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Following Jesus
Mark 8: 27-38

Then Jesus 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. =

It’s hard to be **shocked** by these words of Jesus today—because most of us have heard them so many times.

Take up your cross and follow me.

But these are ***crazy words, hard*** words.

And they came because Jesus was asking his disciples

‘who do people say that I am?’,

and then “who do **YOU say** I am?”

And Peter says You are the **Messiah**.

Which is right.

But then Jesus starts **describing** his identity as a Messiah.

And his mission is a suffering Messiah, much like the suffering servant that Isaiah described in Isaiah chapter 53.

Jesus describes the suffering that is ahead of him, and even his own death...

And **Peter can’t believe** what Jesus is saying—so he actually rebukes Jesus!

To which Jesus says *get behind me Satan, you are thinking about human things, not divine things.*

That’s when Jesus calls the crowd and his disciples, and says

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

Do you realize how **crazy** that sounds?

He was a **leader**, a pretty famous teacher and healer and preacher, and he was saying something like,

take up your electric chair and follow me.

The cross was an instrument of torture.

Crucifixion was the worst form of Roman execution.

Jesus was clearly laying out a path for himself and his followers that ***doesn't really appeal*** to the modern mind.

First of all, most of us are ***not excited about being followers.***

Most people want to learn about leadership, not followership.

It even sounds funny to say.

Great movies, books, college commencement speeches—

they don't encourage people to be great followers,

they say be leaders, take charge,

march the beat of your own drummer, right?

It seems like the only place where it's great to be a follower is ***Twitter***—where you literally have to click and 'follow' other people and what they tweet.

But even on Twitter the ***best thing is to have a bunch of followers!***

So once again we want to be leading—not following!

But Jesus is talking about us following him.

Not going our own way, but going His way.

And ***Jesus was a follower*** ---he was always following his Father in heaven.

The Gospel of John is especially clear about this,

because he is always pointing the attention away from himself

and to his heavenly father God. J

ust crack open John, you'll see this everywhere.

But throughout all of the Gospels,

we see Jesus take time to be away and alone with God,

following his leader,

just as we are to follow Him.

But if we are going to take up our cross and follow,
we have to **know WHO we are following.**
Who is Jesus?

If He were to ask us, **Who do YOU say that I am?**
What would you say?
Is he Lord? Teacher? Friend? Savior? Brother?
And what **kind of person** is he?

Last week we closed our eyes and pictured Jesus—
and realized that many of us have the **Children's Bible cover Jesus**
in our heads, with a calm, robed man in sandals,
with arms outstretched, surrounded by lambs and children...
oh and usually blonde and blue eyed!

But really—**what kind of person is Jesus?**

By his own definition he is not just Messiah, Son of God, but also a **follower**—
a man who denied his self, his own ego, his own pride,
and always pointed his followers to God.

Which is **beyond counter cultural**—
because Americans are all about self and pride!
We want the credit and attention and accolades, right?
All of our **social media** is built on that assumption—
that what we say and think and the pictures we take and even the food we eat,
is so important that we want and need to share it with the world!

And Jesus is so different.

The question is, **do we want to follow Jesus?**
The humble, real, and yet powerful Jesus—
but not in the way we think of power, right?

Process theologian **Bernard Loomer** talks about 2 kinds of power.
The first kind is what we see most often.
It is **unilateral power.**
It says I am in charge, I am right, and you are not.
It is a power built on persuasion, coercion, even bullying.
It is a power that divides and separates and segregates into us and them,

the powerful and the powerless.

The second kind of power is **relational power**.

This is a power built on empathy.

It says we are in this together,
we are in relationship.

It is a power that includes, breaks down walls,
listens, and is receptive to ideas.

While unilateral power is the kind the world seems to run on,
Relational power is the kind that **most of us want** in our relationships,
with parents, friends, and spouses.

It's the difference between a **power over** and a **power with**.

Jesus had relational power, not unilateral.

He was about building relationships, not divisions,
listening, having compassion and mercy,
and he met people right where they are.

He still does.

His relational power is about **self-sacrifice and love—not might**.

This is the kind of power **God uses to save us**, literally, from our sins.
It was the power that was **willing to go all the way to cross**,
to the grave and beyond—it is the the power of love.

If we follow relational power, **we let go of ourselves**.

This is Jesus' way of life, and it is our calling.

This way of sacrifice actually **brings blessing**.

Because Relationships are more powerful than ideology.

To let go of our selves—is to gain Jesus Christ.

This is what Jesus means when he says:

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,^[i] will save it.*

Peter wanted a Savior with unilateral power.

Jesus gave him relationship,

and a **love that is far more powerful** than coercion or pride.

So Jesus is a Savior of sacrifice and love,
 a Savior willing to suffer and die for us,
 and who calls us to that ***same kind of life!***
 Wow.

Why would we want THAT kind of Savior?

One pastor I was reading called the way of Jesus ‘Big Theology’—
 we need a suffering God, because the world knows suffering!

Theologian Alfred North Whitehead said that
 God is the fellow sufferer, who can understand us.

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that only a suffering God can help us.

I was reading something about this in ***Streams in the Desert***—
 twice this week.

On September 8th Streams was talking about

‘the effectiveness of God’s work during times of crisis’.

We are set free ***not from suffering, but through it.***

The hard times are actually the ***source of our growth*** in faith.

It was talking about ***Joseph***—the favorite son with the fancy coat,
 who was ditched by his jealous brothers, sold into slavery,
 wrongly imprisoned and forgotten...until one day he became the Pharaoh’s
 right hand man and the one in charge of all the food during a famine!

(see Genesis 37 and following)

During all those dark times, ***‘iron entered his soul’.***

Previously he had only the ***gold*** in life.

During suffering he gained the ***iron***.

Streams goes on to say that it is ***suffering and iron*** that is the ***common bond***
 between people.

That makes sense.

We ALL suffer.

We all need to be strengthened like iron.

“gold is partial to only a few, but iron is universal”.

Wow.

Now that is powerful, and it gives us a ***window into the heart of Jesus.***

Jesus knows that ***suffering is universal.***

So is love.

L.B. Cowman, Streams in the Desert, entry from September 8th.

As Savior of the world, he knows
both **love and sorrow, joy and suffering**.

Hebrews 4:15-16 says this: ¹⁵ *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested^[d] as we are, yet without sin.* ¹⁶ *Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

Jesus is a **Savior of relationship, suffering, and love**, not might.
And he says take up your cross and follow me.

Your cross.

It is like us saying take up the **electric chair**.

And can you even imagine having that dangling on a chain around our necks?

So, what does it **mean to take up our cross**?

Well, first remember--

we are not Jesus, we can't be Him.

We are human, sinful, broken and fallen.

The best we can do is **try to follow** in his footsteps.

And to do that, we **rely upon the grace of God**,
and the **help of the Holy Spirit!**

If we are serious about following Jesus,
we will try to the **path of suffering and sacrifice---**
not worldly pride and power.

Which means we may **not always be popular**, also like Jesus.

What do you think your cross is today?

It's **different** for all of us.

Sometimes we say—*that's my cross to bear*.

But I think we have to be **careful**,

because Jesus is **not saying that suffering itself is good**.

Or that we should suffer for suffering's sake.

He says very clearly again and again, **'for my sake'**,
those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel,^[i]

will save it.

This is ***so important.***

The suffering we are called to experience as Christ-followers is a suffering ***for Jesus and the Gospel.***

It is suffering that we are called to endure,
for the greater ***good,***
for the good of ***one another,***
for the good of ***our growth in faith.***

We are ***NOT called to just suffer because we are Christians.***

This is not a call to remain in an abusive relationship,
or to put up with continued manipulation or cruelty.

THAT is not redemptive suffering.

What ***Jesus is talking about it something much harder and easier.***

C.S. Lewis once said:

Christianity is both harder and easier than we might imagine.

Jesus said take up your cross and follow me,
but he also said *'my yoke is easy and my burden is light'*.

Following Jesus is ***actually easier***
than trying to do life all on our own.

For example, ***what seems easy in life is often the most difficult.***

It seems easier to ***procrastinate***—but what happens when you do?
Life ends up much harder!

What we are called to do in following Christ isn't easy,
But it's ***easier than trying to do it on our own!***

Jesus ***does demand a lot from us---*** Lewis writes:

Christ says, "Give me ***all.*** I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want you.

*I have not come to torment your natural self, **but to kill it.***

No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there. I want to have the whole tree down....

Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think are innocent as well as the ones you think are wicked—the whole outfit.

I will give you a new self instead.

In fact, I will give you myself: my will shall become yours."

C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity.

That's what it means to take up our cross and follow.

it means ***giving ourselves*** to Jesus.

Surrendering our own pride, and ***gaining life*** with Jesus.

C.S. Lewis wisely said that ***every morning we have a choice***—to ***listen*** to ourselves—or to the voice of ***Jesus***.

And the more we listen to His voice, the more our lives become like ***stain*** on wood instead of ***paint*** on a surface.

We grow to become ***more and more like Christ***.

In fact, Lewis says that's the ***whole point*** of Christian life!

Lewis writes, "*In the same way the church exists for nothing else but to draw people into Christ, to make them **little Christs**.*

If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time.

God became Man for no other purpose."

C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity.

The call to take up your cross and follow—
is the call to ***become like Christ***.

Do you think of your life like that?

We ***talk*** about following Jesus, we ***sing*** about it, we ***pray*** about it,
but is it our goal? To be like Christ?

A former seminary classmate, J.C. Austin wrote that following Jesus and taking up our cross ***does not come naturally***.

He gave the example of civil rights leader ***John Lewis***.

Someone asked John, What should you do when someone is being hit, or punched, or dragged in front of you?

And most of us would say, 'fight back'.

But his commitment to ***non-violence and Jesus*** led him to say this:

*"If someone is being attacked and beaten," he said,
"it is your responsibility to intervene to protect them."
But intervening does not mean returning violence with violence to drive the
attacker away; intervening means stepping in and shielding your fellow
marcher with your own body,
accepting the blows yourself in order to save them,
even at risk to your own life."*

Rev. J.C. Austin, *Following Jesus is For Losers, Day 1, 2012*

I was reading Pastor Janet Hunt,
who learned about the local history in Northern Illinois,
of ***the Underground Railroad*** and church folk who smuggled slaves.

Methodists and Presbyterians and Unitarians did things like
building their homes with hidden rooms and underground passageways.
They constructed haystacks with hollow cores,
and wagons with false bottoms,
all for the purpose of providing shelter
for those seeking freedom.

Janet H. Hunt, Picking Up Our Crosses, Dancing With the Word, 2018.

During World War II there are countless stories of brave families
who hid Jews in their homes.
During the war, Anne Frank hid from Nazi persecution with her family in
hidden rooms in a house in Amsterdam.

These are ***big examples*** of taking up your cross and following Jesus.

But sometimes our calling is ***very simple***.
On Friday, ***Streams in the Desert*** had this to say
about taking up your cross and following Jesus:

*The cross that my Lord calls me to carry may assume many **different shapes**.
I may have to be content with mundane tasks in a limited area of service...
or to cultivate the same field year after year without a harvest...
I may be asked to nurture kind and loving thoughts about the very person who
has wronged me, and to speak gently to him, take his side....
and bestow sympathy and comfort to him.
I may have to openly testify of my Master before those*

*who do not want to be reminded of Him...
there are many crosses, and every one of them is heavy and painful...
Yet Jesus is never as near to me as when I lift my cross,..*

L.B. Cowman, Streams in the Desert, September 14th.

The last hymn we are going to sing today is ***Take My Life***
by Frances Ridley Havergal.

And it's perfect for today---because it's all about
Taking up our cross, and following Jesus—by giving Him our lives.
All of it.

Friends, hear the ***Good News of the Gospel*** today,
Jesus is calling us to take up our cross, and follow Him.
Will we ***listen?***
Will we ***surrender?***
Will we ***follow the One who gives us true life?***
For those who lose their life for His sake, will save it.
May we have the courage to follow Jesus, Amen.