

Follow Me – A Call to Respond
Mark 8:27-38

Brothers and sisters, membership loyalty programs are great aren't they. They allow you to accumulate points and then cash them for rewards - just for doing things that you would normally do anyways; like paying bills, buying groceries, or making purchases on a credit card. It's great.

A few months ago I discovered that I was automatically part of Telus rewards because I was a Telus customer, and just for paying my bills over the past couple of years I had accumulated enough points to cash in on a \$100 Home Depot gift certificate. Thank you very much.

And I know other people who pay every expense they can with their Air miles credit card, so they can rack up the points and get free flights for their vacations. Needless to say, they were quite happy to discover Valleyview had signed up for the Giving App and they could make their monthly donations on their credit card as well.

But sometimes these programs work too well in favor of the customer, and they end up costing the provider more money than they are bringing in. When that happens, the provider will have to make some changes to the program and let members know that the deal is changing.

I remember a few years ago Air Miles had to make some changes to its programs because too many people were getting too many free flights. So now there are limits – qualifying factors on redeeming Air Miles - so that they are not paying out premium costs for premium flights.

It's the same kind of situation that occurs when a public service or amenity that was available to everyone for free, must now limit who qualifies to use the service for free and implement a user fee in order to keep up with the demand for the service – like using a city rec center.

Or maybe the cost is to try and discourage demand for the service. Remember when our city council put out the notice – about this time last year – that as of Jan 16, 2024 there would

be a user fee of 15 cents for single use items, like a bag for your order at the Mc Donalds drive thru.

They wanted us to be aware that it was going to cost us to continue to have the convenience of getting our orders in bags and we would be notified and asked when we placed our order if we wanted a bag with that for... 15 cents.

Now, in spite of that notification – most of us were caught off guard and we were NOT happy with our city council when we started getting asked if we wanted to pay for a bag... Air miles customers were not happy about getting their flight choices restricted, and no one is happy when they have to pay for a public service that they used to get for free...

Likewise, I think the disciples and the crowds that had been following Jesus were probably somewhat taken aback when Jesus adds a qualifier to what had been - up to this point - a pretty good loyalty follower program.

Up until now Jesus' call had been "follow me!" And over the past two Sundays we've seen how this call summoned ordinary fishermen, tax collectors named Levi, and it also seemed to draw crowds of people who followed Jesus around the countryside as well. And it had the benefit of giving everyone Jesus' great teaching, his healing and deliverance ministry, as well as telling people that their sins were forgiven! That's a great loyalty program, sign me up to follow Jesus!

But in this morning's passage we hear Jesus add a qualifier to His call – its not just "follow me" anymore... instead Jesus specifies that *"anyone who would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross."*

Now the NIV translation says *"anyone who would be my disciple"* but the Greek literally says anyone who would *come after me*, and that's important to retain that in the translation because this tells us why Jesus is adding this qualifier to His follower program. You see, up until now Jesus has been in what we might call the "advertising phase" of His ministry.

He's been announcing that the Kingdom of Heaven is near, and giving product demonstrations to show that He's the real deal, teaching with authority, authority over the kingdom of darkness – casts out demons, heals sickness, forgives sins, calls people to follow Him. He won't out and out call Himself the Messiah but He's saying that He's the Son of Man – that lesser-known messianic figure from Daniel's prophecies...

He's been in this advertising, focus group, marketing, preliminary phase ever since He came out of the wilderness and starting proclaiming “repent for the Kingdom of God has drawn near” in Mark 1:15.

Now, 7 chapters later in Mark 8, we find Jesus and his followers all way up in Caesarea Philippi, and Jesus determines He's has done enough “advertising” and it is now time to begin the “implementation” phase, which requires that He makes His way down to Jerusalem.

But are his followers ready? Jesus puts them to the test – specifically His disciples... Who am I? Well... the people think

you're probably some sort of prophet come again... Elijah, John the Baptist or so – but... we think you are the Christ!

Good! That's excellent. The “advertising” phase has been successful enough with those closest to Him. They can see He is more than a good teacher, a miracle worker, a prophet, rather He is the anointed one the prophecies pointed to.

However, it soon becomes evident the disciples believe Jesus' journey to Jerusalem ought to be a campaign. One that rallies support along the way, drawing more and more people who are eager to follow the long-awaited Messiah as He marches to Jerusalem, establishes Himself as King, delivers Israel and establish God's Kingdom here on earth. You are the Christ Jesus, if its time to go to Jerusalem... lets do this!

Thus, Peter rebukes Jesus for speaking of suffering, rejection, and execution in Jerusalem – that's not how you rally support and gain followers and start the work of delivering Israel! Jesus, have you forgotten about Joshua taking the land? What about the mighty Judges like Gideon, Jehu, even Samson?

And what about Isreal's mightiest hero – King David, for Christ's sake Jesus... as Messiah you're His heir – act like it!

Brothers and sisters this was a real temptation moment for Jesus. Many of the prophecies concerning the Messiah speak of His political power, might and glory. Isaiah 9:6-7 *"he will be called **Wonderful** Counselor, **Mighty** God... He will **reign** on David's throne... **establishing and upholding it** with justice... The **zeal** of the Lord **Almighty** will accomplish this."*

And Psalm 2:7-9 tells of His military victories, of conquering the nations and ruling over them. God says *"You are my Son, today I have become your Father. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance; the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter, you will dash them to pieces like pottery."*

So Peter's rebuke was well intentioned and scriptural, but this was not how the Messiah was going to deliver Isreal, and in fact had Jesus given into temptation and gone this route it would ultimately have been ineffective.

What would Jesus bring to a military deliverance of Isreal that had not already been done previously? How would Jesus lead all Isreal and the nations to turn and give genuine heartfelt pure worship to Yahweh and not backslide to become perfunctory and resented? A military victory and a political Kingship would not accomplish this – it's not needed.

What is needed is a spiritual victory and kingship. There's a more significant oppression going on than what Peter and the disciples and the crowds understand and Jesus calls it out and resists the actual oppressor – Get behind me... SATAN!

There is a spiritual battle between God and Satan that has played out in His Covenant relationship with Israel. Isreal is led into sin and covenant unfaithfulness by Satan leading to their exile and political oppression.

This underlying spiritual battle must be fought and won, and Isreal's covenant unfaithfulness must be resolved in Jerusalem through suffering, rejection and execution AND... resurrection.

So Jesus then looks at the disciples, and addresses the crowds and he says *“If you are going to follow after me, if you plan to follow me to Jerusalem, know this... you must deny yourself and take up your cross and go where I go.”* It’s implicitly communicated this journey will not be a triumphant campaign to take power, to make Jesus King, to overthrow the oppressors – it’s a funeral procession, a death march.

But the big question now is how do we apply Jesus’ qualifier about following Him to us today? On the other side of His journey to Jerusalem, AFTER His suffering and rejection and death? What does it mean to deny ourselves and take up our cross if we are to come after Jesus and follow Him?

Well...brothers and sisters, just as Jesus shifted from his “advertising” phase to the “implementation” phase and set a new direction towards Jerusalem... today He calls us to move on from following Him solely because of how His teaching, healing, deliverance and forgiveness makes our day to day lives better and shift our focus to following Him towards the

coming Kingdom of God – which the book of Revelation 21:2 describes as “the New Jerusalem.”

Jesus warns us that His benefits are not simply meant to help us “live our best life” or “become the best version of ourselves” and He points out the foolishness in this.

He says to us *“if you use me simply as a means to save your life on this side of eternity, you’ve missed the point and you will lose your life in eternity... what good is it to be my follower and gain the best version of yourself, to gain the best life ever, to have all the peace, contentment, happiness, wealth and success as my follower? You can’t trade any of those things from this life to save your soul in the next life!”*

The Apostle Paul understood what Jesus meant here, he phrases it pretty bluntly in 1 Cor 15:19 saying *“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”*

Brothers and sisters, Jesus doesn't this to happen to those who are following Him – today He wants us to know that there is much more to following Him than benefits for this life and He wants us to shift our focus from this temporary life to the eternal, the new Heaven and Earth, the New Jerusalem!

So, what this means is that all the blessings and benefits we experience from Jesus' teaching, healing, deliverance and forgiveness in our day to day lives now – need to be seen as signs that point our vision forward.

If we experience healing now, think of what it will be like when there will be no more sickness and disease! If we experience deliverance now, think of the day when the devil and his demons are cast into hell! If we are inspired by biblical teaching now – think of what it will be like to see Jesus and the Father face to face and speak with them directly.

You see how this works? These are signs that point us to get a vision of the coming Kingdom, and call us to follow after Jesus, anticipating His return to bring in the Kingdom.

So– who wants to follow Jesus to the coming Kingdom?! Ok then... Jesus gives us the qualifier as well; deny ourselves and take up our cross.

Now, Jesus' instruction to deny ourselves is not a call to asceticism or simple living. It's not a command to being frugal or cheap, that we must be overly disciplined, and refrain from enjoying Godly pleasures in His good creation. There are times and places for that, there is even some biblical basis for that – but its not from this passage.

Denying ourselves in this context is about denying our sanctified desires to advise Jesus on how He ought to bring about His Kingdom plans in our lives, in His Church, and in this world. Even if you think you have good biblical basis, promises and prophecies for why Jesus ought to do things in that way.

Brothers and sisters, what trips us up as maturing believers and followers of Jesus who are now excited about the coming Kingdom and focused on the life to come - are those time when we can see so clearly how God could work out a

Kingdom purpose in our lives, could bring someone else to salvation, How He could bring teaching, healing, deliverance, forgiveness and do so much good in this world, as a sign of the coming Kingdom - If He would only take a certain course of action...

So we pray for that and ask Him to do that, maybe we try to start a ministry for it, or take a step out in our lives in that direction. But Jesus doesn't go that way - because it's not in His plans for how He's going to bring about the Kingdom.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus wants us to know we must deny ourselves the temptation to rebuke Him about how He should go about being a Good God in bringing about the Kingdom.

If we follow Jesus, remember Jesus had to submit to the Father's plan and to follow it to Jerusalem. Yes – in the garden Jesus asked if there was any other way to fulfill God's Kingdom work – but He denied himself the opportunity to rebuke the Father, and said not my will but yours be done.

Brothers and sisters, denying ourselves as excited and enthusiastic followers of Jesus, anticipating the coming Kingdom is all about being willing to let God bring the Kingdom into our lives through things which look like defeat. Thus, Jesus says *"if you lose your life for Him and for the gospel you will save it."* Deny ourselves... Amen?

And then there's the matter of taking up our cross. Again, let's first clarify what this is not. Bearing our cross is not putting up with the challenges and difficulties we face or having to accept that we live in a broken and imperfect fallen world, and that following Jesus means life will get easier. That's not taking up our cross.

So, raising your little hellion is not a cross to bear. Dealing with a debilitating illness is not a cross to bear. Struggling with being single and staying pure is not a cross to bear.

Now, should we demonstrate good Christian character in such circumstances and trust in the Lord? Absolutely. However,

those kinds of situations are actually connected with what we just heard the Lord say about denying ourselves.

Brothers and sisters, to take up our cross is to embrace death. I'll let that sink in for a moment... but I'll clarify I'm not suggesting we go all "goth style" in our embrace of death.

Remember in Jesus day, when someone carried their cross it meant they were convicted as a despicable criminal, and were sentenced to die by crucifixion. They would be made to pick up the crossbeam upon which they would hang and die, and carry it to the site of their execution, just as Jesus would.

The only modern equivalent I can think of is when the Mafia are going to kill you, they give you a shovel and make you dig your own grave. So, this is more like Jesus telling his followers pick up your shovel... and follow me, we're going to our death.

So brothers and sisters, we take up our cross, we embrace death on a few different levels.

First, we must embrace that Jesus, as the Christ, had to die - and die as a convicted criminal. It was not a noble death or a peaceful death it was a brutal death - but a necessary death. Not for the purpose of playing on your emotions so that you feel badly and repent. But because the very structure of our Covenant relationship with God requires that those who are unfaithful pay with their life. His death was necessary to achieve our forgiveness - we need to embrace this.

Second, we embrace death as a means by the Holy Spirit sanctifies us and changes us and we cooperate with Him. Paul explains to us in Galatians 5:24 says *"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh [sinful nature] with its passions and desires."*

And in Colossians 3:5-9 he gets very practical in what this looks like. He says *"Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry... rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other..."*

Brothers and sisters, have you noticed – as the immorality in our society is increasing – most people justify it by claiming that whatever immoral thing they are doing is “a part of their identity” and they are just authentically being themselves. I’ve heard people say that when they’ve tried to repress these immoral aspects of who they are, it was like a part of themselves was dying... and we can’t have people killing parts of the themselves right – so we should celebrate it instead.

But we take up our cross... we can embrace death, we do not need to fear killing off desires, emotions, thoughts, deeds, the aspects of ourselves which make up our sinful nature, because there is something better coming.

Something which Jesus mentioned to the disciples – something incredulous, but so small – like a seed perhaps, something they missed because they were so shocked by Jesus’ speaking of suffering and dying... that something brothers and sisters is the resurrection.

Brothers and sisters, we don’t deny ourselves and take up our cross to suffer for suffering’s sake! Jesus also went to Jerusalem for the resurrection – to be raised to an eternal life. As He was raised up on the cross to die – He was then raised up to new life that resists death.

But there’s a paradox here for us brothers and sisters.

Now that we follow Jesus on the other side of His completed work in Jerusalem, now that we follow Jesus on the way to the New Jerusalem, and the resurrection of our bodies - we follow through denying ourselves and taking up our cross. Which essentially means that the way to new life... is through death.

The Apostle Paul confirms this in 1 Cor 15:36 he says *“don’t be foolish, what you plant does not come to life unless it dies”* and then again in vs. 42 *“So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable!”*

So, brothers and sisters – taking up our cross is to embrace death as the path to life.

Not just in the fact that Jesus' death brings new life, not just that we put to death parts of ourself that are sinful, but that quite literally that our own death is how we will move from this life into the next life to be with our Lord and receive our reward.

So, brothers and sisters today is the day to respond to Jesus call, in faith and obedience and with an informed willingness to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow the risen and ascended Lord Jesus, not for the benefits in this life, but for what is coming in the next.

Make that decision today to see your blessings and benefits as signs of greater things to come in eternity – things that are so good we can't even begin to imagine them.

Make that decision today to trust that Jesus is good, not to doubt Him, not to waiver in following Him, not to be ashamed

of Him, regardless of the path by which He brings about the Kingdom in your life and in our church and ultimately in this world leading up to His return.

We do not fear death, we need not fear disease or sickness, or aging – for eternal life comes through death.

So, brothers and sisters – let today be the day that resolve that you will take up your cross – and follow Jesus! Amen?

Let's pray.