

Get Behind Me

Mark 8:31-38
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In his book “The Jesus I Never Knew,” Philip Yancey tells of a missionary named Matteo Ricci who went to China in the 16th century. He had with him samples of religious art to illustrate the Christian story for people who had never heard it.

The Chinese readily embraced portraits of the Virgin Mary holding her child. But when he showed them paintings of the crucifixion and tried to explain that the God-child had grown up only to be executed, these new Christians reacted with revulsion and horror. They much preferred the Virgin and insisted on worshiping her rather than the crucified God.¹

In other words, they would follow Jesus only so far, but not to the cross, not with their whole hearts. In today’s New Testament lesson, Jesus teaches us what it is to follow him whole heartedly, even all the way to the cross.

Jesus is with his disciples on the outskirts of Caesarea Philippi, overlooking the capitol city and it’s huge, white marble temple built to honor and glorify Caesar, the Roman Emperor who set himself up as a god.

Peter has just declared, in response to a question from Jesus, “You are the Messiah.” And now Jesus begins to tell them just what that means, and what it means for us to be a follower of the Messiah.

The word Messiah means “anointed” by God. Everyone was expecting God to raise up a military-style leader and savior who would deliver them from the oppression of the Roman Empire.

And here comes Jesus teaching them, as Mark says, “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.”

Can you imagine the leader of any country saying such things about having to suffer, be rejected and killed, and then rising again?!? It makes no sense.

And yet, that’s the leader we have in Jesus – someone rejected by those of wealth and power (the elders), rejected by those who enforce the laws (the chief priests), rejected by those who make the laws (the scribes). It doesn’t sound like such a leader would stand a chance, does it, with all the wealth and power in the world working against him?

¹ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1995), 33.

Thankfully, Jesus is not interested in being the leader of this or any other country. Jesus is interested in leading our hearts, leading us to true and lasting victory over all that stands in the way of seeing God's plan and purpose fulfilled.

Do you want to see God's plan and purpose fulfilled? I sure do. Or at least I try to want that, I try to be a follower of Jesus in all things, I try to trust in God's wisdom and blessing, I try to listen for the Holy Spirit speaking to me.

I try, and, too often, I fail. We all do. We all fail to follow Jesus as we should.

Because it's hard; the hardest thing you could ever do. Most everything in life is working against us following Jesus so closely, so closely as to overcome all temptation, so closely as to put Jesus' plans ahead of our own, so closely as to follow Jesus all the way to the cross, setting aside your life – your wants and desires – for the sake of others in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. And yet, that's what it is to be a follower of Jesus – self-sacrifice.

After Jesus began teaching about this, Mark tells us that "Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But (Jesus), turning and looking at his disciples, ... rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'"

This is where temptation comes in. Satan tried to tempt Jesus in the wilderness, and here's Peter trying to tempt him in the capitol city, tempt him to abandon his purpose as the Son of God.

When Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan!" he's not calling Peter Satan. He's saying, "Put me first in your life. Get behind me. Don't let worldly temptations come first, don't let them come between you and me," you and Jesus.

Not that this is easy. It's not. But it is possible. It's possible to overcome any temptation and to put Jesus first, when it's Jesus you turn to for guidance and strength.

Jesus says to the crowds and to his disciples and to us, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Those listening to Jesus that day knew exactly what the cross meant – suffering, suffering under the weight of a heavy wooden cross, suffering under the pain and ridicule of being crucified for being a follower of Jesus, for being the hands and feet and heart of Jesus..

Now, Jesus is not saying his followers must literally be nailed to a cross. But he is saying that we can expect a certain amount of suffering, even and especially when doing the right thing. And he's saying that, when we take up our cross – our suffering – in following him, Jesus actually lifts the burden and carries it for us.

It's hard to hear Jesus saying that his followers must "deny themselves" and "take up their cross," and yet, this is the same Jesus who says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)

The interesting thing is, if we don't deny ourselves by overcoming temptation, if we don't take up our cross by shouldering Christian service, then we're giving Jesus little if anything to help us with. It's all ease and pleasure, accumulation and power. And Jesus is not going to help us with that, not when it's all about us, with little if any self-sacrifice for the sake of others.

Oh, and that "sacrifice for the sake of others" – that's harder still. Jesus actually says, "... 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."

It's hard to set aside your life for the sake of someone else. Just ask any parent, or any adult child of an aged parent.

As the adult child of my mom, I've come to know their struggle and hardship anew in our current situation. My wife Yuri and I had hoped to share with my brothers the burden – the sacred, blessed burden – of caring for my mom in her final years, and the blessings and joy that come with it. We even considered helping her move back to the Cleveland area where she was born and raised, where she and my dad raised our family, where my brother still lives.

But that was not to be, not part of God's plan. Her Alzheimer's and the decline that followed just came too suddenly. And besides, Yuri and I know how to anticipate and address her needs, whereas my brothers would be starting from scratch.

And all of this is fine. I'm confident it's just as God would have it, regardless of any other notions we may have had.

As for pouring myself into caring for my mom the rest of her life, as for the memories it triggers of caring for my first wife before she died, as for being there whenever Mom needs me, I'm blessed by that.

I get to take care of my mom. I get to take care of her in ways my brothers will never know, in joyous, tender moments they will never get to experience. So, yes, the burden is heavy – as it is for all of you in those difficult areas of life – but shouldering it in the Spirit of Jesus Christ makes it light.

Jesus eases even our greatest burdens when we put him ahead of our own wants and desires, those temptations we face. When you gladly shoulder such burdens, giving yourself over to God's plan for your life, it brings for you what I call hidden blessings, the

blessings that come amid life's greatest struggles, the amazing, unimaginable, surprising blessings that come from following the Lord all the way to the cross, and beyond. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Almighty God, we so often try relying on ourselves instead of you in times of trouble. But you are the source of our strength.

Comfort and encourage those who grieve, and especially the family of Kathy German.

Embrace those who suffer from illnesses of mind, body or spirit with your strength and healing presence.

We pray, O God, for your wisdom and guidance in dealing with the struggles of life – family struggles, workplace struggles, struggles in our neighborhoods and communities, struggles globally.

Our deepest longing is to follow you, O Lord, and yet we fail to live as you command. Help us to not hide from struggle and conflict, but allow it to shape us so that we might truly become more faithful disciples.

We pray this as those who dearly want to follow you, wherever that might lead. We pray as your disciples, whom you taught to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.