

Text: Mark 8.34
St Stephen's

Sept 12/13, 2009
Weekend Message

Hard Sayings of Jesus: Our Cross

We are looking these weeks at some of the hard sayings of Jesus, and there are a lot of them! Like:

"Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven!"

Matthew 18:21-22

490 X! Is there anyone here who has done that? Or...

*"Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is **narrow** and the way is **hard** that leads to life, and those who find it are **few**."*

Matthew 7:13-14

In this series we want to give Jesus a **fresh hearing**, this Jesus who sometimes says offensive things, impossible things – the one who is not quite tame, not quite safe! And **remember why** he says things like this; he is in pursuit of transformed hearts, and that is **no easy task**. The healing of the heart will require strong medicine, costly medicine. But here is his promise:

"A pupil is not above his teacher," Jesus said, "but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher"

Luke 6:40

Like him in every way. So buckle your seat belts and strap on your crash helmets. He we go with another hard word from Jesus.

Today we look at **his teaching about the cross**. Jesus taught three times about the cross in his years of ministry... The **first time** came about half way through those years:

"he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things... and be killed, and after three days rise again... And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him..."

Jesus' **cross was hard** for Peter. Hard to believe, hard to accept, hard to watch. But Jesus would go on to say...

"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me..."

Mark 8.31-37

Say "my cross". There is a cross for Jesus. There is a cross for his followers. Months later Jesus returned to the subject for a **second time...**

he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise."

So what do they do?

...on the way they had discussed with one another who was the greatest. And he ...said to them, "If any one would be first, he must be last of all..."

Mark 9.30-35

Say, "last of all". There is a cross for Jesus. There is a cross for his followers. Near the end he spoke to them a **third time...**

"we are going up to Jerusalem; and... they will condemn him to death... and kill him; and after three days he will rise."

And when James and John started to angle for the **most powerful cabinet posts** (rt & lft) in his new administration, he went on to say...

"whoever would be first among you must be slave of all..."

Mark 10.32-45

Say, "slave of all..." His cross was to be **the shape of his death**, but it was **also the shape of his life**. And it is to be **the shape of our lives** as well. There is a cross for Jesus. There is a cross for his followers.

*Whoever does not bear **his own cross** and come after me, cannot be my disciple.*

Luke 14:27

What is 'his own cross'? Some have linked it to some of the unavoidable **hardships** we face in life, or some of the occasional circumstances that bring sharp suffering, like illnesses, a broken marriage, or economic hardship. But I don't think those are what Jesus has in mind here, for he says that this cross of ours is **essential**, not optional ("must"), **universal**, for all ("if anyone"), **voluntary** (something you can "take up" or avoid), **frequent** (Luke says Jesus told us to take it up "daily"). And he promises it will be **life-changing**.

With these hints in mind, what Jesus means by our cross becomes clear. **Two themes:**

'Pick Up Your Cross' Means Crucify Your Self-Life

Our self-life is always getting in the way; we are **so full of ourselves** and our **opinions** that we **are unable to trust him**. That is why we always want to **argue with him** about what he tells us to do. We think we **know better** than he does. And as long as that is true, we cannot be his disciples. The **biggest obstacle** to my discipleship is **my self life, self-love, self-confidence**. That is why Jesus says something very large in us must die if we are going to belong to him.

Richard Foster says our cross is, *"the ability to lay down the terrible burden of always needing to get your own way."* Aren't you **tired of** always having to get your own way? **Wouldn't you like to get over yourself?** Wouldn't you?

So what's his prescription for our illness? *"Deny yourself, pick up your own cross and follow me"*. Life gives you **all kinds of opportunities to practice this**. Just get married! Or have kids. Or work for someone. Or own something. Or live next to someone. All

kinds of **opportunities to be 'last of all', 'servant of all', 'slave of all'**. And that is exactly what Jesus leads us to do - give your life away for him and for his Gospel.

We **don't like** this talk about the cross any more than Peter did. We fear that if we give up our 'self-life', our control, our independence, our opinions – that we will lose our freedom, lose our lives. People today say that **the way to real life** is to **follow every passion**, fulfill every urge and pursue every dream. Jesus says almost the exact opposite.

*whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me **will find it.***

Mark 8.35

You **will** find it. That is his promise. That brings me to the second theme:

'Pick Up Your Cross' Means Crucify Your Sin-Life

Today there is the wide spread conviction in our culture — and we live this way — that **sin wins**. Most of us believe that we must learn to live in perpetual spiritual and moral defeat and that **Christlikeness is impossible**.

If that is true, then **(Rip out these pages from a Bible...)** goodbye to the

- **Sermon on the Mount** (forgive 70X7, be perfect, love enemies),
- **1 Corinthians 13** (love hopes... believes... endures.. never fails)
- **Ephesians 4 & 5** (wives, submit – husbands, love...)
- **Colossians 3** (take off... put on...)
- **James** (not the hearers of the word, but the doers of the word...)
- And while I am at it, how about **the law in Lev & Deut**

I could go on! This is what you are doing if you settle into the 'sin wins' life. Well, I have to say, this bible does feel a **lot lighter** now! It seems to fit me a good bit better!

I came to Christ in **the incredible hope** that these ripped out pages are true, that **a changed life is possible**; that Jesus could make good on

his promise to **make me like him**. He can! Don't let anyone tear pages out of your bible.

I have **staked my whole life and career on the confidence that this book is true**, and that these pages were written not just for someone else, somewhere else, but for me and for you in this day and this place and this culture.

This church has taken a costly stand on that very conviction. **Don't let anyone tear pages out** of your Bible! Not one of them. **Every single page is there for you**. Every single page is true.

But if the bright and good hope of Christlikeness is to be realized in our own lives, it will take something decisive – a partnership between his cross and our cross, between his sacrifice and our sacrifice. He does all the heavy lifting in this partnership. But we have our own necessary part.

This is from Col 3, talking about **carrying your cross...**

that means killing off everything connected with that way of death: sexual promiscuity, impurity, lust, doing whatever you feel like whenever you feel like it, and grabbing whatever attracts your fancy. That's a life shaped by things and feelings instead of by God... make sure it's all gone for good: bad temper, irritability, meanness, profanity, dirty talk.

Colossians 3.5,8 Msg

Is this **possible**? Well, yes. But it is **difficult**. Something will **have to die**. What makes it difficult is the place we have given **human desire**. Let me explain.

Most people make decisions in life based on the **pursuit of their desires**. We think, "*I want to...*" and we do it. Or "*This will make me happy...*" and we go after it. This is simply the way we live.

What we do **stop to do is ask** if what we want is **good**. Or if what we want will create **real love**. Or if what we want will make us more **Christlike**. What is 'good' and what creates 'real love' and what makes for Christlikeness – is not on our radar very often.

It will take **strong medicine** to heal our desires, because **they go deep** into our humanity. It will take 'cross' medicine. How does it happen? **In the sight of Christ's cross, we pick up our cross**. In the sight of Christ's cross, **we simply refuse our natural desires the right to direct our life. We decide that we shall no longer live for them to be satisfied.**

I want to talk about this carefully as I finish, because it is important. Look with me at this **next verse**.

"I appeal to you, in view of the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God..."

Romans 12:1

Paul is doing something very **important** here, and he does it all the time – but it is **easy to miss**. He has just finished **11 chapters** of the most profound theology in the bible, and it has all been about **redemption**, about the cross about the mercies of God. He is about to write **5 more chapters** on **how to live as Christians**, how to be Christlike. In between these two sections of his greatest epistle, he pens an important **transitional sentence**...

"I appeal to you, in view of the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God..."

Look at that little phrase, '**in view of the mercies of God**'. He is saying, **in view of God's grace** (don't lose sight of it), in view **of your forgiveness** (keep your eyes on it), in view **of Christ's cross** (eyes locked)... walk away from your sins, let go of the self-life, give yourself to this new life. **In the sight of Christ's cross, you can pick up your cross.**

If you try and **live a cross-shaped life** without **keeping his cross in sight, you will fail**. You will do all kinds of **bizarre** things to try and get your desires under control. The history of the church is filled with people beating their flesh and mistreating themselves in order to try and crucify their desires.

But Paul directs us to **something far more powerful**. To Christ's death. To his mercy. To His cross. **Live within sight of it**, Paul says. Come there often. Stand before it. Think about it. Pray there. Yield there. Eat and drink there. As you do, **something remarkable happens**.

Your desires recede. They let go. And you find yourself **free**, in that place, to make decisions you could never make before, to walk away from sin. To step into Christlikeness. To forget about yourself, to do what is good and live a life of love. You come back again and again and again. I do. **In view of his sacrifice**, I find the freedom to **live a life of sacrifice**, and walk free.

"I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, **in view of the mercies of God**, to **present your bodies as a living sacrifice**, holy and acceptable to God..."