

A Worm's Eye View

It is difficult to understand Jesus, because he asks us to exchange our worm's-eye view for a God's-eye view.

Mark 8:31-38 Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB)

His Death and Resurrection Predicted

31 Then He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, be killed, and rise after three days.

32 He was openly talking about this. So Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him.

33 But turning around and looking at His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind Me, Satan, because you’re not thinking about God’s concerns, but man’s!”

Take Up Your Cross

34 Summoning the crowd along with His disciples, He said to them, “If anyone wants to be My follower, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me.

35 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of Me and the gospel will save it.

36 For what does it benefit a man to gain the whole world yet lose his life?

37 What can a man give in exchange for his life?

38 For whoever is ashamed of Me and of My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.”

How blessed we are to have beautiful stained glass windows in our church. Often stained glass windows tell the story of Jesus' life. Light comes through the windows and makes the colors glow.

As you can see, the windows are made of many small pieces of colored glass that fit together to form the picture. Have you ever thought about how stained glass windows are made? It is a difficult process.

Working with glass, is not only difficult, but dangerous. You must wear glasses to protect your eyes when working with glass and many special tools are needed such as glass cutters, glass grinders, and pliers.

Small pieces of glass must be cut to exactly the right size. Sometimes the glass breaks in the wrong place and you must be careful that the glass doesn't cut your hands.

Even though working with stained glass is difficult, it is worth the effort because the end result is a

beautiful, inspiring piece of art that can cause us to think about God's love.

The Bible teaches us that following Jesus is a difficult thing to do. Jesus said, "**Whoever wants to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me**" (8:34).

Jesus warns us that to follow him is like carrying a huge, heavy cross. Even though you choose to follow Jesus there may be times when you have difficulty making the right choices and doing the right thing. You may get discouraged. Others may make fun of you. You might think it is just too hard to do, but it is worth the effort.

In much the same way that stained glass is beautiful and inspiring, so too will your life be beautiful and inspiring to others when you show them God's love. Just as light comes gleaming through stained glass, God's light comes from within you shining out for others to see.

SERMON:

Our lesson today, is bracketed by the story of Jesus healing a blind man at Bethsaida (8:22-26) and another blind man, Bartimaeus, at Jericho (10:46-25). During this period, Jesus is struggling with disciples who are blind to the truth that he would teach them. "**Having eyes, don't you see? Having ears, don't you hear?**" he asked (8:18). "**Don't you understand, yet?**" (8:21).

In his great confession (v. 29), Peter showed that he has caught a glimpse of the truth, but verse 32 reveals that his vision was distorted by his prior understanding of messiahship.

In verses 31-33, Jesus speaks to the disciples. In verses 34-38, he calls the crowd to join the disciples in hearing the criteria for discipleship.

This is the first of three occasions in this section where Jesus predicts his suffering and death (see also 9:31 and 10:33-34). On all three occasions, the disciples demonstrate their lack of understanding and Jesus responds by expanding his teaching on discipleship.

For longtime churchgoers, our Gospel lesson today is familiar—so familiar that it tends to go in one ear and out the other. "I've already heard that one," we think—and we are tempted to daydream. But this story has the power to transform our lives—but it requires that we really hear Jesus—that we struggle with the difficult things that he is saying.

So I invite you to listen carefully this morning. Listen to what Jesus says. Listen to determine what it means for your life. Listen so that Jesus might turn your life to a new direction. Listen for a word from God aimed directly at your heart!

To understand this story, we must first understand what has just happened. Peter has just proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah—the one for whom Israel has waited for so long—the one who will save Israel. That was the turning point in the Gospel of Mark. Prior to that, Jesus taught and healed. After that, Jesus starts his journey to Jerusalem, where he will die. Peter's confession was the hinge—the turning point of the story. Peter, so often wrong, got it right! Jesus is the Messiah—the one who will save Israel.

But what happens next? What happens next is that Jesus begins to teach the disciples what it means that he is the Messiah. He begins to teach them that he must suffer and die.

The disciples have sacrificed a great deal to follow Jesus, and it is beginning to pay off. Jesus has been working wonder after wonder, and the crowds are responding nicely. The disciples see great possibilities ahead, and cannot welcome anything that suggests otherwise. We should not be too critical of them for refusing to accept Jesus' talk of suffering and death. It must sound to them as if he is having a bad moment and needs a bit of encouragement. Even today, having known all our lives how the story turns out, we prefer a gospel that promises success. The cross has always been a hard sell—and will always be so.

Now listen to what Peter does next. Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. Peter, who just said that Jesus is the Messiah takes the Messiah aside and rebukes him. Mark doesn't tell us what Peter said, but it isn't hard to imagine. He said something like, "Jesus, that talk about suffering and dying is not what we need to hear. That's crazy talk! Pull yourself together! YOU'RE THE MESSIAH! Got it! Now start acting like the Messiah! Tell us about the good things you're going to do. Let's not hear any more talk about suffering and dying!"

Doesn't it seem odd that Peter would confess his faith in Jesus as the Messiah in one breath and then criticize Jesus in the next breath? It seems odd to me!

But perhaps it isn't odd after all. Peter had been seeing Jesus heal people and work great miracles. He had heard teaching so profound that it had to come from God. We should not be surprised that he was having trouble coming to grips with the idea that the Messiah should suffer and die.

To be honest, we have heard "The Rest of the Story" a thousand times—the story of Jesus' death and resurrection—and sometimes we still don't get it. Like Peter, we expect certain things from Jesus—and sometimes what we get is very different from what we expected. That happens in every generation of Christians, because Christ says things that we don't want to hear. For instance, let's look at how Jesus responded to Peter's criticism. First, he said:

**"Get behind me, Satan!
For you have in mind not the things of God,
but the things of men" (v. 33).**

Jesus was trying to show the disciples the world from a God's-eye view, but the disciples were used to seeing the world from a worm's-eye view. It was like trying to explain electricity to someone who has never seen a light bulb—who has never heard a radio or seen a movie. How do you explain electricity to someone like that? It wouldn't be easy.

Frankly, when I went through a science class many years ago, I didn't find it easy to understand electricity either. I've seen light bulbs by the thousands. I use electricity every day to run my refrigerator—and my television—and my computer—and a thousand other things. But if you ask me how electricity works, I would be hard pressed to explain. I know what electricity can do, but it seems more like magic than science to me. I wouldn't want to have to explain electricity to someone who has never experienced it.

Jesus was trying to explain something even more mysterious than electricity. He was trying to explain how things look from God's vantage point. He was trying to tell the disciples that he, the Messiah, would have to suffer and die. He was trying to tell them that they, too, would have to suffer and die. That did not sit well with them. They did not get it! Who can blame them!

Once again I will remind you that we are familiar with what Paul Harvey called "The Rest of the Story"—the part about Jesus dying and being raised from the dead—but very often we fail to connect the dots—fail to recognize what that means for us. Let me give you some examples.

A number of years ago, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, a reporter interviewed a Princeton student for her opinion about possible American intervention. The student replied, "There's nothing worth dying for."

"There's nothing worth dying for." Don't be distracted by the military context of that statement. Let's just look at the student's words, "There's nothing worth dying for." Is that what you think? Lots of people think like that—but Jesus did not. Jesus said:

"Whoever wants to come after me,
let him deny himself,
and take up his cross, and follow me.

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it;
and whoever will lose his life for my sake
and the sake of the Good News
will save it" (vv. 34-35).

That's quite different from "There's nothing worth dying for"—isn't it!

When Mark wrote this Gospel, he and his friends knew what it meant for Christians to take up their cross and follow Jesus. Rome was persecuting Christians. The first readers of Mark's Gospel would have known Christians who had died for their faith. They would have been in danger themselves. But they believed that Jesus had accomplished something through his death that he could not have accomplished any other way—and they knew that they might find themselves in a situation where they would have to choose between Christ and death. They understood the cost of discipleship.

Discipleship involves self-denial and cross-bearing. At the time in which this Gospel was written, Christians were literally bearing crosses and losing their lives—but they were not masochistic. They were purposeful believers whose sacrifices were feeding the growth of God's kingdom.

Sports provide an analogy. Games are won, not just on the playing field, but also on the practice field. To experience glory on game day, the athlete must first push himself or herself to the limit on the practice field. Physical conditioning is painful and practicing fundamentals is tiresome, but the purpose of discipline is neither pain nor boredom but victory.

So it is in the spiritual realm. Spiritual discipline begets spiritual victory. The church is always tempted to offer less costly discipleship in the hope of attracting more people. A weak call, however, produces weak disciples. "A church may win people by disguising the true meaning of discipleship. But it cannot do anything with them after it gets them" (Luccock, 768).

The challenge to lose our lives for Jesus' sake conflicts with modern values. Preservation of life is a major industry. Modern medicine, proper diet, and exercise extend our lives. Cosmetics and plastic surgeons preserve our appearance. Funeral directors continue the work even after we die, using cosmetics to make us look "natural." Those values make it difficult for us to hear Jesus' call to lose our lives for his sake.

When this Gospel was first written, Christians were literally in danger of losing their lives for their faith. They were tempted to deny Christ to save their lives. That is still true for many Christians today. Persecution of Christians is alive and well. More Christians died for their faith in the 20th Century than in the 1st Century. The list of nations where Christians are routinely persecuted is a long one: China, North Korea, Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia, East Timor, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Egypt, Sudan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Cuba—to name only a few.

The challenges that most of us face seem trivial by comparison to martyrdom. Workplaces are inhospitable to Christian witness. Coaches schedule games on Sunday mornings, forcing young people to choose between sports and Jesus. People label Christians as fanatics or bigots for beliefs that run counter to the prevailing culture. These are serious and painful issues, but nevertheless fall far short of the kind of persecution that Christians endured through the centuries and are still enduring even today in many parts of the world.

"Whoever wants to come after me,
let him deny himself,
and take up his cross, and follow me.

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it;
and whoever will lose his life for my sake
and the sake of the Good News
will save it" (vv. 34-35).

But Peter, not yet having seen the open tomb, did not understand. Jesus announced that he would have to suffer and die, so Peter took him aside and rebuked him. Peter didn't get it, and I can't say that I blame him. All too often, we don't get it either. Just listen to some of the things that we say.

We say, "Look out for Number One"—which is just another way of saying, "Love yourself. Take care of yourself." But Jesus says, "**You shall love your neighbor as yourself**" (Mark 12:31). He calls us to "agape" love—the kind of love that God has for people—the kind of love that a mother has for a child—the kind of love that takes care of the beloved—the kind of love that cares more about the beloved than about oneself. That's quite different from "Look out for Number One"—isn't it!

In fact, Jesus goes even further. He says:

"You have heard that it was said,
'You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.'

But I tell you, love your enemies,
bless those who curse you,
do good to those who hate you,
and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you" (Matthew 5:43-44).

That's especially different from "Look out for Number One"—isn't it!

Another example! We say, "If I don't take care of myself, nobody else will." But Jesus says:

"Therefore, I tell you, don't be anxious for your life:
what you will eat, or what you will drink;
nor yet for your body, what you will wear.

Isn't life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

See the birds of the sky,
that they don't sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns.
Your heavenly Father feeds them.
Aren't you of much more value than they?"
(Matthew 6:25-27)

That's quite different from "If I don't take care of myself, nobody else will"—isn't it!

So what's my point! My point is simply that it was hard for Peter to understand Jesus because Jesus was showing him something even more mysterious than electricity. He was showing him how things work in the kingdom of God. He was asking Peter to shift from a worm's-eye view to a God's eye-view.

And my point is that we often find it difficult to understand Jesus too. We want to tame Jesus—to domesticate him—to make him harmless and comfortable, like a lapdog. We want to look to Jesus for easy solutions to our problems—for a way to believe and grow rich. Jesus responds by saying:

"Get behind me, Satan!
For you have in mind not the things of God,
but the things of men" (v. 33).

But the good news is that lots of people do "get it"—do try to live as Christ would have them live:

- I see Christians paying their own way to go on mission trips to help needy people.
- I read about Christians who have given up the comforts of hearth and home to go to foreign lands where they live uncomfortable lives—often dangerous lives—to help people and to proclaim the Gospel.
- I see our denomination (NOTE: Speak here about the good work that your denomination has done to support disaster relief and other initiatives to help people in need).
- I see this congregation (NOTE: Talk about the good work that your congregation is doing).
- I see people in this congregation who give sacrificially of their time and money to keep this church going—to keep our witness to Christ alive in this community—to help our children grow in faith.

Those are the kinds of selfless ministry to which Christ calls us.

Jesus says:

"Whoever wants to come after me, let him deny himself,
and take up his cross, and follow me.
For whoever wants to save his life will lose it;
and whoever will lose his life for my sake and the sake of the Good News
will save it" (vv. 34-35).

This is the word of God.