



Sermon, June 17, 2018  
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## “No Powdered Christians”

### **Scripture: Mark 8:31-38**

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.’

**Opening Story:** You might remember comedian Yakov Smirnoff. When he first came to the United States from Russia he was not prepared for the incredible variety of instant products available in American grocery stores. He says, "On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk—you just add water, and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice—you just add water, and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, ‘What a country!’"

Smirnoff is joking but we make these assumptions about Christian Transformation—that people change instantly at salvation. Some traditions call it Repentance and Renewal. Some call it Sanctification of the Believer. Whatever you call it, most traditions expect some quick fix to sin. According to this belief, when someone gives his or her life to Christ, there is an immediate, substantive, in-depth, miraculous change in habits, attitudes, and character. We go to church as if we are going to the grocery store: Powdered Christian. Just add water and disciples are born not made.

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Unfortunately, there is no such powder and disciples of Jesus Christ are not instantly born. They are slowly raised through many trials, suffering, and temptations. A study has found that only 11 percent of churchgoing teenagers have a well-developed faith, rising to only 32 percent for churchgoing adults. Why? Because true life-change only begins at salvation, takes more than just time, is about training, trying, suffering, and even dying. But that may not be what we want to hear.

In our Scripture lesson for this morning, Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked him. Why? Peter believes the kingdom of God can be obtained instantly by force. Peter has a worldly view of the Kingdom and Jesus is speaking about a heavenly kingdom. For a moment, I would like you to listen to this story with new ears and see Jesus through the eyes of Peter and the rest of the disciples. Get rid of all your notions about who Jesus is. Take away from your mind Jesus as the Son of God. Strip from your memory that he died on the Cross and the church teaching that he did that for your sins. Forget that Jesus ever said "love your enemies" or "love your neighbor."

For a moment, I want you to think of Jesus only as a military leader. Imagine that your country has been invaded and is being ruled by godless men. Sense, now, that the tension is mounting and you are about to go into battle. You are about to conduct a *coup d'état*. You and this band of ruffians are going to attempt to overthrow this government by a sudden violent strike. Certainly, the odds are stacked against you but you have a very strong belief that God is on your side despite the overwhelming odds.

Now you are thinking like Peter. Jesus comes before his disciples and lays out *his* "military" strategy. Look at verse 31. Jesus says, "We are going to march into Jerusalem. I, your General, will suffer many things. Furthermore, we are not going to get any help from our Jewish brothers the Elders. Even the Chief Priest and the Sadducees will not join us. Our government, the Sanhedrin, is corrupt and can be of no help to us. We are going it alone and I will die in this battle."

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Isn't our reaction pretty much like Peter's reaction? And what is troubling? That Jesus is so blunt. Verse 32a is found only in Mark: "...and he was speaking the word plainly." When Peter takes Jesus aside and "rebukes" him, it is not because Peter misunderstands Jesus' words, but because he does understand them, and he doesn't like them. To quote that great theologian Mark Twain: "Many people are bothered by those passages in Scripture which they cannot understand; but as for me, I always noticed that the passages in Scripture which trouble me most are those which I do understand."

Perhaps we judge Jesus to be reckless: "Doing what is necessary to survive" is a thoroughly human mode of operation. It is often necessary in order to improve life, especially when there are many people who are counting on us. To throw caution to the wind when one is leading or participating in a movement, especially one that is truly a worthy cause, is the height of recklessness. Jesus demands to know how he is being identified (8:27-29a). Peter, probably speaking for all his colleagues, gives Jesus a very high identification - "Christ", which like "Messiah" means "The Anointed One of God" (8:29b). When Jesus not only predicts his own demise, but declares that it is necessary (8:31), Peter rebukes him because their very survival is ultimately dependent on his, and if he is scheduled for demise then so are they. Peter can't have this, and neither can we, because this is no way to make the world a better place. Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" We ask, with great sarcasm, "Who does Jesus think he is?"

But more importantly, we are also asking, "Who does Jesus think we are?" I mean, it's one thing for Jesus to be so reckless, but does he really think that we are willing, let alone are even *capable* of joining in his reckless plan? Take up our crosses indeed!

And just exactly what does Jesus mean by that: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me?" When Jesus said, 'if you are going to follow me, you have to take up a cross,' He did not have a beautiful gold cross in mind - the cross on

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a church steeple or on the front of your Bible. To the people of Jesus' time, a cross meant one thing, and one thing only: a place of execution.

It was a symbol of the reality of death and execution, especially for anyone who didn't follow along with the Roman way of doing things, of those who bucked a system based upon the domination and subjugation of peoples and civilizations around the Mediterranean.

Cyprian, a third-century martyr, had this to say to his friend Donatus about how the way of Jesus contrasted with the way of Rome:

"This is a cheerful world as I see it from my garden under the shadows of my vines. But If I were to ascend some high mountain and look over the wide lands, you know very well what I would see: brigands on the highways, pirates on the sea, armies fighting, cities burning; in the amphitheaters men murdered to please the applauding crowds; selfishness and cruelty and misery and despair under all roofs. It is a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians—and I am one of them."

"They are masters of their souls." This is what it means to walk the Way of Jesus – to have freedom in God by dying to the myriad of things that want to run our lives for us, that want to drag us into behaviors and attitudes that degrade us or abuse others or enslave us and addict us.

The way of Jesus is the way of freedom. Freedom from death. Freedom from the hold that the way of death has over us. And this is how we have that freedom: Jesus died our death for us. He took into himself all the death-dealing power of the Systems of this world – the political systems, the cultural systems, the economic systems, the falsehood systems, put-down systems and systems of oppression – Jesus took all their power to the cross and the power of death was destroyed there. Paul in Romans 4:25 says that Jesus was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

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The way of Jesus is not a quick fix. Oh sure, we add water, but there is no “Poof! Instant Disciple.” Each day we struggle with the cross and we wrestle with our lives. Whether one has struggled and endeavored for 60 or 70 years to follow Jesus or if you have just begun to walk that path or even if you haven’t committed to the Way of Jesus just yet but are trying to figure it out, we need to be clear on this one point: the way of Jesus is not a quick fix. It comes at a great cost, and that cost is your life. How do we do this? By walking his path every day. The church exists to show this path to all who would walk it. The church exists in order to get the way of death and domination out of our heads and the Way of Heaven and of Jesus into our heads. The way we do this is by focusing on three main areas of Disciple Formation:

- Faith Exploration
- Spiritual Formation
- Life Implementation

Every group in our church needs to be a means for exploring our faith.

There are no powdered Christians. Baptism is simply a beginning. Each day we must explore to what things we must die in order to enter into the full, abundant life of Jesus. The church exists as the means to explore that faith, to be formed spiritually, and to find ways to implement our faith in our lives every day. Sunday morning worship is a beginning, but the real work begins when we go out of these doors. Martin Luther said, “A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing.” Jesus gave his life that our lives might be filled with the abundance of God. Let’s start living our lives in such a way that his gift to us does not go to waste.