

Christian, Carry Your Cross!

- I. Jesus carried his cross
- II. So you can carry yours

³¹He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³²He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

³⁴Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For whoever wants to save their life^a will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ³⁸If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

As you probably know, this weekend Mount Olive will welcome a number of new members into our congregation. And one of the questions that I always ask our new members during the new member orientation is simply, "Why Mount Olive?" In other words, "What attracted you to our congregation? Why did you choose to join this church?" And can you believe that almost all of them said, "We chose Mount Olive because the pastors are so good looking!" No, that's not what they said. But they did say things like "We chose Mount Olive because of the exceptional Christian education our children receive here." Or, "The people at Mount Olive have been so warm and welcoming." Or, "This is where I learned what the Bible really teaches about God's grace." And of course, all those are fine reasons to join our congregation. But you know, the one thing I've never heard a new member say is, "I joined Mount Olive because I know it will make my life harder." Or "I became a Christian so that I can suffer more." Or "I'm a Christian so that I don't get what I want."

Now, even though nobody is going to say that that's why they're going to join a Christian

congregation, the fact is, they could. Because Jesus clearly teaches that these are all things that come with being one of his disciples. And while at first, we may think that those are all bad things (I mean, nobody really wants to suffer more), the fact is, Jesus changes our thinking so that we see even the crosses we have to carry in life, in God's hands, are not bad things, but rather are blessings.

Today we continue our sermon series entitled, Rethinking Religion. Today Jesus invites us to rethink the whole idea of what it means to suffer as a Christian, what we might call suffering under the cross. Here in Mark chapter 8, Jesus basically says to each one of us,

Christian, Carry Your Cross

And when it comes to the Christian cross, we'll see that:

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The account we have before us takes place during Jesus' last year of earthly ministry. In the verses immediately prior to our text, after asking his disciples what other people are saying about him, Jesus asked them directly, *"And who do you say I am?"* It was Simon Peter who spoke for all the disciples when he made a beautiful confession of faith. He said, *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."* That confession prompted Jesus to commend Peter with the words, *"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven."* You might say that was a real high point for Peter. And not much later, Peter experienced another high point when up on the Mount of transfiguration, Peter witnessed an awesome display of Jesus' heavenly glory. But in between those two high points, comes the account we have before us today, where Jesus reveals to his disciples a much less glorious side of the coin. Mark records the event with these words, *Jesus then began to teach them, (namely, the 12 disciples) that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priest and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three*

days rise again. Mark adds the note, He spoke plainly about this. (Mark 8:31,32)

You see, up to this point in Mark's gospel, Jesus had made only veiled references to his upcoming suffering and death. He spoke, for example, about the time when the bridegroom would be taken away from them. But now, for the first time, Jesus is laying all the cards on the table. He speaks plainly to them: The Son of Man must suffer. He must be rejected. He must be killed, and he must rise again. And why must all these things happen? Or as the Greek says, why was it necessary that they happen? Two reasons. First, because in the pages of the Old Testament, God promised that these things would happen. Read Isaiah 53 or Psalm 22 or Psalm 16. Through the inspired prophets, God had clearly promised that the coming Messiah would suffer and die and rise again. If God promised it, then it must happen, because God cannot lie.

But there is an even more important reason why God's Son had to suffer and die. It's simply this. If Jesus had not died, well then, heaven would be a very empty place. There would be angels in heaven, but there would not be any humans there. Why do I say that? Because the Bible tells us that *the wages of sin is death*. In other words, the only thing that sinners like you and I have earned from a just and holy God is eternal death, forever in hell.

In fact, the only way that anyone can avoid that kind of eternal penalty is if someone else endures that penalty in our place. That's exactly what Jesus did by his suffering and death on the cross. Because the Bible says that God our Savior wants everyone to be saved, because God wants no one to perish, because God wants you and me with him in heaven forever, well, that's why as Jesus said, "The Son of Man must suffer and die and rise again.

You might say that that's what Jesus wanted his disciples to know. It's why he spoke plainly to them. But what he wanted them to know is NOT what they wanted to hear. In fact, when Jesus spoke about his upcoming death at the hands of the Jewish leaders, how did Simon

Peter react? Mark tells us, *Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him.* Matthew's parallel account tells us that Peter said, "*Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you! (Matthew 16:22)*

And how did Jesus respond to Peter's rebuke? Mark tells us. *When Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan! he said. (Mark 8:33)* Whoa! That was a little harsh of Jesus, wasn't it? Calling one of your best friends, one of your closest disciples, Satan? Why would Jesus do that? Well, if you think about it, the words of Peter, in effect, were the words of Satan. Remember when the Devil came to tempt Jesus in the wilderness? What was Satan's temptation? "Jesus, all you have to do is bow down and worship me and I'll give all the kingdoms of the world." In other words, "Jesus, you don't have to die to get what you want. Just do what I want you to do instead of what your Father wants you to do." Isn't that exactly the temptation that Peter was presenting to Jesus? "Jesus, you shouldn't have to die. That wouldn't be right." But in reality, what was Peter doing? He was putting his will above God's will. He was saying, "This is what I want rather than what God has decreed"—which is exactly why Jesus rebukes Peter with the words, "*You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.*" Or as the old NIV translated these words, "*You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.*" (Mark 8:33)

Thank God that Jesus did not fall for this temptation of Satan, even if it was presented by someone who probably thought he had Jesus' best interest in mind. Thank God, that as St. Paul once wrote, Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross. For it is that it is that humble obedience that not only gives us the model, but also with a motivation to exhibit that same attitude in our lives today. Or to put it another way, I. Jesus carried his cross II. So that we can carry ours.

Now don't misunderstand those words. I once had someone tell me that the message of

Good Friday is that just like Jesus suffered on the cross, so we have to suffer to get into heaven. But you realize, that's not true. No amount of suffering on our part will ever earn us a spot in heaven. The only suffering that wins us God's favor is Jesus' suffering in our place. But once Jesus has made us right with God by his suffering and death, he then goes on to tell us how his suffering is going to have an impact on our lives. Or to put it another way, because he carried his cross, now we who are his followers will have to carry our crosses, too. Isn't that what Jesus says here in our text? "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*" (Mark 8:34) What does Jesus mean by that? Exactly what is the Christian's cross?

Well, some people would say your cross is any suffering you endure as a Christian. If you get a flat tire, if you catch a cold, if your kids won't listen to you, those are all your Christian cross. But really, that's not true, because the fact is, all those things happen to unbelievers too. No, the Christian cross is what you endure specifically because you are a Christian. If you got that flat tire because you were hauling so many people to church with you, that it blew out your back tire, well, that might be your Christian cross. If you caught a cold because you spent all day hanging door hangers for our Easter services or if your kids don't listen to you because they'd rather watch TV instead of participating in your family devotion, that might be a Christian cross.

The Bible defines the Christian cross as what you must endure because you are living your faith. For example, if your college professor gives you a bad grade because you refuse to defend the theory of evolution, if some of your coworkers give you the cold shoulder because you don't want to join their raunchy humor, if your boyfriend dumps you because you refuse to sleep with him, that's a Christian cross.

And yet, I have to tell you that carrying your cross is not so much about being ridiculed

by others because of your Christian faith. No, the hardest part of carrying your cross, really, the essence of carrying your cross, is found in Jesus' words, "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves.*" Notice that Jesus uses the word must. That's the same word that he used when he said that the Son of Man must suffer and die. It's not an option. It's the will of God himself. So it is for anyone who wants to be one of Jesus' disciples. Jesus says that they do what? They must deny themselves. What does that mean? Well, to deny means to "say no to". If your favorite college denies your enrollment application, it means they said no to you. Well, God demands that you say no to you, too. Or more specifically, that you say no to your what? Your "Self", that is, your sinful self. It's that voice inside of you that constantly says, "Me first. This is what I want. This is what I think. It doesn't matter what God says, I'm going to do what I want to do."

I expect that I don't have to tell you how hard it is to yourself, right? It's like fighting a war against an enemy that's inside of you. Wherever you go, whatever you do, that enemy is right there with you. Sometimes attacking, sometimes nagging, sometimes tormenting you, but always saying, "Me, me, what about me?"

Do you see why Jesus says that the need to deny yourself is, in fact, a cross? Think about it, back in Jesus' day, crosses were not made out of Styrofoam. Crosses were heavy. They were rough. They were made for killing people. To carry a cross was a hard thing to do. So, why does God demand that you and I keep carrying a cross? Why do we have to keep enduring these attacks from the outside and from the inside? The answer? Because it is these very crosses that keep us running back to Jesus' cross. When I'm tired of fighting the battles against my sinful nature, Jesus says, "*Come to me, you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.*" (*Matthew 11:28*) When I feel like I have this thorn in my flesh tormenting me, the Lord says to me what he said to St. Paul, *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in*

*weakness. (2 Cor. 12:9) And when I wonder why God would let a believer suffer so, St Paul says to us in our epistle reading today, in God's hands, *Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God is poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given to us. (Romans 5:3,4)**

My friends, in the end, it is Christ's cross, the one that he was committed to carrying for you, the one on which he spilled blood for you, the one from which he announced that the bill for the sins of the world was paid in full, it is that cross—and everything it stands for—that ultimately gives you and me the reason and the ability to think a little differently about the crosses that God asks us to bear in our lives, as his beloved children, for our good and for his glory, in Jesus' name. Amen.