

CHRISTIANITY 101: 10. THE BEST IS YET TO COME
Mark 8.31-38
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A dear old saint of God was on death's door, and she knew it. Her life on this earth would not last much longer, so she spent what energy she had left making sure her affairs were in order. Among the things she knew she needed to do was to meet with her pastor to discuss her funeral arrangements.

Aware of her declining health, her pastor was only too pleased to meet with her to discuss the service. After all, it is so much easier for families and pastors alike when congregants spell out their wishes for the worship gathering that will bring closure to the shared relationship.

Over tea, the woman explained what she wanted in the way of songs and Scriptures, who might give a testimony of love. But she had one peculiar request. She wanted to be buried with a fork in her right hand.

Initially perplexed, her pastor asked about the significance of the fork. As she explained, however, his face lit up and he could hardly wipe the smile off his face.

A few weeks later, the lady passed from this life into the next, and her pastor carried out her requests for her funeral, including being buried with a fork in her right hand.

"You who were at the visitation," he said, "may wonder why our dearly departed sister was buried with a fork in her hand. You see, this was her express intent; she wanted you all to be wondering, 'What's with the fork?'"

"I'm here to tell you what's with the fork," replied the pastor. "One of the things we cherish about being a church family united in Christ is our times of fellowship. When we get together for a pot luck supper, after the main course, there's always someone saying, 'Keep your fork!' with a promise that there will be some delicious desserts that will follow the substantial meal. And to be sure, there would follow some velvety chocolate cake, or a deep-dish apple pie that would bring a wonderful end to a terrific meal.

"So I'm here to tell you," said the pastor, "keep your fork! Because the best is yet to come." He went on to discuss what it meant for this lady to have been a follower of Christ, and how heaven was set out for her: indeed, the best was yet to come.

After the funeral, a luncheon was held, and amid the stories of the deceased that were shared, people could be seen licking their forks, saving them for what they knew would be a delightful close to the meal.

The best is yet to come. We've spent ten weeks now, off and on, talking about some of the basics of the Christian faith. We've talked about God, and salvation in Christ, the Holy Spirit, right down to the church, the reality of evil, and the end of the world. We're going to close out the series today by talking about the final destination for followers of Jesus: heaven. And we know that the best is yet to come.

We know this by faith, however, because the reality is that the Bible does not say a great deal about our eternal home. Of course, that has not stopped countless people cutting down millions of trees to write books in which they speculate on the nature of heaven, either to comfort or scare.

So you might think this could be one of the shortest messages I'll ever preach, if I can't find much biblical foundation for a conversation about heaven. But I'm not interested in speculation; I am interested in what the Bible has to say on the subject. We could spend a whole series on this, and I do recall having preached one message before on the nature of heaven. Today, though, I want to focus on what is required of us to experience the reality of heaven.

We understand that life on this earth has its limitations. In the Nicene Creed, a statement of faith for the Christian church that was formulated early in the 4th century, the conclusion says this: "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." Among early believers, there was a sense that there had to be more to this life. Yet even before the history of the church, in the early life of the Hebrew people, there was an understanding of life's brevity; earlier, we heard Psalm 39, in which the Psalmist acknowledges that every person's life "is but a breath" (Psalm 39.5).

Perhaps the great question is, what do we do with this life that is but a breath?

A few years ago, this concept was popularized by someone who observed that on the average headstone in the average cemetery, we will find, at the very least, the name of the deceased, the year the person was born, and the year the person died. In between those years, there is a dash. So we might well ask, "What are you going to do with your dash?"

This can be used in a variety of ways to motivate or encourage people, perhaps to be active in their communities; to hug their children regularly; to make a donation to the Cancer Society, or the like. But for us in the Christian faith, we want that 'dash' to be as enriching as possible in every way, including eternally.

I want you to think about this very carefully: your investments of money, time, energy, emotion – all of your investments – have a payoff of one sort or another. When you invest your money wisely, your retirement may be secure. When you invest yourself in a service group, your community will be better off. When you give money to a charity, you're helping that organization make a better world. When you invest in spiritual things in the life of the church, you're making a difference not only in the here-and-now, but for eternity – for the "life of the world to come" about which we profess faith in the Nicene Creed.

Let me use Bible Fun Camp as an example. Donna and her team put countless hours of effort and creative spirit into creating an environment for welcoming children in our community, not just so that they have something to do for a week of mornings in a long, hot summer; not just so that kids can be entertained; not just so that the church can feel like it's giving back to the community in some way. No, our singular goal in the work that goes on for Bible Fun Camp is to help these kids connect with God, to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus loves them so much that he died for them, to forgive their sins; and rose again to give them eternal life. This is an eternal investment. We want to plant seeds in the hearts of these kids so that they will come to have a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and thereby experience what we already know, that the best is yet to come.

Of course, the side-benefit of professing faith in Christ, especially at a young age, is that they get to experience life as followers of Jesus and can make this world a better place with a motive of love for others. When an eternal investment is made in them, they will, we pray, grow up to make eternal investments themselves.

What is it, though, that will make us want to build into other people for eternity's sake? In short, it's about discipleship. Jesus talks about this throughout the gospels, and one of those stories falls in Mark 8.31-38 <read>.

Peter had just made the great confession of Jesus as the Messiah, and Jesus followed up by telling his disciples that he would be killed and would rise from the dead. Peter rebuked him for saying such a thing, and Jesus responded by calling him Satan! Peter wasn't looking at the big picture. Jesus told him he had very human things in mind, rather than the things of God.

After this little encounter, Jesus gathered his friends around him to give them insight about what discipleship truly means. In short, discipleship entails three demands from Jesus. He says in verse 34, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Let's look at these three demands that Jesus makes of his disciples.

First, the call is to deny yourself. This is not denying oneself something, like giving up chocolate for Lent or something like that. No: this is denying oneself. The New Living Translation puts it this way: "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me." It translates "deny yourself" as "turn from your selfish ways". A little more poignant is Eugene Peterson's translation in *The Message*: "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am."

This is hard for us to hear, living in a culture saturated with the agenda of self-satisfaction. Turning from our selfish ways, letting Jesus be in the driver's seat – this is all so counter-cultural, isn't it? So different from what the world tells us entails success!

Discipleship, being a follower of Jesus, is not part-time volunteer work or an extracurricular activity. Yet for the majority of people today – perhaps even the majority of church-going folk – the Christian life is one option among many, one more thing on the to-do list that may or may not get done, depending on how long the grass is or how long it's been since we went to visit Aunt Bertha. We rejoice with those for whom the church and the faith it represents remains the centre of life, but for most people, that's just not their reality. There are too many other shiny bangles out there.

But Jesus isn't into playing second fiddle to a shiny bangle. What he's saying when he tells us to deny ourselves is that either Jesus is Number One or none of it matters. That sounds harsh, but that is the reality of biblical discipleship. Jesus is Number One. Deny yourself. Turn from your selfish ways. Jesus is in the driver's seat.

Jesus' second demand for discipleship is the call to take up your cross. I'm sure this would have sounded very strange in the ears of the disciples who first heard this, since Jesus had only begun to allude to his suffering, death and resurrection. But they all knew the reality of crucifixion; it was the capital punishment of choice for the Roman government. An empty cross standing on a hill was also a key form of crime prevention.

The disciples knew that those who were crucified were among the most reviled, hopeless people there were. They knew that the law said, "anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (Deuteronomy 21.23, NIV). In this sense, Jesus was telling these men that anyone who wanted to be his disciple had to "be willing to join the ranks of the despised and disowned", in the words of one commentator (D. Garland, NIVAC).

This sort of flies in the face of those who would tell us that all we have to do is say 'yes' to Jesus and life will be just peachy, doesn't it? The health and wealth gospel people aren't much into Jesus' idea of discipleship. To take up one's cross meant, for the first hearers, to identify themselves fully with Jesus, something that they would be reluctant to do once he was sentenced to die. And for the first readers of Mark's gospel, it meant to be willing to stand fast as believers even though the ruling culture may well have them put to death for their trouble. For us, today, it might mean a few weird looks, an uncomfortable conversation, or a lost friend on Facebook. For some in today's world, it might mean beatings, imprisonment, and death. Put it in perspective. Either way, to take up your cross means to be willing to be more than a little uncomfortable while wearing proudly your profession of faith. "Don't run from suffering," as Peterson translates it. "Embrace it."

Jesus' third demand is to follow him. There's not really any other way to translate those words. (As the Internet meme shows us, Jesus is saying to all of us Twitter users that he literally wants us to follow him.) Jesus calls us to walk in his way, wherever he goes. This is not always the way we would choose ourselves, of course; and it doesn't mean being part of a convoy that would marvel at Jesus' deeds but fail to follow after his example.

No, to follow Jesus means not only to do religious things, as we might understand them; it means to do the things that Jesus did, in Jesus' way. It means to love extravagantly, like the father of the prodigal son. It means to name sin for what it is, and to call people to repentance and holiness, beginning with ourselves. It means to live a life characterized by spiritual discipline - not just meeting the bare minimum requirement, but going the extra mile, as anyone in first century Palestine would be asked to do when carrying a pack for a Roman soldier, as far as Jesus is concerned.

Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Follow Jesus. Not very glitzy, and not very popular. But that's what's required of a disciple. In our culture, we wonder what might be the ROI? The return on investment? The payoff? What's in it for us? (Even that is not a very disciple-like question.)

Jesus answers it for us in verse 35: "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." It's a reversal, isn't it? If you want to save your life, you've got to give it up. I've quoted missionary-martyr Jim Eliot who once said, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." It's a good paraphrase of what Jesus is saying here: if you're smart, don't worry much about this life, but invest yourself in a life that lasts forever.

We can gain the whole world, Jesus says, and lose our souls in the process. What are you doing with your dash? What's it costing you? While you're engaging in earthly pursuits, is your soul sitting off in the corner like an unattended child, waiting for attention? Which part of you is going to live forever, one way or another? Doesn't it deserve attention now?

Jesus says that we do well not to be ashamed of him, lest he be ashamed of us one day. Shame is the opposite of divine vindication. Psalm 25.3 says, "No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame, but they will be put to shame who are treacherous without excuse."

Jesus doesn't say that confessing him as Lord and Saviour will make us happy all the time. He does say that it will save us in the time of God's judgment. This is a hard word, but may God grant that our ears are open to hear it, and our hearts open to receive it. Listen to this quotation from Thomas a Kempis, a classical spiritual writer of old, who wrote a work called *The Imitation of Christ*: "Jesus today has many who love his heavenly kingdom, but few who carry his cross; many who yearn for comfort, few who long for distress. Plenty of people he finds to share his banquet, few to share his

fast. Everyone desires to take part in his rejoicing, but few are willing to suffer anything for his sake. There are many that follow Jesus as far as the breaking of bread, few as far as drinking the cup of suffering; many that revere his morality, few that follow him in the indignity of his cross; many that love Jesus as long as nothing runs counter to them; many that praise and bless him, as long as they receive comfort from him; but should Jesus hide from them and leave them for a while, they fall to complaining or become deeply depressed. Those who love Jesus for his own sake, not for the sake of their own comfort, bless him in time of trouble and heartache as much as when they are full of consolation" (76-77).

What can you do? Check these out on your connection card.

If you want to commit to Jesus' demands to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow him, it might mean making changes in your life; check that off on your card. I will pray for you. It may mean change, and change never come easily.

If you check that off, I will be in touch with you to see how I can encourage you in that process as I pray.

You might want to take up a spiritual discipline that has been lacking in your life. Maybe it's Bible study, or prayer. Maybe it's fasting or confession of sin. Maybe it's times of silence or solitude. Maybe it's greater engagement in worship or in service for the Lord. Whatever it might be, check that off, and as I pray for you, I'll encourage you with some options if you like.

Or maybe you started off better than you find yourself right now in your discipleship walk. Maybe you'd like to recommit your life to Jesus Christ, starting with a clean slate before the Lord. Put that in the blank space on your connection card, and when you do it, tell me, and tell others, because a commitment that is shared publicly is a commitment more likely to be kept.

It's possible, in the midst of all this, that you might never have made a decision to follow Jesus Christ in the first place. If that's so, I want to give you the opportunity to do that today. Check off, "I want to begin a personal relationship with Jesus", and I will follow up with you to encourage you in this new, amazing step you're taking.

You might be saying by now, "This was not a sermon on heaven. This was a sermon on discipleship." And to that I might as well say, "Guilty as charged." So what does discipleship have to do with heaven?

Simply put, this life is a rehearsal for heaven. There's a lot we don't know about heaven, but this much we do know: we will live full-time for eternity in the presence of Jesus. The best truly is yet to come. If we're going to live for him in eternity, now is the time for us to get into the swing of it.

If we're not interested in living for Jesus in this life, life in heaven will be of no interest to us whatsoever. When we get together and worship the Lord week by week, as we do in our homes day by day, we're getting ready to live forever with the Lord. As disciples, we prepare ourselves for that reality.

"If anyone would come after me," said Jesus, "he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8.34). He is ready to lead. The question is, are we ready to follow?

This has been a serious matter about which we've talked this morning, and I want to give you a few moments in silence to contemplate what the Lord may be saying to you, and then I'll pray.

<Pause>

Lord Jesus Christ, your call to us is clear: deny ourselves, take up our cross, follow you. But we admit that it's a hard call. We are not up to the task ourselves. So thank you that your grace floods our hearts and enables us to accept the call you place on our lives. Where we are weak in our walk with you, make us strong. Where we are unsure, make us confident in you. Where we struggle, come to our aid. Help us to invest in this life in ways that will pay off in eternity. Help us to remember, Lord, that in the end, nothing else is going to matter except what we did with you. So we pray for ourselves, and each other, that we may know the blessing of life with you in this life, and in the life to come. Help us, with the gifts we offer, to share that blessing with people all around the world, and in our own community. Use us, and our gifts of time, talent, and treasure, that your glory may be achieved and many lives changed. Amen.