

J.j.

Which Do We Prefer, Easy or Hard?

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, 57th & Broadway, Sacramento, CA

Second Sunday in Lent (B) March 4, A.D. 2012 †

Mark 8:31-38 31Then 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. 32He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33But 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."

34He 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. 35For 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, will save it. 36For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38Those who are ashamed of me and of my words 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."

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father; to Whom be the glory now and forever. Amen.

Deny your self -- take up your cross -- and follow Jesus!

Taking up the cross! That's what we're doing again this Lent, right? After a fashion, that is. Denying ourselves -- we're really not very good at that -- why, it's practically un-American.

Our government tells us that to have a robust economy we must do our part -- consume, spend, don't economize, splurge -- you deserve it, you know -- you've earned it.

Take it easy -- live the good life. Well? How is that working out?

I. DIAGNOSIS: We Prefer Easy

A: Addicted

I'm afraid that we are addicted to "easy" -- we don't really want to deny ourselves.

For example, we prefer the use of alcohol and drugs for an escape from facing our problems. For example, we like the good feelings we get at Christmas and Easter and quickly get tired of the hard work of Advent and Lent.

E.g., we love what promises to get us out of trouble, but we're mostly unwilling to pay the price of suffering as we work through our trouble.

Listen to Jesus: **31Then 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. 32He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.**

As we listen to Peter here, he is the spokesperson, not only for the other eleven, but also for all of us as he "**rebukes**" (v. 32) Jesus for choosing the hard path of suffering.

I imagine that we are also ready to rebuke Jesus.

Look at the example He set -- He's ready to lose his life! And we're supposed to follow Him?

We're addicted to feeling good, to the easy way.

B: Easily Tempted

Not only are we addicted to easy, our will power is set against the good -- our hearts are pre-programmed to be wayward.

We come into this world committed to the side of Satan, opposing God, and we defend our choices -- it's called, original sin. The Augsburg Confession calls it "inborn sickness."

Like Peter and the others we are ready to tag along with a god who works miracles, gives us emotional highs, and promises us prosperity.

Look at the crowds at the mega-churches, like Joel Osteen's in Houston -- those are the folks who want a blueprint for the successful life, the comfortable life, prosperity.

And we have a president who promises to give us everything -- he'll take it from the rich.

Good! they deserve it -- it's not right that they have so much and we don't.

When we think this way, we open our hearts to Satan's "empty promises."

Jesus said to Peter, "**Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.**" (v. 33)

The Greek word translated here, “set the mind on, be intent on,” has an interesting translation in the Authorized or King James Version.

There Jesus says to Peter, “**Thou savorest not the things that be of God...**”

“Not savoring...” meaning something to do with the organs of taste and smell -- not delighting in, not enjoying the taste of the things of God.

And Jesus continued, being “**ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation**” (v. 38).

Having the wrong savor, our hearts like to trust emotional “feel-goods” and other false gods, idols; and we end up on the side of Satan, our minds on the things of this world.

I’m reminded of a song by the folk singer, Arlo Guthrie, whom I’ve quoted before. It’s called “Which Side.” Here are the opening verses:

WHICH SIDE
(words and music, Arlo Guthrie)

There’s trouble all around the world
Well, it looks that way to me.
People don’t know what to do
They don’t know where they should be.

But just one question still remains

To which we must respond.
Two roads lead from where we are
Which side are you on?

Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?

C: Ashamed

To our surprise, and our eternal regret, being on the wrong side means being told that “**the Son of Man will be ashamed of [us] when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.**”

Oh yes, Satan promises that we can “gain the whole world” (v. 36) by choosing his side, though the Devil knows full well that it will mean “forfeiting” (v. 36) our soul.

What could be worse for us than to discover too late that the “**Son of Man [Jesus himself] will be ashamed**” (v. 38) of us eternally!

So, 1. We’re addicted to easy; 2. We’re easily tempted; 3. Jesus is ashamed of us? ?

II. PROGNOSIS: The Hard Choice is the Best

A: Jesus Chooses the Cross

So much for easy; now for the hard part.

You’ve probably heard some of the strange one-liners of the comedian Steven Wright,

Here are a couple: Quote, “Half the people you know are below average.” -- “A clear conscience is usually the sign of a bad memory.” OK, so what is the speed of **dark**?

Here’s one I like: “I intend to live forever; so far so good.” -- or, “Hard work pays off in the future, laziness pays off now.”

That last one, that’s not the way Jesus thinks.

Let’s go back to why Peter rebuked Jesus in the first place.

Jesus “**spoke plainly**” about the fact that he must “**suffer... be rejected..and be killed.**”

What kind of Messiah is that, Peter thought.

Peter had other ideas of messiahship, of the good life, of following a wonder-worker.

However, Jesus had it right. He knew we could never save ourselves -- never live up to God’s demands of perfection.

Jesus would be the kind of Messiah, the kind of Christ, that would offer himself for the salvation of the whole world.

His sacrifice on his own particular cross would count for salvation before His Father precisely because He was His Father’s One and Only Son -- both God and man in one person -- the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

That has been God’s plan since the fall of Adam & Eve.

B: So, We Choose the Cross When We Trust Jesus

When Jesus calls us to believe His promise, we deny our selves and follow Him. That’s hard.

“**Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ... repent, and believe in the good news**” (1:14-15).

Change your ways, He's saying. Turn around, commit yourselves to a new life. Which side are you on?

Taking up the cross is now our life, a life of walking beside the Crucified One. Some Christians have been known to define 'taking up the cross' with some misfortune in their lives. A wayward child? -- that's the cross I have to bear.

A loss of some kind? -- a cross to bear.

However, the first meaning of taking up the cross is literally to be ready to die upon it as Jesus himself did, to become martyrs for the faith, suffering the loss of all things, as the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, "regarding [our possessions] as rubbish, in order that [we] may gain Christ and be found in him...becoming like him in his death...." (Phil. 3:8-10).

"...like Him in His death..." -- Do you know that has already happened to us?

Yes, in our baptisms we were "...buried with him (Christ) by baptism into death,..." [Rm. 6:4]

In the baptismal liturgy we were asked, "Do you renounce the devil and all his empty promises?"

We said yes! You see, we've made a commitment -- we took up the cross.

Jesus said, **"..those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."**

Sounds hard -- we prefer easy.

But here's the paradoxical promise of Jesus. He said, "**Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened -- 'heavy-laden' Take my yoke upon you ... for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.**" (Mt.11:28-30)

Did you notice? He gives us easy when we take on the yoke of faith in His promise!

C: Now We Are Ready to Carry the Cross to Others

That doesn't sound easy.

It's not easy, and we prefer easy; but we are ready to carry the message of the cross to others.

We **can** answer those who ask the hard questions of life.

We in the church **have** the answer in the cross of our Savior.

Watch for the questioning, the searching -- the searchers may be sending very subtle messages of hurt and longings for peace.

Help them; it may be hard, but make the offer. Tell the Good News. Bring them to church.

Remember, "those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Remember, too, the other verse, that the yoke of our Lord Jesus is easy, His burden, light.

So, in the words of Arlo Guthrie, here's the rest of his song:

Moses crossed the desert
With a band of weary men.
For forty years they wandered through
The hot and burning sand.

And Moses went and prayed alone
The weary vagabond
And lightening wrote these words in stone:
Which side are you on?

Jesus stumbled through the streets
On the road to Calvary
Nailed high to testify
With other local thieves.

And as they hung there dying

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One asked what lay beyond.
That all depends, the Master said,
Which side are you on?

Some men work for little things
And some men work for more
Some men work for anything
And some don't work at all.

And me myself I'm satisfied
To sing for God's own Son.
And ask you what I ask myself
Which side are you on? [Skia 12 pt.]

["Outlasting the Blues" Arlo Guthrie, Rising Son Records, Inc., 1987]

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