

"Whoever Desires to Come After Me"

Have you ever thought you knew someone, because you had learned something about them? Maybe you learned where they were born or what their job was, and you assumed you knew everything about them. Those kinds of assumptions can certainly get you in trouble.

In our passage, we find the disciples thinking they knew Jesus. You see, they finally learned something critical about Jesus. In the passage just before this we saw that they finally realized that Jesus was the Christ. And that is certainly true. We talked about that last week - how the disciples finally came to that conclusion.

And yet, just because they finally knew this important truth about Jesus, didn't mean that they really knew him. No, no sooner do they make that momentous confession do we find them confused about what that meant. They thought they knew Jesus because they thought they knew what the role of the Messiah would be. However in this passage we find Jesus challenging their assumptions. We see Jesus calling into question what they thought they knew about him and his role as Messiah.

And so as we dig into this passage, let's look afresh at what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah. And this is important, because if we are going to follow Jesus, and be his disciples, we must be learning about who he is and what he came to do. We can't properly follow him unless we also know his mission.

So look with me then at this passage. Let's begin by looking at what this passage says about Jesus and his mission. There are actually two very different pictures that Jesus presents about himself in this passage. One picture of Jesus starts our passage and a different one ends our passage: verses 31 and 38. In both verses Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man, a common title that Jesus took upon himself during his ministry. These are the only verses in our passage that use this title, and in both of them Jesus describes something about what he as the Messiah will do. But they are very different pictures about the Messiah. In verse 31, we find a picture of a suffering Messiah. In verse 38, we see a picture of a glorious Messiah. These are certainly two different pictures, but both are true. Let's look at them both.

Verse 31 says that Jesus began to teach them how he would have to suffer many things, be rejected by the religious leaders of the time, to be killed, and ultimately to be raised from the dead on the third day. This is pretty important information about Jesus. First notice that this comes on the heels of the disciples confessing that Jesus is the Christ. This information about the suffering of the Messiah isn't given to the disciples until they make this identification of Jesus. It's as if they are finally ready to learn this.

And notice *how* Jesus tells them this. Verse 32 says that he told them this openly. In other words he spoke to them plainly and clearly. He wasn't telling them this in parables or metaphors. He spoke clearly and plainly about the suffering that was ahead for him. Jesus was revealing to them a mystery that was finally to be unveiled. The Messiah was to suffer. He was to suffer and die, but he was also to rise again from the dead on the third day.

And yet this should not have been as much of a mystery to them as it seems it was. Notice an important word in verse 31. Jesus says that he "must" suffer these things. Why "must" he suffer these things? Well, we know that he "must" suffer these things in order to secure salvation for us. We know that he "must" suffer these things because God the Father decreed them to happen in this way and required it of the Son and the Son was glad to do so. But I think that the "must" here especially calls to mind that Jesus was fulfilling prophecy that foretold that things would happen in this way. In that sense, in the sense of fulfilling prophecy, the Messiah *must* suffer in this way. He "must" because as surely as God inspired the prophets to write of the Messiah's work, and God cannot lie, then surely these things must necessarily come to pass. Jesus basically says this again in Mark 9:12, making this exact point - that because the Scriptures spoke about this suffering, then Jesus must suffer in this way.

Where do the Old Testament Scriptures speak about this? Well, Jesus would later say on the Road to Emmaus after his resurrection that all the Scriptures talked about this, the Law, Psalms, and the Prophets! And so in one sense, we can find references to Christ and his work throughout the Old Testament's Scripture. But of course there are some passages that speak more specifically about the suffering aspect of Jesus than others. Isaiah 53 is one chapter that comes to mind about Christ's suffering. Psalm 22 is another. Hosea 6:1-2 is often one pointed to as a veiled reference to the Lord's resurrection on specifically the third day. These are surely just a few of the places where Scripture looks forward to the suffering of the Messiah.

And so this is one identification of Jesus as the Messiah - he would suffer for God's people. He would be rejected and die, but would rise again. Of course Jesus doesn't describe the significance of this suffering here. He will later. He will talk about how his suffering was to atone for the sins of God's people. But for now he at least explains to the disciples of the suffering aspect of his mission.

But this picture of a suffering Messiah stands in contrast to the other picture that Jesus gives of himself in verse 38. In verse 38 Jesus talks about a future glorious coming. He will come with the glory of his father along with the holy angels. Here in verse 38 we learn a lot about the Messiah. We learn that he is the Son of God. We learn that he will come once again at a future point in history, and it's implied that he'll be coming to bring judgment. And he will come along with the holy angels. All of this points to the glorious nature of the Messiah and the glory of his second coming.

And so these are two very different perspectives of the Messiah. Now, at *that* time, the role of Messiah was about suffering. In the future, his role will be about glory. He had come then to suffer and be rejected. In the future he would come again in glory. And that is how these two pictures of the Messiah are reconciled. The suffering of the Messiah refers to his first coming. The glory of the Messiah is realized especially in his second coming. Both pictures are true, but they paint a larger picture of the two-staged role and mission of Jesus as the Messiah.

So what's this mean? What does this mean for the disciples and what does it mean for us? Well, if the disciples are going to truly follow Jesus as the Messiah, they need to understand this bigger picture of the Messiah. For that matter, they need to understand the implications of the Messiah's mission if they are going to follow him. That's what Jesus continues to describe in verses 34-38. In verse 34, he calls a crowd of people together to turn this into a larger teaching moment. He doesn't give the crowd the same background and detail of his sufferings that he had just told the disciples. To them the teaching here is limited to his words in

verse 34 and following. But for the disciples these words tell them that there are two possible responses to Jesus and his Messianic mission. Jesus' two-fold mission of suffering then glory could have but one of two responses, either you could follow Christ and take up the cross in discipleship, or you could reject Christ, caring more about trying to gain the world.

So let's look at these two responses to Jesus that he presents in verses 34-38. Jesus begins in verse 34, saying, "Whoever desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." Wow. This discipleship is radical. Jesus says that following him involves two things: deny ourselves and take up our crosses. Let's think about these two things separately. The first - self denial, is obviously a short, but loaded, command. This self-denial is not a call for ascetic or monastic living as some have incorrectly taken it. It's not that it's virtuous in and of itself to debase yourself. We don't deny ourselves just to deny ourselves. No, we deny ourselves for the sake of Christ. And so this a radical call to give up any claims to worldly rights and privileges that would interfere with God's plan for our lives. It's a call to put aside our own desires in light of the commands of Christ. It's starting to say "no" to ourselves and "yes" to God. It's to acknowledge that God is the center of the universe and not ourselves. But of course the way that this is so simply put helps enforce the radical nature of this call. Christ is calling us to make sacrifices for the sake of Christ and the gospel - even radical ones.

If that is not clear, the second command drives home his point. Christ calls us to take up our crosses. Since we live after the death of Christ on the cross, we can't help but think about this in light of Christ's sacrifice. Surely Jesus is foreshadowing his death on the cross with this command. Of course at this point Mark hasn't told us anything about Jesus disclosing that his death would be through crucifixion - just that he would suffer and die. So, presumably the disciples would not have made this connection in a literal sense for Christ. But nonetheless, the crucifixion imagery is what Jesus has in mind and it is what the people would have understood when he mentions taking up a cross. This is a death march. Jesus says that to follow him, meant going on a death march. Criminals who were crucified on a cross had to carry the cross beam of the cross out to the site of crucifixion. They would carry the own instrument of their tortuous death. There was no worse way to die at that time. This was such a bad way to die, that one benefit of being a Roman citizen was that you were protected from such a death. If you did get a sentence of death as a Roman citizen you had the right to have a more humane death.

The world would say that this is not a very good way to make more disciples. If you want to make more disciples, you probably shouldn't describe your discipleship program as that of a self denial and compare it with going on a death march. But that's all part of the point. This is a radical call by Jesus, and it is one that distinguishes his followers from the rest of the world. His followers are ones who will radically follow him, "Jesus Freaks," realizing that life in this world is different because they know Jesus. For the Christian, life in this world would now be radically redefined. For the Christian, life is to be about following Christ, it involves much self-denial, and it involves living as dead to the world.

The opposite response is to reject Christ and this call for radical discipleship. Instead, Jesus describes the alternative response in verse 36 as trying to gain the whole world. You see, that's what the world is about. It's about one's self. The world lives an inward focus looking to improve one's self. Everyone is trying to earn the "whole world" by its actions. Everyone is trying to get ahead, usually at the expense of others, and without concern for God's plan for their lives.

And yet these responses have eternal consequences. Jesus makes that clear. How you respond to Jesus has ramifications to your very life and soul. Those who follow Christ, are following the path to life, even though it may involve sacrifice in this age. But those who reject Christ, do so because they think it means giving up your life in this world. Jesus acknowledges this and points out a sort of paradox in verse 35: "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it." Obviously Jesus has two different life's in view here. One life is a life apart from Christ, full of selfishness and sin, life that is merely life in this world and age. The other life is the eternal life that comes with Christ, it is the true life that endures beyond this age. From a Christian perspective, we could call the first our old life and the second our new life. Jesus calls Christians to lose this first life, lose their old life, to take on new life. People who cling to their old life, do so at the expense of losing the new eternal life that is offered to them.

And so whoever desires to save their life of sinfulness and rebellion against God will lose their eternal life, and even their current existence, when Christ comes again to judge the world. When Christ comes again, he will come as a judge, and anyone who has clung to their life of rebellion will find eternal damnation. They will lose even what life they did have. But as Christians, if we come in faith to Christ, willing to give up our old life and live instead for Christ, then we already begin to taste of the new life Jesus gives us. By denying our old selves and taking up our crosses in dying to this world, we actually don't find death, we find life. We find the life that is truly life! We find real life. Life that is not full of sin and misery but life that is full of true fulfillment and true blessing. (Do I need to qualify that it's only semi-realized here?)

Jesus describes these two possible responses to him in verse 36 in terms of value. "What do you truly value?" Jesus asks. Do you value earthly wealth and treasure over your very life and soul? Is worldly success for the few fleeting years of your existence here worth losing your soul and life for all eternity? What will a man give in exchange for his soul?

Jesus makes the same point in terms of shame in verse 38. Some are ashamed of Jesus. They are ashamed of the way of the cross. Others find their joy and fulfillment in Christ and the cross. If you are ashamed of Christ, he will be ashamed of you when he returns. He will come to judge those who are ashamed of him, when he returns in glory. But to us who believe, we are not ashamed of Christ, then when he returns, he will not be ashamed of us. To us, Christ is precious. He is our very life. Not our old life. Not who we used to be. No, when we come to Christ we cast off that old way of living. But he is our real life. He is life beyond this life.

So Jesus talks about several different images to talk about these two different responses to him and his message. He compares old life with new life. He compares dying to the world with dying in eternal damnation. He calls us to ask ourselves how much we value our eternal lives. He talks about shame - are we ashamed of Christ? But he also describes these two possible responses with one final image. In verse 38 he mentions an adulterous and sinful generation. You see we can either be identified with an adulterous and sinful generation, or we can be identified with Christ. And this adultery is not talking about the physical act of adultery. It's about hypocritical living for God. It's saying you love God in one breath, but then saying you love sin and idolatry in another. That's spiritual adultery. The prophets of Old rebuked Israel for this sort of adultery all the time - the people would claim to follow God, but then make sacrifices to pagan idols. But that shows the sharp contrast Jesus is talking about. You are either for him or you are against him. There is no middle ground. If you claim to love Christ and

follow him, but still love the world, still love your old life of sin, then you are committing spiritual adultery. And he puts you in the other camp - of those who reject Christ. Of those who are ashamed of him. Of those who are part of the adulterous and sinful generation.

All of this is a very serious discussion by Jesus. All of this should cause us to look inward. Do we understand Christ's mission properly? Do we follow him in the way he asks us? Are we more interested in earthly glory, and therefore unwilling to follow a savior who leads us in the way of the cross? If you find yourself twisted inside, wanting to follow Christ, but just not sure about this radical discipleship and all that it entails, I would like to point you to Peter in our passage as a source of encouragement.

I think we can all identify with Peter here. Peter hears Jesus mission of suffering. And what is his response? Verse 32. He rebukes Jesus. By the way, that is never a good thing to do. And yet it is such a genuine response by Peter. He rebukes Jesus because Peter had a different view of the Messiah's mission. Peter was obviously only thinking about a Messiah of glory. He didn't want to see that the Messiah must first come to suffer. He wanted a Messiah who would usher in earthly glory. He wanted a Messiah who would restore the nation of Israel to a geo-political force in the world. He wanted the restoration of Israel promised by the prophets. But the problem is that Peter had aimed too low in glory.

Jesus would indeed fulfill the prophecies to restore God's people to glory. But it would be a better glory, a heavenly, eternal glory, that far exceeded all of Peter's imagination. But to accomplish that, the enemies that stood in the way had to be vanquished. But the enemy was not Rome as Peter might have thought. The enemies were ourselves. We are sinners. Humans have identified ourselves with rebellion against God's kingdom. The sin inside God's people has to be conquered, and then the kingdom of God will come in its glory. Sin would be conquered definitively on the cross. Jesus would atone for the sins of God's people. But that atonement would then be brought to the people, calling them to come in faith to Jesus as their savior.

And as Christ brings that salvation to people's hearts, he calls them to share in his mission. He calls them to unite with him in his suffering and with the cross. For that is what Jesus did on the cross for us. On the cross, he identified with us. He took on our sin. He bore the penalty that was due to us. That is why the Messiah must first suffer. He had to suffer and die, so that we would not have to die. So that we could have true life.

And now as we give up our lives in this world, we do it as an act of faith. We take up our crosses to say that we believe in Christ. We identify with him and his suffering. We come willing to suffer for his sake, because he suffered for us. And the hope that comes along with that: as much as Christ came at first to suffer for us, his second coming is when he will come in glory. And if we are united with him in his suffering, we will certainly be united with him in his glory. That is when the final restoration will come. That is when God's kingdom will come in its fullness. That is when our new life will fully shed the remnants of our old life. Then suffering will be no more. Then our life of self-denial and taking up the cross will be fully transformed into a life of exaltation. We will be lifted up with Christ. And we will spend eternity in praise and joy of our exalted and glorious savior, Jesus Christ.

There's a quote from the New Testament that I think brings this message home nicely: "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; 13 but rejoice to the extent

that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. 14 If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. 15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. 16 Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter." Amen. Guess who wrote that? Peter. Peter wrote this. It's 1 Peter 4:12-16. You see that is what is so encouraging in all this. Jesus lovingly rebuked Peter when he got it all wrong in verse 32. Peter had effectively tempted Jesus away from his mission in verse 32 and essentially spoke on behalf of Satan. Peter couldn't have gotten things more wrong. And yet look how Peter grew. What he says many years later in his first epistle shows that he finally understood the two-fold mission of Christ. And that should give us hope. Jesus transformed Peter as he disciplined him. And Jesus will transform you as well as you are disciplined by him.

You see that is the good news. If Jesus came to suffer, it was for us. It was for Peter, and it was for us. It was so that we could begin a life of discipleship. It's so we could begin to deny ourselves in this world and take up our crosses. It's so we could know the life that is truly life. It is so we can join with Christ in his eternal glory. And so for Jesus to suffer first, suffer for us, it tells us that he has come to save us. And if he came to save us, then it means that he will be at work in our hearts and lives. Maybe your faith is so small right now. Maybe you are all twisted inside, wanting to live your life for Christ, wanting to sacrifice for his sake, but realizing how meager that looks like in your life right now. Maybe you still cling on to your old life too much. But take heart. In our passage, this life of discipleship looked so meager in Peter's life. He didn't want to take up his cross, he wanted to take up his sword. But he kept following Jesus and Jesus did not lead him astray.

And so as you struggle to follow Jesus in the way he describes today, I would counsel you, keep your eyes on Jesus. If he grew Peter in such a marvelous way through his discipleship, he will certainly do that for you. He came to suffer for us! He came to identify with us. And so pray that he will cultivate in you a willingness to suffer for his sake as well. Pray that you would identify yourself with him all the more. Look to Christ. Find your life in him. Say that to live is Christ and to die is gain! Rejoice whenever you have a chance to you share in Christ's sufferings. And look to glory.

Saints, I hope you see the encouragement of this passage. I hope you see how the work Christ did in Peter's life should be an encouragement to us. But before we close, I'd like to think a little bit further about applying this radical call to discipleship in our lives. What are the things in your life that keep you from following Christ? What are the things in your life that would cause you to respond like Peter? Maybe you are not like Peter in the sense that you are not looking for someone to come and bring political revolution in overthrowing the Romans. But maybe you do have false conceptions of what Christ is to do in your life. Maybe you are looking for him to do certain things in your life that are not consistent with his mission? Maybe you are looking to tell Jesus what to do in your life, instead of asking him how you can serve him better.

Maybe it's some idol you have in your heart. Maybe you are following Jesus with the hidden hope that you will get on God's good side and he will then give you that idol. But is that self-denial? Is that taking up the cross? No, that's just trying to use Jesus to get what you want. If that is the case, I would challenge you - maybe you haven't understood the gospel yet. The gospel is not about getting on God's good side so he can do you a favor. The gospel is that we haven't been on

God's good side, so Jesus suffered and died that you could be reconciled to God - not by our works, but by Christ's. And so if we are to suffer for his sake in this life, it's not to earn our salvation. It's not to get on God's good side. No, we willingly suffer because we have already been reconciled to God by Christ's suffering. It's a joyful response of gratitude for Christ's suffering for us.

And yet Peter tells us, make sure that our suffering is for Christ as a Christian, and not because of our sins. In that passage from 1 Peter that I read, Peter said not to suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody, but to suffer as a Christian. In other words, people do bad things in this world to try to get ahead. Sometimes they get caught and suffer for it. That's not the suffering Jesus is calling us to. He is calling us to suffer in *NOT* doing those things. Think about it - the world is full of people who will lie, steal, and cheat, to get ahead in this world. In so many ways, our world, our government, our society, is setup in ways that allow people to get ahead through such evil ways. If we don't live that way, we will likely fall behind others in worldly status and success. But that is part of suffering for the gospel. If our earthly prosperity is stalled because we are not willing to act in sin like the rest of the world, isn't that part of what it means to deny yourself and take up the cross? Surely it is. We often think about Christian suffering in terms of persecution - people ridiculing us because we are Christian. But just living righteously means sufferings and setbacks in this world.

But in light of the gospel, how can we resist this suffering? Because of Christ's love for us, surely it is no burden to follow him in this way, even to suffer now for his sake. Martyr and missionary Jim Elliot rightly said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose." That sounds pretty similar to what Jesus says here and what Peter says in his letters later in life. These are words to live by! Christ will not disappoint. Amen.

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