

Carrying Your Cross

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Mark 8:27-38

When I was at school, I can remember an occasion where my Dad dropped me off for an exam I was really worried about. And he just said the words, "Don't panic Mr. Mainwaring!" That really cheered me up because I love Dad's Army.

If you were at the church in the evening last week you would have seen Lloyd Notice perform the Gospel of Mark. It was amazing. And you remember, very importantly, there was a great big cross there in the middle. And I'm sure you were all wondering, 'goodness me, I wonder how that got up from the crypt into the church.' Well, it got there because I carried it. And I can remember doing that, knowing I was going to give this talk the following week (i.e. today). And I thought, 'Thank you, Lord. That's my sermon introduction covered right there.' Because it just so happens, we've just been talking about 'carrying your cross'.

And I will start here by saying that this has probably been the hardest sermon subject I have written about. Not because of the heaviness of the topic or anything like that. It's because I'm very aware of moments in my life where this "carrying your cross" theme has basically been a tool used to beat the congregation over the head with. The tactic will tend to be, basically, 'you need to get serious about your faith, and you need to realise just how sinful you really truly are.' And, basically, you end up feeling worse than when you arrived because you realise how far you fall short of the glory of God.

But if you're a Christian here, that should be no surprise to you. We know that the reason we're in church is because we know that we need help. We need help when it comes to things like 'eternal life' and 'salvation.' That shouldn't be a surprise to you. So, this is not news to you. But I want, to draw our attention to this phrase that's going to come up again and again as we go through the talk.

Choosing to carry your cross should never add to the work of his cross.

It should never add to the work of his cross. It should never take away from the work of his cross. And that's going to come up again and again because I want this to actually be a very comforting reality - that the work has been done already. If anyone was here for Tony Haines and Jo Tucker's talk last week (they were both very, very good), we got a teaser of exactly what this phrase, 'carrying your cross,' means. You'll know that being a Christian is not just for Sundays, it's not just for Christmas or Easter or any other Christian event. It is very much for life. And as Jo and Tony showed a snippet of last week, **it's a lifetime of growth**, becoming the man or the woman that God and Jesus is calling us to be. And it's true that when we become Christians, when we say, 'I want in on the action,' it's saying that we want to live Jesus' way. The Apostle Paul wrote to some Christians living in Rome

Romans 12:2 | “² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

And just hold on to those last three words, because we're going to come up to them right at the end. And I love verses like this. There's a great word in here, which is the word translated “conform to the pattern of^(syschēmatizō)”. This is one of those times where a Greek word is used only in one other place in the New Testament. And it's here:

1 Peter 1:14 | “¹⁴ As obedient children, do not conform ^(syschēmatizō) to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.”

So do you see? There are two paths. You're going one way or the other. You're either conforming to the world (in other words, doing what you want to do), or you're conforming to be more like Jesus. So when Jesus said if anyone should take up their cross to follow him, it is a call for us to become the person that we're meant to be. Day-by-day, wrestling, often struggling to become more like Jesus, and getting rid of, or laying aside, or cutting off anything in our lives that stands in the way of that. To stand up in the face of temptation or pain and say, “not my will, not my way, but Lord, your will and your way.”

And Tony showed us last week that actually in Jesus' day, Many people couldn't see how the traditions that they had put in place were getting in the way of seeing Jesus for who he really is. But as we shall see, Peter got it. Peter understood.

Mark 8:29 | “²⁹ ‘But what about you?’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’ Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah.’”

When we call Jesus the Messiah, the Christ, (they're the same word), we say in our hearts that Jesus is king. **And the destination, the journey, when we take up our crosses, when we believe, is to become more like that king, knowing that one day we will see God in all his glory.** And that is the goal. It is without question in my mind, that this is the reason why every single person is born. That is the meaning of your life. And I quote this in pretty much every sermon: The meaning of life, the chief end of man and chief end of woman, is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

And I'm telling you right now, no one alive is ready for that. Not one person. You cannot even begin to imagine, or comprehend, or conceive the joy that is waiting for you in Heaven. We talked about this a couple of months ago when we did we were doing the *Tenets* series, about Heaven. Heaven is not ‘Earth 2.0;’ it's not ‘Earth updated’ or ‘Earth-premium-subscription.’ The reason why it's Heaven is because God is there, and you're getting nothing better than that. Nothing can compare.

But because of that I want to point out a kind of an elephant in the room here because we've just been talking a lot about joy, and the joy of the Lord. And we know that becoming more like him in our thinking, or in the way that we see people, or in the way that we treat people; in being more giving; being more charitable; a heart for the homeless or having a heart for seeing justice in the world. That is a huge joy. But, if we're honest, the day-to-day task of that can feel like a massive slog at times. And I'm sure I'm not the only one who feels that. It can be a real drag.

And you see the thing about crosses is that they are heavy. And they were reserved for people who were condemned to be executed. John Walton, (who's a Dr.-Christian-history-nerd, He wrote that "Those condemned to execution would often carry the horizontal beam of their cross (the patibulum) out to the site of their execution, through an often hostile and mocking mob.¹" So, if you lived in first century Palestine, and you found yourself carrying a wooden beam on your back, you weren't supposed to come out of that situation alive.

And of course, in the truest sense, we die to ourselves. Listen to how Paul put it in his letter to the Romans.

Romans 8:13 | “¹³ ‘For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.’”

If you want to simplify this further, it's choosing to do things Jesus' way, and not the way that I would want to do it. Or, we would want to do it.

¹ Craig S. Keener and John H. Walton, eds., *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible: Bringing to Life the Ancient World of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 1645.

And he did say 'take up your cross' to his disciples, many of whom died because of their decision to take up their cross. Many of them were killed for their faith. **Some people who end up dying to themselves, and want to follow where the Lord leads, end up being killed for it.** And I bring to mind at this point a chap called Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Lutheran minister. I obsessed over his writings as a student in a university. He wrote a book called *The Cost of Discipleship*, which is basically like a massive punch in the gut against what he called 'cheap grace.' He was targeting people who didn't understand that the grace that they had been given was also a call to carry their cross. And this was a big deal because he was writing in a time where Christian churches in Germany were capitulating to the Nazis. It was easier for many Christians in Germany at the time to turn a blind eye. It was easier to lay aside their cross. Bonhoeffer became a runner for the German resistance, and he wrote openly against the Reich. And at one point he ended up in America, and he could have stayed there, but he chose to go back to Germany. He didn't have to, but he believed in God's calling to take up his cross, and eventually he was executed for following God's calling.

And what's also striking is that we're reading the Gospel of Mark right now. One of the reasons this appears to have been written, if the scholars are right on the dating here, is that it would have been roughly around about the time where Herodotus tells us that Nero was blaming Christians for a fire that started in Rome. And so, Mark reminding them that Jesus is king and he is the Messiah, the king of the kingdom of God, was meant to be a comfort to them.

Now, I am so unbelievably confident when I'm talking about people like the disciples and Bonhoeffer, some of you here, right now, are going to be comparing yourself to them.. That's a very, very natural thing to do, comparing people who gave their lives to following Jesus. So, on the one hand, I want to state the obvious that when you become a Christian, you're not signing yourself up for death, to be killed for your faith. But this is where we're coming back to what I said earlier about the cross, and not adding to the work of the cross.

If we're not careful, we can be in danger of feeling completely and utterly unworthy of God's grace, love and mercy, because we don't feel like we're doing enough; other Christians seem to be so good at putting off the flesh and putting Jesus first; we keep stumbling over the same sins over and over again. And it feels like you can be someone who at the first opportunity will just lay aside their cross just for a moment. Because it's easier, to satisfy an itch that needs scratching. And in that place, it can be very easy to see a million trees and not one single forest. You might think 'God must be so disappointed in me.' And that leads to thinking that you're a hopeless case: 'I just don't think I can do what the 'real,' the 'hardcore' Christians can do.' And then that leads to another place: 'Maybe, I never was a Christian in the first place. Because if I was, I'd be like them.'

And if that's you, I want to cut straight to the heart of that straight away. With that simple sentence, something that I wish I'd heard many, many years ago, is that **carrying your cross should never, ever add to the work of his cross.** When it comes to salvation, to eternal life, a lot of work has gotten into that. And here's the good news of the gospel. Not one part of that was done by you. You contributed nothing to your salvation. Not one bit. **All of that work was done by Jesus when he died on the cross that he carried. The cross that he died on. The cross that he was taken down from. And the cross that could not keep him in the grave.** He rose again on the third day.

1 Peter 2:24 puts it this way:

1 Peter 2:24 | “²⁴ “He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.””

We actually see this in Isaiah as well, which is where Peter is quoting from.

**Isaiah 53:5 | “⁵ ‘But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.’”**

Notice what neither of these verses say. You bore your sins in your body on a cross. By your wounds you have been healed.

No – it was Jesus who did all of that. We know what the work is, Peter and Isaiah have just said it. And none of it was you. Not one bit of it. And that's a hell of an insurance policy, isn't it? All our wrongdoing, completely covered, and the compensation is eternal life and the joy of intimacy, knowing the Lord. So, **I don't want anyone to even dare entertain the notion that how we feel or what we do or the strength of our conviction or even the strength of our faith can add or take away from the work of the cross.** You can't put him back up on the cross, and you can't retake him down again. It's already happened, and he's done it. I know I believe it. I know I am safe, because he dealt with my sin on the cross.

And the thing is, **when it comes to taking up our cross, as Peter worked out, it's that Jesus has every single right to ask us to do it.** Only Jesus has that right. Peter confesses Jesus is the Christ. In other words, Jesus is the king. And we get this in the very beginning of Mark. We're going to take us right back to Chapter 1:1.

**Mark 1:1 | “1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah,
the Son of God,”**

This is by far the heaviest item in Mark's little theological backpack. Everything he writes about comes from this. Everything.

Jesus is the Christ. Therefore, John baptises him.
He is the Christ. Therefore, he's tempted in the desert.
He is the Christ. Therefore, Jesus preaches the kingdom.
He is the Christ. Therefore he performs healing upon healing
He is the Christ. Therefore take up your cross and follow him.

And, as we've read, we pick up the story where Peter shows that he's got that. He's understood he understands that Jesus is the King of the Jews. And this is a big deal, because at the time, Israel, Judea was under Roman occupation. And Jews believed that there would, one day, be a king of David's line who would come and reign in the kingdom of God, presiding over a rule of everlasting peace and righteousness. And Jesus has just told Peter he is indeed that guy. So you can imagine Peter's eyes lighting up
And then we read:

Mark 8:31 | “³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.”

Come again? You don't need to be Einstein to work out what's going on here and work out why Peter responded the way that he did - because a dead person can't rule. He says, 'No, thank you.' And it's funny isn't it how like we can miss things because we're modern day readers of the Bible. Rabbis were followed by the disciples. The Rabbi goes is in the front, followed by the disciples. Peter goes to Jesus' side, level with him, and pulls him aside. And say 'No, that's not going to happen. You've got a job to do. You've got to be a king.' And then Jesus says those immortal words,:

Mark 8:33 | “³³ ‘Get behind me, Satan!’”

You can imagine Peter had shivers. I bet his shivers had shivers, quite frankly. Now, Peter was not wrong about the fact that Jesus would be a king, because the Old Testament promises that he would. He would be a king of David's line. There's a Morecambe and Wise sketch with Andre Previn, the conductor. Morecambe is at the piano about to do his big bit and he starts playing all the wrong notes on the piano. Previn says, 'you're playing all the wrong notes.' Morecambe pulls Previn up by the scruff of his neck and he says, 'I am playing all the right notes, just not necessarily in the right order.' And this is exactly what's going on with Peter. He's playing all the right notes but in the wrong order.

Yes, Jesus *will* be king, he *will* reign, and there *will* be everlasting peace. But there's a moment that has to happen first. He has to die. He has to go and take up his cross, be buried, rise again, and ascend to his Father in glory. And you're living in this reason right now. Because there's a window of time, there's an opportunity right now, for you to come to faith, to know the living Lord. Jesus is going to come back one day. That window isn't going to last forever. This is our chance. And, if you haven't already, I pray you take it. And hopefully you'll see why as we close.

I want to close therefore with what the work of the cross has been doing for me, not just in the past but also today. And so I want to quickly revisit Romans 12:2, the passage we started with.

Romans 12:2 | “²Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.””

Remember, we're going one way, or the other. We're conforming to his good, pleasing or perfect will. Or we're going the way of the world, which, by logic here, is *not* good it's *not* pleasing and it is *far from* perfect. I don't know about you, but I really want good things. I want pleasant things. I want perfect things. And I'm going to tell you now, I'm so convinced of this - you will never find anything close to these things outside of God. You can never find the best other than with God. In God there is no division, there's no strife. He's just pure bliss.

I've been really enjoying a couple of books lately. One is called *None Greater* by Matthew Barrett, and the other one is called *To Gaze Upon God* by Samuel Parkinson. These are the kinds of books that have been showing me that God is just the best. In-and-of Himself, there is none greater, there is none better, none more lovely, none more beautiful, none more excellent, and none more worthy of our praise, none more worthy of our gaze, none more worthy of our adoration. And there is so much grace for us when we lay aside our crosses, and forget all that, to scratch a sinful itch. There's so much grace.

And, day-by-day, he is showing me that all of this work, all of this stuff is worth taking up my cross for. And I pray that you'll join me in that. For the times where taking up our cross is an easy yoke, an easy burden to take because it's the Lord's. But the times where, also, it just feels like a drag and it's really easy to lay it aside. So, let's do this together and grow together to be more like Jesus. I can't do it on my own. I need you guys. And you all need each other. We all need each other. So let's grow together to be more like Jesus, who is the best, best that ever bested.

Closing Prayer

“ Lord Jesus, thank you that you are the best. There is none greater than you. There is none beside you. There is no one like you. And I pray you'd give us the eyes to see that, by your Holy Spirit. Would you open our hearts and our minds to see your beauty, and your glory, in such a way that we just can't help to want to be more like you - in our attitudes; in our words; in our actions; how we see the poor and the downtrodden; how we look at the world. We want to see it through your eyes. For there is none greater. And Lord, we long for that day. Thank you that you will carry us through, because the work is done, the work is yours. And for the times where we feel like we're not enough because, again, we keep stumbling, we keep falling, we keep laying aside our cross: Father, I pray that you would just comfort us. Remind us that a bruised reed you will not break (Isaiah 42:3). May we know that comfort. Help us put on your armour, and teach us, day-by-day, to live for your glory and to understand your joy all the more. Amen.”



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