



Sermon

For the week of September 27, 2009

based on Mark 8:27-38

Do you remember the Russian comedian, Yakov Smirnoff? When he first came to our country, he was flabbergasted by the incredible variety of instant products available in American grocery stores. He once told this story. “On my first shopping trip I saw powdered milk. Just add water and, presto, you’ve got milk! Then I saw powdered orange juice. Just add water and, presto, you’ve got orange juice! Then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, ‘Oh, my, what a country!’”

Mr. Smirnoff was joking of course, but sometimes I wonder if we make similar assumptions about Christian discipleship. We’re convinced that once someone is brought to faith in Jesus, that’s it, as if there’s an immediate and miraculous, an in-depth and substantial change in his attitude, character, and habits. In other words, perfection is achieved immediately. We go to church as if we’re going to the grocery store. Powdered Christians. Just add water.

Now it is true that God’s declares us perfect for the sake of Jesus Christ. The word for this is *justification*. And what God declares us to be he also calls us to be. The word for this is *sanctification*. This is where the struggle becomes real. This is where the rubber of faith meets the road of daily living. It’s to our lives of sanctification, living for Jesus, that the Apostle Paul refers, when he writes, *“Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Php 2:12).*

And so today, as we continue our fall series of discipleship sermons, entitled, *Breaking the Huddle*, we want to hear and heed Jesus’ call to:

Step Out of the Ordinary with God’s Kind of Faith

1. Be courageous and leave behind the things of men.
2. Be courageous and follow after the things of God.

1. Be courageous and leave behind the things of men.

Jesus has been instructing his disciples at a breathless pace. When they reach the region of Caesarea Philippi, the very center of Roman power in Palestine and the hub of all that is humanly wise and learned, Jesus pauses to put his disciples to the test. He asks them, *“Who do people say I am?”* “Oh, that’s easy,” they must think. *“Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”* But then Jesus gets downright personal and asks, *“But what about you? Who do you say I am?”* It doesn’t surprise us that Peter’s the first to answer, but he answers well. And while he may not fully understand all the implications included in the title he uses, he says to Jesus, *“You are the Christ.”*

“[Jesus] 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, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.” Jesus patiently takes the time to instruct his disciples about what’s going to happen to him. He doesn’t want them to misunderstand his mission as *“the Christ,”* the Anointed One. The problem is that Peter is slow to understand the meaning of Jesus’ words. He—like we—tends to focus on *“the things of men.”*

In fact, all the disciples fail to see why Jesus has to suffer and die. As a result, they can’t appreciate what his death is going to do for them. In many ways we’re no different. Our weak, finite minds struggle to appreciate the value of Jesus’ great redemptive work. In fact, it may even be detestable—offensive—to us that someone—the Son of God, no less—had to die for us. I mean, we’re not THAT bad, are we? Our situation wasn’t THAT hopeless, was it, that God had to come into our world and die for us? And Jesus’ cross is pushed aside.

There’s a disturbing trend in Christianity today that denies what we Lutherans call the Theology of the Cross. The tendency is to focus on success and prosperity and to deny suffering and pain. Instead of God’s grace that heals the

soul, there's the mystic power of the preacher's touch that heals the flesh. Instead of heavenly riches purchased by Christ's blood, there's the fascination with balanced checking accounts, casting the evil spirit of debt from our lives, and pursuing financial freedom as if it were one of the gifts of the Spirit.

You and I face the very real temptation to focus on *"the things of men"* to the point where we, like Peter, take Jesus aside and rebuke him. We're tempted to be instant-mix disciples or powdered Christians. The temptation is cheap grace. Cheap grace is grace without the cross; grace without discipleship; grace without Jesus Christ living, suffering, and dying in our place. Cheap grace tells Jesus to stay in heaven, because we really don't need him here on earth. Cheap grace looks for a quick fix to spiritual problems. It winks at sin, minimizes sin's consequences, and denies any thought of divine payment for sin.

Jesus didn't come to offer cheap grace. Jesus came to live, suffer, and die—all in our place. In the words of the prophet, *"Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows; yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Is 53:4,5).* This is not cheap grace. It cost Jesus dearly. But it is free grace—free because he did all of it willingly and free because it comes to us without cost. These are *"the things of God."*

2. Be courageous and follow after the things of God.

"Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.'"

Jesus doesn't limit these words to his disciples but includes the entire crowd. They all have the same thing on their minds. They're all repulsed by Jesus' words that he will gain his greatest glory by suffering and dying. This runs counter to their own personal ambitions regarding their place in the kingdom of God. What they want are positions of power in an earthly kingdom. What they're really doing is putting themselves and what they want before God and what he wants. It's to this that Jesus says, *"[You] must deny [your]self."*

To deny ourselves and follow Jesus means that we make doing God's will the primary goal of our life and that we submit our will and desires to his. Any way you look at it, that's going to involve sacrifice. In short, we should expect to receive the same treatment that Jesus received. And we shouldn't shrink from it. Self-denial is much more than a student sacrificing some precious sleep to study for an exam. It means focusing on Jesus and enduring whatever it takes to stay faithful to him. When our sinful nature tells us to sin, we don't listen to it. When it tempts us to avoid suffering, we go straight forward. We courageously follow Jesus, who himself suffered and died and was raised for us. Oh, yes, it takes a great deal of self-denial to serve the Lord Jesus in his kingdom. But that's what Christian discipleship is all about.

Our human, limited way of thinking objects vehemently to this line of thinking. How can we gain life by losing life? At every turn our world tells us that we need to look out for Number 1. The world is appalled at Jesus' questions: *"What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet lose his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"* Isn't that what's it all about—gaining the world? In fact, this philosophy is so deeply engrained in our society that we've turned it into a cheap means to salvation, a god, a creed to replace Jesus.

As a matter of self-reflection, we need to answer questions like this: What is our greatest possession? Family? Children? Business? Worldly goods? Jesus says that the real answer, the only answer, is our soul. Look at it this way. Can a boat float us to heaven? Can a bank account pay the debt of our sin? Can our family provide a heavenly residence for us? The answer to each of these questions clearly is no. If our soul is lost, there is no amount of worldly stuff to redeem it. Forgiveness and salvation and heaven are ours only by trusting in Jesus as our Savior. This is the truth that we need to help us if we are to walk with Jesus, and especially if we are to bear our burdens and carry our crosses for his name's sake.

That's why we, your called and elected leaders here at St. Paul's, have developed a *Core Curriculum* for you to grow, as the Apostle Peter says, "*in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*" (2 Pt 3:14). These are "*the things of God,*" and the stronger you are in them the more courageous you'll be to leave behind "*the things of men.*" You'll find this *Core Curriculum* on page 9 of today's worship folder. It includes these four connections:

- *Connection to Christ,*
- *Connection to His Church,*
- *Connection to Christian Living, and*
- *Connection to God's Ways.*

Each "connection" is intended to help you along the path of discipleship, to assist you in your walk with Jesus. We hope and pray that every one of you will plug in wherever it's appropriate. We're confident that each one of you wants to step out of the ordinary with God's kind of faith, a courageous faith, a faith that rejects and leaves behind "*the things of men*" and embraces and follows after "*the things of God.*" May God for Jesus' sake graciously grant it for our growth in sanctification and for the salvation of many more immortal souls. Amen.

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