

Ever Felt Spiritually Inadequate?

Mark 8:31-38

Hear again Jesus' call to discipleship as given in Mark 8:34, "Anyone who wants to be a follower of mine must renounce self; he must take up his cross and follow me." This line has given me more difficulty than any other statement, verse, or passage in the New Testament. You might wonder why I would feel that way. This statement of Jesus is about as simple and straightforward as any he ever made. It would be hard for a person to say that he does not understand it. And it does not lack for interpretation and commentary. I have heard countless sermons and read numerous articles based on this one verse. I have preached on this text dozens of times myself. It addresses the central themes of discipleship—self-denial, sacrifice, and commitment. Why do I find it difficult?

One reason is that it leaves me with a sense of uneasiness. When I confront Jesus' summons to sacrificial living, I realize that I have a lot of work to do in the areas of self-renunciation and cross-bearing. When I evaluate my lifestyle over against this call to discipleship, I am deeply humbled. I thank God for a season such as Lent that forces me to consider this contrast. That's a difficult thing!

This statement also arouses within me an attitude of cynicism. I don't know very many other persons who measure up to the standard of discipleship given here. I have known a few who thought they did, but they stumbled all over the problem of pride! Let's be honest. Are modern Christians serious about the call of Jesus? Do you recall what Jesus said to the rich young man? "Go," Jesus told him, "sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Mark 10:21). Do you know anyone who has ever done that? I often think at G. K. Chesterton was right when he said, "Christianity has not so much been tried and found wanting, as it

has been found difficult and left untried.” I have to confess that statements such as the one before us today make me a bit cynical.

Mainly, though, it is the way the church and preachers have used this comment of Jesus that has caused me difficulty. If we are not careful in the way we share this call to discipleship, we do more harm than good. We can leave faithful followers of Jesus with feelings of spiritual inadequacy. I have been affected that way more than once.

In the church in which I grew up it was clear that Christians were divided into “good, better, and best.” It was also obvious as to how those grades were determined. Those who attended all the services of the church and/or gave the most money were considered “best” at surrendering self and taking up a cross. But then, even the most dedicated members of the local church were not on the level of the clergy, the missionaries who occasionally visited from the field, or the evangelists who made the rounds at revival time. They were the ones who were “really committed.”

I found a similar attitude in seminary. I felt called to a pastoral ministry and to the study of the New Testament and Christian theology. The seminary I chose boasted that it was the seminary that emphasized world missions. Students with a higher level of commitment to Christ went to foreign lands. We were often asked to look deep into our hearts to see whether God was calling to serve overseas. Leaving life as we knew it would demonstrate true self-denial and cross-bearing.

Seminary life featured another plateau of devotion that I had not encountered earlier. Professors were held in awe. They were perceived as giving themselves in study without concern for salary or possessions. I don’t know what seminary teachers earn today, but in the 60s they were very poorly compensated. Constantly I heard that if Dr. So-and-So were to take a job in

industry, he would earn ten times as much money as he was receiving as a teacher. Once I replied, "Well, maybe he should do that and tithe his income."

During my years in the ministry I have heard that persons who truly heed the call of Jesus will spend hours in prayer each day, that they will always give more than the tithe, that they will witness to so many persons each week, that they will volunteer so much time in missions efforts, and so on. You have heard these claims as well. Ever make you feel spiritually inadequate or inferior? Does it make you a little sheepish about approaching God to talk about your concerns? Do you feel that you are just not in the loop all the time? This statement of Jesus about self-denial and cross-bearing can raise some difficulties.

Let's take a fresh look at this very familiar passage. Too often we treat statements like this one as a kind of threat or challenge or standard of measurement. Used that way they inevitably lead to levels in the Christian experience and to judgmental attitudes. Perhaps that's not at all what Jesus intended. Actually, I'm pretty well convinced that that's not what he intended.

Mark makes it clear that Jesus turned to address the crowd, not just the disciples. He placed all his listeners on the same level. Then he gave an invitation to discipleship. I emphasize the idea of invitation. This is an invitation to discovery, to self-understanding, and to life-affirming concepts.

"Anyone who wants to be a follower of mine," Jesus said, "must renounce self; he must take up his cross and follow me." That sounds strong, because it is strong. But life requires a focus. This is not so much a threat as it is a plea. We are called to be in the presence of Christ. Living in the presence of Christ, or coming to know that we are in the presence of Christ, does not put us down or cause feelings of inadequacy. On the contrary, that awareness gives life and vitality. That's one of the wonders of Christian discipleship. Greek philosophers

and Jewish rabbis had disciples who learned their ways and their religious or philosophical systems. Jesus changed the idea of the disciple. He called persons to be more than mere learners; he called people of “abide in him” and to share his presence and his work.

The concentration of self on Christ opens us to our true selves and our true freedom. Luciano Pavarotti said, “When I was a boy, my father, a baker, introduced me to the wonders of song. He urged me to work very hard to develop my voice. Arrigo Pola, a professional tenor in my hometown of Modena, Italy, took me as a pupil. I also enrolled in a teacher’s college. On graduating, I asked my father, ‘Shall I be a teacher or a singer?’ ‘Luciano,’ my father replied, ‘if you try to sit on two chairs, you will fall between them. For life, you must choose one chair.’ I chose one. It took seven years of study and frustration before I made my first professional appearance. It took another seven to reach the Metropolitan Opera. And now I think whether it’s laying bricks, writing a book—whatever we choose—we should give ourselves to it. Commitment, that’s the key. Choose one chair.”

There is no hierarchy in the presence of Christ. Before Christ how can one person ever stand taller than another? Didn’t Jesus say that he came as a servant? Didn’t he ask how a follower can be greater than he? No, there is no meanness or threat in this invitation. It is a warm call to true selfhood.

Well, what about that matter of bearing a cross? A disciple takes up a cross. We have made that notion a troublesome thing. It has negative overtones. A cross to us is a burden, something imposed upon us. We speak of a loss as a cross to bear. We speak of a weakness or shortcoming as a cross. A cross is something we bear grimly.

Jesus didn’t mean that. He doesn’t impose anything. He asks us to take up a cross willingly. It is a deliberate choice. We take up the cross of service, of

change, of struggle. Why wouldn't you want that? When you narrow life, you find it. From the outside it seems that Christian discipleship is hard. Once the commitment is made it is natural. The way of self can be hard! Soren Kierkegaard said, "It costs a man just as much or even more to go to hell than to come to heaven. Narrow, exceedingly narrow is the way to perdition.

To be sure, there are times of doubt. Is it worth it? A man under severe stress began to wonder about the value of discipleship. He was tired and burned out. He looked at friends who seemed to be completely carefree. He thought he would like to take a vacation from faith. One night he had a dream in which Christ came to the foot of his bed. The Lord said to him, "I sense that you are finding it difficult to follow me. I have come tonight to release you from your commitment. You may follow your own plans and desires. You may do what you wish with your time, your money, and your strength. You need not spend time any more in worship or prayer. I love you too much to hold you against your will. You are released from all obligations of discipleship. You are now free."

A moment later there was such a sense of emptiness and aloneness that this man awoke in a cold sweat. He realized in an instant that his real freedom was in Christ, not apart from him. He saw that only by giving himself wholly to Christ could he find life at all. He cried out, "Lord, don't go. I do love you. I want my cross. I will be your disciple forever."

We are all alike on this pilgrimage called discipleship. No one is adequate without the power and presence of Christ. No one is inadequate within the power and presence of Christ. It is fitting for us to say "our Jesus" in worship. It is fitting for us to say "my Jesus" when we are talking about personal faith.

The invitation comes to everyone. I'm still a bit troubled by this passage. I'm troubled by my own failures in following Jesus. I'm no longer troubled by the

idea that we are called to some level of commitment that we cannot attain or that others are higher on the scale than we.

This summons is a call to life. Let's hear it, embrace it, and celebrate it.

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