

+ Mark 8:31-38 + Christ Calls Us to a Cross + 2nd Sunday in Lent + 8 March 2009 +

Why a cross? It was the most shameful, painful and humiliating form of execution that the Roman government used to punish political rebels and criminals. While the cross was still used as a tool for execution, the early Christians were reluctant to use it in their art even though it had already become a symbol of Christ for them.

...Yet here it is! Here it is in the most prominent place on the Lord's altar. Here it is built right into this pulpit. There it is hanging on the wall. Perhaps it's hanging on a necklace you're wearing. If you were to step outside you'd find it at the peak of our entryway. We even have it in the name of our congregation—Cross of Christ. Why a cross? Why has an ancient tool of Roman punishment become the symbol for Christ and his followers?

In the Gospel Lesson, we find out why the cross is far more than a symbol for those who follow Christ. The cross is really at the heart of our Christian faith and ever present in our Christian life. With more straight talk for us from the Savior, **CHRIST CALLS US TO A CROSS** as he takes up his cross for us, and commands us to take up our crosses as we follow him.

This morning Mark takes us near the end of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus had been facing increased opposition from his enemies, so he was taking more time to teach his disciples privately. Mark tells us, **"He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this..."** Jesus was about to begin his final journey to Jerusalem. He knew what awaited him at the end—the salvation, the deliverance of sinful mankind. Jesus also knew what awaited him on the way—temptation, suffering, pain, ridicule, and a cross where he would finally meet death. He didn't sugarcoat the details, but was very straightforward with his disciples. He wanted them to realize that there was no other way. He had to suffer to save. He had to take up his cross if he was to remove the guilt of our sins.

The disciples, on the other hand, wanted Jesus to take up a crown or a throne instead of a cross. Earlier Peter had clearly confessed that Jesus was indeed **"the Christ, the Son of the living God."** That was the common confession of the disciples, but they still didn't understand what that meant for Jesus. They figured since Jesus was God's Anointed One, he would one day restore Israel to great glory and honor. One day he would overthrow the Romans and make the Jews rulers of the world under his earthly reign. Even Peter didn't get it. Surely Christ wasn't going to suffer and die a criminal's death on a cross, but reign with glory. Surely that was a better way for God's Anointed to save the world. So during a lull while Jesus was teaching, Peter pulled Jesus aside and started to rebuke him. Peter argued, **"Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!"** "Come on, Lord! You don't need to go through all that suffering to save. You're the Christ!"

You wonder if the disciples were hoping Peter would convince Jesus to stop all this foolish talk, but none of them expected Jesus' reaction. He immediately rebuked Peter and called out the source of such a dangerous attitude. **"Get behind me, Satan! ...You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."** Satan was behind all this trying to stop Jesus. So the Lord took the opportunity to teach his disciples and the crowds about the true cost of following him. They had to realize there was only one way to receive a crown of glory—the cross. Christ had to call them, as he calls us, to a cross. If no cross, then no glory. **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."**

Jesus' words seem strange to our 21st Century American ears. **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself..."** Deny self? None of us would be quick to admit that the whole aim of our lives is to get our own way, but from infancy on, doing everything we can to accomplish our own will comes very easily. "I want this. I want that. I need this. I need that. I don't like this. I like that. If only I had this...then I would be happy. I wouldn't have disappointment or frustration if everyone would just do what I want. What's in it for me?" And so on. On a daily basis, what naturally comes first? Me. My needs. My desires. My feelings. So naturally, life becomes a constant struggle to make it all about me. Christ's command is difficult then!

To make things even more difficult, self-centeredness is practically the air we breathe. Turn on the television. Go on the internet and you'll see countless ads designed to put the focus on you and your desires. Watch most shows or movies and you'll see how gratifying self is at the very heart of what we watch. We're taught to feel good about ourselves, to put our own needs first. In the end, however, where does all that self-focus lead?

Jesus himself asks, **"What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"** When you and I really take a long, hard look at ourselves, we see all the imperfections, the faults, the sins, the things we don't want other people to see, because if they could we'd be undone by guilt and shame. We see every reason for our destruction and we don't want to look at that. So we keep trying to gratify self. We keep buying into our culture's message of "me and my desires first." In the end, though, all we do to gratify self is worthless if we give up our souls for it. That's not all though.

“If anyone would come after me, he must take up his cross.” Crosses were big and heavy and covered with sharp splinters that pricked and poked and cut. They were never easy to carry and the longer the distance carried, the tougher it became. So a cross is really an appropriate picture of the suffering Jesus was going to endure. He himself was about to literally take up his cross. From the moment he willingly left heaven, that’s where Jesus was headed. Isn’t that remarkable?

What was it that kept Jesus going to the cross? His perfect obedience to his heavenly Father. You see, unlike us, Jesus’ every thought, every word, every action was a perfect act of worship to his heavenly Father. He never had to do battle with a sinful self, since he was without sin. Even when Jesus was **“overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death”** the night he was betrayed, he still followed his Father’s will. He prayed, **“Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.”** His will was ever and always submitted to that of his heavenly Father. So when the time finally came for Jesus to take up his cross and be crucified on it, all that perfect obedience was finally complete as he declared with his final breath, **“It is finished!”**

Why would Jesus do that? Why did the almighty Son of God willingly endure such hardship, pain, suffering and finally death? He did it for us. He did it because he loved us. He perfectly submitted to his Father’s will, because we could not. He carried his cross to Calvary and allowed himself to be crucified there, because there was no other way to remove the burden of our sins.

Now Jesus calls us to take up our crosses and follow him. Our cross-bearing didn’t cause his. Our cross-bearing doesn’t save the world or even attempt to save ourselves. Our cross-bearing comes as a necessary consequence of Jesus’ cross-bearing for us...and sometimes it involves suffering.

Like I said, crosses were never easy to carry. In a similar way for believers, there are times when suffering occurs because we follow Christ. For example, the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah once cried out to the Lord to relieve him of his “cross”. Jeremiah objected to what he had to endure because he had to separate himself from what was popular. He suffered ridicule, humiliation and loneliness for proclaiming the Lord’s Word, when no one wanted to listen. He wanted to drop the cross, but that wasn’t possible.

It’s no different for you and me. We may not be persecuted directly or openly, but perhaps people subtly ridicule us for our Christian faith or the fact that we drive past all kinds of churches to come here. By nature, we’d much rather try to make life easier on ourselves, wouldn’t we? Suffering also comes by simply denying self of what it wants or the pain that is inflicted on our sinful selves when we obey God’s commands and not our desires.

The fact is, if there is no cross, there is no Christian. If we follow Jesus, it’s all or nothing. We can’t do it part-time when we feel like it, but all the time, even if it means following him where we’d rather not go. Just because you follow Jesus doesn’t mean God will give you wealth, success, advancement, or popularity. In fact, it often means the opposite—hardships, suffering, rejection, ridicule, loneliness, but as followers of Jesus such cross-bearing for his sake always drives us to the cross of Christ.

There in Christ we find comfort amidst hardship, plenty amidst need, security amidst ridicule, peace amidst crisis, healing amidst pain, relief amidst pressure, life amidst death. It is in Christ that we find the forgiveness and strength to continue to carry the crosses he allows us to bear as Paul once said, **“I can do everything through Christ who gives me strength.”** Jesus does that because he bore his cross for us all.

So why does Christ call us to a cross? Yes, he took up his for us, and yes, we take up our crosses to follow him, but will we ever get to put ours down? Well, remember what happened after Jesus’ carried his cross for us. After he declared his task complete, Jesus was done with his cross. He died, but the story doesn’t end there. It ends with life! Jesus rose from the dead, and that glory will be ours someday too. We haven’t earned it from denying self or carrying our crosses, but because Jesus’ victory over death is also ours through faith in him.

One day our sinful selves and their self-gratifying desires will finally be silenced. The crosses we bore in this life will drop by the wayside. On that glorious day, we will stand cross-free with all who faithfully follow Christ to eternal glory. There in heavenly glory, we will sing of the glorious battle won for us, and we will praise the Lamb who was slain for us...on the cross. **“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!...To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!”** Amen.