

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,  
by Dr. David Fischler, on Sunday, March 12, 2017**

## **THE ONLY WAY TO FOLLOW**

### **Mark 8:31-38**

No one likes to suffer. Pain which is a normal, inevitable part of our existence is something that we flee from every chance we get. Even Jesus, in one of His thoroughly human moments, asked the Father that the cup of pain and suffering be taken from Him. And yet, it is that same Jesus who, in calling us to follow Him, warns us that doing so will result in our accepting a share in His sufferings. Warns us? He positively requires it of us. The context for today's reading from the Gospel of Mark is found in verses 27-30, if you would take a look with me at those for just a moment.

Jesus and His disciples had gone to the town of Caesarea-Philippi, north of the Sea of Galilee, at the foot of the highest mountain in Israel, Mt. Hermon. On the road out from the town He put a question to them. "Who do people say I am?" He asked that question in verse 27, and once they answered that, He asked them who *they* said He was. You see the answer given by Peter in verse 29: "You are the Christ." And that of course was a right answer, but it was given without understanding, as verse 32 shows. Jesus begins to explain what it means for Him to be the Messiah. How He was going to have to go to Jerusalem, to be rejected by the leaders of Judaism, to be killed by the Romans at the behest of the Sanhedrin, and then rise again on the third day. He wanted them to be prepared for the shock of His crucifixion, but also to know that His death was not the end. The triumph over the powers of death and hell would follow in short order. But Peter, the guy who knows everything, would have none of it. He knew exactly who the Messiah was. Messiah was the person chosen by God to liberate Israel from Roman oppression, who would restore the kingdom of David in all its splendor and would then rule in Jerusalem with His faithful followers, who would be rewarded for their loyalty and hard work with the finest places at the royal court. After confessing Jesus as the Messiah Peter was already having himself measured for his purple robe, and the pillow on which he would lean at the king's banquet table. He certainly wasn't going to listen to any nonsense about the Messiah being rejected by the Sanhedrin, much less killed by the Romans. And so verse 32 says, "Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him." I love that. It's like a five-year-old going up to Billy Graham after the sermon of the crusade and telling him he's missed his theology. How he misinterpreted the passage and needs to try again. This is what I imagine Peter saying: "You just stop this kind of talk, mister. Can't you see it's demoralizing the troops? Where did you get an idea like that anyway? Do you think that these men would let you be crucified? They're going to escort you into the city. You're going to enter as a conquering hero. And then (this is the really important part) they're going to get what they so richly deserve. So let's not hear any more nonsense about dying, okay?"

Well, our Lord's response to this misguided attempt to derail His mission was withering. I can imagine Peter not only wanting to crawl under the closest rock, but then burrow into the ground and dig through to China. Our Lord's response was, "Get behind me, Satan."

Have you ever been called Satan before? I know if I had I'd be either really annoyed or extremely humble. "Get behind me, Satan. You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." Now let's make this clear. He wasn't saying that Peter was literally Satan but that he was allowing himself to be used as the tempter's mouthpiece. Jesus' reply was directed both at Peter and at the one who was speaking through him. Peter was on entirely the wrong wavelength. He was talking about what concerns people. Things like political power, wealth, comfort, freedom. None of which are bad things necessarily in themselves, but none of which concerned Jesus. Peter thought that Jesus, as the Messiah, had come to usher in a life of ease and liberty for His followers. Nothing could be further from the truth.

So it is that we're told in verse 34 that He called to Himself a crowd of people. He went beyond just His immediate circle. He even went beyond the broader circle of His other disciples. And He gave them an invitation. No doubt many, if not all, of the people in the crowd knew Him or knew of Him. Some of them had maybe even heard Him preach or teach in the synagogues or in the streets. Now He told them what it would take to become one of His followers. "If anyone would come after me," He says, "he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Not exactly the way to build a megachurch, is it? Well, this was a call to discipleship, the likes of which had never been heard in this realm. Other rabbis when they began to gather students around them promise them wisdom, respect, and the admiration of the people for their knowledge. It also so happened that rabbis typically lived fairly well because of the esteem that they commanded in the community. Jesus offered something radically different. Something calculated not to win adherents but rather to present a clear choice between the things of God and the things of men.

First, He calls on the person who would be His disciple to deny himself. The word for deny here means to completely disown, to completely separate oneself from something or from someone. It's a word that was used to describe Peter's denial of Jesus on the night of his betrayal. Now to deny ourselves has nothing to do with our identity as an individual. Before I became a Christian I was who I am, David Fischler, a guy from New Jersey who grew up Jewish, etc. All that stuff remains the case. All of that is still the case even after becoming a disciple of Christ, but denying self instead has to do with separating ourselves from what St. Paul calls "the old man," the corrupt and sinful nature with which we were born, self-centered and in rebellion against God. That sinful nature continues to reside in us even after we become Christians. The sinful nature that resides in us even after we become Christians lives off of us like a vampire survives off of the blood of the living.

Of that sinful nature, the way that it continues to plague us, Paul writes in Romans 7, verse 18-19, "I know that in me nothing good dwells. The good that I want to do, I do not do, but evil that I want not to do, that I practice." Anybody ever had this experience? Doing something you know is wrong and you know you don't want to do it, but you do it anyway. Notice that he speaks here of the action of the sinful nature in causing us to sin when we don't want to, as if it is somehow separated from us. And in the Christian, it is. It lives off of our new self, the self that's been born in the image of Christ, like a parasite

lives off its host. What our Lord is telling us in Mark 8 where He says we have to deny ourselves, is that we have to put that parasite away, refuse to have a relationship with it, don't indulge it, don't listen to it. Recognize it for the evil thing that it is and control it so it doesn't control us. That's how we go about denying ourselves. By controlling the urge to sin, taming it and eventually evicting it entirely from our hearts and lives. Of course that's something we can't do on our own. We're entirely incapable of that, so that's something in which we have to rely on God and the work of God's Spirit within us to enable us to do that.

So the second aspect of Christ's call to discipleship is to take up our cross. This is the part that would have provoked shocked gasps from the Lord's listeners. The picture that He's giving them here is one of the Romans' most favorite and brutal forms of execution. A slow, extraordinarily painful death that was used to punish a variety of crimes – treason, inciting rebellion, etc. This is what awaited His disciples. Not ease and comfort. Nor purple robes and acclaim of the people, but suffering pain and death. Not a pretty picture, is it? It's certainly not the way that the world thinks is the way to win friends and influence people and gain followers. Faith Church isn't going to turn into a megachurch by talking all the time about taking up the cross. But the cross is what our Lord has offered to His people. Nowhere in the gospels does Jesus ever hint that earthly life who truly follow Him, who truly seek to live the life of faith to which He has called us, will find leisure or pleasure or affluence or influence or power or comfort. What He promised instead was that His disciples would be persecuted, imprisoned, denied their rights, publicly ridiculed, knocked around, have their property confiscated, lose their work, have their very lives taken from them. And so it has always been through the centuries, culminating in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most dangerous of centuries for Christians. A. M. Rosenthal of the *New York Times* once wrote in his newspaper column: “Millions of American Christians pray in their churches each week, oblivious to the fact that Christians in many parts of the world suffer brutal torture, arrest, imprisonment and even death, their homes and communities laid waste for no other reason than that they are Christians. The shocking untold story of our time is that more Christians have died this century, simply for being Christians, than in the first 19 centuries after the birth of Christ. They have been persecuted and martyred before an unknowing, indifferent world.” He wrote that before the rise of ISIS. Not that ISIS is necessarily the worst offender in that regard, at least in terms of raw numbers. But the fact is that what this Jewish editor of the *New York Times* recognized was that the world doesn't like us. The world hates us. And the world will do everything that it can to stop us from carrying out the mission that God has given us.

The truth is that millions of our brothers and sisters have died in the last hundred plus years at the hands of religious and political tyrannies. ISIS has been officially designated as a genocide perpetrator for its murder and its treatment of Christians in territories that it captured. As it is pushed back every day seems to unearth new horrors. Before the country split into northern and southern halves, Christians of the Sudan in Africa for years systematically killed or were sold into slavery by its Muslim rulers. China's government continually harasses through imprisonment. The house church movement which has by some estimates over 100 million members has, as a matter of fact, thrived

in the face of persecution. In India it's a crime punishable by imprisonment to entice someone to change his religion. And promising eternal life to the person who will believe in Christ is counted as enticement. Get that. You don't have to bribe someone with money in India to be called a proselytizer who is of breaking the law. All you have to do is tell them the promises of the gospel and that's a form of enticement. In other words the law can be understood to say that preaching the gospel is illegal. And in some parts of the country in India that's how it's enforced. In Egypt Coptic Christians are routinely denied employment because of their faith and hundreds have been killed in recent years by Muslim terrorists. And on occasion even by their Muslim neighbors.

Even in our own country with its guarantees of freedom of religion, and thank God for those or we couldn't be here this morning without taking our lives in our hands if we didn't have those, and we thank God for those every day, but there are those who seek to drive the church underground, who would forbid the wearing of symbols of faith in workplaces, who prevent parents from teaching the faith to their children, who would use the destructive powers of taxation to destroy the church as a viable institution. The hostility toward the people of God and the gospel we proclaim is real. And here's the thing. There is absolutely no reason why we should be surprised. Our Lord told us two thousand years ago that it would be this way. And so it has for two thousand years. For those who can't take the pressure there is always Harry Truman's maxim: If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen. Those who can, we will know as American Christians who really know the true meaning of that expression, "Take up your cross."

Finally, Christ's call to discipleship involves what sounds like a simple command: Follow Me. Once a person has denied himself and taken up his cross, which means once he's disowned the sinful nature and willingly taken upon himself the possibility of suffering and pain that goes along with being a disciple, once he's done that he's ready to give to Christ the loyal obedience that our Savior deserves and requires. For each of us, that will involve knowing His commandments and carrying them out to the best of our abilities as God gives us the grace to do so, and doing so in all the various situations that we find ourselves in. For instance, we're commanded to turn the other cheek and not seek revenge when harmed. We're commanded to tell the truth even when there are consequences we don't like. We're commanded to lay aside worries about material things and trust the Lord's provision. We're commanded to love one another that the world may know that we are His disciples and in some ways that's been hardest of all for Christians to live by over the centuries.

Now how we work these out in the course of our daily lives is going to differ from person to person, Christian to Christian, situation to situation. But the commands don't change and it's the obligation of the disciples to obey. Jesus, after all, didn't say, "Those of you who feel like following," but instead called those whose deepest desire was to follow. Not, by the way, out of some kind of legal obligation, but out of love for the One who is calling us to walk in His ways. Those who do will reap the reward prepared for us by our Father. Christ speaks of that reward in verse 35, and that involves one of the great paradoxes of the Christian life. "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 the odd truth about life as a

follower of Jesus Christ that if we hold onto this world, if we try to get everything we can out of this life, if goods and comfort are more important to us than eternity, we'll lose the only life that really matters, basking in the glory of our Savior, a life, moreover, that begins now, not simply after death. But if we are willing to give everything we have, if we're willing when called upon to suffer for Christ, if we're willing to die to self and selfishness, to the world, if we're willing to live for Him alone, then all the riches of the kingdom of God will be ours. Even now, He extends His hand toward each one of us and asks, "Are you willing to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me. If so, take my hand, walk with me. I will be only too happy to present you to my Father, proud to say that you are His child."