



Follow the Leader

Featuring Heath Eslinger

Five-Time Southern Conference Championship Head Coach

Great teams have great coaches. Successful corporations have great CEOs. Vibrant churches have great pastors. Strong families have great parents. And the list goes on and on. When there is great leadership in charge of any group, good things tend to happen.

But here's the catch.

No matter how great a leader might be, their leadership only matters if it is actually being followed. You might have the greatest coach in the world, but if you don't follow his or her instruction, you won't reap the benefits of their invaluable guidance. You might have great parents, but if you don't follow their example or obey the rules they have created for the family, you will likely find yourself struggling in different areas of your life.

Heath Eslinger has a strong appreciation for great leadership. He was blessed to have Christian parents that raised him with biblical principles. He was also blessed to have committed coaches at various stages of his wrestling career that helped him achieve his goals as an athlete.

But back to the catch.

Eslinger learned that the laws of leadership also applied to his faith. He knew about Jesus from a young age yet never truly followed Him until his senior year in high school. And then in college, Eslinger continued to follow Jesus and experienced a high level of spiritual growth.

"For the time, I was pursuing Christ on my own," he explains. "I had to do that to survive. It was either sink or swim, and I chose to swim."

What he learned during that time was that his ultimate calling was to simply follow Christ.

"When Jesus called His disciples, He always used those two words: 'Follow Me,'" Eslinger says. "Those men dropped what they were doing and obeyed. But so many times we look left, look right, or we look behind us, instead of making that decision to follow and trust Him completely."

It might seem strange that these men would stop what they were doing and immediately follow Jesus. But it was actually a very logical decision based on Jesus' growing reputation as a great teacher, His known association with John the Baptist, and the fact that He had already performed miracles. The disciples knew there was something special about this man and they all responded to His call quickly and without question. Later on, however, Jesus shared with them a harsh reality that perhaps they had not expected. Following Him wasn't going to be easy:

“Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me.’” (Matthew 6:24/NLT)

When Jesus referred to a cross, it was both symbolic and prophetic. Crucifixion was a popular form of execution within the Roman Empire. Jesus was telling the disciples that following Him was going to be the spiritual equivalent of taking up a cross and being put to death. Little did they know at the time that Jesus would one day face the same fate in the physical realm.

For some people, the initial decision to accept Christ into their heart is an easy one. Salvation is a free gift and comes with the promise of eternal life. Following Him can also lead to some tough decisions. It might require shedding some things in our life that don't honor Him or taking a path that He chooses for us, not the path we chose for ourselves.

But just like Eslinger discovered, following Jesus will eventually lead us to the exact spot where He wants us to be.

“As wrestlers, one of the things we lack sometimes is trust in the plan,” he says. “When things don't go our way, we begin to have some doubts. The same is true in our everyday lives. You have to continue to follow God and the right situations will present themselves. Don't worry about five years down the road or even a year from now. Be in 100 percent pursuit of God's will today. As you do that, you'll always be in the right place at the right time.”

Following God requires trust and obedience. It also requires endurance and perseverance. That's why Jesus' analogy of the cross can be so difficult for those who have chosen to pick it up and follow Him. It reminds us that walking with Him isn't a walk in the park.

Thankfully, there is always strength in the journey (see **Isaiah 41:10**) and the reward is far greater (and infinitely longer lasting) than anything this world can offer. It might seem tough at times, but wholeheartedly following *the* leader is the best decision you'll ever make.

Discussion Questions

1. Who are some people that you would consider to be great leaders and why? What are some qualities that great leaders usually exhibit?
2. Do you generally find it easy or difficult to follow whoever is in charge? Explain. Are there certain types of leaders you find easier to follow than others? Why is that?
3. How would you have responded if you had been placed in the disciples' shoes and asked to leave everything behind and follow Jesus?
4. When you decided to accept Christ, was it an easy decision or one that took time to make? Explain. Has your walk with Him always been easy or have you experienced challenges along the way?
5. What are some things you might need to lay down in order to fully accept the call to pick up your cross and follow Jesus?

Closing Prayer