

Confessing Christ, Carrying a Cross

Mark 8:27-9:1

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Who is Jesus? What does it mean to follow him?

These are important questions for Mark as he writes his Gospel. He's already identified Jesus at the beginning as "the Messiah, the Son of God." But he hasn't really explained what that means. In this passage the focus sharpens on these questions.

What does it mean to say that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah? And what does *that* tell us about being his disciples?

Jesus and his first disciples are traveling in mainly Gentile territory. They've gone to the villages around Caesarea Philippi, a city to the north of Galilee. It was near the source of a spring that feeds the Jordan River. The old Canaanite god Baal had been worshiped there. The Greeks dedicated a cave there to Pan, the god of nature.

King Herod the Great built a white marble temple in Caesarea to honor the emperor Augustus and he placed an image of the emperor near the altar of Pan. Herod Philip later beautified the city and his name was attached to it.

In New Testament times Caesarea Philippi was a place to worship both Pan and Caesar. Near this site of nature and emperor worship, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" Jesus' identity and dignity were first recognized in a region that was devoted to affirming that Caesar is lord (William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark. New International Commentary on the New Testament*).

Jesus is getting them to think, to remember what they've heard and evaluate it. And the disciples reply with some of the common opinions people were expressing about Jesus. "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others say you're one of the prophets." These are exactly the same opinions recorded in chapter 6 when Herod Antipas was hearing about Jesus and wondering about him.

These identifications of Jesus show that people had high opinions of him. Even though they were wrong, people did see Jesus as someone

special, with a special relationship to God. But they didn't go far enough. They didn't see Jesus for who he really is.

What is popular opinion about Jesus today? If we surveyed a wide range of people, and asked, "Who is Jesus?", what kind of answers do you think we'd get?

Some would say he was a great teacher, a good example. Some would say he was a prophet. Others might say he was a person with a higher consciousness of God than most. There would be those who see him as one among many revelations of the divine. Still others would see him as a person who realized his potential and being one with God in a great way—but no more than any of us can. Various cult leaders might claim to be Jesus or to surpass Jesus. Some people see him as a revolutionary leader. Skeptics might see him as deluded or dishonest. Some scholars say that the Gospels aren't reliable sources for knowing about Jesus. In their view, about the best we can say is that he was a wandering philosopher, a sage whose sayings undermined the common view of things. Many average people probably see Jesus as someone special who has something to do with God and religion (as far as they know about him at all). And many people we might interview would say that Jesus the Son of God, God with us.

You can probably imagine more responses to the question, "Who do others say Jesus is?" But now Jesus makes his question personal. He asks his disciples, "But what about you? Who do *you* say I am?" This is the most important question of all. How we understand it and answer it is vital.

And Simon Peter, in a burst of insight and inspiration, answers, "You are the Christ/the Messiah." And we might say, "Right on, Peter! Good job! Someone in this story has finally recognized Jesus." We tend to align ourselves with Peter as he confesses Christ.

So we're surprised, as the disciples must have been, when Jesus strongly warns them not to tell anyone about him. Why is that? Mark has shown previously that Jesus tried to keep many of his miracles and healings quiet. Jesus doesn't refer to himself as Messiah in this Gospel.

The Jews of Jesus' time had quite a variety of ideas about the Messiah. Many of those ideas were nationalistic and militaristic. The

Messiah would be Israel's king who would lead the nation to victory over their enemies. Jesus didn't want to be identified with those ideas. He was more and his mission involved more than the people could imagine. To proclaim himself "Messiah" in that setting would have caused misunderstanding and would have kept people from seeing his true intentions.

Another reason he didn't want the disciples to tell anyone that he was Messiah is that they still didn't know what they were talking about. Though Peter uses the right words in affirming Jesus as Messiah, he probably doesn't understand correctly what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah.

I remember our pastor preaching on this text (actually Matthew's version of it) when I was in junior high. He gave an invitation for people to come forward and shake his hand if we wanted to affirm that Jesus is the Christ. *Everyone* in worship that day went forward. Some didn't just shake the preacher's hand, but knelt at the communion rail to pray. That was quite an experience. But looking back on it I doubt if we all had the same understanding of what we were doing and of what it means to say Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

Based on the various understandings of Messiah among first-century Jews, as Peter calls Jesus Messiah he probably has in mind a savior who would bring God's kingdom as fought against Rome. And, based on Peter's experience of Jesus so far—miracles, healings, demonstrations of power and authority—he might think Jesus the Messiah must be Jesus the Powerful Healer, Jesus the Conqueror of Evil.

Though he's moving in the right direction, Peter's perception of Jesus is still off. Peter's confession of Christ is like the blind man of Bethsaida's first sight. Jesus touched the blind man's eyes and he could see partially. He said he saw people, but they looked like trees walking. So Jesus touched the man again. He looked intently, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Peter and the other disciples are beginning to see, but their perception is limited and distorted. They need another touch from Jesus. They need their vision clarified.

So Jesus begins to clarify the disciples' perception of himself. He starts teaching them what it means to call him Messiah. It's as if he is

saying, "O.K., you can call me 'Messiah' if you want to, but let me define the terms." And Jesus goes on to define what it means for him to be Messiah and what his mission is about in terms of rejection and suffering (verses 31-32).

Now Peter still has his own definition of "Messiah"—and it doesn't include suffering. For Peter and the others, "suffering Messiah" is a contradiction in terms. So Peter takes Jesus aside and starts to rebuke him for talking like this. "Lord, that can't be right. God wouldn't let that happen. Stop saying these things!"

Peter's still struggling with his preconceptions. He may realize that if Jesus is rejected and suffers, he may have to as well. And Peter loves Jesus. They're friends. He doesn't want Jesus to suffer and die.

But Jesus hears in Peter's rebuke an echo of Satan's temptation in the wilderness—to go some way other than the cross. And Jesus reacts strongly to Peter. He turns his back on him, looks at the other disciples, and rebukes Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! You don't have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." Because you're thinking in merely human terms and misunderstanding who I am and what I'm about, you're an adversary, a tool of the enemy. Peter, and all of you: get back to following me. Return to your rank as a true disciple (Lane).

While Peter and the others are recovering from that outburst, Jesus calls others to join them. And out of this redefinition of who he is he begins to describe what it means to follow him.

Jesus draws the closest possible connection between the way of the Messiah and the way of the Messiah's followers. The kind of Messiah Jesus is determines the kind of followers he has. Who he is and what he's like show us what confessing him and following him means. Jesus the Messiah and his followers are focused on the cross. This is a call to discipleship and a warning of its cost.

So you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God? Now what? What are you going to do about it?

Jesus says, "If you want to be my disciple, my student, my apprentice, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me." Jesus as suffering

Messiah goes the way of the cross. And everyone who would be his follower must go the way of the cross as well.

When Mark wrote this and the Christians in Rome first heard it, they probably took it very literally. They would have understood these words as a warning that being disciples of Jesus might mean execution. In their time the cross was a well-known instrument of Roman execution used on runaway slaves, rebels and other criminals of lower classes. For being followers of Jesus they quite literally might have to carry the crossbeam to their own execution—and many did.

Verse 35 pictures a trial in which a person is commanded to renounce Jesus and live. In other words, denying Jesus to save one's physical life means losing eternal life. And losing one's physical life because of faith in Jesus brings a person into eternal life. That's the kind of situation many of the first Christians faced and what Mark's readers in Rome were going through. That situation has been repeated and sometimes still is in many places around the world.

But what do these words mean to us, in a situation where following Jesus doesn't involve the threat of execution? Certainly our following Jesus includes a willingness to give our lives for him. Maybe we imagine ourselves heroically standing up for Jesus in the face of persecution. But we can follow Jesus in giving ourselves up in a variety of ways. C.S. Lewis wrote, "The sacrifice of Christ is repeated, or re-echoed, among His followers in varying degrees, from the cruelest martyrdom down to a self-submission of intention..." (*The Problem of Pain* 104).

This is a call to deny ourselves. What does it mean to deny ourselves? Richard Foster points out that we're more comfortable with words like "self-fulfillment" and "self-actualization" than with thoughts of "self-denial." But Jesus calls us to self-denial without self-hatred or self-contempt. Self-denial shows that we are of infinite worth and shows us how to realize it. In self-denial we come to understand that we don't have to have our own way. Our happiness doesn't depend on getting what we want. It's not the loss of our identity, but finding our true identity (*Celebration of Discipline*, 2018, pp. 113-14).

E. Stanley Jones said that the way to affirm ourselves is to deny ourselves. We find ourselves by giving ourselves away. God builds the bridge between himself and us. We cross the gap by self-surrender to God (*The Divine Yes* 58).

That bridge is the cross of Jesus where he gave himself to do God's will and fulfill God's purpose. Our cross is whatever it takes for us to do God's will, whatever sacrifice we make or risk to be faithful followers of Jesus.

Once a decade, the village of Oberammergau, Germany puts on the Passion Play, a drama about the last days of Jesus. There's a story about an American businessman who attended a performance and then was backstage visiting with the actor who played the role of Jesus. Seeing the cross the actor had carried in the drama, the businessman asked his wife to take his picture when he lifted the cross to his shoulder. He was surprised and embarrassed when he could hardly budge it from the floor.

"I don't understand," he said to the actor. "I thought it would be hollow. Why do you carry such a heavy cross?"

The actor replied, "If I did not feel the weight of His cross, I could not play the part" (Maxie Dunnam, *Alive in Christ* 33).

Confessing Christ means carrying the cross. A Christ-shaped life is cross-shaped. If we're going to claim him and be identified as his, we'll feel the weight of his cross.

Who Jesus is and what it means to call him Messiah says a lot about what it means to follow him. We want the whole story that the whole gospel gives. Just following Jesus the powerful wonder-worker isn't enough. And just seeing the suffering Jesus isn't adequate either. Miracles are part of the picture. Resurrection is promised. There is glory following suffering and even in the midst of suffering.

Jesus is God's Son, and that means above all being obedient to God in sacrificial service, even when the way of God leads to Golgotha. This is the Lord we follow.

Who do you say Jesus is? Is he God's Son, the Messiah? Is he your Savior and Lord? How will you affirm that? Are you a fan or a follower of

his? How do you follow him? How will we live this week in a way that shows who Jesus is and that we are his followers?