

The Cost of Discipleship

Mark 8:31-38

31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

During this Lenten season, one question should dominate our thinking: “What does it mean to be a faithful disciple of Jesus?” Frederick Buechner suggests that after his baptism, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness asking himself the question of what it meant to be Jesus, and that during Lent Christians are to ask in one way or another what it means to be Christians. In his Gospel, Mark sets out to answer these questions, realizing that the answers are linked. Before we can understand what it means to be a disciple of Jesus the Messiah, we must understand what it meant for Jesus to be Messiah. It is these two questions that Jesus addresses in our scripture. His answers are as unacceptable now as they were then.

While messianic expectations differed among first-century Jews, the idea that the Messiah would deliver the Jews from Roman oppression was prevalent, and Galilee was the hotbed of revolutionary activity. That Jesus’ Galilean disciples would harbor such a view would not be surprising. Certainly no one expected a

suffering and dying Messiah! Yet this is precisely what Jesus begins to teach his disciples at Caesarea Philippi. In 8:31–32a, Jesus announces that his destiny includes “great suffering,” rejection by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and death, and while he also announces that he will rise again after three days, it appears that this most important detail somehow goes unnoticed by the disciples. It is no wonder. At the mention of suffering, rejection, and death, all listening ceases! They can bear no more! This kind of talk is nonsensical and totally unacceptable, and even if they hear that last part, it is but the final foolishness in Jesus’ insufferable scenario. No need for a resurrection, because a Messiah would never suffer and die! Yet this is “clearly” what Jesus is teaching (v. 32a). This is what messiahship means for Jesus.

Jesus’ unacceptable statement is followed by the unbelievable. So unacceptable is Jesus’ understanding of his messianic agenda that Peter, who has just confessed Jesus to be the Messiah (8:29), rebukes Jesus! Imagine the scene. Peter walks over to Jesus, probably puts his arm around him, and takes him aside to set him straight about messiahship. “Suffering, rejection, and death are not on the agenda. Prestige, power, and dominion are the agenda. It’s David’s throne we’re after, ruling the nations with power and might. We signed on for a crown, not a cross!”

The story is astonishingly relevant. Peter was blinded by his own preconceptions. His cherished convictions about what the Messiah’s agenda should be would not allow him to see what the Messiah’s agenda must be! How often are we guilty of this? Arrogantly we assume that we know what must be done, so that even a word from Jesus himself cannot dissuade us. Blinded by our prejudices, presuppositions, and preconceptions of the way things must be, we would not be convinced otherwise, even were someone to rise from the dead! Of course we would never rebuke Jesus, never with our words, not ever. Our “rebukes” are of a kinder, gentler nature. We respond with neglect and indifference. We will never

touch a hair of his, we will only let him die! Think of G. A. Studdert-Kennedy's horrifying poem Indifference.

When Jesus came to Golgotha,
They hanged Him on a tree,
They drove great nails through hands and feet,
And made a Calvary.
They crowned Him with a crown of thorns
-- Red were His wounds and deep --
For those were crude and cruel days,
And human flesh was cheap !

When Jesus came to Washington,
They simply passed Him by,
They never hurt a hair of Him,
They only let Him die.
For men have grown more tender,
And they would not give Him pain,
They simply passed on down the street,
And left Him in the rain.

Still Jesus cried, "***Forgive them,
For they know not what they do!***"
And still it rained the winter rain,
That drenched Him through and through.
The crowd went home and left the streets,
Without a soul to see,
And Jesus crouched against a wall,
And cried for Calvary.

Jesus hears Peter out. Then, turning and looking at all of the disciples, he rebukes Peter. And what a rebuke it is! Peter is speaking for Satan, the great deceiver. From the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Satan was out to change his course, to turn him away from the cross to be another kind of messiah. The wilderness temptations which we talked about last time, (Mark 1:12-13; Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13) were temptations to avoid the cross by being another kind of Messiah, a temptation that Jesus faces that last night before his arrest and brutal

death when in the Garden he pleads for a cross-less course to the crown (Mark 14:32–42). But it is not possible. No cross, no crown!

Peter's rebuke reflects the way we humans think, Jesus says. The way to victory is the way of power and might, the might that makes all things right and results in a glorious kingdom. Just look at human history where power and might are the rule. Just look at our own lives, where the winner is always the one that is most powerful. But for Jesus and any who would be his followers, there is another way.

Jesus speaks to the "crowd" as well as his disciples. He speaks a word for everyone who would be his disciple then and now. We must "deny" self. Self has been the problem since the Garden of Eden, and so long as the tyranny of self exists, we will never "take up" the cross. Jesus could not have chosen a more vivid image. In first-century Palestine the cross meant one thing: death, the cruel, tortuous death that awaited any who dared threaten Caesar's kingdom. Indeed, the Romans put up crosses like billboards advertising Caesar's supremacy and power; and the fate of any who dared to challenge it. Jesus' hearers knew exactly what taking up the cross meant. In 6 CE they had watched the Romans crucify two thousand Galilean insurrectionists. Imagine the impression this must have made on the young Jesus.

As long as self reigns, we will forever be seeking painless shortcuts to the kingdom. We will try and try again to substitute another way for the way of the cross. But only when we deny self and take up the cross can we follow Jesus. All of our attempts to save our lives are futile (vv. 35–38). All our efforts to make another way are a denial of the one who showed us the way, the way of the cross. This is the cost of true discipleship. In the end, true messiahship and true discipleship are connected. When we are finally willing to accept Jesus for who he is, the suffering one who lays down his life for others, then we can understand who

we are to be, and denying self, we can take up the cross and follow him. **W. Hulitt Gloer**

In this season of Lent, structured as it is to remember in its fullness the journey of Jesus to the cross, it is also the perfect time for understanding the call of Jesus to discipleship. In these forty days we may contemplate not only the wonderful power of the cross of Christ, but the power inherent in taking up our own crosses too. Opportunities are daily before us, times when we may give our lives sacrificially to acts of love, compassion, justice, and peace, even in the face of the same imperial forces of sin and death that confronted Jesus. In this season, we are wise to ponder, not only the cross, but the picture of Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, calling all his disciples to take up our own crosses and to walk with him in paths of love and service. **Paul C. Shupe**