

Difficult Christianity

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Matthew 16:21-28

“But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! ... for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’”

Are you a fair-weather fan? There is a point when every sports fan has to declare how strong his or her commitment might be; if he or she is a fair-weather fan. This is that time when the team begins to lose, and lose some more, and then lose some more. And then it gets worse. Then the team turns in management style, trades all the good players and begins to really, really tank. The great baseball movie *Major League* is a fictional story about the Cleveland Indians at that point. In that movie there are about three true fans that still go to the games and root for the team. Are you a true fan? Are you a devoted fan? Are you a fan that will root for your team despite its season, despite its losses? Or are you a fan that will look for a new team at the first sign of trouble? Are you a fan that will go northeast to the Jets or the Giants at the first sign that the Eagles might not have a championship season? All sports fans are faced with this choice at one time or another. Are you a fair-weather fan?

We find ourselves at a similar decision point with Jesus in this passage in Matthew. Remember where Matthew has taken us so far. We’ve traveled quite a distance, and we’ve gone many miles. We have had a good season and feel right about this Jesus, this wonder-worker. Maybe it was his miraculous baptism that tipped us off. It might have been the amazing sight of the skies opening up, the dove descending upon him, and the voice from heaven declaring Jesus to be the divine son, one who enjoys God’s holy pleasure. Or maybe it was his signs of wonder that excited us about him. He healed a leper; he healed the centurion’s servant, and even laid hands on Peter’s mother so that she might find health again. We’ll never forget walking with Jesus to the daughter of the synagogue leader. We’ll never forget what it was like to when all he did was take the girl’s hand, and she arose! We thought she was dead, but she found life through this amazing Lord, this Jesus! Can you remember the life of Jesus with the disciples? Do you remember many of the teachings that Jesus offered as well as his words – blessing the peacemakers, offering God’s mercy to all, and even showing us ways to pray. In the same way that a sports fan remembers all the great plays, all the wins, all the glory, I am asking you to allow yourself to remember this Jesus as the disciples remember him, and as the Gospel has traced for you. I am asking you also to remember the ways Jesus has been a part of your own life. Remember all the ways he has changed, transformed, and saved you. Remember all the ways Jesus has moved you, brought you peace, and has offered you hope. For all of these thoughts, all of these memories need to be in your mind as you face the decision before you. We are at a decision point, and Christ is asking if we are going to be fair-weather followers, or true believers.

Remember specifically that time you have declared Christ’s true glory. Peter shouted, he called; he named whom this person, this Christ. This just happened, just a few verses before the section we read today. Christ asked that first powerful question, “Who do you say that I am,” and Peter responded, “You are the Messiah, the son of the Living God.” Peter remembered the miracles, the teachings, and the glory of Christ that they had seen thus far, and named this experience as the divine. We have all been at that moment, haven’t we? We have all had that moment when we step back, and notice God’s glory, and proclaim it for what it truly is. If you ever climb mountains, you have this experience. There is a moment when the trail breaks above the tree line, it is a moment when you can lift your head from the trail before you and look around. At that moment you may see the other mountains surrounding you. Or you may see the valley far below you. It is at that moment when you know the glory of God through creation and all you can do is proclaim that glory. This was where Peter was as Christ asked him, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter remembered all that Christ did; all who Christ was, he looked out and saw the vast horizons of Christ’s miracles, and proclaimed God’s glory!

This where our memory should first lead us, to proclaiming the glory of the Lord. Like climbing a mountain, look

back on your life with the disciples. Look back on all the ways God has been active in your life. Maybe God has spoken to you through a spouse, a friend, or a family member. Maybe God has acted in your life during a time of poor health or financial difficulty. Maybe God has acted in your life during a time of spiritual distress. Maybe it was a time when all you knew was darkness, all you knew was despair, all you knew was anger, and somehow God's tender, loving hand reached in and touched you. Think of God in your life, think of Jesus in your life, think of the Holy Spirit in your life. Remember the words of comfort that God has offered you, remember the miracles that Christ has done in you and through you, and then see the horizon of God's activity in your life. Can you answer with the disciples, can you answer with Peter the question, "Who do you say that I am?" Can you shout, can you declare with conviction, "You are the Lord?" With the disciples, like that sports fan, we can all find ourselves claiming Jesus Christ as our savior, as our Messiah, as our Lord!

It is at this point when we have to make a decision. Here Jesus tells us what is coming next, where he is going, and what will be in store for all who continue to follow him. Christ tells us that he is going to undergo great suffering, he tells us that he is going to be killed, and then on the third day be raised. All of a sudden, in an instant we find ourselves at the bottom of the mountain all over again. Suffering, and death, at the hands of the temple leaders? (Let us note that it was and is difficult to focus on the third day resurrection when such suffering is emphasized.)

We find ourselves at the bottom of the mountain, looking up at the praise we once proclaimed. Christ is Lord, we said, and then Christ challenged our own understanding of Lordship with his prediction of suffering.

We find ourselves at the bottom of the mountain, looking up to the glory we were enjoying. Christ can heal, cast out demons, so nothing should be able to stop him. Yet mere mortals will be the cause and the hand of his suffering.

We find ourselves at the bottom of the mountain, looking of at the joy, the glory, the success we thought we were enjoying, but it was taken away in one statement, one claim, and one prediction. Like the military family that rejoices when a son or daughter follows the family tradition and joins the armed services, the glory is great. But when that family member is sent to combat, the joy becomes a tense anxiety. In the beginning of the great classic *The Inferno*, Dante, the author, finds himself at the bottom of a mountain, in his own despair. He sees light and hope and glory, and tries to claim it with joy, but is chased away by beasts. The hope seems farther away than before.

But then again, what else can we expect. For we have just heard bad news from Christ. We have heard what biblical scholars like Benedict Viviano call a "passion prediction." It is Christ saying, "hey I'm glad you are rooting for me, but you should know, I am going to loose the entire next season." Jesus is telling us what is coming next, what is in store for him, and the news effects us all. So we have to make a decision.

How are we going to respond?

How are we going to respond? Jesus just threw this bad news into the room, he predicted his own death, and how are you going to respond? Maybe you feel called to respond with Peter. Maybe you feel called to deny such an absurd prediction, such suffering, and such sacrifice. "No, Lord. Not you!" Maybe you want to take the ski lift up the mountain, the easy way, the quick way to salvation and glory. This is the way of the world – it is the instant gratification, the instant glory, and the no-wait generation. This is a culture of quick fixes, of immediate results. It is one that declares someone as a potential winner and expects to see results right away. We don't want to show patience. We don't want to have patience. We don't want to show any effort. We don't want to make any effort. We just want to get on the ski lift and end up on top of the mountain. TV dinners were just the start for such a society. After all, what would it say when the person you just declared as your star player was to be condemned by the ruling establishment. After all, what would it look like when the person you praised loudly with much vigor was to be beaten and crucified? It wouldn't be right. It wouldn't be proper for our Lord to suffer so.

Ah, such a response is deep and wide in our own religious culture. Pat Robertson just suggested that the United States assassinate the leader of Venezuela, and claimed that it was morally justified because of its expediency. Where is the room for the transforming love, the patience mercy, and the powerful grace that God offers to all in such a response? But Robertson is looking to take the ski lift up the mountain. Many Christians are looking for churches that will offer an instantaneous grace from God. Change me now; give me the gifts of mercy now! But transformation is slow, the way of Christ is a path we are called to walk, mercy is given, but must be lived into. People want what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." It is a grace that offers salvation without any suffering. It is a grace that offers the glory of the world without the work of the cross. It is a grace that can be bought and sold. It is a grace that looks to the mountain and takes the ski lift to the top, quickly going over the cross, the passion and the sacrifice below. This is the grace Peter is looking for in his denial of Christ's passion, it is the grace many of us are looking for in our own lives and our own churches. It is a response we all claim as a people, and as a culture at one time or another in our lives.

No wonder Jesus' response is so strong, stern and direct. No wonder Jesus rebukes Peter so strongly. The very

one who claimed Jesus as Lord and Messiah, the very one who claimed to be with Jesus to the end, is denying the difficulties, the sufferings, the passion, and the very cross that Jesus is claiming he must take. At best, Peter can be described as a fair-weather fan.

How else can we respond to the passion that Jesus describes? How else can we respond to the difficult news that Christ gives to us? We can all respond in the way Christ offers. Hear what Christ says after rebuking Peter, "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 will find it." Jesus is calling us all who have walked with him thus far, who have experienced his grace, to accept the challenge, to accept the passion, to accept the sacrifice and follow him. We are called to go not the way of the world, but to go the way of the cross.

This is the way that takes up sacrifice and that experiences glory. Think of the sacrifice and the glory that our Baptist ancestors have taken. Think of Adoniram Judson who suffered sickness, persecution, and the loss of his wife as he ministered to the people in Burma. He suffered prison, he suffered persecution, and he suffered as any apostle could have suffered. He went the way of the cross, he gave his life to Christ, but he experienced the glory of the gospel shared, the glory of grace experienced across the world.

It is like we are called to boycott the world, the ski lift, the cheap grace and easy results. We are called to say no to the temptations of glory without the cross. We are called to say no to the gilded crossed sparkling, denying the sufferings of Christ, and skipping right to the resurrection.

I recently heard a story about a man who was so good that God gave him a halo. The only problem with this halo was that his wife resented it, and a rift was forming in their marriage. So the man decided to get rid of the halo. He tried committing each one of the seven deadly sins in order to have his halo removed. But with each sin he engaged, each time he tried to sin to the point of being marked, his halo shined ever brighter - because of his motives. This man tried to sacrifice that he was, what he had gained in his life for the sake of his marriage, and gained life all the more. That is what we are to do as Christians. We are to sacrifice, we are to give up, we are to let go of our worldly desires for power, our desires for recognition, and our desires for our own agenda and take on the desires of Christ. This is difficult Christianity. This is a Christianity that claims all the glory, all the praise; all the fame will be achieved, but only through sacrifice, only through hardship, and only through grace. So we find ourselves at a place to make a decision. The 1st century preacher John Chrysostom described this passage in such a way; we are a place where we have to make a choice, and Jesus gives us that choice. We are given that choice when we walk forward to the Baptismal pool, when you say, this is no longer my life, Lord, but yours - take it and live it. And at that moment you will begin to truly live. But the choice continues to come before us. Each day we are faced with the decision, the choice of living the difficult Christian life. Each day we are given opportunities to witness the sacrifice of Christ, and our witness will make our life difficult. We are given the opportunity to answer peace to violence, we are given the opportunity to answer love to hate, we are given the opportunity to answer justice to oppression, and we are given the opportunity to answer Christ to the world. By being here on a Sunday morning, you have already made a choice to walk and climb up the mountain to the glory of the Lord. We are given the opportunity to answer again with Peter and deny the sacrifice and suffering of the cross, and to take up our cross again with Jesus and walk his walk. This is the path, the commitment, and the choice Christ calls us to make.

So will you say "yes" to Christ? Will you take the more difficult road, the road that may lead to rejection, the road that may lead to persecution, and the road that may lead to hardship? Let me give you some hope if you are going to choose that road. First, you will find true and full life. I don't just mean life in heaven, I don't just mean a pie-in-the-ski life, but in the here and now you will find life. Your actions will have worth, your presence will have meaning, and your prayers will be powerful - through the grace of God, you will find life. Second, you will find glory. The passage read today ends with glory. It ends with the angels, the glories of heaven, and Christ in his fullness reigning. We will be there when the fullness of Christ's reign will come to be. We will be there when heaven and earth become as one. You will experience it when you are witnessing to the kingdom and the way of Christ. When you offer love, and love is received, there you will experience this glory of God. When you stand up for justice and righteousness and you do not falter or fall, there you will experience this glory of God. When you say each day, Lord I take up my cross and again give my life to you, there you will experience the glory of God. And that glory will give you continued strength and hope.

Finally, you are not alone. You are with a family, a body, and the body of Christ. We are working together, we are walking together, and together we are all making again the decision to give up our own life, to give up our own glory and be here for the sake of the Lord. This is where we have to go as a church this next year, to the glory of God. This is what we have before us this next year, the cross and the glory. We can't start programs for the sake of starting programs. We can't grow this church for the sake of growing the church. No, all we do must be for the sake of Christ and Christ's glory.

This means we will have a difficult year ahead of us. This means we will have to work to bring the light to the people, the hope to the nations, and Christ to the lands. But that is the choice I made when I came here, that is the choice you all made when you came here, and that is the choice we will continue to make as we walk with Christ.

So let us decide to follow Jesus. Let us decide to walk with him. Let us decide to be with Jesus, and there is no turning back. No turning back.

AMEN