

31Then 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. 32He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33But 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.”

34He 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. 35For 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. 36For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38Those 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.”

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Jesus has just asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” And stumbling onto the truth with “the Messiah” is Simon Peter. That’s the correct answer! Peter is elated! All the disciples are! Their rabbi is the long awaited Messiah of Israel. Immediately after that, our gospel lesson today picks up, where Jesus starts talking to the disciples about how he will be rejected, and then he is going to die and rise again. Perhaps emboldened by his recent correct answer, Peter pulls Jesus aside, and – taking on the role of campaign manager – he harshly rebukes his candidate. “Jesus, pipe down! Recent polling tells us that the vast majority of people don’t want their Messiah to die. People won’t follow you!” The lesson says that Jesus turns slightly so that all his disciples can hear what he’s about to say; “Get behind me, Satan! You’re setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” “Get behind me, Satan.” Ouch. Peter just went from here [high] to here [low] in a matter of seconds.

If you've ever wondered how many times Jesus called someone Satan, this is it. It is used against his closest disciple. Clearly, Peter struck a nerve when he told Jesus to cool it. To be clear, it was only centuries later that Christians began to treat the word "Satan" as the name for an entity. The origin, which happens to be the way Jesus uses it here, is that "Satan" was a descriptive word used for anyone who tempted you. So by calling Peter "Satan," Jesus is admitting that there is a temptation to not continue this journey toward his death. I don't blame him.

After this emotional response to Peter, Jesus calls both the disciples and the broader crowd closer to him, perhaps to offer them a moment of clarity to get to his point. He says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." This must have been astonishing to hear. Deny oneself? Take up a cross? What is he asking of those who follow him? Self-denial involves making a firm stand on the side of God, and not taking the easy path. Self-denial is hard stuff, but it is doable. People of God have done self-denial before now. So that part of his statement is not new. But take up a cross? The cross symbolizes death. Not only that, but the cross symbolizes death that is abusive, death that is dehumanizing, and death that is agonizing. That is all his audience thinks when they hear him say this. Death by crucifixion must be the most humiliating experience anyone could undergo. This Roman invention involved stripping a person naked, beating him, forcing him to carry his own torture device on his back through town, piercing his arms' median nerves with nails, driving a nail through his feet, and waiting for his lungs to slowly fill up with fluid, ending in a slow death by suffocation. As they suffocated, the only way to get a gasp of air was to elevate the body, which could only be done by straightening the legs and putting one's weight on the feet. Mind you, nails are in those feet. So every gasp of air came with excruciating pain. It often wasn't quick. It was common for a person to be left hanging there for more than a day. Condemning this vile practice of the empire he belonged to, the Roman philosopher and statesman Cicero said, "There is no fitting word that can possibly describe a deed so horrible."

All of that is to say that no one sought to ponder a cross in that day and age. The practice of crucifixion was considered so awful that even mentioning a cross was socially unacceptable. That's why some writers in the New Testament still used the euphemism of Jesus "dying on a tree." That

was more polite than saying “dying on a cross.” Politeness didn’t stop Jesus from scandalously bringing up that subject today. It was to drive home his point about discipleship. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” So not only must his followers deny themselves and stand on the side of God, but they must be willing to carry a cross in order to stand where God is standing. Imagine how they heard that. “Take up your cross and follow me.” I imagine he lost some followers after declaring this. Perhaps today he still loses followers when we ponder the depth of this phrase.

I’ve shared the following story before. Seminary for me began with a summer-long intensive Greek language course. For the final project of this class, we had to choose a single verse of the New Testament and write a paper on that verse and give a 15-minute class presentation on it, using only the tools we had acquired in translating the ancient Greek language. One classmate of mine chose this verse; “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Shortly into his presentation, my classmate made a quip that Jesus didn’t mean that his followers should literally take up a cross and follow him to the death. At which point the professor stood up and shouted without any contrived emotion, “Who are you to decide what Jesus is or is not calling his followers to do? And how dare you denigrate those Christians who have died and those who are dying today for the sake of the gospel!?” Suffice it to say the remaining 15-minutes of the presentation were awkward.

To follow Jesus means denying ourselves by putting the interests of God above even my own. To follow Jesus means the willingness to take up our own cross. Does that mean we are bound to die because we are following Jesus? No, and we believe God does not desire such outcomes. However, Jesus is being brutally honest that if someone follows his path and denies her own interests for the sake of the gospel, then she must be prepared for the potential costs of doing so.

We should not kid ourselves into thinking that persecution of Christians ended in the 4th Century. However – and this must be understood – no one should claim that Christians in the United States are being persecuted whenever a Christian’s sensibilities are offended. Let’s remember: Jesus offended people’s sensibilities all the time. The worst part of such claims is that they belittle the experience of people who actually are persecuted. Even though you and I are fortunate to live in a

country that doesn't experience Christian persecutions, that doesn't change Jesus' call for us - his followers - to be fully aware of the potential costs of following him. Taking up our cross may sound awful, but there is a mystery to it. The path toward the cross is also a path through the cross and to an empty tomb.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Interestingly, the “follow me” part of this verse in Greek is the same word that Jesus angrily threw at Peter when he said, “Get behind me, Satan.” So the verse says, “Take up your cross and get behind me.” Putting that together, it seems that the point of this whole passage is that there are two ways to “get behind” Jesus. We -- like Peter at this moment in time -- can either be disciples who refuse the self-denial aspect of a Christian life, and therefore we are scolded to get behind Jesus as he continues on his path. Or we can be disciples who put God's interests first, so we take up a cross and get behind Jesus as he continues his path. One way or another, it seems we are all bound to get behind Jesus.

Perhaps that is the grace in all of this: Jesus is going to lead us on this path to the cross, whether we as disciples are on board with it or not. However, only one way reveals to us the promise of true, abundant life in God while still in this world. Jesus wants us to see that this gracious abundant life comes at a cost, and that cost is death on a cross. However, he paid that cost. We don't have to pay for this abundant life in God, but we should take to heart its expense. May this Lent be a time for us to explore together the true cost of this grace that Christ freely offers us.

Amen.