

Sermon Title: The Way of the Cross: A New Way of Thinking
Subtitle: Getting it wrong but teachable enough to make it right.
Video URL: <https://youtu.be/VxO5sG2Wt28>

If you've ever visited the great cathedrals in England, as Ellen and I did just over a year ago, you might assume that the apostles were larger-than-life stained-glass saints with shining halos representing an exalted degree of spirituality. The fact of the matter is that they were very, very common men, as Peter demonstrates in our Gospel today. Yet, His human defects have a way of endearing him to us because he was a mixture of both the natural (which the N.T. defines as carnal) and the spiritual. This mixture is just one of the reasons he was called by two names in the Gospel. This vacillating man was sometimes called Simon, and sometimes he was called Peter. By nature, Simon was brash, wavering, and undependable. At other times, he was Peter, the rock, the man who Christ was making him to be. Therefore, he is not out of our league, for we see in him what transformation and spiritual growth often look like in our own lives, as we frequently take one step forward and two steps back. Such duplicity is painfully played out before us in the Gospel assigned for this Sunday.

The narrative begins with Jesus asking the disciples, "***Who do others say that I am?***"¹ After Jesus is given various answers, he makes the question personal and asks, "***But who do you say that I am?***"² Peter steps forward and says, "***You are the Christ.***"³ Yes, Peter was correct, but he didn't understand the implications of the kind of Christ Jesus came to be.

¹ Mark 8:27

² Mark 8:29a

³ Mark 8:29b

At this point, Jesus speaks for himself and tells them more about his mission, which was previously unknown. Mark's Gospel says, "***And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly.***"⁴

The thought that Jesus must suffer and die was so intolerable that "***Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.***"⁵ Much like so many of us, Peter enjoyed thinking out loud, but he also had an agenda with human ambition and natural desires at its center. He wanted Jesus to go from strength to strength and from victory to victory, without suffering and a cross. In other words, he only wanted the positive side of the Gospel truth. But it earned Peter one of the harshest rebukes ever uttered in the Bible when Jesus said to Peter, "***Get behind me, Satan. For you are setting your mind not on the things of God, but on human things.***"⁶

This particular event is recorded and rerecorded in all three of the synoptic Gospels because anyone who attempts to live and walk in the Spirit will struggle with distinguishing between the things of God and natural human ways of thinking. The imagery of denying yourself and taking up your cross runs counter to our instincts and our culture, for we naturally want to save our lives, not lose them. We want our lives to be a series of gains and not losses. But regardless of what stage of life you may be in, life is not meant to be all about yourself, your goals, or your wants. Life in the kingdom of God is about viewing all of life, including its losses and tragedies, in a whole new way.

⁴ Mark 8:31-32a

⁵ Mark 8:32b

⁶ Mark 8:33 ESV

It's well known that the world's happier people are not those who are trying to make themselves happy. The happy ones are usually those who are caught up in a cause that transcends the ordinary flatland of their lives and who, perhaps one day, notice they're happy. But it takes spiritual wisdom to understand and take hold of these things.

Our New Testament lesson from James adds deeper insight into spiritual wisdom with an overall theme that seeks to teach the duties of discipleship. In its opening chapter, James exhorts, ***“doers of the word and not hearers only.”***⁷ The ***“perfect law of liberty”*** that James describes signifies the Gospel's obligatory aspects with its standards of Christian behavior. The person who looks deeply into the law of love amid the “strong winds”⁸ of human impulses that cause us to speak and say things to the contrary must be resisted. Peter learned that lesson the hard way, and we often do too.

Anything worthwhile has a price, which includes the results of a mature faith. Growing up into maturity is never easy, particularly in discipleship, where self-denial extends to every aspect of our faith journey.

Old Testament lesson from the prophet Isaiah gives us a picture of the spiritual growth that occurs when this kind of self-discipline is addressed. The passage we read is the third in a series about “Israel’s Suffering Servant,” who will lead his people out of exile. Isaiah describes how this messianic servant will find the strength to face formidable opposition. Isaiah writes, ***“The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning, he wakens - wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not***

⁷ James 1:21

⁸ James 3:4

rebellious; I did not turn backward.⁹ The secret of the Messiah’s fortitude is that he has disciplined himself to learn and listen to the Sovereign Lord’s voice. The words Isaiah uses for Lord God is Adonay Yeh-ho-vee. The combination of these two words in Hebrew describes the unspeakable personal name of God. It implies that Jesus made room for a personal, intimate encounter with God as he woke morning by morning to listen to what his Heavenly Father had to say. Such listening was not only the secret of how he was able to **“know how to sustain the weary with a word,”**¹⁰ but it also enabled him to find the strength to **“not drawback”** and even **“offer my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.”**¹¹ Moreover, it empowered Jesus to **“become obedient unto death, even death on the cross.”**¹²

If this was true for him, how much more should such listening be vital for us? Opening your life to be taught by God is an adventure. It starts by giving the first part of your day to the Lord as a “first fruit” offering to show your gratitude and trust in God’s provision. Therefore, the first and best of each day should be given back to Him as we, too, need to “wake morning by morning to listen as those who are taught.”¹³ Like any other part of your life, such devotions can have ups and downs, starts and stops. Sometimes, like Peter, it is one step forward and two steps back. Thankfully, we can learn from Peter’s mistakes and many other faithful believers who have gone before us and found the grace to **“take up their cross and follow him.”**¹⁴ Amen.

⁹ Isaiah 50:4-5

¹⁰ Isaiah 50:4a

¹¹ Isaiah 50:5b-6

¹² Phillipians 2:8

¹³ Isaiah 50:4b

¹⁴ Mark 8:34 paraphrased