



Cross Purposes

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Mark 8:27-34

January 17, 2021

Is following Jesus hard or easy? Today's Scripture is all about following Jesus. Would you say that following that Jesus is hard or easy?

During these last two months of my ministry at VPC, I'm reflecting on *What Matters Most* to me. As I look back over the last 42 years and the 3500 sermons I've preached here, I vacillate between telling people that following Jesus is the most wonderful thing in the world and telling them that it's really hard. If I only tell people following Jesus is easy, I will be setting them up for disappointment down the road. Yet, if I only tell them that following Jesus is hard, who will enlist to follow him?

C. S. Lewis devotes a chapter in *Mere Christianity* to this very question. *Is Christianity Easy or Hard?* Lewis asks. He writes that following Jesus is sometimes hard. He references today's reading about denying self and taking up your cross as one such example. Yet there are other times when Jesus speaks of following as easy, such as his words, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28).

So, which is it? Is following Jesus hard or easy? It's both. Following Jesus is hard. Following Jesus is easy. Hold this thought. We'll come back to it later in this sermon, but first the story.

Today's Scripture serves as a seminal moment in Jesus' ministry. It's no coincidence this conversation in Mark 8 between Jesus and his disciples occurs at the precise midpoint of Mark's gospel. After this pivotal dialogue, Jesus sets his face for Jerusalem where his enemies are waiting to take him out.

Jesus asks his disciples as they travel near the Roman stronghold of Caesarea Philippi, “Who do people say I am?” (Mark 8:27) His disciples give customary answers. “Some say you are John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets” (Mark 8:28).

Jesus then asks his question a second time, only this time he intensifies it, “What about *you*? Who do you say I am?” (Mark 8.29) Peter, the spokesman for the group, who often gets it wrong, this time nails it, “You are the Messiah.”

Jesus seizes the moment to introduce to his disciples the fate awaiting him in Jerusalem, “The Son of Man must suffer... must be rejected... must be killed...and must rise again” (Mark 8:31).

Peter doesn't take kindly to Jesus' dire prediction. He takes Jesus aside and essentially reads him the riot act. Jesus, in turn, puts Peter back in his place with the strongest possible rebuke, “Get behind me Satan” (Mark 8:33). Peter tempts Jesus in the same way the devil did when Jesus began his ministry (Mark 1:13).

This is the moment when Jesus says, “Whoever wants to be my followers must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). Jesus couples *following* with two related ideas, that of denying self and taking up the cross. Verse 34 is a classic example of a *chiastic* structure in the Greek. Don't check out on me here. Stay with me. A chiastic structure is a common rhetorical device in the Greek language. An idea presented in the first half of the sentence is then restated in the second half. Only, in the second half the order is reversed, forming a crisscross

pattern. Repetition in a chiasmic structure helps listeners understand and remember.

I can illustrate using John F. Kennedy's famous patriotic statement, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." "Ask not what your country can do for you" is the main idea in the first half of the sentence. The second half, "Ask what you can do for your country" serves to reinforce the main idea, but does so in reverse order. If we were to assign a letter to each principle word in the sentence, it would follow an A-B-B-A pattern. I've illustrated it here:

A Ask not what your **country**
B can do for **you**,
B ask what **you** can do
A for your **country**.

"Ask not what your country can do for you" is the main idea. The thought is reinforced in the second half but in reverse order, "Ask what you can do for your country."

Jesus employs a similar chiasmic format in verse 34:

A Whoever wants to become my **followers**
B must **deny themselves**
B and **take up their cross**
A and **follow me**

"Whoever wants to become my followers must deny themselves" is the main idea. The same thought is expressed in the second half, that of "take up your cross and follow me." *Following* is emphasized at the beginning and the end of the sentence. And the middle concepts of denying self and taking up your cross are comparable, related ideas. Denying self means to take up your cross.

This is the first time Jesus speaks about his death on a cross to his disciples in Mark's gospel. The cross was a hideous means of public execution in the Roman Empire. Jesus denies self-interest by taking up the cross. He models this same spirit of self-surrender later in Mark's gospel when he prays, "Not my will, but yours be done" (Mark 14:36).

Taking up our cross doesn't literally mean for us what it meant for Jesus. None of us will die on a cross. Yet the call to put aside self-interest still stands. Jesus calls us to die to self-interest and take up what God wants us to do with our lives.

Mark later in his gospel describes how the chief priests and teachers of the law hand Jesus over to Pilate "out of self-interest" (Mark 15:10). Mark is not writing about unbelievers. He's describing people who have devoted their lives to knowing and doing God's Word. What an incriminating statement--handing Jesus over out of self-interest.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Let me return to the question I asked earlier. Is following Jesus is hard or easy? Following Jesus is hard. Following Jesus is easy.

First, the hard part: It's hard to deny myself. I want to amuse myself. Pamper myself. Medicate myself. Enjoy myself. Promote myself.

It's hard to control my tongue. I want to win every argument. I always want to get in the last word.

It's hard to be generous. It's hard to give sometimes. I don't want to part with my hard-earned money.

It's hard to have difficult conversations with people. I want to stay in my own bubble and avoid conflict. I want to play it safe.

It's hard to follow Jesus as Lord. I want to be my own lord. I don't want to relinquish control of my life to anyone else. I want to maintain control of my own life.

Following Jesus *is* hard. How could it be otherwise? I appreciate what F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote to an aspiring writer, "Nothing any good isn't hard."

You may be aware as you listen to this sermon that something is preventing you from following Jesus. Jesus said to a rich young ruler, "One thing you lack. Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me" (Mark 10:21). Maybe, like this rich young ruler, money keeps you from following Jesus. Maybe it's a resentment you are carrying around with you. It could be a bad habit or addiction you can't seem to shake, or a high need to control that gets in the way. Tell Jesus you want to lay it down and start leaving it behind.

Okay, now for the easy part. Following Jesus is easy because it's not all up to us. Following Jesus is not merely a matter of self-exertion and hard work. Change, what we call transformation in the spiritual life, is what Christ accomplishes in us. We do not change ourselves. Christ changes us. Following Jesus is easy because he's the one

doing the transforming. We are not transforming ourselves. We trust Christ to do his transforming work through us.

We talk often in this church about the spiritual disciplines of prayer, reading Scripture and cultivating spiritual friends. I won't lie. Practicing these disciplines is hard work. Yet remember, Christ is the one who does the transforming.

I like the way Lewis portrays it in the chapter I referenced earlier in *Mere Christianity*. Lewis contends that lazy students do more work in the end. Diligent students who pay attention in class and do the daily assignments have an easier time of it on the final exam. Yet lazy students who check out in class and fail to do their homework find it harder in the end. They are the ones who have to cram and pull all-nighters to get a passing grade.

Following Jesus is hard, yet here's the key: You put in the time and do the work and it will pay off in the end.

Some of you are anxious about the future. I get it. Chris and I wonder and worry about our future, too. We will be leaving this community we love. Where will we live? Where will we worship? What does God want us to do with our time and talents? These are hard questions for us to sort out right now. Yet here's the easy part. We have learned over the years to let Jesus help us shoulder the load. We are yoked with Christ. He'll help us carry our burdens. What we need to do is to apply what we have learned. This Jesus who has led us in the past will do so again.

What matters most? Jesus matters most. Most of all.
Jesus invites us to follow. Following Jesus is hard.
Following Jesus is easy.