



"It'll be fun," I said as we grabbed our helmets and headed down the road. And it did feel fun in the invigorating morning air with a cool breeze blowing on our faces. It was still fun a few minutes later after we had coasted on our bikes up to the trailhead. I started down the trail and everyone followed. Most were using mountain bikes, but the terrain did get challenging. It didn't take long for the child on the 1980's banana bike to wipe out. "Fun" soon became "tricky." Difficult turns caused another wipe out or two. At that point I think most would have described it as tiring, not fun. Finally, after a couple bumps, some small scrapes, and a few tears and drops of sweat we made it back to the trailhead. We still had to make it back home from there. By now the sun had transformed the early brisk morning into a sizzling heat. And the return was mostly uphill. We stopped to rest in a shady area. Then came the mosquitos to remind us of the best part of monsoon season. By now I had to admit fun might not have been the most accurate word. I started describing it as an adventure. Call it what you want, we had run out of water, were dripping in sweat, and couldn't wait to get home. I said it was going to be fun; I didn't say *easy*. That's what it is like sometimes for us as members of the family of God. We might set out expecting things to be a breeze. But we shouldn't be surprised if we hit hard times –far more trying than any difficult bike ride. This morning we continue our sermon series on "Family Values." We're looking at what we value as members of God's family. We look now at Mark 8 to learn that our family expects hard times and just what gets us through.

It might have seemed at times like being with Jesus meant nothing could phase you. His disciples saw him breeze by some setbacks. It started with his first miracle. A friend of the family ran out of wine at their wedding celebration. It was a minor setback. But at Mary's request Jesus turned 120 gallons of water into wine! Easy, right? When confronted by demons he rebuked them, and they fled before him. When Peter brought Jesus to his home they found Peter's mother-in-law was ill. No worries! Jesus healed her. And when the crowds at Nazareth tried to drive him off a cliff to kill him they couldn't touch him. Jesus walked right through them. What about the storm they faced that dark night on the sea? Jesus calmly slept until he woke and rebuked the wind and the waves and they became perfectly calm. Wouldn't you like to have that kind of power to handle hard times?

The disciples knew Jesus could do all these things because of who he was. Yes, he was a man. But he was much more! Jesus asks his disciples what everyone thought of him. The crowds all had grand ideas. He had to be great in order to do the things he did! Yet the disciples knew Jesus was even greater than all their wildest dreams. "Who do you say I am?" he asks. Peter proudly pipes up, "You are the Christ!" They were following God's Son, the chosen Savior of the world! Nothing but glory awaited!

That's what they must have been thinking, at least until Jesus told them what was on the path ahead. He explains that the road wasn't going to be so easy. They should have known this was the case. Despite his miracles Jesus had always lived a very lowly life. He had worked hard and faced a hard life. Even as a little child he had been on the run from those who wanted to kill him. As an adult he lived without a place to call his own. He grew tired and faced setbacks. His friends like John the Baptist and his earthly father, Joseph, died. Life got hard and it was only going to get harder. "He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this." Jesus had alluded to his suffering and death before. But now he is plainly teaching it. He's bluntly saying, "I'm going to suffer many things, I'm going to be rejected, I'm going to be killed."

Peter doesn't want anything to do with it. "Jesus, you're the chosen one! You can't be rejected! You're the one who saves. You can't suffer and die!" We don't know exactly what Peter said, but he took Jesus aside and was starting to rebuke him. He told Jesus that he was going down the wrong trail. An argument erupted. Jesus turns to face Peter and all the disciples. He in turn rebukes Peter, "Get behind me, Satan, because you are not setting your mind on the things of God but the things of the people."

Peter should have known better. He had just confessed Jesus is the Christ. But now he questions his plan and God's methods. Jesus shows how necessary it is to correct false thinking without delay at even the first sign of error. He immediately calls out Peter for turning aside from what God says must happen. This must be done whenever someone tries to shy away from the message of the cross of Christ. The moment a brother or sister in the faith deviates from Christ crucified for us we have to correct them! Peter only had the wisdom of this world. And behind it was the deceit of Satan. It was contrary to God's plan and deserved a sharp rebuke. He made the mistake of trying to instruct God. Peter wanted to fix the way God had planned things out. Jesus wasn't giving up by going toward suffering ahead. He wasn't despairing by saying "it's no use, I give up." He was telling Peter what God's plan was. He had taught them this is what "must" happen. "This is the path I must take."

And we need to watch ourselves too. And at the first sign of any suffering we begin to question God's working and his plan. Even though we may have good intentions our thoughts may at times be more in line with Satan than with Christ. When we veil the cross in favor of our own ideas we turn aside from God's plan to Satan's plan. And this is a real danger for us because we are prone to have in mind the things of people instead of the things of God. Our concerns become godless instead of godly.

Jesus goes on to explain what it means to be part of the family of believers. God's family is to expect hard times. He warns all of us: "Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." This is not a description of how to earn heaven, but how a disciple should expect life to be as they follow Jesus. Notice that there are no exceptions: "...anyone... must..."

Anyone who wants to be a disciple of Jesus must deny self. This means forgetting about our own plans and pleasures and looking to God's plan and his promises. We must deny more than just a portion of self or just some habit but our entire self. For the young child to deny self means even more than saying, "I'll take the last donut." It means to realize that every action and habit should be centered on loving God and loving others. It means silencing that voice which constantly cries, "Not fair! That's mine" and, "I deserve better." It means yielding every personal claim and right to the will of God. For the youth it means learning their first paycheck isn't just for themselves to spend on selfish ends and to fill their heart's desires with food and toys. To deny self as a mature adult means to make your goals in life match God's goals. To deny self means every day to say to the old sinful self, "You are not my master. Seeking pleasure through this world is not my goal." The sinful heart hates to orient itself this way.

We must also face hardships and take up a cross -that is the suffering we face as a Christian- and follow a Savior who suffered. We expect hard times. "You must take up your cross." As a Christian you don't suffer a cross to pay for sins. But you carry a load of suffering and pain because you follow the true God. Scripture gives us several reasons for us carrying our crosses, but for now we must focus on the fact that it is unavoidable. Every Christian has a load of pain and suffering to carry.

Everyone who follows Jesus will struggle to accept that God's plan for us involves suffering. What youth today can possibly bear up under the pressure to confess their faith when confronted? The college professor will ridicule it. The so-called friends in their social media circles will attack them. And they will have to choose between following God's Word and what he teaches or stepping aside. The temptation will arise when asked, "You mean to say you actually believe what your old church teaches about sex, about marriage, about men and women and the Bible? You actually believe what the Bible teaches about stories of miracles and a creation?" They will be tempted to step aside and set down their cross. They will be tempted to deny the truth and avoid suffering. And mature Christians in a congregation like ours which practices care with doctrine will be told, "You are too strict." A cross must be carried for the sake of God's Word and his plan. That can mean rejection as they reject the Word we love.

At other times our cross may be broader, a type of suffering, illness, or pain in our life. And we'll be tempted to wonder, "Is this what it means to follow God? If I'm part of his family, why do I suffer?"

Peter would later struggle to carry this cross. He would fail to deny himself as he denied his Savior. The same man who confessed, "you are the Christ," denied Jesus. Peter saw Jesus bound and beaten. He saw Jesus on trial and rejected. When the cross came in the form of suffering for the sake of confessing Christ he chose self over Jesus. "I don't know the man," he said. He didn't want to suffer too.

All of us have a conflict with the sinful heart which loves self and hates our cross bearing. What times will you be tempted to set aside Jesus and put yourself first? What pleasures will make you slip away from loving God to loving self? What pains will lead you to set aside your cross and leave Christ?

When we see the danger it deserves a rebuke, "get behind me Satan! You don't have in mind the things of God!" To put down our cross and put ourselves first is to end up losing everything! "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it." If we choose to put the sinful desires of the heart first, then we don't have in mind God's plan but our own. If we try to put ourselves first, we actually have succumbed to Satan's greatest temptation. We begin to believe that we can attain good things for ourselves apart from God. Jesus says we then lose the life we have with him. "Whoever gains his life will lose it." We can gain all the pleasures and good things of this world and avoid all suffering for the sake of Christ. But we've only gained what will decay and our suffering will never end without Christ.

But with Jesus we can expect more. We can expect glory. That's because we could not attain glory for ourselves. We deserve the curse of sin and death and hell. But for us Jesus denied himself. He came in human flesh to carry out his saving plan. His plan wasn't to serve himself and gain earthly pleasures. It was to consider his life as payment for ours. He valued the things of God and our well-being above his own well being. He gave himself to suffer many things for us all. He denied self for the love of us all. And because he accomplished this we have life. He went to suffer many things and he died on a literal cross for you.

Will we put self first and let our lesser burdens deter us from following him? We are strengthened to go on by his promise. Jesus, who said he would also rise back to life promises us that the journey is worth it. With a new heart of faith, we deny our old sinful self. We consider it dead and no longer our master. We follow Christ bearing all suffering and pain because he is our source of goodness. By his suffering and death, his cross, we have gained everything. "Whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it." That is, we might give up our time, our energy, our perceived privileges, rights, and comforts in this life, but if we give it up for Jesus, we've not lost anything! Through his gospel we've gained life!

He doesn't say it will be easy, but it will be worth it. That difficult bike ride wasn't our last family bike ride, but it certainly is one that will be remembered. The next time we went out I attached a promise to the journey. I didn't say it would be easy, but I said, "come with me and I'll buy you a donut." All memories of the previous hardships biking were erased. Without hesitation they grabbed their helmets and followed. Without complaint they endured the heat, the hills, and the bumps. Why? They knew what to expect. It wouldn't be easy, but it would be worth it because of the promise. For us we too know the promised gift and our goal. It is to rise with Jesus who now lives. It is to gain with him everything and eternal life! Will we be tempted to turn aside when hard times hit? Will we at times want to put self above our Savior and his plan? Or will we expect hard times, and endure it all for the sake of his gospel? As part of the family we know what to expect.