

Mark 8:31-9:1

Intro The Choice of the Cross Before the Crown February 17, 2008

Life is filled with choices. Choices make life enjoyable. Yet is there not a point of insanity? Take the choice of ordering a cup of coffee at Starbucks. Robyn Waters, in her book "The Hummer and the Mini: Navigating the Contradictions of the New Trend Landscape" writes there are more than 19,000 ways to order a drink at Starbucks. Others report 55,000 up to 38 million different drink combinations.¹

Need I remind you that we're talking about coffee here? When do our choices become absurd? Before Starbucks we had only coffee, then they added decaf to our list of choices and then gave us a couple options of dairy derivatives and a selection of sweeteners. So that if you were offered six choices of how to get a cup of Jo, you would be faced with 63 drink combinations.

Our national obsession with choice took on a whole new meaning when, in '73, Burger King encouraged us to think of dining options when they sang to us..."Hold the pickles, hold the lettuce. Special orders don't upset us. All we ask is that you let us have it your way!"

- So when MacDonald's countered with their Big Mac jingle we were faced with two all beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickle, onion, on a sesame seed bun...we had 8 choices, giving us 255 ways to order a Big Mac.
- Walk into a mom-and-pop ice cream shop with 10 flavors of ice cream, 3 sauces and 3 toppings to choose from, we have 16 ingredients offering us 78,998 combinations. I'm not going to calculate the myriad options at Cold Stone Creamery.
- An average pizza place will have at least 5 meat toppings, 10 veggies, sauce and cheese and 2 types of crust to choose from. These 19 ingredients offer you over 524,287 combinations.
- The average deli offers at least 3 different types of bread, 10 meats, 5 cheeses, 3 vegetables, and 4 condiments. With 25 ingredients, assuming you get at least bread and something else gives 33,554,106 combinations.

We measure the quality of life by the variety of choices. So when we consider the quality of our Christian life how often do we approach it in the same manner, expecting a variety of choices?

You may choose a Catholic Jesus or opt for Orthodox, Evangelical or Liberal. Is your pastor's theological bent Calvinistic or Arminian, Amill or Premillennial. Will the water be applied from above or will you walk into it? Wine or Welchades? You want Presbyterian? Will that be PCA, OPC, EPC, PCUSA, ARP, CPC, BPC or RPCNA? Will worship be hymns or praise songs...or a blend of both? What does God's Word say...KJV or NKJV, American Standard, or NASB, ESV, RSV, NRSV, NIV, Living, Amplified, or the Message? No wonder people shop for a church like they do a new car.

But what are the choices presented to us in the gospel? What choice do we have when it comes to how the Christian life is lived out? What choices are there really before us?

In Mark 8 Jesus poses the question "Who do people say that I am?" The options of John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets was proffered. He then focuses the question for the disciples, "who do you say that I am?" to which Peter gives that wonderful response..."You are the Christ." There are no options. There is no choice. In our passage Jesus explains what it means to be the Christ as he presents the only choice that lay before him, a choice to suffer.

Peter's response to this option is to offer an alternative choice, a choice that would avoid the cross and is the fast track to victory and success. To this Jesus makes it clear that for Him and for us, we have no choice but the cross, no choice but Christ. READ Mark 8:31-9:1

CHRIST HAD NO CHOICE, BUT THE CROSS

While Peter answers well the question as to who Jesus is in v29, he needs to realize much more. So Jesus begins to teach. He *begins*, for this is the first of three in Mark's central section where he explains the necessity of suffering for Him...and for us. The others are in 9:31 and 10:33.

There is no choice but to suffer. *Must* is a simple word speaking of divine necessity. There are not a series of options available to Jesus from which he may choose depending on circumstances. The universe is not open to various possibilities affected by other choices.

Suffering is at the heart of the incarnation. The Son of Man, a designation taken from Daniel 7, makes it clear that this is the Messiah, the one who receives all dominion and glory, who will reign as king and to whom all will bow in worship. Yet, what was not understood from the Old Testament was that this king must suffer. Rejection and death are not a choice, but a necessity.

Peter, as the spokesperson for the disciples, objects with strong language

Peter takes Jesus aside to instruct Him privately. Suffering is never a reasonable choice, any more than opting for a Sanka at Starbucks. So Peter rebukes Jesus, a word found in 1:25 to command a demon to cease from speaking and depart. In 4:39 Jesus stills the wind and the waves with a rebuke. It is not a polite response, but more akin to, "Shut up! We will not have this kind of talk!"

While it is easy to pick on poor Peter as the foot-in-the-mouth disciple, his thinking is not far from our own. Suffering is satanic. Pain comes from sin; rejection is alienation from God. His concept of the Messiah cannot allow for God to suffer. But Peter, like many today, misconstrues the nature and character of God.

Sixty years ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, pastor, theologian and martyr in Nazi Germany wrote: "In a world where success is the measure and justification of all things, the figure of him who was sentenced and crucified remains a stranger."² Substitute *success* with a growing church, strong marriage, perfect kids, a stable job or a stable mind.

Jesus' response to Peter is arresting

While Peter speaks in private, Jesus makes this public. As he turns his back on Peter, He faces the 11 disciples, condemning Peter's denunciation. Jesus rebukes Peter, rejecting his choice of a life of ease. He deplores the idea that some could choose a triumphant Messiah while others may opt for a suffering servant, all depending on their theological persuasion or personality.

To deny suffering is to be an adversary, to be Satan. Peter's choice of victory is the choice men seek. But God has something else in mind. Peter voices what we all desire, a life of ease, success, triumph. He wants not a cross, but the victor's crown and Jesus must give it to him.

But this is not just a brief lesson in theology, only a correction in Peter's Christology. It is not just that he improperly comprehends the degree to which Jesus will go to secure salvation for his people. Peter's problem is his misunderstanding of Jesus' life warps his own life.

Confusion as to the person and work of Christ distorts us so that we cease to resemble the Savior we seek to serve. Christ had no choice but to suffer. We may never opt out of it either.

But as I look across this church I see people with an air of stability, reasonably ordered lives, a modicum of success in life, business, and relationships. To you this passage presents a conundrum, it is perplexing. For suburban saints, Christ's passion becomes a passport to pleasure. So you are left in a daze as you face failure, sickness, and rejection. For you the value of the cross is muddled. Christ's choice of the cross doesn't limit you, but opens up choices. So many battle spiritual depression not because you suffer, but because you are not as successful as you like to think you should be.

CHRISTIANS HAVE NO CHOICE, BUT CHRIST

Jesus then turns to the crowd, looking beyond just the twelve and makes it clear that this choice-less life that he takes is the only option for us. Yet this is not just "I have to endure this, so should you" response. As we are identified with Christ, with an exchange of our sin on Him and His righteousness imputed to us...there is then a necessary relationship between Jesus' suffering and our own.

Christ suffers; he endures the Father's rejection so that the Father will not reject us. Yet, that does not mean suffering is no longer a choice for us. It means that the Father's acceptance disallows all other options, except looking to Christ alone.

The demands of Christ...to deny oneself, to take up the cross and to follow Him (v34)

Let him deny himself.

This is denial of self, not self-denial, an important distinction.

Self-denial is asceticism, self-discipline, saying no to something you otherwise would like.

It is at the heart of the misguided notions of Lent, in which you practice self-denial by giving up something that is not otherwise forbidden in Scripture.

In self-denial you are training yourself not to be controlled by something outside of yourself. Not a bad idea on its own. But the demands of Christ go much further; for the heart of the problem is not the box of chocolates you need to say no to, not the third drink...so you can be a stronger Christian, but the heart of the problem is *you*. Your choices, agendas and desires.

You are not to deny a practice, but deny who you are at the core. Your rights, your agenda are what you are to deny. The good that Peter wants for Jesus, which he wants for himself, is at odds with God's plan. Any choice, but Christ, is deadly.

This strikes right at the heart of our very existence, because the one thing that we, as human beings, value and covet and protect above anything else is the right to make

ultimate decisions for ourselves. This is what Jesus means by, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself" -- deny our self-trust, deny our self-sufficiency, deny our feeling that we are able to handle life by ourselves and run everything to suit ourselves.³

But we love the art of negotiating with God. We will deny ourselves this or that, thinking we've accomplished enough. We will set aside desires we know are displeasing and thinking that is the extent of discipleship.

But unlike what toppings you want at Pizza Hut, there are not various permutations of how we can structure a relationship with Christ. At the core, we must set aside ourselves, our agendas for what we imagine is good. What makes this so very hard is that many of our agendas are good, nice, and pleasant.

Do you want a satisfying marriage? How about children professing faith? Does your agenda include a comfortable church with good friends? Are these the whisperings of Satan, promising good when Jesus promises a cross? Your only choice is Christ and his cross. What does this cross look like?

Take up his cross

Jesus speaks these words to crowd before his crucifixion. They would have only known the humiliation reserved for the most heinous criminals of the lowest class. To be impaled on a stake, hung from a tree, splayed naked and made to gasp for breath was all they could comprehend to this picture. Jesus presents a horrible picture of what it means to follow Him.

But notice the command, the choice that is before us.

The cross we are to bear is not something foisted upon us, but willingly embraced by us. It is not just living under oppressive circumstances, but an active involvement. The cross is not just a handicap, difficulty, or trial. Irresistible sufferings may be the Father's hand of discipline or His refining mercy. These are trials but not crosses.

A cross is taken up when and where you are painfully denying self. The cross is an emblem of shame and humiliation. It is embracing degradation. That is what we are to take on. Here is where your choice, where denial of self comes to the forefront what our options are in life. Christ becomes most real when we willingly embrace suffering as God's gift to make us like Christ.

Bonhoeffer states in *Cost of Discipleship*: when Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die. Where will you die today? Where does your agenda for ease and comfort cry out for you to reject a suffering Christ who calls you to come and die?

Follow me

The final single choice which we must make is one calling us to single minded obedience, we must follow Christ. This obedience is one not of perfection in all things, but to pursue the path of Christ to Jerusalem, to shame and humiliation, to suffering and death.

This is what C.S. Lewis says in *Mere Christianity*.

Christ says, "Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want you. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there. I want to have the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think are innocent as well as the ones you think are wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you myself: my own will shall become yours."⁴

Christ's demands lead us to a new identity, Christ's identity, as the reasons to take up the cross. When we refuse to deny our agenda, when we seek to maintain, preserve who we are, we will always lose. The life in v35 is psyche, that quality of life, our soul. When our choices are all that matter, when our happiness is what we strive to obtain, we lose it in the end.

There has yet to be a person who made happiness their goal and who has ever attained it. Instead, it is a by-product, a wonderful consequence of a life well spent following Christ.

The losing of one's life for Christ's sake occurs when we stop creating goals that will never satisfy. Those idols of our hearts, those good choices we pursue of contentment, joy, peace...will always consume us and leave us empty.

Can we really sell our life, our soul? It's been tried. Sterling Jones engaged in a Faustian adventure when he put his soul up for auction on eBay. Within a few days eBay removed Jones' offer and alerted him that eBay did not allow the auctioning of human souls.

"According to eBay spokesman Kevin Pursglove, there's no proof Jones can make good to the winning bidder. 'This gentleman would have to make a pretty strong case to us that he could deliver his soul.'"

But so-called success was found by a 29-year-old university communications instructor. After a 10-day bidding war, a New York real estate agent purchased it for \$1,325. The seller said, "In America, you can metaphorically and literally sell your soul and be rewarded for it. That's what makes this country great."⁵

What Christ is telling us here is that we really have no viable option. The choices we think we have to play with our relationship with Christ are but foolish toying with eternity. To be ashamed of Christ by refusing to take up the life of shame of the cross is only to meet up with his shame of us in the last judgment.

Few statements say it better than the words of another famous martyr, written when he was only 22. Jim Elliot, cut down by the Auca Indians in Ecuador in the 1950's, said:

"He is no fool who **gives** what he cannot **keep**, to **gain** what he cannot **lose**!"

This identity that flows out of Christ's demand in our life, is the only hope for victory in the future.

Suffering will not always be our theme. The Son of Man, described in Daniel 7, will come in glory. We see the hint of this even in the prediction of his death...he will rise again. That promise is made even clearer in 9:1. We will see not only suffering in this life, but we will glimpse the kingdom of God come in power.

The disciples saw Christ transfigured before them on the mount and again after he rose from the dead. It was seen in the power of Pentecost. It is seen still today, as God's grace enables us to take up that cross. It is ours as we come to the end of ourselves. When proud people that we are, renounce our desire for status and honor. When greed is gone and our appetite for wealth is set aside. For those of us who are complacent, God's power is seen as we set aside our love of ease, when the fainthearted cease their love of security, when the violent set aside revenge. While we continue to struggle with these choices in our lives, while we may often not struggle, but too quickly give in to our agenda, refusing to die to self...Christ comes to us having risen from the dead and with power, walking with us down the road to Jerusalem.

The choice that is before us is more critical than what we take in our coffee or what toppings we'll have on our pizza. Our choice is whether we will demand of God that he show himself to us according to our agenda, to confirm our choices, our idols, our desires or will he meet us in the midst of our pain, showing himself powerful when we are the weakest. The choice is ours. We all want the crown, we long for victory. But the only path to triumph is through the cross. We not only must look to Christ on the cross, but also find where we are to take up that cross in our own lives. If we will not carry the cross, we shall never wear the crown.

¹ Adapted from http://www.idea-sandbox.com/blog/2006/08/fascination_with_coffee_combin.html

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Touchstone, 1995), p. 77

³ Ray C. Stedman, *The Way of the Cross*, Series: The Ruler who Serves, Catalog No: 3315, 2/16/75

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (HarperOne, 2001), p. 196-197

⁵ Dan Oliva, *Enumclaw*, Washington; sources: Salon.com archives (2-25-00); Wired magazine (April 2005) p.26