

# Jesus' Tipping Point

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Mark 8:27

**Sermons Series:**  
**In Christ Together**  
**for the World**

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point.*

Malcolm Gladwell's book, *The Tipping Point*, has been in print for ten years now. His title is taken from the world of epidemiology. Every epidemic has a tipping point. Viruses move through the population at a leisurely pace until a critical mass is reached and an epidemic ensues.

Gladwell illustrates his point by describing the origins of Sesame Street. In the late 1960s, when Sesame Street was being conceived, child psychologists cautioned its producers not to mix people with puppets. It would confuse children to mix fantasy with reality by having people interact with Bert and Ernie, Kermit the Frog and other members of the Muppet family.

Before the show's debut on public television, its producers conducted a test market in Philadelphia and New York City. They found that children's attention span remained strong during the Muppet segments. Yet, when people talked with people in the street scenes, children's interest plummeted.

The producers decided to defy the advice of child psychologists and mix fantasy with reality. Jim Hensen's

decision to incorporate puppets into the show that could walk and talk with people became its tipping point. That's where Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch got their start.

When Andrew and our daughter, Emily, were young, Sesame Street was the rage. Whenever they watched Sesame Street, I watched it with them. I, like them, was enthralled with the puppetry. Those were the early days of my tenure here at Vienna Presbyterian, when I was responsible for giving the children's message. So, I got to thinking, what would happen if I used a puppet to help me deliver the children's talk? That's how Barnie came to be.

I found that Barnie held children's interest long enough to communicate the lesson. I didn't expect all that much to come from it. So you can imagine my surprise when one of our missionaries, Dave Robinson, who works with World Vision in famine relief in Muslim majority nations, told me about a woman who serves with World Vision in Cambodia. She and her family were formerly Vietnamese refugees adopted by a church in Vienna, Virginia in the early 1980s. She was introduced to

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the good news of Jesus Christ by a pastor from that said church that used a puppet to communicate the message.

Barnie has been in moth balls for years now. But to commemorate this occasion, I've brought him back for an encore.

Today's scripture lesson is the tipping point of Mark's gospel. The fact that it comes at the precise midpoint of Mark's gospel is hardly coincidental. No doubt Mark writes his gospel with this conversation in mind. Jesus' ministry has reached something of a crossroads, a tipping point.

Jesus asks his 12 disciples a pivotal question, "Who do people say I am?" (8:27). There has been plenty of speculation about Jesus' identity. The religious leaders regard him as demon-possessed, and even his own family thinks he has lost his mind (Mark 3:21-22). His disciples answer that people regard him as some sort of prophet, along the lines of Elijah or John the Baptist.

Jesus personalizes his question a second time, "Who do *you* say that I am?" (8:29). Peter, impetuous Peter, who sometimes gets it wrong, this time, nails it. "You are the Christ." As readers, we're told at the outset of Mark's gospel that Jesus is the Christ (1:1), but this is the first time anyone describes Jesus this way. The Greek word for Christ is *Christos*, which corresponds to

the Hebrew word *Messiah*, meaning the anointed one.

At this point, Mark tells us Jesus begins to teach them (8:31). He's been teaching them all along, but this is a pivotal moment when Jesus introduces his suffering, death and resurrection. Previously, Jesus has made only veiled references to his impending fate, but now he speaks in plain language: "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (8:31).

The adverb "must" is used in such a way to modify all four verbs. The Son of Man *must* suffer, *must* be rejected, *must* be killed and *must* rise again.

When Jesus begins to talk this way, Peter takes it upon himself to pull Jesus aside and rebuke him. Rebuke is a really strong Greek word. The only other instance this word is used is when Jesus rebukes evil spirits.

What makes Peter's rebuke so scandalous is that he is trying to divert Jesus from his divinely appointed mission to suffer, be rejected, be killed and rise again. Jesus insists he must, of necessity, do it this way. There is no other way. Peter is just as convinced it must not be.

Peter is spot-on about Jesus' identity, but dead wrong about Jesus' mission. Peter becomes upset when Jesus gets in the

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way of the plan Peter has laid out for the world. Peter fantasizes that Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem to claim his rightful crown, which most certainly means all of his disciples will be assigned places in Jesus' cabinet. Peter and Jesus' disciples are convinced Jesus' ministry must end in triumph. A dying Messiah makes about as much sense as trees walking.

Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter with a blistering reply: "Get behind me, Satan" (8:33). Only a few verses previous, Peter calls Jesus Messiah, but now Jesus identifies Peter as aligned with Satan. Peter tempts Jesus in much the same way the devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness to put aside God's plan. Now Peter is getting in the way of Jesus fulfilling God's plan. Get behind me, Peter. Your rightful place is behind me, not in front of me.

I can appreciate Peter's dilemma. I, too, want an invincible God who saves people from suffering, not a vulnerable God who subjects himself to suffering.

Jesus says in verse 34, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me." This verse is a classic example of an A-B-B-A chiastic structure:

- A—If you want to become my followers
- B—they must deny themselves
- B—take up their cross
- A—And follow me.

A chiasmus is a literary structure in which the first thought in the sentence is reiterated in the last while the middle two concepts correlate with each other. Following Christ, which begins and ends this sentence, is wrapped around two related ideas, that of denying self and taking up the cross.

Jesus' language of taking up the cross would have jarred his first century listeners. The only people who took up their crosses in those days were condemned criminals in route to their execution. Take up your cross is not some burden we carry, as though asthma or arthritis is our "cross to bear." There is more to it than that. Taking up your cross is dying to self. It means abandoning any preoccupation with being self-absorbed and self-centered. We say no to every course of action which is based on self-seeking and self-will.

Jesus goes on to say in verse 35, "For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel, will save it." Some things in life are saved by being given away and lost by being hoarded. Love is like that. You save love by giving it away. If you hoard it, you will lose it.

C. S. Lewis writes in the last paragraph of his book *Mere Christianity*, "The very first step is to try to forget about the self altogether. Your real, new

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self will not come as long as you are looking for it. It will come when you are looking for him [God]. Does that sound strange? The same principle holds in everyday matters. In social life, you will never make a good impression on other people until you stop thinking about what sort of impression you are making....This principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up yourself and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it.”

We’ve been asking three questions of Mark’s gospel during this sermon series. These questions are all addressed in Mark 8.

Who is Jesus? He is the Christ, the Messiah, God’s anointed one.

Why did he come? He came to die for our sins. Somehow Jesus’ death is salvific for us. My spellcheck doesn’t recognize this word salvific. Salvific is the power to bring about salvation and redemption in someone’s life.

What is our response? Our response is to follow him. Those who talk about following Jesus must actually follow him. We speak often in this church about our disciple-making mission. We are learning all our lives what it means to follow Jesus. We invite you to join us in the journey to become one of his followers.

The attitude of following is not in vogue among today’s parents. Parents want to instill in their children to be good leaders. What parents teach their children to be good followers? But precisely what Jesus wants is good followers.

A story is told about a high school senior who was filling out a college application form. Her heart sank when she read a question on the application form of the college she really wanted to attend. “Are you a leader?” Being exceptionally honest and conscientious, she thought about the question for a moment and answered, “No.” She returned the application, expecting the worst. To her great surprise, she received the following letter from the admissions office. “Dear applicant, A study of the application forms reveal that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower.”

We need leaders in the church, this is true. But what we really need are good followers.

