

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
March 17, 2024

## **Self-Denial and the Cross**

Mark 8:27-9:1

Today's text opens with some retreat and reflection. Jesus and his disciples are on a two-day journey to new territory. This is a good opportunity to look back on all that has happened in their ministry in Galilee, and to look ahead to what they can expect as their mission continues to unfold. During the trip, Jesus takes his disciples aside and asks them what they've been seeing and hearing in the places where they've served. "What are folks saying about me? Who do they think I am?" The disciples offer up several possibilities. John the Baptist, Elijah, or maybe another one of the prophets. Different people have different opinions, but they tend to cluster around the idea that Jesus is a significant prophetic figure, someone sent from God.

But then Jesus sharpens the question and aims it right at his disciples themselves. Objective reflection on the opinions of others is one thing. But what about those closest to him, those who have been with him, actually participating in his kingdom movement? "Who do you say that I am?" (8:29a). Peter, speaking for all of them, nails the answer. "You are the Christ" (v. 29b). You're the Messiah, the anointed one sent to save God's people and to implement God's powerful rule.

You might expect Jesus to give Peter and the other disciples an A. But instead, Jesus instructs them to keep quiet about this revelation. He tells them not to post this on social media or discuss it with their family and friends. They shouldn't mention it in their next sermon or include it in a community Bible study. Not because their answer is wrong, but because their understanding of the answer needs to be overhauled. True, once they were blind but now they can see, but they still see indistinctly. In order to see more clearly, they need to reexamine their definition of "Savior."

That's when Jesus again shifts the conversation, this time to the subject of suffering. That's the main flaw in the disciples' understanding of "Messiah," "Son of God," "Son of Man." They don't realize that suffering lies at the heart of Jesus' identity and mission. "He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again" (8:31). Mark's use of the imperative "must" conveys the idea that what will happen to Jesus isn't just blind, cruel fate, or the result of corrupt human institutions, but that his suffering and death somehow, someway, lie at the heart of God's will and purpose. In other words, there will be no salvation without the cross.

Peter, again representing all the disciples, protests such an idea. Especially since so much of what he and the other disciples have experienced so far in Jesus' mission has been about power, authority, and ministry success, Peter can't conceive of a Messiah who gets executed. He takes Jesus aside and speaks to him with an air of superiority, as if Jesus needs to be corrected. It's no wonder that Jesus fires right back, calling Peter "Satan." Peter is thinking in strictly human terms, not divine terms.

But Peter isn't the only one. The brief disciples retreat that I mentioned has come to a contentious end. Jesus now turns from private instruction to public proclamation. He calls together a crowd and issues an invitation to discipleship. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (8: 34). Some of us have heard this summons so often that we've become immune to its shock. Remember that crucifixion was a tortuous, humiliating form of capital punishment. The Romans forced the condemned individual to carry their cross beam to the crucifixion site. That's the picture Jesus uses when he issues his altar call to us. "If you want to be one of my followers," he says, "then you need to go where I'm going." His destination is death, and so it will be for us. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."<sup>1</sup>

Clarence Jordan, author of the "Cotton Patch" version of the New Testament, was the founder of an interracial farm community in Americus, Georgia. He suffered greatly because of the stand he took and his initiatives to bring about racial equality in economic sectors. One day Jordan was getting a red-carpet tour of another minister's church. With great pride the minister pointed to the rich, imported pews and luxurious decorations. As they stepped outside, darkness was falling, and a spotlight shone on a huge cross atop the steeple. "That cross alone cost us ten thousand dollars," the minister said with a satisfied smile. "You got cheated," said Jordan. "Times were when Christians could get them for free."

Christ calls us to a cross that's free, yet costs us everything. Notice that he isn't saying take up *a* cross, or take up *the* cross, but take up *your* cross. This is a deeply personal invitation. It's not an invitation to attach a shiny cross to a gold chain around your neck. It's not an invitation to hang a decorative wooden cross on your family room wall. It's not an invitation to put a cross decal on the rear window of your car. It's an invitation to a cross-shaped life, a life characterized by suffering and sacrifice.

When I say suffering, I don't mean that many of the hardships, trials, and troubles we face in life should be identified as a form of the cross. Sometimes individuals will tell themselves, or others will say to them, that the disease they're enduring, or the mistreatment they're experiencing, or the problem they're facing, is simply the cross that they must bear. But I don't believe that's what Jesus means. He's not speaking about the burdens that life often brings upon us. Rather, the kind of cross that Jesus is talking about bearing is a way of living that involves painful, redemptive action undertaken voluntarily for the sake of others. It's a course of life that runs against our human inclination to self-protection and self-preservation.

Jesus speaks of it as "denying oneself." Again, note what Jesus doesn't mean. He doesn't mean rejecting yourself. He doesn't mean hating yourself. He means denying the self that clings to its own existence, holding on for dear life, and in the process actually loses what it aims to preserve and protect. "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (8:35).

Preacher John Stott captures it well when he says:

To deny ourselves is to behave toward ourselves as Peter did toward Jesus when he denied him three times. The verb is the same. He disowned him, repudiated him, turned his back on him. So must we do to ourselves. Self-denial is not denying ourselves luxuries like candies, cakes, cigarettes, and cocktails (though it may include this); it is actually denying or disowning ourselves, renouncing our supposed right to go our own way.<sup>2</sup>

So whenever we think about self-denial, we have to do so in light of our sinful condition, our human lostness and brokenness. We default toward self-will rather than God's will. We're prone to trust ourselves more than we trust Jesus. Only as we relinquish our own agenda, and give up our will to live on our own terms, are we able to go with Jesus and experience the risen life that he has made possible for us. As Bonhoeffer summarizes it, "To deny oneself is to be aware only of Christ and no more of self, to see only who goes before and no more the road which is too hard for us. Once more, all that self-denial can say is: 'He leads the way, keep close to him.'"<sup>3</sup>

It's not as if Jesus is setting a high bar of discipleship and then stepping back to watch and see if we can measure up to it. No, Jesus calls us to take up our crosses and follow him, to go with him. He's summoning us to go somewhere that he has already been, into self-sacrificial suffering and death for the sake of others. Self-denial means that we set aside our own path for his path. We don't do it in order to prove ourselves to him. We do it because we identify ourselves with him, commit our lives to him, and tie who we are to who he is. What Jesus has already done for us makes our yielding to God's will possible and purposeful. We do it for him and for the gospel (8:35).

And as we do, we experience a kind of living that only comes from dying. Not necessarily dying in the physical, biological sense, but dying in the sense of relinquishing the desire to live on our own terms, forsaking self-will for God's will, acknowledging that we belong to God and not to ourselves. This is the way to life. It's the way Jesus has already traveled on our behalf. Yes, he was very clear with his disciples about what was ahead for him: suffering, rejection, death. But he was also very clear about what was coming after that, resurrection. So even now, if you follow him in his lowly way of self-denying death, his risen life operates in you and transforms you. And at the end, when he comes again, he will not deny you or renounce you, but welcome you into the life of God's kingdom.

"What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" asks Jesus (8:36-37). The word translated there as "soul" can also mean "life," and can also be rendered as "self." I like Eugene Peterson's rendering: "What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?"<sup>4</sup>

A few years ago, a reporter for NPR described how some companies tried to promote the importance of having customers read the fine print before they sign up for service. I'm talking about the user agreement that most of us skim through or skip over, moving quickly to click the "I accept" button. To prove its point, one cyber security company went so far as to insert an item called the "Herod clause" in their policy. The clause stated that service would only be provided if "the recipient agreed to assign their firstborn child to us for the duration of eternity." Another retailer changed its license agreement to a pre-checked box. If the user didn't uncheck the box, they granted the company "a nontransferable option to claim, for now and forever more, your immortal soul."<sup>5</sup>

Humorous as it is, that report highlights how our paths are shaped by who we sign up with in life. And when we sign up, we need to make sure we understand the commitment we're making. When Jesus gets into a tense discussion with Peter and the other disciples, he's trying to help them understand the details in his definition of the Messiah. And when Jesus issues the invitation to the crowd, and to us, he's trying to make sure we read the fine print about the cost of discipleship. Jesus wants us to know that only by denying self will you be able to become the true self that you're meant to be by joining yourself to him.

Eugene Peterson underscores the great paradox of the gospel. He writes, "In getting us ready to live, Jesus gets us ready to die. First he gets himself ready to die so that he can live. Then he gets us ready. Our habit is to think life first, then death. Jesus radicalizes our perceptions: first death, then life."<sup>6</sup>

Death, then life. Taking up your cross, denying yourself, and following Jesus is the way to life. For some of our fellow disciples in this world, this may take the form of heroic acts of great sacrifice and suffering, or perhaps even martyrdom. Though this may not be the case for you, Jesus' invitation to you is just as urgent, just as costly, and just as life-changing. As you turn from sinful desires, give up your will to live on your own terms, acknowledge God's claim on your life, and keep close to Jesus, he will daily lead you into the ways that you can sacrificially lose your life for him, for the gospel, and for others. And you will see the reign of God come powerfully into your life.

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995) n.p.

<sup>2</sup> John R. W. Stott, "Am I Supposed to Love Myself or Hate Myself?" *Christianity Today*. April 20, 1984. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1984/april-20/am-i-supposed-to-love-myself-or-hate-myself-cross-points.html> (March 13, 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 88.

<sup>4</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993) 92.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew S. Schwartz, "When Not Reading the Fine Print Can Cost Your Soul." *NPR Strange News* (March 8, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *On Living Well: Brief Reflections on Wisdom for Walking in the Way of Jesus* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2021) Kindle edition.