

Being a Disciple

(from Greg Ogden's *Discipleship Essentials*)

Central Truth:

A disciple is someone who has responded to the call of God in faith and obedience, has therefore been adopted into God's family, and has taken up the lifelong process of dying to self while allowing Jesus to come alive in us.

Scripture for Devotional Time

Read Mark 8:27-38

Questions:

1. Why did Jesus rebuke Peter?
2. Jesus' words of discipleship come off the heels of Peter's misguided beliefs. What does that say about what we should expect as a disciple of Jesus?
3. Where does this call to being Jesus' disciple "threaten" your life?
4. Is there anything that needs to "die" in your life in order for something new to be planted?
5. Who might keep you accountable to any changes Jesus calls you to?

Supplemental Reading

Written by Darrell Johson, associate professor of pastoral theology, Regent Seminary, Vancouver B.C.

“‘Life is difficult.’ That is the way M Scott Peck begins his very helpful book *The Road Less Traveled*. Most people do not see this truth. Most people believe that life should be easy. The road most traveled is the road of moaning and grumbling about life’s difficulties. The road less traveled is the road of accepting life’s difficulties and meeting them head on.

What Peck says about life in general is even more true about life with Jesus Christ. Discipleship is difficult. Following Jesus is costly. In his sermon on the Mount Jesus made it very clear that living with him meant walking the road less traveled. ‘Enter through the narrow gate,’ he said, ‘for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it (Matthew 7:13-14).

Jesus promises to give anyone who will follow him abundant life (John 10:10), but he makes it very clear from the beginning that to follow him is difficult and costly. He calls us to follow him on the road less traveled.

Jesus’ True Identity

Mark 8:27-35 may be the hardest of the hard sayings of Jesus. Jesus and his disciples were traveling through the villages around Caesarea Philippi, a city north of the Sea of Galilee. Caesarea Philippi was a pluralistic city, a city of rich and diverse religious and philosophic heritage. Up to this point in his ministry Jesus had done and said things that had stimulated the question, ‘Who is this man?’ In Caesarea Philippi Jesus asked his disciples, ‘Who do you say that I am?’ Peter, speaking for the twelve said, ‘You are the Christ’ (vs. 29; Matthew 16:16).

Jesus accepted their answer, but he immediately began to fill those terms—Messiah and Son of God—with unexpected meaning. ‘The Son of Man,’ Jesus’ favorite way of referring to himself, ‘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’ (vs 31). Jesus knew he *must* leave Caesarea Philippi and make his way to Jerusalem. And he knew that in Jerusalem he *must* suffer. And not only suffer but be rejected. And not only be rejected but be killed, crucified. And then be raised.

Peter could not handle Jesus’ words. ‘Never, Lord!’ he said. ‘This shall never happen to you!’ (Matthew 16:22) Suffering and death did not fit Peter’s concept of the Messiah. The Messiah comes in glory and power.

Peter also knew the implication for himself of Jesus concept of Messiahship. Just as there would be no resurrection for Jesus without crucifixion, so there would be no resurrection for the disciples without crucifixion. Peter had become the mouthpiece of the tempter, repeating the temptation Jesus had resisted in the wilderness.

Jesus' Difficult Road Less Traveled

From that day Jesus walked and taught the road less traveled, the road that leads to Easter but that goes right through the cross. There are all kinds of forks in the road offering another way, a way around the cross, but each of them eventually ends in a cul-de-sac. There is only one road to life. This road ends on the other side of the empty tomb, and we do not get there except through the cross.

Jesus gave this hard saying not only to his disciples but also to the multitudes. William Barclay rightly observed, 'No one could ever say that he was induced to follow Jesus by false pretenses. Jesus never tried to bribe men by the offer of an easy way.' Jesus was up-front with any would-be follower: 'If anyone would follow me—and I hope you will because I can give life abundantly—this is what you are in for' (Mark 8:34-35).

Notice the word *if*. That *if* reflects Jesus' acknowledging our freedom to choose. A certain rich man heard Jesus' call to discipleship, and he walked away (Mark 10:17-22). He heard what he was in for and judged it too costly. Mark tells us that Jesus looked at the man and loved him (vs 21), still knowing what his choice would be. But Jesus did not run after him or change the terms of the call. Jesus said, 'Estimate the cost' (Luke 14:28). 'You call me Messiah, Christ. You wish to follow me? If so, you should realize quite clearly where I am going, and understand that by following Me, you will be going there too.'

Jesus uses three vivid phrases to describe the road less traveled: deny yourself, take up your cross, and lose your life for my sake.

Deny Yourself. This is probably one of the most misunderstood and misapplied commands of the Lord. The word Mark uses in 8:34 means 'to resist,' 'to reject' or 'to refuse,' in short, to say no.

The phrase *deny yourself* is used in a number of important New Testament texts. For example, in Mark 14:71 Jesus had been arrested, and Peter was standing outside the courtroom warming himself by a fire. Peter was confronted three times and accused of having known Jesus. He began to curse and swear, saying, 'I don't know this man you're talking about.' Peter denied that he even knew who Jesus was. To deny yourself is to say, 'I do not know the person.'

Denying yourself may involve denying things, but this is not what Jesus is getting at. Neither does it mean denying your self-worth. Denying yourself does not mean denying feelings. And although some would say if you are enjoying following Jesus, something must be wrong, in truth it is not about denying yourself happiness. Finally, denying yourself does not mean deny your brains.

To deny yourself means to deny your self-lordship. It means saying no to the god who is me, to reject the demands of the god who is me, to refuse to obey the claims of the god who is me. A decisive no—'I do not know Lord Me—I do not bow down to him or her anymore.' Jesus calls us to say no to ourselves so we can say yes to him.

Take up your cross. This phrase has also been misunderstood and misapplied. Many people use it to refer to enduring an illness or disability, a negative experience or bothersome relationship: 'This is the cross I must bear.' But Jesus' words mean much more. 'Jesus' statement must have sounded repugnant to the crowd and the disciples alike.' The phrase would evoke the picture of a criminal forced to carry a cross beam upon which he was to be publicly executed.

A criminal picked up his cross only after receiving the death sentence. When a criminal carried his cross through the streets, for all practical purposes he was a dead man. His life had ended. A man on his way to public crucifixion 'was compelled to abandon all earthly hopes and ambitions.' Jesus calls his followers to think of ourselves as already dead, to bury all our earthy hopes and dreams, to bury the plans and agendas we made for ourselves. He will either resurrect our dreams or replace them with dreams and plans of his own.

This is a hard saying, but a liberating saying as well. Human bondage in all its forms is the result of being our own gods. Freedom comes when we lay down the ill-gotten, false crown, when we say no, when we live as though gods who are us have already died.

Lose your life for my sake. Herein lies the paradox of the road less traveled: we finally find ourselves when we lose ourselves for Jesus' sake. And how do we lose our lives for him? By investing all that we are and have for him and his gospel. By saying to him, 'Here is my home, my checkbook, my talents and gifts, my brain, my heart, my hands, my feet, my mouth. Here—its all yours. Use it all to glorify yourself and further your purpose on earth.'

This is a risky thing to say according to the world's wisdom. But in the end, when history is completed, what will really matter? Nothing except the kingdom of God. The only investments that pay off in the end are the investments made in the kingdom now. Those who walk the road less traveled, the road of losing everything for Jesus' sake, end up gaining everything that finally matters. Jim Elliot summarized it well: 'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.'

That is why Paul told the Philippians, with great joy,

"Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ...I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ...I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his

sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.” (Philippians 3:7-11)

Accepting the Challenge

What are some of the signs that we have not yet met Jesus’ challenge head on? The signs abound in churches today and manifest themselves as jealousy—not having what others have; competition—trying to achieve more than the next person; argumentative spirits—needing to have our own way; oversensitivity—becoming resentful when not recognized for our work or wanting it to be noticed that we’ve lost it all for Christ. We believe that we deserve the things we have—the nice homes and new cars. We plan our future without reference to the kingdom of God and spend the resources we have to improve our own kingdom. We use the gifts of God to advance our own name, our own reputation.

But ‘unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds’ (John 12:24). The road to Easter goes through Good Friday. The road to new life goes through the death of the old. The road to resurrection goes through crucifixion. Jesus calls us to walk that road, the road he walked.”

Final Questions:

1. How does your understanding of being a disciple of Jesus need to change?
2. When does discipleship become hard?
3. Where do you see the joy of discipleship?