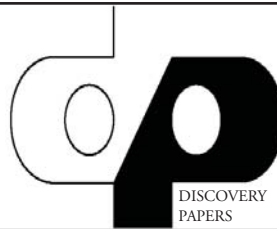


COMING ALIVE

**SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING
JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK**



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Mark 8:34-9:1
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Martin Luther King Jr. penned these words:

To our most bitter opponents, we say: "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. ... Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory."¹

Who can doubt the power of such words? They overwhelm me, but they also inspire me. Yes, I want to love. Do I want to love like that? I'm not sure. In Mark 8:34-9:1, Jesus challenges us to love like that.

In Mark 8:31-33, Jesus taught about his mission. Shockingly, from the perspective Peter, one of his disciples, that mission would involve Jesus' suffering and death. Now, beginning in Mark 8:34, Jesus teaches about following him.

Mark 8:34-9:1:

³⁴And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. ³⁵For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? ³⁷For what will a man give in exchange for his soul? ³⁸For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."
¹And Jesus was saying to them, "Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power."²

Take up your cross

Jesus tells his disciples and a crowd he has summoned that following him involves denying oneself. What does this mean? Peter demonstrates what it doesn't mean. He had expectations for the Christ and he asserted them after Jesus predicted that he, the Son of Man, would suffer and be killed. Peter didn't deny himself; instead, he denied Jesus. Jesus responded by equating Peter's vision

with that of Satan and by telling Peter to "get behind" him—to stop leading and start following (Mark 8:31-33). Denying oneself, in the context of following Jesus, means giving up the right to define one's vision for life and giving it to someone else—namely, Jesus.

What sort of vision does Jesus put forth? He says that anyone who wishes to follow him must take up his cross. What does this mean? Again, Peter demonstrates what it doesn't mean. Peter has identified Jesus as the Christ, the coming king who was expected to fight Israel's battles. If you were a Jewish nationalist and you anticipated the coming of the Christ, what would you expect to "take up" in his cause? You would expect to take up precisely what Peter later took up. When Jewish authorities arrested Jesus, Peter drew a sword and attacked the slave of the high priest, whereupon Jesus warned that those who "take up" the sword will perish by the sword (Matthew 26:51-52, John 18:10-11). Peter, who thought he was following Jesus, took up not his cross but his sword.

Rome, the superpower of the day, crucified Jewish rebels. Crucifixion was not simply a means of execution; it was also a political statement. By crucifying those who opposed them, especially insurrectionists, the Romans said to the Jews, "We're in charge and you're not." If you took issue with Rome's right to rule, you ended up on one of its crosses. The crosses inserted into the land of Israel served as a perpetual and bitter reminder to Jews that they were a subject people. Many Jews, at the behest someone they believed to be the Christ, would have eagerly taken up swords against the Romans to overthrow them and uproot their bloody crosses.

Now, along comes someone Peter believes to be the Christ telling people to take up their crosses if they want to follow him. Many of those whom Rome condemned to crucifixion were forced to carry the crossbeam to the site of execution (John 19:17). Does Jesus mean that he will lead people in rebellion against Rome and that many will be crucified as a result? Or does he mean that those who follow him will victoriously take up—and take away—the crosses of Rome? (The word translated "take up" (*airō*) can also mean "take away.") No, but if you were expecting a nationalist Christ, you might interpret his words in such ways.

Yes, Jesus, as the Christ, came to fight Israel's battles, just not the battles Jewish nationalists expected him to fight. His sights are set on a bigger foe, one with whom Peter was unwittingly aligning himself.

Jesus will not lead Israel in rebellion against Rome, the enemy of the day; instead, he will lead Israel in

rebellion against Satan, the enemy of the ages. To take on Satan, you don't take up a sword; instead, you put on love. Satan wants you to take up a sword, return evil for evil, and keep violence in circulation. If you strike at Rome, Rome strikes at you. And on it goes in a never-ending cycle of violence. Jesus wants you to put away the sword and put on love, drawing evil onto yourself and taking violence out of circulation. You submit to Rome, insofar as submitting to Rome doesn't conflict with submitting to Jesus. If serving a lord other than Caesar means that Caesar condemns you to crucifixion, then you die a brutal, shameful death without striking back. You turn the other cheek; you go the extra mile; you take up that cross.

You take up your cross literally because you've already taken it up spiritually. You're already following Jesus in the way of self-giving love. If following Jesus leads you to take up your cross in a literal sense, so be it. For the sake of love—love for Jesus, love for your enemies—you'll lose the battle. You've got a larger battle to fight, and you can't win that one with a sword; you can only win it with love. "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone," says the Apostle Paul. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:17, 21). With love, especially love for your enemies, you defeat Satan. You might even win over a few enemies along the way. Later in the Gospel of Mark, a Roman soldier has a radical change of heart after watching Jesus die on the cross (Mark 15:39). Jesus won that double victory Martin Luther King Jr. extols: freedom for himself, freedom for his enemy.

Jesus, after his first encounter with Satan, told his countrymen to "repent and believe" (Mark 1:15). To follow Jesus, you deny yourself (you repent of your way) and you take up your cross (you believe in the way of self-giving love).

Self-giving love

You probably have at least some vision for your life: the things you'd like to accomplish, the relationships you'd like to enjoy, the place you'd like to live. So, how do you feel about relinquishing the right to define your life? Many people can't even begin following Jesus, at least the way the scriptures define following Jesus, because they can't fathom denying themselves. To deny ourselves, to relinquish the right to define our lives, we must somehow come to the conclusion that we can't be trusted—that we don't know the world well enough, that we don't know ourselves well enough, and that we don't know the future well enough to say with any degree of confidence that the path we envision for ourselves is the right one. In any event, most of us don't walk down our paths for very long before running into roadblocks. For many of us, it takes the failure of our visions to persuade us to release them.

If you can't be trusted to define your life, can you trust anyone else? The scriptures deem Jesus trustwor-

thy. Jesus, in this story, invites our trust. Problem is, his vision for our lives is shaped like a cross. It's one thing to relinquish your right to define life; it's another thing to give that right to someone who commands you to take up your cross.

To take up your cross, you first have to put away your sword: you stop injuring others for the sake of advancing your cause. You put away anger and malice and resentment. You cease hostilities. You forsake revenge. To do so, employ the Psalms, especially the Psalms of lament. When you lament, you pour out your anger in God's presence because you know you need a new perspective. You don't ignore your anger; you channel it. When a cup is poured out, it can be filled with something else. So it is with a lament. You pour out anger, and you take in a new perspective. Jesus employed Psalm 22, which the New Testament quotes or alludes to seventeen times in connection with his crucifixion. From the cross, instead of striking back at those who were mocking him, he cried out with the first line from Psalm 22, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Instead of taking up your sword, take up the Psalms. Then take up your cross. Put on self-giving love.

You don't necessarily need to go out of your way or add to your schedule to put on self-giving love. You begin with the people who are already in your life, even the difficult people. Ask yourself how you can love, in practical ways, those who are closest to you: your family, your housemate, your co-workers, your neighbors. Taking up your cross involves making small, sometimes difficult decisions for the sake of love. These decisions help set a pattern—a cross-shaped pattern—for your life.

Jesus didn't appear out of nowhere in Gethsemane to make the most difficult—and most significant—decision in history: the decision to submit to the Father's will and, quite literally, take up his cross. He journeyed toward Gethsemane one step at a time in the way of the Lord. He made hundreds of small decisions along the way. When the time came for the big one, he was ready. If you simply determine to put one foot in front of the other each day, making small decisions in the way of the Lord, you will be ready if that way leads you to your own Gethsemane.

Last week, we scheduled a special trash pickup at our house, which meant I had to spend an hour or so hauling garbage to the curb. Garbage duty is not one of my favorite assignments. To me, it doesn't rank high on the list of significant tasks that one could undertake. It doesn't compare with, say, sharing the gospel with someone. However, with Mark 8:34 fresh in my mind, I began hauling garbage by reminding myself that I was serving Christ by serving my family. One can take out the garbage for the sake of Jesus and the gospel. Taking out the

garbage doesn't cost me much, just an hour or so, and maybe a backache. But, well, it costs something. So the task took on new meaning. Oh, and while I was taking out the garbage, I asked my neighbor for help with a particularly heavy item that I couldn't move by myself. Somehow, we got into a discussion about spiritual things and I shared the gospel with him. Take out the garbage for the sake of the gospel and you might end up sharing the gospel. Small decisions for the sake of love—preparing a meal, writing a note, holding your tongue—mean a lot. They set a pattern—a cross-shaped pattern—for your life.

After you establish a pattern by making small decisions to take up your cross, consider entering some place where people are in pain in your world and bring with you the love of Christ. In going to the cross, Jesus went to a place that gathered the pain of the world. Pain—a world in pain—needs love most of all.

In taking up your cross, in practicing self-giving love, you open yourself up to rejection. You don't seek rejection, but when you take up your cross, you always risk the possibility that your cross-bearing will be spurned. When it is spurned, embrace the pain instead of deflecting it. Then follow the pain as it leads you deeper into the heart of Jesus. Instead of protecting yourself from the pain of rejection, use it to your advantage.

I wonder where I'd be if I'd received the love, acceptance, and validation that I've craved. I don't think I'd be nearly as close to Jesus as I am. In the big picture, the sting of rejection has been my friend, not my enemy. It has escorted me into the presence of Jesus, where I have learned to follow his vision, not mine.

What if, in taking up your cross, someone takes up a sword against you? You know what to do: lament and forgive. On the cross, Jesus not only asked the Father why he had forsaken him, he also asked the Father to forgive those who crucified him (Luke 23:34).

Does taking up your cross mean you let others do whatever they want so that you become an enabler for their destructive ways? By no means. Consider Jesus. Does Jesus, who took up his own cross, strike you as a doormat? While provoking his enemies, he was "grieved at their hardness of heart" (Mark 3:5). For reasons that have to do with love, he refused to do what others wanted him to do. If Jesus is any example, strong words and non-compliance often go hand in hand with self-giving love.

For many people, taking up a cross feels like a burden too great to bear. They know they're supposed to love, but they never feel that they're loving enough. They're not so much taking up their crosses as they are taking on loads of expectations. Again, consider Jesus. He didn't heal everyone, yet it was never said of him that he felt he wasn't doing enough. He healed some in one town, and when the town wanted more, he left it (Mark 1:35-39). He rested. He spent time alone. He ate. He slept.

He even slept during a storm that threatened the lives of his disciples (Mark 4:38). He didn't do everything, but, by virtue of his knowledge of the scriptures and his connection to the Father, and quite apart from trying to live up to expectations, he did some things—the things congruent with his mission. He died, from a contemporary perspective, much too soon, leaving much undone. Don't try to do everything. Don't feel guilty that you're not doing everything. Don't take up someone else's cross; take up your own cross. Give attention to the scriptures and prayer, and do something.

Jesus not only commands us to take up our crosses in Mark 8:34, he also gives us reasons for taking up our crosses in Mark 8:35-9:1.

Save your life

The word "life," also translated "soul," dominates Jesus' explanation in Mark 8:35-9:1. For Jews, "life" was connected to their covenant, or partnership, with God, who instructed them to "choose life" by remaining faithful to him. Otherwise, they would lose the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 30:15-20). However, both John the Baptist and Jesus accused Israel of unfaithfulness, even if many Jews, particularly nationalists such as the Pharisees, deemed themselves perfectly faithful.

Well, Jesus says, if you insist on preserving your version of life, you'll be turning your back on partnership with God. Even if a Jewish nationalist were to succeed beyond his wildest dreams by taking up a sword so that Israel gained not only the Promised Land but also the "whole world," he would do so at the cost of his life, his share in God's partnership with Israel. If God's people gain the whole world by taking up a sword against Rome, they become no better than Rome and forfeit their vocation as the light of the world. What will someone give in exchange for partnership with God? More than the world, for the world isn't worth it. Satan, by the way, offered Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world," and Jesus refused (Matthew 4:8-10). God, of course, would give Jesus the kingdoms of the world, but only after Jesus had taken up his own cross.

Jesus tells his listeners that he will reject them when he "comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels" if they reject him and his words concerning partnership with God and instead align themselves with this generation, which has turned its back on God in favor of pagan-like agendas. Jesus says that he, the Son of Man, will come within the lifetime of some of those listening to him. Jesus would later tell the high priest that he also could expect to see the coming of the Son of Man (Mark 14:62). By the time Jesus, as the Son of Man, "comes," the kingdom of God will have already "come" with power. In the vision of the prophet Daniel, the Son of Man, as the representative of God's people, "came up" to the Ancient of Days, God, to receive an everlasting kingdom (Daniel 7:13-14).³The coming of the Son of Man, then, refers not to the so-called

“second coming”; it refers to events proceeding from the first coming, especially the ascension of Jesus to his heavenly throne, from which he reigns over the earth (Luke 24:50-53, Acts 2:32-35).⁴ The imminence of the enthronement of the Son of Man and the coming kingdom of God should impress upon those listening to Jesus the urgency to deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow Jesus.

What, then, should they do? Jesus wants them to lose their lives: to release their versions of life, even their versions of faithfulness to God. They should do so for the sake of both Jesus and the gospel. The gospel is the good news concerning the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. Jesus defeats Satan and brings in the kingdom by taking up his own cross, and then his followers implement his victory by denying themselves, taking up their crosses in self-giving love, and following him. If you deny yourself and take up your cross, you will save your life: you will be choosing life—partnership with God.

What you're supposed to be

Why should we take up our crosses? First, because of what we will lose for refusing to do so, and second, because of what we will save for doing so.

You can insist on clinging to a cross-less vision for life and defend it against all comers, but even if you succeed beyond your wildest dreams, you will do so at the cost of your life: your partnership with God. God created us to bear his image, to reflect his splendor, to be the light of the world. Refusing to embrace a cross-shaped life means turning your back on your own humanity. It also means that Jesus, the now-enthroned Lord of the world, will turn his back on you when he comes to establish his kingdom. He will want nothing to do with you, because you have wanted nothing to do with him. If in this life you refused to take up your cross and follow Jesus, then how will you be able to even *want* to see the one who took up his cross for you?

By refusing to take up your cross, you lose much. By taking up your cross, what do you save? You save your life: your partnership with God, and all that it entails. You save your humanity—actually, you let Jesus save your humanity, so that you become, surely and eventually, what you want to be but what you can't be on your own, which is nothing more or less than what you're supposed to be. Being in partnership with God means that you participate in his purposes, that you participate in life, that you participate in the world. What, in light of Jesus' words, are you, achieving in partnership with God? You are achieving, with all the followers of Jesus, nothing less than the vanquishing of evil and the establishment of the eternal kingdom of God on earth. How are you doing it? By taking up your cross in self-giving love.

Fredrick Buechner writes of visiting his mother in her apartment, where he received a phone call from a

friend in tears who had just heard that his parents and his pregnant sister had been in an automobile accident and that it was uncertain whether any of them would live. The friend was at the airport waiting for a flight to take him to them and asked Buechner, then in his twenties, to come and wait with him until the plane left. Buechner remembers, “I was afraid of my friend's fear and of his tears. I was afraid of his faith that I could somehow be a comfort and help to him and afraid that I was not friend enough to be able to be.” As it turned out, his friend composed himself, called again, and said there was no longer any need for Buechner to come. So Buechner didn't go. Many years later, he shared these reflections on the episode:

My mother's apartment by candlelight was haven and home and shelter from everything in the world that seemed dangerous and a threat to my peace. And my friend's broken voice on the phone was a voice calling me out into that dangerous world not simply for his sake, as I suddenly saw it, but also for my sake. The shattering revelation of that moment was that true peace, the high and bidding peace that passeth all understanding, is to be had not in retreat from the battle, but only in the thick of battle. To journey for the sake of saving our own lives is little by little to cease to live in any sense that really matters, even to ourselves, because it is only by journeying for the world's sake—even when the world bores and sickens and scares you half to death—that little by little we start to come alive. It was not a conclusion that I came to in time. It was a conclusion from beyond time that came to me. God knows I have never been any good at following the road it pointed me to, but at least, by grace I glimpsed the road and saw that it is the only one worth traveling.⁵

When you journey for the sake of Jesus and the gospel, for the sake of the world, you save your life—or, in Buechner's words, you “come alive.” The voice of Jesus that calls you beyond yourself, which you may hear in the voice of a friend, calls for your sake. The hard road—the way of self-giving love—is the life-giving road, the only one worth traveling. The world needs followers of Jesus to come alive and give themselves to self-giving love. And you come alive in the most paradoxical of ways: by taking up a cross.

The most durable power in the world

Are you clinging to a vision for your life that you need to release? Are you fighting the wrong battles—for pride, success, power, possessions, or earthly security? You've got a bigger battle to fight, the battle for the kingdom, and you can only fight that one by taking up your cross. Practice self-giving love. Why? Because at the deepest level, self-giving love appeals to you. It resonates with who you are, who you want to be, who you're supposed to be. Practice self-giving love because you want to come alive.

Martin Luther King Jr. again:

Love is the most durable power in the world. This creative force, so beautifully exemplified in the life of our Christ, is the most potent instrument available in mankind's quest for

peace and security. Napoleon Bonaparte, the great military genius, looking back over his years of conquest, is reported to have said: "Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have built great empires. But upon what did they depend? They depended on force. But centuries ago Jesus started an empire that was built on love, and even to this day millions will die for him." Who can doubt the veracity of these words. The great military leaders of the past have gone, and their empires have crumbled and burned to ashes. But the empire of Jesus, built solidly and majestically on the foundation of love, is still growing.⁶

Think about a way you can participate in the empire of Jesus this week by doing one small thing for the sake of love that costs you something, even if it only costs you five minutes.

NOTES

¹ Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Collins Publishers, 1977), 47-45.

² Literary structure:

A "And He said to them": "Follow" (34)

B "For whoever wishes to save his life ... " (35)

C "For what does it profit a man ... " (36)

C' "For what will a man give ... " (37)

B' "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words ... " (38)

A' "And Jesus was saying to them": "See" (1)

³ The angels, in Daniel 7:9-19, constitute the heavenly court.

⁴ None of what Jesus says disavows the so-called second coming. The scriptures elsewhere affirm that Jesus will come again to establish the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 15:20-28).

⁵ Fredrick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey* (San Francisco: HarperSan-Francisco, 1982), 107).

⁶ Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Collins Publishers, 1977), 47-45.