

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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“No Bailout for Christians”

[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." Mark 8:31-38 (NRSV)

MESSIAH FEVER

In the first seven chapters of Mark's gospel Jesus is on a roll. He says what only God can say, and he does what only God can do.

He enables the blind to see. He miraculously feeds thousands with only two small fish and five loaves of bread. He forgives sins. With each new miracle the excitement builds.

Some people are asking, “Could he be the Messiah?” The crowds are getting bigger and bigger.

The disciples have no doubt. They have already begun to jockey for cabinet level positions in the new administration. And as we begin the eighth chapter of Mark's gospel it looks like their expectations will be fulfilled.

Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter speaking for the whole group says,

“You are the Messiah.”

Jesus didn't deny it, but he did say something curious.

Jesus said, “Don't tell anyone.”

REBUKING JESUS

But, now just a few short verses after we learn that Jesus is the Messiah the disciples are starting to wring their hands in despair. In fact Peter is angry with Jesus. He's so angry that he takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him.

The word translated rebuke is a very strong word. It might be the word we would use to describe a principal dressing down a negligent student.

The free translation of the Message stirs my imagination. Eugene Peterson translates verse 32, "... Peter grabbed Jesus in protest." Can't you just see Peter grabbing Jesus by his robe trying to shake some sense into Jesus?

What is going on here? What made Peter so mad?

It was what Jesus taught. Jesus taught it openly so that everyone could hear.

Jesus said that he, the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the religious leaders, be killed and after three days rise again.

I suspect Peter didn't pay much attention to that last statement about rising again. We know what it means, but he probably didn't know. Remember, up until this point in history no one had actually risen from the dead.

But, Peter knew all about suffering, rejection and death. And like us he wanted no part of a plan that included things like that. Peter wanted a leader who could feed the hungry, heal the sick, and take over the government.

Peter wanted a leader who would bring back the good old days like the ones they enjoyed under King David. Peter wanted someone who would rescue them from the mess they were in.

To put it in modern terms, Peter wanted a bailout. Peter wanted a messianic stimulus package.

What he got was a cross.

No wonder Peter rebuked Jesus. Jesus wasn't living up to his billing. What kind of Messiah talks about suffering, rejection and death?

REBUKING PETER

But, then Jesus rebukes Peter in an even stronger way. He turns his back on Peter in mid-sentence and says, "Get behind me Satan."

Why was Jesus so hard on Peter? He was hard on Peter because Peter was doing the work of the devil. Peter was suggesting that God's kingdom could come the easy way.

In our desire to make the gospel attractive, we, like Peter want to downplay any talk of suffering and sacrifice. But, you can't have Christ without a cross.

In fact Jesus' rebuke of Peter suggests that this illusion is the ultimate temptation.

Last week we discussed Mark's very brief account of the temptation. In that passage Mark doesn't tell us how Jesus was tempted. He just tells us that he was tempted.

But, in today's lesson we learn the content of that temptation. Jesus was tempted to abandon the way of the cross. Jesus was tempted to try and bring salvation with sacrifice.

This was not just a temptation faced in the wilderness. This was the temptation that dogged Jesus all of his life.

In this case temptation came in the form of a disciple who urged him to take an easier, more reasonable path.

But, Jesus did not fall for the devil's disguise. He turned his back on Satan's ploy. And then he said,

"Your mind is set on earthly things instead of heavenly things."

THE WAY OF THE CROSS

What did Jesus mean by this? What heavenly things should we set our minds on?

Jesus draws the crowd in closer and spells it out. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Mark 8:34

The way of Jesus is the way of the cross.

When the disciples wanted to call Jesus Messiah, he warned them to keep quiet.

But, when Jesus talks about the cost of discipleship he lets everyone in on the message. The dark shadow of the cross looms over any who would follow Jesus.

And today that's still true. Jesus tells us openly and candidly, "If you want to follow me, you also need to take up a cross."

What does he mean? What is Jesus talking about? They don't crucify people any more ... at least not literally.

What is this cross that we are supposed to carry?

First, it's important to note what Jesus did not mean. The cross of Christ is not thrust upon us by outside forces. We must take it up willingly.

We sometimes talk about having our cross to bear. Usually we're talking about something like a health problem, an annoying relative or a bad boss. All those things and more can be a burden. But, they are not the cross of Christ.

Shakespeare talked called these troubles as the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." Those arrows are bad. But they are not the cross of Christ.

The cross we are called to bear is the cross of humility. The cross of Christ is a voluntary act of self denial so that we can follow Christ.

Remember Jesus said, *deny yourself*, take up a cross, and follow me.

TRANSFORMED BY THE CROSS

When people dare to take up the cross of self denial, things change in amazing ways. A new community is formed. This community is not based upon self interest or self righteous legalism.

This community is based upon selfless love and service. This community has a new way of living that is based upon the call of Christ.

Paul once wrote that our attitude toward each other should be profoundly influenced by the cross. Jesus the Son of God became a Son of Man. He humbled himself. And he humbled himself even more when he sacrificed his life for sinners on the cross.

In light of the cross we too are called to humble ourselves and live sacrificially.

Instead of always "looking out for number one" and doing everything out of selfish ambition, we are to also look out for the interests of others.
Philippians 2:1-11

THE LIFE GIVING CROSS

This sounds like pretty tough stuff.

But, ironically self denial in the cause of Christ does not make us feel bad. Instead of destroying our self confidence cross bearing builds it up.

Cross bearing does not make us feel like we have missed out on something. On the contrary, the cross of self denial enables us to live life to the fullest.

Jesus said that real life is not about getting more and more. Real life is about giving. And the more we freely give in the name of Christ the more life we receive.

STARS AND SERVANTS

Philip Yancy said that in his career as a writer and a journalist he had interviewed a wide range of people. And he could divide them into roughly two groups: the stars and the servants.

The stars were those who made it big in some area of life. The stars were NFL football greats, famous authors, TV personalities and captains of industry.

And he said that after interviewing these stars, he actually felt quite sorry for many of them. He said,

“Many of these idols are as miserable a group of people as I have every met. They appear to have more troubled marriages, troubled psyches and more incurable self-doubts than most.”

The other group, the ones he called servant were people like relief workers in Bangladesh and PhDs scattered throughout the jungles of South America translating the Bible into obscure languages.

He wrote,

“I was prepared to honor and admire these servants, to uphold them as inspiring examples. I was not, however, prepared to envy them.

But, now as I reflect on the two groups, stars and servants, the servants emerge as the favored ones, the graced ones. They work long hours for low pay and no applause, wasting their talents among the poor and uneducated.

But, somehow in the process of losing their lives, they have found them.”

Unlike Philip I haven't had the opportunity to interview stars and servants all over the world. But, I have seen this principle in action.

Some of the most miserable people I have ever met live faithfully by this motto: “It's all about me.”

It doesn't make any difference if they are rich or poor, educated or uneducated, young or old. One thing is always true of this group. They are profoundly dissatisfied with their lives.

And then there are those people who are always smiling, always doing things for others. They don't need any credit for what they do.

In fact quite often they refuse credit. Serving comes so naturally to them that it seems like a small thing. They walk lightly on this earth because their burden has been lightened by the blood of the Lamb.

THE CROSS BEFORE THE RESURRECTION

I think it's important that Jesus always mentions the resurrection *after* he talks about suffering, rejection and a cross. Quite naturally the disciples don't know what he is talking about when he talks about resurrection.

For example, in the ninth chapter of Mark's gospel Jesus makes a second prediction of his death and resurrection.

And the disciples ask each other, "What does he mean by resurrection?" They won't be able to understand resurrection until after they have walked the road to the cross.

And in a spiritual sense the same is true for us. The promise of God's salvation does not mean much to us until we have walked the road to the cross ... until we have personally made the decision to take up our cross and follow him.

But, when we do make that decision, when we do take up that cross, we make an amazing discovery.

We discover that the cross is not so much a burden to bear but a way to experience true life.

EXCHANGING BURDENS FOR A CROSS

Jesus said as much. He said that those who are burdened should come to him. And at the feet of Jesus we can lay our heavy burdens down and find rest.

But, that's not all.

When we lay all those burdens down we take up a new burden, a yoke. It is the yoke of following Jesus. That yoke is the cross of Christ.

And yet Jesus said that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Matthew 11:28-30

Notice that in this passage we escape heavy burdens by taking upon ourselves the yoke of Jesus. When we take up the cross of Christ, we can lay everything else down. Instead of being worried about many things we only have to worry about one thing, serving others in the name of Christ.

NO BAILOUT FOR CHRISTIANS

This can be a rather challenging passage. We quite naturally want to avoid all talk of sacrifice.

We want to hold on to what we've got. We want to avoid those situations and people that upset us.

The call to sacrifice will always disturb and even anger those who think of religion as a bailout, a panacea for all that ails us.

This attitude has not been helped by those who hawk a "consumer oriented" religion that promises to give us what we want when we want it.

But, we shouldn't fall for that. We shouldn't expect to be bailed out because we are disciples of Jesus. That's the ploy of the devil.

Jesus has been open and honest with us from the very beginning. There will be struggles as we seek to follow him. But, it is through the struggle that we are saved.

A SAVING BURDEN

Drifting snow and bitter cold threatened the life of Sadhu Singh and his Tibetan companion as they crossed a Himalayan mountain pass. Fighting the sleep of death they stumbled over a mound in the trail.

It was a man, half-dead.

The Tibetan refused to stop and continued on alone. But, the compassionate Sadhu shouldered the burden of the man and trudged on as best he could.

Through his struggling, he began to warm up, as did the unconscious man. But, before reaching the village they found his Tibetan companion ... frozen to death.

Take that as a parable of our lesson for today. It shows how the cross can save us. When we voluntarily take up a cross, when we voluntarily take up a burden out of compassion, that moment of shared suffering can become a means of salvation.

A cross is still a cross. The road is still long and difficult. But, Christ is with us on that road, and our willingness to take up the cross of suffering for another is powerful testimony to the salvation that is ours in him.

This week I was discussing the decline of my retirement account with some friends.

Some suggested that they were losing sleep over their losses. I admitted that I was taking the ostrich approach ... avoiding all news and focusing on other things.

Another friend said that he was taking a theological approach. He was praying that the second coming would occur before he had to retire!

But, suppose we embraced this time of struggle as a way to understand what is really important ... a reminder that our call is to seek first the kingdom of God and let all those other things take care of themselves.

We don't need a bailout. We need a Savior.

May God help us lay down our burdens, take up a cross and follow Jesus.

Amen.