

Time of Grace Ministry
Death to Selfie: Get Comfortable with Discomfort
Mark 8:34, 13:5-13
October 20, 2019

Pastor Mike Novotny

And I get the emails; I save them in my inbox. "Pastor, this church saved me. I never got about grace until then." And we make videos and the church celebrates and there's baptisms and then a year later, I get out the church directory and I think, "Where did he go?" "What happened to her?"

Comfort is something most of us love and that's a good thing. Comfort - just like friendship, just like excitement, just like happiness and laughter - is a good gift from a good God. God gives all us all these little comfortable scenarios so that we would just be excited and long for that moment when we experience perfect comfort in his presence.

But comfort, like all those other things, is also really dangerous if you love it a bit too much. If comfort isn't just nice when God gives it, but it's something you need, comfort can go from a good thing to a God-thing and that's a bad thing. Because when Jesus spoke to his disciples and he talked about what it would mean to be a Christian, he did not say that they would have to put on their crocks and follow him. And he didn't say you'd have to sit on a couch and follow him. No, do you remember his words? Let me remind you. In Mark 8, Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." He said, "The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy but since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away."

And I have to tell you that that story has caused me more heartbreak as a pastor than anything else. To see people who are so excited about Jesus; they come to church maybe and it's the first time in their life they ever got it. That this is a gift; God's love isn't something you earn. He loves and he loves and he forgives and then he forgives and eternal life isn't something you have to fix and get for yourself; it's just something that Jesus gave when he died on the cross and rose from the dead. And I get the emails; I save them in my inbox. "Pastor, this church saved me. I never got about grace until then." And we make videos and the church celebrates and there's baptisms and then a year later, I get out the church directory and I think, "Where did he go?" "What happened to her?" And what's even more bitter than a person who never comes to church is the person who comes and is so excited and then they're gone.

And I don't want to see that happen to you. If this year happens to be the hardest year of following Jesus, I don't want to see you walk away. I don't want to see you give up the thing that causes you so much joy when you first heard it just because it was harder than you thought it would be. So before I show you those words in Mark 13, I suppose I should give you a clear definition of what I mean; what exactly is a cross?

And if you're taking notes in your program, here's the definition I want to give you: A cross is what you suffer because of your Savior. A cross is not just suffering in general. I mean, our atheist friends and our Christian friends might suffer the same things in life so that suffering is not the cross. And any kind of suffering that a Christian goes through is not the cross; sometimes Christian suffering is just a consequence. Alright, if I'm a gossip and you can't trust me and no one wants to be my friend because I just run my mouth and talk behind people's backs, that's not a cross I have to bear not having close friendships; that's just a consequence. And if you self-medicate your emotions with food and you eat and you eat and you eat and now you have heart problems and diabetes and another surgery, that suffering is not a cross; that's just a consequence. No, a cross is the stuff that you would not suffer if it wasn't for Jesus. If it wasn't for his word, his path, his teaching, you could avoid it. We might say the shorthand is that the cross is avoidable suffering and the only reason you're going to go through it is because you want to be devoted entirely to Jesus.

And today, Jesus is going to give it to us straight. He's going to tell us at least four things, four kinds of suffering that we're going to have to go through to be faithful disciples to him. So listen what he says here in Mark 13; spoken just days before Jesus died. "Jesus said to his disciples, 'Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name claiming I'm he and will deceive many.'" Jesus is warning us here about spiritual deception; that there's some people who are very spiritual, they might even be very religious, they might even come in Jesus' name and claim to be someone worth following. And according to Jesus, there will be many such people and they will deceive many. Family members and friends and co-workers and neighbors will buy into what Jesus says is deception.

Okay. Well, what's the cross in that? I mean, if you believe the right thing and you stick to his word, what's the suffering? Well, the suffering is what happens when you actually try to repeat that to those people. I mean, have you ever tried in the nicest, most gentle, humble, compassionate way to tell someone that they've been deceived? That what they believe about spiritual things is not right? Have you ever told someone that they've been lied to by their parents? They've been duped by their spiritual leaders and that they're not actually following the path of Jesus? If you have, you know it doesn't come without suffering. The looks that you get: "How dare you? How judgmental must you be? How intolerant you are of other beliefs. If you were born in a different place, raised in a different family, you'd probably believe the same thing." It will come back hard. And the truth is, if you didn't care about Jesus' teaching, if you didn't know how exclusive he was in the things that he said, to go and make disciples and teach them to obey everything that I've commanded you, this is the kind of suffering that you could avoid entirely.

But that's not it. Jesus continues with the second cross in his sermon. He says, "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains." There's wars and earthquakes and there's famines; there's natural disasters like sister earth is sick. These are the contractions before our broken world is finally delivered and you've read enough of the headlines to know it's true, right? There's a famine that's taken 50,000 lives of children in Yemen right now. In 2011 and 2012, 285,000 starved in Somalia. The civil war in Syria has taken over

400,000 lives. The drug war in Mexico, 100,000 and counting; closing down the most popular tourist destinations. And there's rumors of wars; what's going to happen with Russia and North Korea and America? There's earthquakes that rattle our neighbor to the south; once and then twice in Mexico. Buildings fall, hundreds are buried in the rubble.

So what's the cross in that? I mean, don't Catholics and Protestants and atheists and Buddhists and Christians and Hindus suffer natural disasters at about the same rate? Well, yeah. The cross for the Christian though is believing that God is powerful and God is love in moments like that; we might call it the cross of trust. To stand up after another natural disaster, after children are left without parents and parents left without children, and to proclaim with all the faith in the world, "God is love and God is power." And our own sense of reason and logic suffers while we say it: "No, that can't be right." I mean, if I was pure love and if I could stop stuff like this from happening, I would. So you've got to choose; either God has the power and he just doesn't love you or he has all the love for you but he doesn't have the power to save you. You can't have both. And the cross is to believe in faith. Even when you don't get God, he still is God.

And it's even harder when the suffering is your own. When it's your family that's hungry, when it's your household that can't pay the bills, when it's your body that miscarries again, when it's the war that affects your family, when you come home with the scars and the memories and nightmares, when your son battles PTSD and his life just isn't the same. When it's not just some headline, it's your headline, to believe God is love and God is power, that's a cross. And if you just gave up on this God, on this book, on this Jesus, you could avoid it altogether.

But Jesus still isn't done. He goes on in sermon, in verse nine: "You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever's given you at the time for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit." Handed over. Arrested. Flogged. That's suffering for the name of Jesus. And if you've read the Bible, you know that this isn't the exception; it's the norm for God's most faithful people. Read the book of Acts, like the sequel after Jesus' life, and you'll see Stephen get stoned and Peter gets arrested and James gets put to the sword. Saul is hunting down Christians to murder them until he becomes a Christian and other people hunt him down to take his life. There's suffering in the Old Testament and the New; all the apostles except one were killed for believing in Jesus. And the one that survived only survived after he was boiled in oil and exiled to the island of Patmos.

And I wish it was just a first century thing but it's not. Jump on a website like persecution.com and read the headlines that are happening right now on planet earth for the name of Jesus. Here are the first four that I saw on the website. Four Christians were just arrested in Laos for talking about Jesus. Two churches had their doors shut by their government in Algeria for talking about Jesus. A pastor in Indonesia was arrested for getting into a taxicab and talking about Jesus. A 17 year old kid in Pakistan was arrested and imprisoned for going on Facebook and making a post about Jesus. And when he sat in jail, thousands of people from his village surrounded the jail and demanded that he be murdered for his crime.

Every day on planet earth, Christians are being arrested and suffering. They're standing before village elders, town councils, and national governments and they could avoid all of it - they wouldn't have to suffer any of it - if they would just give up the name of Jesus. And Jesus still isn't done. Look at the last words of his pep talk from Mark 13, he says, "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. Everyone will hate you because of me but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved." Jesus said your brother, your father, your son, your best friend will hate you. And some of you have experienced this, haven't you? Many of you were blessed to grow up in families where mom loved Jesus and dad loved Jesus and your brother and your sister loved Jesus and the grandkids love Jesus. But if you came to know Jesus later in life, I bet there are people who hate what happened to you. I mean, to have this new experience of God's grace that you just didn't know growing up and going back to your mom and dad and wanting them to have it, too, do you know what that implies? That they didn't do it right. That you're inviting them to church because the way they raised you was insufficient; that they're actually missing something that their own son or daughter found before they did. Do you know what they'll think when you imply that? Or your brother, when you keep posting things on social media - a Bible passage, you invite him to church - he probably liked the old version of you a whole lot better.

Some of you know, one of the heaviest crosses a Christian will carry is to care so deeply about a son, a daughter, a brother, a sister, a mom, a dad, who's not following Jesus just yet. And you could shake that whole burden off your shoulders if you would just forget about all that stuff that Jesus said about the life that comes after this one. That's the cross, according to Jesus. That's what you'll have to go through sooner or later. You'll suffer for his name, for the gospel, just for being his disciple.

You know, when I was in high school, this book made me want to die for Jesus. It's called "Jesus Freaks," and it's 400 pages of people who took up their cross and they gave up everything for Jesus. Twentieth century stories, first century stories, of people who loved Jesus so much that they would die for him. And when I was in high school, I thought that's how I was going to go out. I was going to take my Bible to some hostile Christian country, I was going to walk down Main Street, proclaim the name of Jesus, get shot, and as I was bleeding out, I was going to forgive my enemies in Jesus' name, just like my Savior. You know what I found out though? I'm kind of a wimp. I get a cold and I throw a fit. I mean, my wife is my nurse; I don't suffer very well. And then I found out something even more important that maybe dying for Jesus isn't the really hard thing; maybe living for him is.

And I was thinking, maybe I haven't been honest with all of you. You know, some of you who come to our church, you know that we have this vision, right, that you would have this life full of spiritual fruit; that you'd have real love in your relationships and your family. That you would have this joy that is infectious and it's deep in your heart with God. That you have peace with Jesus because you know he's forgiven your sins. You have self-control against drugs and alcohol and pornography and food. There would be all this fruit because you have these roots in your life; you gather in church and you do life together in groups and you grow in the Bible at home and you give generously and you go out and share God's word and we make little pictures and it looks so beautiful. But maybe what I haven't told you is that all of that will require some

discomfort. That if you pursue this, if you buy into this, you will have to give up some of the most comfortable moments of your life.

I mean, just think about that first fruit - to gather; to be here week in, week out. There's sometimes, right, when it's Sunday and you're at home and you're comfortable and the game is on and family and friends are over, to get up, to change, maybe a shower, and make it to church, that's discomfort. And to come here maybe to park far away from the building so our guests can have the best seats. To sit in the uncomfortable spots, you know, in the middle of the long row right here ahead of me, being willing to crawl over other people so that those who come late with their kids don't have to be embarrassed and crawl over you. To come to a service - and whether it's your favorite song or it's not, whether the musicians are the best ones we have or the worst, whether the sermon is the best one you've heard or not - to fight that part of your heart and to make it grateful just that someone is singing and praying and preaching about Jesus. The truth is to follow this, to be fruitful, you will have to die to comfort and take up a cross.

Oh, and one more thing: It might get worse. Maybe things are going off in your head, "Yeah, I've been through that, Pastor." But the truth is it might get harder. The tragedy might happen this month, the unthinkable might happen this year. The persecution might grow, your family might turn. It might be your boss, it might be our government; who knows what's going to happen. But if it got worse, if you were never as comfortable as you were this past year, would you still do it? Or would the hot sun of trouble and persecution and discomfort dry up your faith fast?

Now before you answer that question, I have to tell you one more thing. Jesus gives this really heavy sermon about the cross in Mark 13. But does anyone know what comes after in your Bible, right after Mark 13? Mark 14, alright? Come on, people. Does anyone know what comes after Mark 14? It's Mark 15, yeah, thank you. And do you know what happens in Mark 14 and 15? Jesus takes up his cross. And everything he just talked about, he goes through. I mean, there's discomfort; he is hated and persecuted. He is flogged and accused. His own Jewish brothers and sisters turn on him and they cry for his death and all of it, from Jesus' perspective, was avoidable. He's God. He could have worked a miracle. He could have flown back up to heaven but he didn't. He winced. He grimaced. He was willing to bear it.

Do you know why? Let me show you in one, beautiful, little snippet of Scripture from Hebrews 12. It says, "For the joy set before him, Jesus endured the cross." He endured it. It was hard. It was painful. He was God but he felt it. In fact, the only time hell has ever happened on earth was on that cross where God totally abandoned his own Son and Jesus cried out, "God, why have you forsaken me?" Why did he endure that? The joy set before him.

And do you know what was the joy set before Jesus? You. The thought of your comfort, the thought of the look on your face when the suffering was over. The thought of you being with God, cleansed and forgiven and saved and loved. The thought of you with God forever and ever and ever in paradise was so beautiful, it made his heart so happy, that he would do anything just to get there and so he did. He suffered and he died. He was hated and flogged and betrayed. He was crucified on a cross because your presence in heaven would bring him so much joy, Jesus knew the cross would be worth it.

It makes me think of William Cowper; ever hear that name before? Back in the 1700s, William Cowper was a famous Christian songwriter but he had a really, really heavy cross. He battled serious depression and to write these songs about singing to God and praising God when you are so sad and depressed that you want to die was almost impossible for him. He thought about killing himself multiple times in his life but William Cowper had this friend, a man named John Newton, the man who wrote the song "Amazing Grace," and Newton kept telling him, "It's worth it. It's worth it. Don't give in; keep fighting. Stand firm. Stand firm." And by the grace of God, he made it. He made it all the way to his final breath.

A few years ago, a Christian theater company tried to reenact those final moments of William Cowper's life. There he was, his breath slowing down on his deathbed, and standing next to him was his friend John Newton. And Newton looked down as Cowper breathed one time and it was his last and he waited in the silence and John Newton looked down at his friend and said, "Told you so." And I wonder if that's not the first thing Jesus will say to you? When you stand firm to the end and through all the grief that you've been through and all the suffering and all the struggle, for all the times that Jesus cost you, for all the times that it would have been easier to sin or give up your faith, when it's all said and over, when these labor pains are done, when the fight is over and the race is run, I wonder if Jesus will not look at you and smile? And when eternal comfort starts to flood your heart, he'll just say, "Told you so."

Friends, you can't see it yet but the Bible promises in the end there will be no more suffering, there will be no more grief, there will be no more pain. Anxiety will never touch your mind again. Depression will never consume your heart. Grief will be a thing of the past. There will be no back pain, no migraines, no miscarriages; there's no mourning or grief or death. Jesus said, "I'm coming to make everything new." So he says, "Stand firm," because the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.

I won't lie to you; there is a cross and it's a heavy cross. But if you come to Jesus, the burden is light because he promises after the cross comes a crown, comes the comfort that never, ever ends.

Let's pray.

Jesus, heaven must be ridiculous for this to be worth it. God, I know what some of the people in this church are suffering with; they grieve and they feel so alone and they battle that deep desire just to give in and have another drink. There are people who've been ostracized from their families for the sake of your name. And people scoff at them on social media because they stand up for everything that you said. Jesus, for all of this to be worth it, what you promise must be ridiculously good and we hold onto that today. That even if it's 100 years of the cross, to have 100 million years with you where there's no discomfort, it must be worth it. And so, I pray, Jesus, for faith and I pray for trust. I pray for everyone here who's suffering that they would endure and I pray for our church as a community that we could encourage one another to stand firm and not give in and to keep running this race.

God, I thank you for your word. I thank you for these promises of love and forgiveness. Jesus, I thank you for your cross. I thank you that this life isn't the start of our suffering; it's the end of it. That this life is the closest a Christian will ever get to hell because our eternal future is heaven and a new earth with you. So help us, God. We would love it if you would put grace upon grace and make this a really comfortable year; if we could be happy and healthy, if there would be no accidents, no tragedy, no grief, we would love you. But even if there was, we would love you because you're infinitely loveable. You're amazing, God, and that's why we praise you today in Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.



TIME OF GRACE®

Death to Selfie: Get Comfortable With Discomfort

Study Notes

Summary

Jesus' "pep talk" about the end of the age was less than comforting. Wars. Earthquakes. Flogging. Arrest. Hatred. Are we willing to walk with Jesus during the end times? Be hated? Die for him? If you know his promise of salvation and election, the answer is easy—Yes!

- **Mark 8:34:** "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."
- **Matthew 13:20,21:** ²⁰"The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away."
- The cross = What you suffer because of your _____.
- **Mark 13:5-13:** ⁵Jesus said to them: "Watch out that no one deceives you. ⁶Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many. ⁷When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. ⁸Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains. ⁹You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. ¹⁰And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. ¹¹Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit. ¹²Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. ¹³Everyone will hate you because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved."
- **Hebrews 12:2:** For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.
- The cross = What he suffered because of your _____.

Points to Ponder

1. What have you suffered simply because you are a follower of Jesus? Were you surprised by that suffering? Why or why not?
2. Visit persecution.com and read the stories of Christians who are carrying heavy crosses. Pray for two of them today.
3. Read 1 Peter 3:8-22. List three truths from Peter's words that inspire you to carry your cross and follow Jesus this week.

Homework for Next Week

Read Mark 14:1-9.

*"Comfort and prosperity have never enriched the world as much as adversity has."
—Billy Graham*