

The Upside Down Guide to Life:  
*The Ultimate Challenge*  
Mark 8:27-38  
March 12, 2006 (the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent)

A few years ago a representative from Teach America paid a visit to one of our premier university campuses – Duke. Teach America hires the brightest students and places them in some of the nation’s worst public schools. So the representative stood before the crowd of Duke students and said, “I can tell just by looking at you that I’ve come to the wrong place. Somebody told me that this was the BMW school and I believe it. Just looking at you, I know you’ve achieved success and that you’re on a track for even more success. And yet I’m there today to convince you to throw your life away in the toughest job that you’ll ever have. I want people to go into the hollow of West Virginia and the ghettos of South Los Angeles to teach in the worst schools in America. Last year two of our teachers were killed on the job. But just by looking at you, I can tell that you’re not interested. So go to grad school, make your millions, and live for success and comfort. But if by chance you’re interested in the toughest job in America, I have a few brochures so come over and see me. Meeting’s over.” With that, those Duke students pushed into the aisles and mobbed that representative, signing up for more information.<sup>1</sup>

I believe that deep down God has wired us for a sense of mission. A challenge-free life might be safe, but ultimately it’s boring, trite and empty. That’s one of the things I love about Jesus: he can be so kind and gentle and (as we say in Minnesota) so NICE; and then he can turn around and issue, without apology, a challenge that cuts to the core of our existence. That’s what we have in this passage: I call it the Ultimate Challenge and its found in verse 34 – “If anyone wants to come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.” Every time I read that verse it stops me in my tracks. It’s so bold, so in-your-face, so uncompromising, so all-or-nothing. It makes me wince. But if I’m going to claim the name of Christian – Christ-one – and really live it, then this is one of the key verses I’ll have to grapple with. So let’s dive in and explore it.

This passage is the hinge of the entire Gospel story of Mark. As the great Yogi Berra once said, “If you see a fork in the road, take it.” The followers of Jesus see the fork in the road and they want to take it. In other words, they want it both ways, but Jesus will remind them that they can take only one part of the fork – not both.

Read verse 27. They are in the city of Caesarea Philippi or “Caesarville” since it referred to the Roman ruler or Caesar. It used to be called a good Jewish name: the region of Naphtali near the city of Dan. But then Caesar and his armies conquered it and renamed it. So as they enter Caesarville Jesus asks, “Who do people say that I am?” The disciples casually rattle off the word on the street (see verse 28). But the second question is riskier: “Who do *you* say that I am?” (see verse 29). But Peter raises his hand, “Teacher, O, I got this one: you’re the Christ” (verse 29b). The word “Christ” was a rich Old Testament word which meant “the Messiah” or “the Anointed One.” It carried overtones

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from a sermon by William Willimon called “The Journey” given on 9/14/1997.

of salvation and deliverance. In particular it meant that the Messiah would throw out the Roman dogs, reestablishing the glory days of King David.

Then in verse 31 Jesus starts to lay down the fork in the road. Read verse 31. Three phrases would have stuck out: must suffer many things, be rejected, and must be killed. And we're told in verse 32 that he "spoke plainly (or boldly, directly, candidly) about these things." It's a stupefying pronouncement. Up to this point in the Gospel of Mark when they hear "You are the Christ" they think power and more power along with success and more success. Now Jesus starts to talk about vulnerability and failure. And Jesus claims that all of this "must" happen – a little Greek word suggesting clear purpose. Suffering, rejection and death – do we really want to follow that kind of Messiah? Or should we look for a different kind of Messiah? That's the fork in the road.

Jesus doesn't soften the "forkiness" of the situation; he intensifies it by issuing the Ultimate Challenge of verse 34. If you call yourself a Christian, a Christ-one, this is the guts of your life. This is Jesus' Ultimate Challenge. And notice who it's for: "Then he called the crowd to him along with the disciples." In other words, this approach to spirituality isn't just for a select group of all-stars of super-saints. This is for you and me. Ordinary people living unremarkable lives encountering routine struggle are issued the same Ultimate Challenge. "If *anyone* (there are no exceptions) would come after me..." here's what you must do.

But let me remind you that in this Ultimate Challenge Jesus is talking about New Life, not just a religious program or a three-step process to a better life. Underneath everything in this Challenge these words of Jesus ring out to us, "Come to me all who are tired and heavy-laden and I will give you rest" (See Matthew 11:28-30). That is the essence of Christian spirituality. The Apostle Paul put it this way, "I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives within me" (Galatians 2:20). Christ is in you – that is our life.

So with that in mind let's look at the three parts to this Ultimate Challenge. Jesus will challenge us on three levels.

**First, Jesus challenges what I will call "the myth of comfort."** "If anyone wishes to come after me let him deny himself." At first glance this sounds psychologically unhealthy. Shouldn't Jesus tell us to affirm ourselves and care for ourselves? Let's be clear what it does not mean: it does not mean that you can never enjoy the simple pleasures of this life. Remember that God created all the good things in this planet: azaleas, cardinals, a sunset at West Meadow Beach, barbequed spare ribs, a cold glass of Riesling, the voice of a friend, the sexual embrace of a husband and wife, your child's face. That's why the Bible consistently gives advice like this: "For *everything* created by God is good, and *nothing* is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving" (1 Timothy 4:4). Jesus' Ultimate Challenge isn't condemning us to a dreary, pleasure-less life.

Actually, his call to denial is much more basic – and much more radical. He challenges us to deny *ourselves*. The Bible calls it the old man or the flesh. It's that part of us

which rebels against God's glory, running away from God, even viewing God as an enemy (See Romans 5:6-11). The Bible warns us this way: "...do not use your freedom to indulge your flesh" (Galatians 5:13). In other words the flesh constantly wants to be indulged and catered to. A few verses later (5:17), the Bible says, "For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit (of God)." In other words, the problem isn't with desire or pleasure; it's with distorted and misdirected desire. And one of our most basic distorted desires of the flesh is the craving for comfort and for a comfortable life. We can act like the most decent, respectable, righteous, church-going people until someone messes with our comfort – and then you better look out!

Most parents could tell you about a reality called the "terrible twos" when the whole world revolves around us and our need for comfort. Well, parents can also tell you about the "terrible twelves" and the "terrible twenty-twos." And my family and friends could probably tell you about the "terrible-46's" (that's how old I am). And, unfortunately as we grow older our craving for comfort and a comfortable life grows deeper and stronger. All of us have a "terrible two year old" inside of us. But Jesus says, "Deny yourself. Deny that terrible two year old inside of you. Put off the old self which is being corrupted and put on the new self (Ephesians 4:22-24)."

When Jesus told us, "deny yourself," he was saying, "Say NO to yourself" or "Say no to your flesh." Every time the flesh – that craving to indulge our self and look out first and foremost for our own comfort - raises its head, deny it, repudiate it and renounce it. The Greek word for deny means to "disavow any connection with" – just like Peter will later deny or disavow any connection with Jesus (it's the same Greek word for deny). So we really need to say to the flesh, "Look, since I met Jesus I don't want to associate with you anymore."

If this sounds easy, it's not. It's tricky work because the flesh inside of us is always there – even in our best and most religious moments. I read this week a quote from a 19<sup>th</sup> century theologian named Abraham Kuyper:

*Self, big and inflated, is not hard to deny. But self shrunk ... hiding behind pious emotions and piles of good works, is extremely dangerous. For what is there to be denied? There is scarcely anything left ... His only end in view is the glory of God. At least, so he thinks. But he is mistaken. Self is still there. It is like a spring tightly bent for a time, only to rebound with accumulated force. And what was called self-denial is really nothing less than self taking care of itself.*

How do I detect the workings of my flesh? How do I know what to deny? That's tricky and it will take a lifetime to learn the ways of your flesh. But we can begin by acknowledging the depth and persistence of the flesh. It's there when I rage at another driver, but it's also there when I sing nice worship songs. That's why I have to constantly (as the Bible says) "walk in the Spirit" (see Galatians 5:16-18), which means that I'm constantly open, asking, seeking the direction of the Holy Spirit, asking God to search me primarily through his Words in the Bible and his words through other people.

That's why the Apostle Paul could say, "I die daily." That means that every day of your life will present opportunities to deny your inflated, pompous, wounded child flesh-self. Every day we have the marvelous, wonderful good news of saying no to that flesh-part of ourselves that ultimately robs us – and everyone around us – of true joy. Jesus challenges the myth of our comfort.

**Second, Jesus challenges the myth of safety.** How do we take up our cross? Taking up your cross does not putting up with difficult people like your alcoholic uncle or a cruel and manipulative parent. Nor did it mean that we should add more suffering to our lives or let people victimize and abuse us – in a psychologically twisted way. Everyone in Jesus' day knew what a cross meant. Obviously, eventually it became an instrument of death, but that's probably not what Jesus was referring to either. When you took up your cross it meant, first of all, that you were going to be ridiculed, spat upon and persecuted for your faith. So in other words, Jesus is saying, "Be my friend, follow me, join me, even if it means that you get in trouble, even if it means that you become an outcast and a rebel; go against the grain of your culture." So this isn't an invitation to allow people to abuse you; it's a specific invitation to follow Jesus even when we're ridiculed and mocked – which is also the point of verse 38.

Jesus is challenging the myth of safety, the lie that life should be and must be completely safe and risk-free; the seduction that we must arrange our life to avoid danger. We're basically safety fanatics in this country. So we spend an enormous amount of energy killing germs, buckling up, wearing helmets, guarding our kids from kidnapers and molesters. Please don't misunderstand me: safety is a good thing. Wash your hands and buckle your seat belt. But listen to this: if you want to follow Jesus, you might get hurt. You might get killed – and that's not the worst thing that could happen to you. See Luke 21:16. Did you hear that word *some*? Wait a minute, Jesus, did you say *some* of us will get killed?

In his book entitled *The History of Christian Mission* author Stephen Neill shows that the first 300 years after Jesus' life His followers were often under threat. "Every Christian," he wrote, "knew that sooner or later he might have to testify to his faith at the cost of his life." Might? For them it was a matter of maybe we'll have to die for our faith and maybe not. But there was no guarantee of safety.

To be honest, the Christian community acts like whiners when someone threatens our safety or whenever our beliefs are criticized. We want to write our legislators and flex our political or cultural muscles. Or we turn down a service opportunity due to ridiculously high safety standards. For instance, I know a man who felt called to a certain mission project in a foreign country ... and then he watched a National Geographic special about an insect that lives in that country. Apparently this bug burrows its larvae under your skin and it can be painful and itchy. So he decided not to go. The bug scared him off.

To which Jesus would say, "What did you expect? Didn't you read the Ultimate Challenge? Did I not tell you to take up your cross? Did you think you could take up

your cross without experiencing any resistance? Yes, wear your helmet and buckle your seatbelt and protect your children from intruders – of course! And then be as winsome and kind and gentle as possible. Love all people. Stand up for justice and seek out the lost, lonely and broken. But don't think that by being safe and nice enough you'll escape the cross. No, be prepared, at all times and in all places to take up your cross and follow me." Following Jesus explodes the myth of a safe life.

**Third, Jesus challenges the myth of control – or that we are in charge.** That's the problem Peter has in this passage: he thinks he's in control; he assumes that he's in charge and Jesus has to line up behind him. Remember that in the disciple's minds Jesus seems to be having an identity crisis. He's the Messiah, the Liberator and Savior, but he has these wacky ideas about what the Messiah is supposed to do. Somebody has to help Jesus so once again Peter steps to the plate: "and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him." Rebuke is a strong word; earlier in this Gospel it's the word used when Jesus rebukes evil spirits (1:25; 3:12; 9:25). In Peter's case it has the air of protective superiority. "He took him aside" suggests something like this scenario: Peter puts his arm around Jesus, takes him for a little walk, while patronizingly lecturing Jesus: "Look, Jesus, you have to get a grip here. This talk of rejection and suffering isn't appropriate for a real Messiah. We're going to start losing some momentum here."

Jesus spoke plainly in verse 31 but now he's brutally blunt. Notice what Jesus did in verse 33 – "Jesus turned and looked at his disciples." Jesus can't let this issue slide so rebukes Peter in front of the rest of this team: "Get behind me, Satan." The phrase means, "Line up behind me. You're the follower; I'm the leader." And then: "You do not have the mind of God." We would say this, "Peter, you need a deep attitude adjustment."

Follow me. The essence of Christianity isn't following a list of rules or being born into the right family. It all boils down to those first words given by Jesus to his first followers (see Mark 1:17-18). We talk a lot about believing in Jesus, and that is good, full-bodied biblical language. But the problem is that it can slip into an intellectual exercise. Jesus' language is more direct and more radical: follow me. Line your life up behind me. If you follow me you have of course believed in me. The Christian life isn't just intellectual assent; it's doing what Jesus says. So when Jesus says things like "Love your enemies" or "Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth" or "Do not worry about your life" or "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength" they aren't just pious platitudes; they are a way of life.

Jesus challenges the myth that we're in control.

**The rewards of the Ultimate Challenge.** I called this the Ultimate Challenge. It's bracing stuff. It's not wimpy Christianity. Now my last question is this: Why? Why would anyone in their right mind want to sign up for Jesus' ultimate challenge? As opposed to those Duke students, this challenge is for life. So why would you want to do it?

Ah, here we hit the biggest fear for many as they approach the Christian way. It might be true but it's too hard or it's too dreary. So I've heard friends of mine say things like, "I'd rather rot in hell with my buddies than sit around in your dreary, lifeless, self-righteous heaven." It's a good point – it really is – and Jesus even anticipates it. He knows it's coming. So he heads us off at the pass.

And listen to what he says (see verses 35-37).<sup>2</sup> Is the Ultimate Challenge all about gloom and doom? Absolutely not! This passage rings with joy and reward. Here's the bottom line: God wants to give you real life. Jesus uses language from the world of commerce and business and he says, "Look, there is profit here. Do you want your life to count? Do you want your life to make a profit? Or do you want your life to be a loss? I want to make your life a glorious profit."

Jesus isn't interested in making your life a loss, or a gloomy, repressive, negative minus. "I have come that you might have life and that you might have life to the full" (John 10:10). God is most glorified when you are most satisfied in Him. God strives for your joy in Him.

So let me ask you this: If we call ourselves Christians, if we call ourselves His followers, do I live or ignore or dilute the Ultimate Challenge? I'm I addicted to my flesh? Am I seeking my own comfort, perhaps even when I do religious things? Is it really still about me and my comfort only now I've learned to use a veneer of religious language and God-talk? I'm I addicted to safety and security, so much so that it cripples me from living a full life for Christ? Am I addicted to being in control? Do I want Jesus to line up behind me – rather than the other way around? And finally, is my life marked by joy? Do I know the profit – the ultimate, unquenchable, incorruptible profit – of trusting, savoring, enjoying and waling with Christ?

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<sup>2</sup> Based on these words I have a hard time with some stuff that passes for authentic Christian spirituality. For instance, in a recent Christian best-seller the author was walking in the neighborhood where he had just purchased his first home. He and his wife stepped into a piece of new construction, the nicest home in the whole neighborhood. His wife then announced, "One day we're going to live in a beautiful home just like that." And sure enough, they got the house which caused the author to conclude, "With God on your side, you cannot possibly lose." Yes, God may give us a nice home and we should enjoy it, but just try sharing this story with a pastor in China who spent the last 11 out of 17 years in prison for his faith; or try sharing it with the children in Sudan who are living in poverty; or just try sharing it with Jesus as he hung on the cross.