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The Cost of Following – an exposition of Mark 8

‘Following Jesus’ has always been a description of what it means to be a Christian. And to some ‘following Jesus’ is more appealing than the language of ‘being Christian’. It sounds clearer, and perhaps in a way safer.

That is, until you read the Gospels, and especially the words of Jesus in Mark 8. ‘Safe’ is not a word I can use any more for ‘following Jesus’. It turns out following him is disturbing, shocking in a way, because of how Jesus himself describes it. And yet, it’s strangely compelling.

As Jesus was on a journey with his disciples, he asked them who the crowds thought he was, and then who they thought he was (8:27-29). Peter’s response in verse 39 that Jesus is the Messiah is a well-known watershed moment in Jesus’ ministry. But Jesus’ instruction on what it means for him to be the Messiah – that he would be rejected and killed, before rising again (8:31) – was not well received. Peter rebuked him, which shows the sort of misunderstanding we seem to continue to be gifted in – thinking we can correct Jesus about who he is and what that means. Jesus rebuke of Peter in the strongest terms shows the deep folly of such an attitude (8:33).

However, Jesus’ response to this misunderstanding doesn’t finish with rebuke. In fact, he calls together the crowds to show them what it means to follow the Messiah – to follow this Messiah. Rather than letting others set the agenda for him, he shows what his agenda is for all who would come after him. In other words, he shows us what it really means to follow Jesus.

‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’ (8:34)

This is a scary statement. We must be careful that it doesn’t simply wash over us. To help us avoid that, let us consider the three calls in this verse:

a. ‘must deny themselves’

This call is so counter intuitive to us we almost think it is easy, but it is no such thing. To actually deny yourself is a very unusual thing to do, and very hard – to give up rights and dreams and hopes for Christ. I think of a minister I knew who was a very good runner.

He was headed towards commonwealth games level marathon running. But he was also a Sunday School teacher. And the big marathons were run on Sundays. Eventually he had to choose. He loved running, but for the sake of Jesus’ kingdom, he felt he should choose Sunday School teaching. He might have had all kinds of glory and success. But he denied himself.

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The first and decisive way you deny yourself is, of course, deciding to follow Jesus in the first place –because at that point you say ‘I am not my own any more - I am yours. You are in charge. I belong to you. And I will follow you.’ That’s a very hard thing to do. It is sometimes noted that New Zealanders have a strong desire to feel independent – we don’t like being told what to do. So to deny ourselves at the level of saying ‘I’m not in charge of myself any more’ – well that is very tough for us. But that is what Jesus calls for here. Intense self-denial. And the next few words show just how intense...

b. ‘take up their cross’

This is not a ‘cross we have to bear’ type thing, which may be a mother in law or difficult job or something similar. No, the cross – when Jesus said this, and for some centuries after – was a clear symbol of shame and death. And carrying a cross had very clear implications – that you were headed to a shameful death. Jesus’ words

are roughly equivalent to 'follow me down death row with an execution hood on your head'. Jesus was speaking at that disturbing level of seriousness.

Of course Jesus himself is, at this point, on his way to Jerusalem where he will die a shameful death. He is calling his disciples to join him.

In the first instance this calls for a level of self-denial and following that is prepared to go to this ultimate, terminal extent. The extent we have seen played out repeatedly in the Middle East recently, where those who have refused to deny Jesus have met an end similar to their Master's.

'Taking up our crosses' entails a level of commitment to Jesus that requires death when certain circumstances arise. But even if it doesn't lead to death directly in our particular circumstance, it is the level of commitment to him that is prepared to die for him – and therefore of course we will be prepared to be identified with him at work or in family or friends; and of course we will do things and share his views even when we might be thought narrow or weak; and of course we will make decisions others don't understand because we make them with Jesus' priorities. If we understand that the level of commitment he calls for is to shameful death of the cross, then these other things will be obvious.

Verse 38 gives us a great picture of one danger area here: "If 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."

Shame was and is a huge reason for not following Jesus, for not taking up your cross. The cross was not only a painful, but even more a shameful death – where you hung naked and you were an example to others of what not to do – full of shame.

"...we are always in danger of being ashamed of Jesus – whether because it would cost our lives to stay true to him, or because we know our culture thinks some of his views are out of date. If we ultimately give in to that shame, and decide finally to reject him, then he will honour that – he will let us reject him."

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Take up your cross, he says. And then finally...

c. 'and follow me'

As we learn to deny ourselves and take up our crosses, we will have learned to step out behind him and follow him, walking in his ways. To truly follow Jesus.

To follow him in this way is a huge, disturbing call. We would be only honestly human if we asked 'why on earth would I want to do it?'

Verse 35 begins to answer that question with an important little word: 'for'

"For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it."

Jesus shows us here simply that, although the cost of following him is huge, it is actually the only sensible thing to do. That's because we lose our lives anyway.

In Star Wars Episode IV, there is famous line where Princess Leia says to Grand Moff Tarkin: "The more you tighten your grip, Tarkin, the more star systems will slip through your fingers."

“We will each lose our life. None of us gets to keep it. Death will take it from each of us before we know it. Even if you live the happiest life (which is really something others always seem to have rather than us) – it will still all be gone soon.”

So it is with us – not with star systems, but with our lives. No matter how hard we try to hold on to them, they slip through our fingers. We have dreams and plans, yet the reality never quite lives up to the dream. And when people look back on their lives, they consistently say ‘it’s gone so quickly’.

We will each lose our life. None of us gets to keep it. Death will take it from each of us before we know it. Even if you live the happiest life (which is really something others always seem to have rather than us) – it will still all be gone soon.

But Jesus is saying that if we lose our lives *the right way* (‘for me and for the gospel’) then we will actually save them. Either way we can’t keep our lives. But if we lose them for Jesus, we save them. Save them eternally – to which end Jesus was heading to that Jerusalem cross. But even in this life we experience that salvation, as we live our lives in the service of one who is truly worth living for – one who gave his infinitely precious life to save us.

The world has much that is shiny and enticing to offer us as a substitute for taking up our crosses and following Jesus. But eventually it always turns out to be ultimately unsatisfying – like the Turkish delight given to Edmund in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Nothing will satisfy us in the way Jesus will. No other calling is as noble as serving the Lord who has laid down his life for us. Nothing is as momentous as being part of his movement for the salvation of the world.

It does cost to follow Jesus. We will lose our lives if we follow him. But we’ll lose them if we don’t follow him anyway – and then all the trappings of life will seem like no more than sand that slipped through our fingers.

Jim Elliot, who was killed in Ecuador by people he was trying to share Jesus with wrote these words in his journal:

“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.”

Let us not try to hold on to what we cannot keep, and in so doing deny the Lord who is truly worth following.