

Title: Being a Christian Is Hard

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, living life is not always easy now and in the past; Jesus promised us salvation, but never promised an easy time following him; help us to be better ambassadors of your son, doing our part to bring about your kingdom, helping us with the rough times, we pray through Christ Jesus. Amen.

James Emery White wrote, “You might remember comedian Yakov Smirnoff. When he first came to the United States from Russia he was not prepared for the incredible variety of instant products available in American grocery stores. He says, ‘On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk-- you just add water, and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice-- you just add water, and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, “What a country!””

“Smirnoff is joking but we make these assumptions about Christian transformation, that people change instantly at salvation. Some traditions call it repentance and renewal. Some call it sanctification of the believer. Whatever you call it most traditions expect some quick fix (for) sin.

“According to this belief, when someone gives his or her life to Christ, there is an immediate, substantive, in-depth, miraculous change in habits, attitudes, and character. We go to church as if we are going to the grocery store: Powdered Christian. Just add water and disciples are born not made.

“Unfortunately, there is no such powder and disciples of Jesus Christ are not instantly born. They are slowly raised through many trials, sufferings, and temptations. A study has found that only 11 percent of churchgoing teenagers have a well-developed faith, rising to only 32 percent for churchgoing adults. Why? Because true-life change only begins at salvation, takes more than just time, (it) is about training, trying, suffering, and even dying. (adapted from, *Rethinking the Church*, Baker, 1997, pp. 55-57)

In our gospel reading, in the gentile territory of Caesarea Philippi, Peter declared Jesus to be the messiah. Jesus, in turn, told them to keep that information under their hats.

Then Jesus tells them his first passion prediction. They are either slow or in denial so, Jesus needs to tell them two more times, later on. Suffering for Jesus is not an option. Jesus says he *must* suffer.

They are likely expecting a military messiah. And why not? All the Jews were hoping for a military messiah to lead them in a revolt against the Romans. They did eventually revolt, twice. Both times were unsuccessful.

Jesus has a different messiah in mind. First of all, Jesus titles this messiah and himself as the Son of Man, a likely reference to the awesome picture Daniel described. Daniel's Son of Man will come from heaven in great glory. Jesus' Son of Man did not come on the clouds. Jesus' Son of Man was born in humble circumstances.

Daniel's Son of Man comes in victory. Jesus' Son of Man will undergo great suffering. Jesus' Son of Man will be rejected by the religious authorities. The very people who are supposed to recognize the messiah and/or the Son of Man, reject him. They choose to stay aligned with Rome rather than accept a religious firebrand from Galilee.

After being rejected by the religious authorities, the Son of Man will be killed. In spite of this bad outcome, the Son of Man will rise three days later. After all of Jesus' efforts to keep secret all that he did and said, Jesus shares this dire outcome openly.

Peter didn't like hearing this kind of talk. Peter was likely expecting a revolution. The very idea of the messiah being rejected and killed was an offense to him. And the rising again after three days was probably too weird to contemplate.

Peter was likely angry. The messiah is supposed to be victorious. Death doesn't sound like a victory. Peter decides to take Jesus aside rather than confront him in front of the others. Peter rebukes Jesus.

Like Peter, we, too, want Jesus to skip the bad parts and just give us the good stuff. This rejection and killing stuff is not what Peter signed up for. Peter decided to set Jesus straight, telling Jesus he needed to get his act together. There is no reason anyone need die.

Jesus didn't take it well. Jesus was basically saying, "I am not the messiah you are looking for."

Last week we heard that Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Now Jesus calls Peter Satan. Jesus tells his Satan to get into line. Satan had a different agenda for Jesus in the wilderness. Peter's agenda is not Jesus'. With all this time with Jesus, Peter has not caught on with what Jesus was preaching. Maybe Peter thought that what Jesus was preaching was for the crowds, but it never applied to the disciples. Jesus confirms this by telling Peter that Peter's mind is focused on a human agenda and not God's.

After telling Peter off, Jesus decides to drive his point home with the crowd. If anyone wants to follow Jesus, they must take up their cross and follow Jesus.

This was very harsh and scary. Seeing people hanging from crosses, especially in the Galilee area was common. The Romans were not always good at removing bodies after they died. Galilee was a hotbed of revolt. Examples had to be made with anyone who thought it was a good idea to challenge Roman rule.

Romans typically humiliated their crucifixion victims by hanging them nude. This would be particularly humiliating to Jews. It was against Jewish law to leave dead bodies. The Romans didn't care about Jewish law.

The people who heard Jesus tell them to take up their cross and follow Jesus could have heard it in at least two ways. One way would be consistent with Peter's thinking. Revolutionaries, if defeated and were survivors, would definitely be taking up the crosses they would be executed with. Those who were looking for a military messiah would hear this as a call to arms.

Jesus then says that to save their lives, they need to lose their lives. This also might reinforce a military action, though it sounds like a military failure. Those who lose their lives for the sake of Jesus and the gospel, will save them. That's a little harder to put in a military context and is a little perplexing. How can one save their life after it is lost? Jesus is heading into a life after this one scenario.

What Jesus says next is not consistent with a military solution. Jesus questions the logic of forfeiting one's life to gain the world. What good is it to have a military victory or any kind of victory resulting in gaining territory or goods if you end up dead? You gain nothing.

Jesus then asks what someone might give to get their life back. After someone has lost everything in death, there is nothing to give.

What Jesus says next seems aimed at Peter and all those who think like Peter. Jesus calls his current generation adulterous and sinful. In the Bible, adultery was used in two ways. One is to be unfaithful to a spouse. The other is to be unfaithful to God. Both of these are violations of trust and are betrayals. Jesus may be using adultery as a criticism of a generation of people who worship other gods and not the one God.

In this setting, anyone who is ashamed of Jesus and his words will face consequences. For those people, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in glory with the angels.

Jesus is challenging the crowd and his disciples to take sides. Violence is not the answer. However, violence is the consequence, specifically crucifixion. Eternal life requires being willing to risk one's life and torture on a cross. Jesus knows his time is short. The disciples need to get on board fast.

What does it mean to deny ourselves? A spiritual discipline of self-purgation is a way to do this. God breathed life into us. Selfishness and preoccupation get in our way. When we get ourselves out of the way, what is left is our true self in Christ.

Jesus' words are tough words. There is no cheap grace like that being preached in a Houston stadium and in other places. Discipleship is risky in this life, but it gives eternal reward. Peter's tough words melted away in the High Priest's courtyard when he denied even knowing Jesus. Yet, Peter was forgiven. We are weak, sometimes too weak to follow Jesus. Yet we are forgiven.

Text: **Mark 8:31–38** (NRSV)

<sup>31</sup> Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup> He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup> But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

<sup>34</sup> He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel,<sup>i</sup> will save it. <sup>36</sup> For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup> Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup> Those who are ashamed of me and of my words<sup>j</sup> in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Other ancient authorities read *lose their life for the sake of the gospel*#

<sup>j</sup> Other ancient authorities read *and of mine*

<sup>1</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version\*](#). (1989). (Mk 8:31–38). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.