now you move on to the part about Christianity, and you see that there's no "Multiple Choice" or "True or False." There's just one essay question. You stare down at your paper and read: "What does it mean to be a Christian?"

So, what are you going to write? Is it going to be a short answer or a long answer? Is this an easy question or a hard question? Should you write about obeying the Ten Commandments and being nice to people? Should you write about reading the Bible and going to church?

There's probably a lot you could write about, but Jesus, our teacher for today, helps us crystalize our answer into two points. Let's look at what he teaches us in Luke 9:18-24. We'll read through these verses and talk about how they answer our test question: What does it mean to be a Christian? Let's start with verses 18-20:

¹⁸Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?"

¹⁹They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life."

²⁰"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Peter answered, "The Christ of God."

So, some people thought that Jesus was John the Baptist, some thought he was Elijah, and some thought he was some prophet from long ago. In other words, because Jesus was a great teacher and miracle-worker, people tried to associate him with some other great teachers and miracle workers.

But all of these opinions were wrong. Peter expressed the truth. He said that Jesus was the Christ. And this wasn't just Jesus' last name. This was a title of extreme importance. Do you know what "Christ" means? It's a Greek word that means "Anointed One." And that title's important because, in the Old Testament, really important people, like kings and high priests, were anointed with oil.

So, when Peter calls Jesus *the* Christ, *the* Anointed One, he's saying that Jesus is the most important person. He's saying that Jesus is so much more than just a prophet or teacher. He's saying that Jesus is the one whom God promised to send to save his people all the way back in the Garden of Eden. He's saying that Jesus is the whom the people of Israel having been hoping to see for centuries, because he would deliver them.

And here we have the first answer to our test question: What does it mean to be a Christian? First of all, it means that you join Peter in confessing that Jesus is the Christ.

I know that might sound obvious, but it's important think about, because there are still people who will tell you that Jesus isn't the Christ. The Muslim faith, for example, believes that Jesus existed; they even call him a prophet, but that's it. Others will say that Jesus existed, but he was just a really good teacher and moral guide, and all the stories about him doing miracles were made up by his followers.

But you, as a Christian, confess something quite different from all that. You confess that Jesus is, indeed, the Christ. He is the Son of God and the Savior of all mankind. He is "the way and the truth and

the life" (John 14:6). He is the one whom God promised to send to save his people all the way back in the Garden of Eden. He is the golden thread of hope woven throughout the Old Testament. He is the burst of salvation exploding from the pages of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. He is the certainty that powered the pens of other New Testament authors, like Paul and Peter and James. What does it mean to be a Christian? It means that you confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God who won forgiveness and salvation for all.

That's the first answer to our test question. But, before discovering the second answer, we need to take a moment to talk about the next verse separately, because it can be confusing. Verse 21: ²¹Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. Doesn't that seem odd? Didn't Jesus want people to know that he was the Christ?

Well, Jesus probably said that because Peter and his disciples and the crowds following him had unreal expectations about what the Christ would do. Many Jewish people expected the Christ to be a warrior, like King David. They expected the Christ to liberate Israel from oppression and to usher in a golden age of peace and prosperity.

That was a false idea about the Christ. So, to prevent that false idea from spreading, Jesus told his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. Later he would tell them to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19), but first he needed to accomplish what he came to do without too many unreal expectations getting in the way. And Jesus explains what the Christ came to do in the next verse, verse 22. Let's read that along with the last two verses:

²²And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. ²³Then he said to them all: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.

So, Jesus did not come to be a warrior king. He came to suffer and be rejected. He came to die and rise again. He came to conquer not the armies of Israel's enemies, but the armies of sin, death, and Satan.

And Jesus had sobering news for whomever would follow him. His followers should not expect easy living. His followers should expect to take up their crosses. And here we have the second answer to today's test question: What does it mean to be a Christian? It means that you carry a cross.

But, what does that mean? What is a cross, exactly? Well, I'm guessing you know the thing Jesus is referring to when he says, "Cross." He's referring to that piece of wood where a person was hung to suffer incredible pain before dying. He's referring to that piece of wood where he would one day suffer and die. Sometimes it looked like a lowercase "t." Sometimes it looked like an uppercase "T." Sometimes it even looked like an "x." And sometimes it were just a long pole stuck in the ground.

So, when Jesus says that his followers must take up their crosses and follow him, does he mean that we need to start lugging one of those giant pieces of wood around? No, he's using picture language here. The cross represents those things that you suffer because you follow Christ, just as an actual cross was what Jesus suffered because he is the Christ. So, to clarify even further, the Christian cross isn't just any suffering; it's suffering that happens because you are a follower of Christ.

Some examples: Losing your job because your company is downsizing and they need to slash the budget – not a cross. Losing your job because you refuse to engage in dishonesty or theft because of your Christian convictions – that's a cross. Having an addiction to alcohol or drugs or pornography – even that's not a cross. Denying yourself such sinful pleasure out of love for your Savior – that's a cross. You get the idea, right?

Now, the question becomes: What is your cross? I'm not a mind reader, but I think I can tell you what some of your crosses are. Let me give it a shot.

I bet that one of your crosses is not always saying what you want to say because what you want to say is hurtful, even though it's true. But you follow Christ. So, you bite your tongue and put on a smile. That can be painfully hard to do.

I bet that one of your crosses is showing love to someone who would be really easy to hate. Maybe this person has hurt you in the past. Maybe this person hasn't cared about your feelings. Maybe this person is annoying. Frankly, maybe this person doesn't deserve your respect. But you follow Christ, so you love even your enemies. That can be painfully hard to do.

I bet that one of your crosses is denying yourself. As a human being, you are an urge-machine. You have hundreds of wants, desires, and pleasures. As a sinful human being, many of these urges are sinful and self-centered. But you follow Christ, so you deny yourself those sinful urges. That can be painfully hard to do.

So, as you can see, there are plenty of crosses that every Christian carries, but there are some crosses that God has not called every Christian to carry. I think specifically of the freedom we enjoy in the United States of America. For now, we generally don't have to worry about physical harm coming to us for what we believe. But some would say that this is changing, and every day we're inching closer to a society where intolerance for our beliefs will turn into physical violence.

So, time for a serious question: Could you handle that? Could you confess Christ even if that meant harm to you or your family? Could you bear the weight of that cross?

That cross would be heavy, and others that we carry even now can be heavy, too. And so heavy do they become that we often do what we are inclined to do with other heavy things: We set them down.

So, time for another serious question: Have you been setting down your cross lately? I know the excuses, because I use them, too. "I'll do better tomorrow." "God will forgive me anyway." "I'm only human." But I wonder how often we've made ourselves unworthy to be called followers of Christ by setting down the crosses he has called us to carry.

So, what's the solution? I know what many might think the solution is: lighter crosses. But that's not the solution, because what matters is not the weight of the cross you carry; what matters is the one who carried the cross first.

I'm talking, of course, about Jesus, the Christ. And if we're talking about tests today, you could say that he passed his perfectly. He picked up his cross and carried it all the way to a hill called Calvary. There he suffered. There he died. And when he rose, he "aced" the test of perfection for all humanity. He took your test that represents your life, the test that you will hand in to God on the Last Day of school, and he filled it out with all the right answers, with all of his goodness, with all of his righteousness. And now that's what God sees when he looks at you. He sees a test you didn't take. He sees a life you didn't live. He sees the perfection of his Son, Jesus. But don't call it cheating; call it grace.

And now I think we're ready to pass our test question for today. What does it mean to be a Christian? It means that you confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God who carried his cross to save you. It means that you have the distinct honor and privilege of taking up your cross and following Christ, until that glorious day when you meet Christ, and he exchanges your cross for a crown. But until that day, we confess the Christ and carry the cross. That's what it means to be a Christian. Amen.