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### Sermon Summary #23

#### Open Mouth, Insert Foot: Learning to be a Disciple the hard way Mark 8:31-38

“Christianity has not so much been tried and found wanting, as it has been found difficult and left untried” (G. K. Chesterton). Being a Christian *costs*. Of course, forgiveness of sins is free. Justification is free. We don’t do anything to obtain these blessings. We simply trust in Christ to provide them. But becoming a Christian may cost you your **reputation**, the **comforts** of western civilization, your **pride**, your **position** in society. It may even cost you your **life**. But the investment you make when you submit in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ yields an everlasting and eternal dividend.

What I’m hoping for this morning is that you and I might *learn something about what it means to be a disciple, what it means really to be a Christian; not in name only, which ultimately counts for nothing, but in the very depths of our soul in such a way that every inch of our lives is radically affected.*

When you read Mark 8 or its parallel in Matthew 16, you can’t help but wonder if these two events really happened, one right after the other. It just doesn’t make sense. Here is Peter, the object of God’s sovereign grace, being **enlightened** with the glorious revelation that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God! Blessed are you Peter, says Jesus. Blessed indeed! But no sooner have these exalted words of faith passed through Peter’s lips **than he becomes the tool of Satan himself**, standing in vocal opposition to the eternal purpose of God. It is out of this painful and embarrassing experience, however, that both Peter and you and I learn what being a Christian is all about. We learn what discipleship really costs. It comes at Peter’s expense, but I don’t think he’ll mind.

Following Peter’s glorious confession, Jesus must have said to himself: “Now is the time to speak more forthrightly about my future.” Prior to this moment there had been only veiled hints of what awaited Jesus in Jerusalem. The disciples didn’t yet fully grasp the need for Jesus to be betrayed and delivered over into the hands of the religious leaders and how he would be flogged and beaten and eventually nailed to a cross. But the time has come for veiled references and elusive hints to pass. Plain language is the order of the day. *So Jesus makes a prediction. And no sooner does it pass through the lips of Jesus than Peter is ready with a protest! Read vv. 31-32a . . .*

“**Must**” . . . . The necessity or inevitability of Jesus’ suffering and death is not due to any *political realities* in the first century. This is no human commitment to a great idealistic goal. This is a **divine imperative**. This is a God-ordained absolute necessity. **God had no back-up plan**. There were no alternatives from which he might choose. This “must” came thundering out of the eternal counsel of God himself. This was Jesus putting words to the unalterable, immutable plan of God.

But in what sense “must” Jesus suffer this way and eventually be raised from the dead?

Did Jesus say this because his Heavenly Father was under the influence of some compelling force beyond his control? **Was God held hostage**, so to speak, to some law outside of himself that required he send his Son to die for sinners like Peter and you and me? NO!

**God did not have to redeem us from sin**. Had God left us in our sinful and wretched condition he would have still been holy and just and loving. The decision by God to make the ultimate sacrifice of his Son for sinners was entirely a free choice on his part. But: *once that decision had been made*, once God had determined to graciously redeem us from sin, it was absolutely necessary that Jesus should die.

Of course, you shouldn’t conclude from this that the Father was coercing the Son to do something against his will. **Read John 10:17-18 . . .** The decision of the Father to send and the decision of the Son to obey were both willing and voluntary expressions of love for you and me and Peter.

I strongly suspect that it was the word “kill” that threw Peter into a spiritual convulsion. Before he can even think clearly or process what resurrection from the dead is all about, **Peter takes Jesus aside and begins rebuking him!** “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you” (Matthew 16:22).

Envision Peter taking hold of Jesus’ arm and pulling him aside. “Come here. What’s the matter with you? Have you lost your mind? You can’t go around saying things like that! Get a grip, for heaven’s sake. It’s embarrassing for you to talk like this. People will think you’re crazy. Don’t forget: You’re the Messiah! **The Messiah doesn’t die!**”

Consider the first century understanding of the Messiah: he rules, reigns, leads; he is Lord, supreme over all; he conquers but is never conquered; he lives and never dies . . . Thus, **1 Cor. 1:18ff. . . .**

In this case, **Peter had fallen prey to the same messianic expectations that many who followed Jesus had embraced.** They looked on Jesus as the fulfillment of their dreams to throw off Roman oppression. Here, finally, was the military commander who could lead Israel in rebellion and ultimate victory over Rome. Peter evidently viewed Jesus more as a **political Messiah** than as a pardoning one. He envisioned Jesus with a royal scepter in his hand. **It never occurred to him his protest was in effect a call for his own damnation! He didn’t realize that his own salvation depended on the fulfillment of Christ’s prediction.** Peter’s plans would have benefited no one, except the Devil. Jesus would have been thwarted in fulfilling God’s purpose and Peter and you and I would have died unredeemed.

The **contrasts** are breathtaking!

- Peter had been the first to scale the heights of theological insight and yet is now the first to plummet to the depths of dangerous ignorance.
- God’s revelation to Peter brought him to the pinnacle of confession. Peter’s presumptuous response plunged him into the dark valley of utter confusion.
- Only moments before, Peter is the rock on which Christ will build his church. Now, he is the rock over which Jesus would stumble and fall, were he to obey Peter’s command.
- Jesus, being attentive and obedient to the Father’s will, says “**I must!**” Peter, being attentive and obedient to the Devil, says, “**You never!**”
- Just as surely as **God** had put the glorious confession of v. 29 in Peter’s heart, **Satan** had put the rebuke of v. 32 in it! At one moment inspired by God; at the next, by the Devil.

**How could this happen?** I suppose some would like to get Peter off the hook by insisting he was motivated by his **love** for Jesus and simply couldn’t bear the thought of him dying in this way. I don’t doubt that’s partly true. But there may be another answer. Perhaps it is to be found in *how supernatural, revelatory experiences can affect the fallen, prideful human heart.*

Describe the rush Peter must have felt when the revelation from God came bursting into his heart! The emotional high. The exhilaration! The spiritual buzz! To make it even worse, in one sense, Jesus pronounces him “Blessed” for having been the recipient of this revelation. **What should Peter have done?** He should have fallen immediately to his knees and cried out: “Oh, God, why me? Why did you entrust this truth to me? I deserve only hell. I’m not sure I can be entrusted with something this magnificent. God, please guard my heart. Protect me from pride. Don’t let me draw the wrong conclusion from this experience.” But that isn’t what happened.

What happened is what often happens to those who are the recipients of some revelatory truth: a prophetic revelation, a word of knowledge, a healing; or perhaps simply a new insight into the Scriptures, etc. Such a person is likely to feel:

- **Special** (it was to me, not John or Andrew or Matthew that God gave this truth).
- **Indispensable** (clearly God knows that Jesus needs me; no one else can do for him what I can).
- **Authoritative** (this must mean they should all listen to whatever else I say!).
- **Infallible** (if I got this one right, I certainly should get everything else right; I’m beyond correction).

- **Unaccountable** (no one has the right to bring a rebuke to me; God has elevated me to a higher and different standard than the one to which he holds them accountable).

If Peter misunderstood what being the Messiah entailed for Jesus, he obviously also misunderstood what was entailed in being his disciple. If Peter envisioned only glory and fame and power for the Master, he probably expected no less for his followers. Jesus, therefore, takes no chances, but grabs the opportunity to clarify in stark and unmistakable terms exactly what it means to be his disciple.

**Jesus refuses to trick you into following him by making empty promises or giving you a false hope of earthly wealth and comfort.** There is no bait and switch with Jesus! He is up front and brutally honest about the cost. In describing discipleship, he mentions **three** things explicitly.

**(1) Self-denial** – This does not mean that you are disciple of Jesus if you deny yourself that second helping of ice cream or third piece of pie. **Did you eat only one blueberry donut in the Café this morning, resisting the urge to buy and eat a second? Good! But that’s not what Jesus is talking about here.** This has nothing to do with physical asceticism, as if being a Christian is a matter of giving away your TV or not eating chocolate for a week. He’s not talking about making yourself miserable by turning down the ordinary pleasures of life.

What Jesus is saying is that **to follow him we must stop following ourselves! Self ceases to be the ruling passion of our lives. It is self will, self seeking, self promotion, and self assertion,** that Jesus has in mind.

He isn’t asking you to **add** him on to all your other pursuits in life. He isn’t asking that he be made one among many passions or hobbies or interests, alongside your devotion to OU or OSU or your commitment to golf; he isn’t saying, “Hey, I hope you’ll think about me as often as you do designer coffee or that you’ll give as much money to my church as you spend on the latest fashion or I-phone.” He isn’t asking that you slip him in between your job and your family, or alongside your financial investments or your love for computers.

Jesus is saying: “If you want to follow me, **you have to die to everything else, including yourself.** I alone must be the all-consuming passion of your life. I must be the focus of every breath you breathe. I’m not asking you to quit your job or neglect your family or abandon your hobbies or stop going to movies. I’m asking that all these things and everything else be **subordinate** to your devotion to me, that you look to me and not to anything else as the primary love of your life.” **“I must be the center of your existence. Everything else is circumference!”**

Jesus is saying that if you want to follow him you must be prepared to **shift the center of gravity** in your life from a concern for self to whole-hearted devotion to the will of God.

**(2) Self-crucifixion** – Self-denial means crucifixion! Jesus here appeals to the **horrifying** image of a death march! This image would have struck the Jewish mind of his day as utterly abhorrent and repugnant, for crucifixion was a distinctly Roman and therefore pagan means of execution. The words of Jesus evoke the picture of a condemned man walking to his place of execution with the instrument of death carried upon his shoulders.

Taking up your cross or **bearing your cross** has been horribly distorted in the modern mind. . . .

John MacArthur:

“The bumper-sticker sentiment, ‘Try Jesus,’ is a mentality foreign to real discipleship – faith is not an experiment, but a lifelong commitment. It means taking up the cross daily, giving all for Christ each day with no reservations, no uncertainty, no hesitation. It means nothing is knowingly held back, nothing purposely shielded from His lordship, nothing stubbornly kept from His control. It calls for a painful severing of the tie with the world, a sealing of the escape hatches, a ridding oneself of any kind of security to fall back on in case of failure. A genuine believer knows he is going ahead with Christ until death. Having put his hand to the plow he will not look back” (202).

**(3) Follow Me** – Discipleship is **more than a reflex imitation** of what Jesus would do in any given situation. It is a following of him in thought, feelings, motivation, intent, plans, power, values, character, etc. If you are left in any

doubt about what denying yourself and taking up your cross and following Jesus really means, simply **READ vv. 35-38** . . .

Problem: Some read these verses and conclude that it is selfish and sinful to have any concern for the welfare of one's soul. "Sam, you are a Christian Hedonist. You believe that the pursuit of pleasure in God is absolutely essential to a godly, Christ-honoring Christian life, right?" Yes. But how do you make that work in light of vv. 35-38?

Doesn't this passage in Mark dilute, if not destroy, my emphasis on the pursuit of one's pleasure, even if that pleasure is in God? I don't think so. In fact, **it encourages your pursuit of pleasure!**

When he calls on you to deny your "self" he doesn't mean that you should give up all concern for the state of your body and soul. Jesus isn't advocating the suppression of personal desire or recommending that you dress shabbily or skip meals or stop putting on deodorant before you come to church. **Jesus is actually appealing to the concern you have for yourself and the eternal welfare of your soul.** The only way you can respond appropriately to his call for "self" denial is if you are wholeheartedly committed to the happiness and eternal welfare of your "self". I know this sounds paradoxical, if not downright contradictory, so let me explain what I think he had in mind.

**Imagine what your response would be to these words of Jesus if you were convinced that concern for your own soul was sinful or selfish. You would forfeit all incentive for obeying him!** The only reason it makes sense to heed his exhortation is because of intense, personal, passionate **concern for what might happen to you if you don't.** Jesus calls on us to deny ourselves because otherwise we'll die! **We must "lose" our lives if we hope to "save" them.** And it is the legitimacy of that personal hope on which Jesus bases his appeal. Clearly, **Jesus grounds his exhortation in the inescapable reality of human desire for one's own welfare and happiness and well-being.**

Jesus is aware that we desire what is best for our selves. He neither rebukes us for it nor calls for repentance as if it were sinful. In fact, *he intentionally targets that universal desire and entreats us based upon its undeniable presence in our souls.* His somewhat paradoxical advice is **that the best thing you can do for your "self" is to deny "self"!** Eternal life is the best and most advantageous thing you can obtain for your "self", but it may cost you temporal life and the passing pleasures of sinful self-indulgence.

What possible profit is there from enhancing your physical life now if it costs you eternal life in the age to come?

**Jesus is simply asking that you sacrifice the lesser blessings of temporal and earthly comforts in order to gain the greater blessings of eternal and unending pleasure.** Do what is best for your "self", says Jesus, and deny your "self"! To refuse to follow Jesus is to deny your "self" the greatest imaginable joy. His call is for us to renounce our vain attempt to satisfy our souls through illicit sex and ambition and earthly fortune. Instead, do yourself a favor. Follow Jesus and gain true life, true joy, true pleasure.

Jesus is not telling us to ignore our needs or to repress our longings but to fulfill them . . . in him!

The paradox is unmistakable. Peter was for saving. Jesus was for losing. Peter's saving would be loss. Jesus' losing would be gain!

The options are simple: Dedicate yourself in this life to the protection, preservation, and promotion of your earthly welfare and you will lose the opportunity for eternal life. Or be willing to sacrifice all that this life and this world offer and in eternity find life abundant and inexpressibly joyful.

Weigh the values: What is more precious, the wealth and acceptance and fame of this world, or your very soul? If you sell your soul to gain what this world offers, what will you give to win it back?

And how will you fare at the judgment seat of Christ? . . .