

THE THREE-PART COMMAND

TEXT: Mark 8:31-38

I don't think I'm the only one who has had a hard time digesting the words of Jesus that we just heard from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus confused the early disciples fairly often, but I think these words probably need some exploration for us as well.

Jesus' words are three different commands for his followers, and all of them are hard for us to understand – and even harder to do. So, let's take them one by one and see if we can find meaning for us today. Jesus said "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me".

The first command was for his disciples to "deny themselves". I think we really need to talk about this, because I'm not sure we really understand what that's all about. At least I'm not sure that I do.

Perhaps we need to start by trying to understand what it means to deny. First of all, the Greek word "deny" is the same one used to describe what Peter does with Jesus around that campfire. Remember? When asked, Peter said he didn't know Jesus, had no connection with him. In fact, these are the only two uses of the word in the entire New Testament: Peter denying Jesus, and Jesus saying we must deny ourselves. Hmmm.

Well, first of all, I think it is clear that Jesus is NOT saying that we have to give up this or that, or try to forget our normal human needs, or live some ascetic life. "Deny yourself" is not about self-abnegation. In fact, it's harder than that. To deny yourself is to set aside your own interests in order to ascertain God's interests. You must be ready to do what God wants.

And what God wants is for us to serve others. Because each and every time we make ourselves vulnerable to the needs of those around us, each time we give ourselves in love to another, each time we get out of our own way and seek not what we want but what the world needs, we come alive, we are uplifted, we experience the glory of God made manifest. That's what Jesus means when he invites his disciples – then and now – to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him, because only those who are willing to lose their life out of love will save it.

Here we need to be clear. Jesus is not talking about a kind of doormat theology where we are to ignore our genuine human needs altogether or see ourselves as not deserving of love, dignity, and respect. There's no justification here for enduring abusive relationships or tolerating injustice. It's about giving of ourselves in love – which is, of course, quite different than having others take from us. And that giving in love almost always includes sacrifice, denying ourselves and our immediate gratification so as to meet another's needs.

And the important thing is that the verse doesn't stop there. In fact, Jesus gives us this three-part formula for being his disciple. If we don't get all three parts, we miss the point of his teaching.

First is the denying of one's own interests. THEN, there is taking up the cross. This makes the denying part look pretty easy. Cross-bearing means much more than just patience or obedience. It means death. It means the resignation of your reputation and life. Crosses imply rejection; those who bore crosses in the Roman imperial world were publicly declaring that their society or their leaders had denied them. Those who follow Jesus, associating with this vividly rejected Christ, take on an identity and a way of living that pose threats to the world's corrosive ideologies and idolatries.

Bearing our cross is NOT about dealing with some normal suffering or problem on the part of human existence. That happens to everyone, every day. When Jesus took up his cross, what did he do? He chose - he wasn't forced – he chose to carry out the ministry that God wanted him to do. That is what “Take up your cross” means – you make an active choice to live into the ministry that God has called you to do, every day.

So we have turned away from our own plans, and turned toward God's plans, and have chosen to live in ministry, our own unique ministry, day by day. But Wait! There's a third part. “And follow me.”

I have this image of the erstwhile modern-day disciple, putting down his own backpack filled with whatever he needs to live his normal daily life, then picking up a backpack that Jesus hands him that is filled with whatever is needed to do the ministry he is called to do – and then, before Jesus can say anything, this earnest disciple just starts off down the street, walking strongly in exactly the wrong direction.

Jesus said to deny ourselves, take up our cross of personal ministry, and then follow him. Guess what? When you follow someone, you wait on their lead. If I am going to follow you in your car so you can show me the way to that new restaurant, I don't leave first, and I don't pass you on the way. I stay behind, watching for turn signals and I let you lead.

There will be times when Jesus will say “go” and times where he will say “wait”. There are times where he will say “work hard, you know what to do”, and times where he will say “stop working and rest”. And there will even be times when he will say “give me your backpack and wait here. I'll be back with your new backpack in a few days”. It's all part of “follow me”.

Self-denial and cross-bearing describe what it means to follow Jesus. Jesus' portrait of discipleship is anything but attractive or easy. Self-denial (a notion John Calvin said constitutes "the sum of the Christian life") is not primarily about squashing our desires or delaying gratification. Jesus calls us to separate ourselves from what defines us. A person in Jesus' culture was defined by those to whom he belonged – usually household or kin. Jesus calls people to embrace new understandings of identity. Disciples join a community defined by association with Jesus; they enter a new family comprising all of Jesus' followers. Self-denial is not self-annihilation, but complete redefinition.

The "theology of the cross" or to "deny oneself" does not mean a contrived kind of humility. We do not follow Jesus by demeaning ourselves. We are called upon to do the very best we can with the talents and abilities God has given us. To "deny yourself" means to keep one's priorities in harmony with what Jesus told us in the two "great commandments" – love God and love your neighbor.

There was, to be sure, a ray of hope in what Jesus said that day, although the disciples may not have heard it. Jesus will be killed, but he will also rise again. Furthermore, those who lose their lives for Jesus' sake and the sake of the gospel will save it. But at this time the disciples would not have known how those promises would come true.

Jesus gave us a three-part formula for discipleship, and we need to understand and do all three parts to be successful: give up claim to ourselves, make a choice to live into our own unique ministry, and let Jesus lead you. Let's not stop with "deny yourself": let's get a full understanding of what all three parts mean.

Jesus gives us this hope for the future, but in today's text we are called upon to follow him not just for this future, but in this life. To follow him now means a life 'more

abundant”, as John told us. As one pastor said, “we follow Jesus not just to be saved or to go to heaven; we follow Jesus because it’s worth it”. Amen.