Book 33

Sunday February 23, 1997

WHAT IT MEANS TO DENY YOURSELF Mark 8:31-38

In the first sermon of this series last week, we learned that the teachings of Jesus frequently give us new paradigms for understanding God, ourselves and our relationship to others. The title of the sermon was "What It Means To Repent." We discovered that the call to "repent" is much more than being sorry for our sins. It includes the invitation to question our old assumptions about God, about the world and others. To repent, means to be willing to turn our life around and go in a new direction.

Today in the second sermon in this series we will be examining another basic principle in the teac-

hings of Jesus which is found the gospels. Jesus said, "If any people want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their lives will lose them and those who lose their lives for my sake will save them." (Mark 8:34-35)

"Deny yourself. Take up your cross. You can win by losing."

What did Jesus mean when he issued this invitation to those who want to follow him?

These ideas, denying yourself, taking up your cross and winning by losing are contrary to what we are told everyday in our present culture. How often do you hear these suggestions in everyday conversation? When is the last time you saw an advertisement or heard a commercial that asked

you to deny yourself, to put others first, to delay your personal gratification, to put off buying something you really wanted until you could afford it and pay cash, or not to buy it at all even though you had the money because you didn't need it?

There are those who think that people who deny themselves and delay personal gratification are strange. Here's one of my favorite letters written to "Dear Abby."

"Dear Abby: We live in a nice neighborhood. There is not one house in our block worth less than $100,000. Some new neighbors moved in next door and I understand they paid cash for their home. They seem very nice but in some ways they are weird. One of our daughters was playing in their home with one of their children

and our daughter noticed they didn't have a television set. They have only one car and the father takes the bus to work everyday so the mother and the children can use the car. They rarely go anywhere except to church. They spend a lot of time doing things together as a family. The wife doesn't have any fancy clothes or jewelry. The children aren't permitted to have any toys dealing with violence. Could they belong to some strange religious cult? What do you make of them?"

Abby's answer was: "Maybe they like to save their money, have conservative standards, high moral principles and ideals. They sound like ideal neighbors to me."

"Deny yourself. Take up your cross. You can

win by losing."

What do these teachings of Jesus mean for us today?

For help in answering this question, I want to begin by quoting from one of Dr. M. Scott Peck's books.

Since it was first published in 1978, THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED by Dr. Peck has been a best-seller. Those of you who have read that book will remember that the opening sentence is: "Life is difficult." Peck then goes on to write, "This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we know that life is difficult--once we truly understand and accept it--then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is ac-

cepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters."

"Most do not fully see this truth that life is difficult. Instead they moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens and their difficulties as if life were generally easy, as if life should be easy. They voice their belief, noisily or subtly, that their difficulties represent a unique kind of affliction that should not be and that has somehow been especially visited upon them, or else upon their families, their tribe, their class, their nation, their race or even their species, and not upon others. I know about this moaning because I have done my share."

Dr. Peck then goes on to point out that discipline

is a basic set of tools we require to deal with life's difficulties and to solve life's problems. Without discipline we can solve nothing.

What makes life difficult is that the process of confronting and solving problems is a painful one. And since life poses an endless series of problems, life is always difficult and is full of pain and of joy.

But here's the good news: it is in the process of meeting and solving problems that life has its meaning. Problems call forth our courage and our wisdom; indeed they create our courage and our wisdom. They help us to grow mentally and spiritually. Thus says Peck, wise people learn not to dread but actually to welcome problems. However there are those who are not so wise and

because we fear the pain involved, we attempt to avoid problems. We procrastinate, hoping they will go away. We ignore them, forget them and pretend they do not exist. We even take drugs to assist us in ignoring them. We want to avoid them rather than suffer through them.

Some people will go to extraordinary lengths to avoid their problems and the suffering that goes with them. Sometimes they build elaborate fantasies in which to live to the total exclusion of reality. Carl Jung said, "Neurosis is always a substitute for legitimate suffering."

Wise people, however, learn not to dread but to actually welcome problems. That's precisely what Jesus was talking about when he said, "Take up your cross and follow me." Welcome

your problems, your obstacles, your sufferings. Take them up and deal with them. When we avoid the legitimate suffering that results from dealing with problems, we also avoid the growth that problems demand of us.

A word of explanation about life's "crosses" is necessary here. Too often when we talk about taking up our cross, we mean something different from what Jesus meant when he invited us to do so. In times of adversity, we've all heard people in a whiny voice say, "I guess this is my cross to bear." One day I overheard a woman say, "My aging mother is a helpless invalid and is very dependent on me. I can't spend much time away from her. This may continue for many years. I guess it's my cross to bear." And a man said, "I was injured on the job last year and now

it looks as if I'm permanently disabled. I guess it's my cross to bear." Without lacking sympathy for these individuals, this is not what Jesus had in mind when he invited those who wanted to follow him to take up their cross.

We know how in everyday conversation people frequently speak of personal problems that have come their way as a cross to bear. Sooner or later everyone's got something they could complain about. That's the nature of human existence. But if their so-called "cross to bear" is involuntary, that is if it is not something they have voluntarily chosen to do because of the meaning it gives to their lives and the lives of others, then it's not their cross to bear in the way that Jesus meant it.

Certainly the involuntary suffering that many people endure throughout their lives deserves our sympathy, but a better label for it would be their "thorn in the flesh." That's the metaphor St. Paul uses to describe whatever disability he had to deal with throughout his life. We don't know what his emotional or physical problem was because he doesn't tell us, but we do know it was something he did not choose and from which he hoped God would deliver him, but he had to live with it anyway.

How then do we deal with the "crosses" in life, the problems which constantly confront us and which we voluntarily take up?

Discipline is the basic set of tools we need to solve life's problems. We need discipline to

handle life's crosses effectively. When we teach ourselves and our children discipline, we are teaching them and ourselves how to suffer and also how to grow.

In this sermon what we are calling discipline has parts-- delaying of gratification and accepting responsibility.

Let's examine each one. When Jesus said, "Deny yourself," he was talking about delaying gratification. It's not a very popular idea in our time. On the contrary we are mostly urged to think first of ourselves, to buy now and worry about paying later. We are told over and over again, "You can have it all now."

Why are there more teen-age pregnancies in our

country than anywhere else in the world? Because we refuse to deny ourselves; we refuse to delay gratification. Because putting off sexual relations until we are mature and married is considered old fashioned. Why wait? Do it now, we are told.

Dr. Peck tells this story about one of his patients. She was a 30 year old financial analyst and she was complaining to him how over a period of months she had an increasing tendency to procrastinate in her job. With the help of Dr. Peck she had worked through a lot of personal problems yet she continued to procrastinate as much as ever. She was not delaying gratification, just the opposite.

Finally one day Peck asked her, "Do you like

cake?" She replied that she did. "Which part of the cake do you like better, the cake or the frosting?" he asked. "Oh the frosting," she answered enthusiastically. "And how do you eat a piece of cake," he asked. "I eat the frosting first, of course," she replied.

From her cake eating habits they went on to examine her work habits, and as was to be expected discovered that on a given work day she would devote the first hour to the more gratifying half of her work and the remaining six hours getting around to the objectionable remainder. Peck suggested that if she were to force herself to accomplish the unpleasant part of her job during the first hour, she would then be free to enjoy the other six. "Isn't one hour of pain followed by six of pleasure preferable to one hour

of pleasure followed by six of pain?" She agreed and being a person of strong will, she no longer procrastinates.

Denying yourself, delaying gratification is a process of scheduling the pain and pleasure of life in such a way as to enhance the pleasure by meeting and experiencing the pain first and getting it over with. It is the only decent way to live.

Denying yourself has one other component in addition to delaying gratification. Lest you misundertand, when Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, he did not mean that we are to treat ourselves as being unworthy. He did not mean that we are to put ourselves down as having no value. He did not mean that we are not to love ourselves.

In fact Jesus saw the self as being very important and its importance is enhanced when it is aware of its connection with others and with God. To activate this connection we need to consciously choose to commit ourselves to something greater than self. We need to have a higher loyalty than pure selfishness. When we make a commitment and devote our time and energy to a worthy ideal then we are drawn out of ourselves and we continue to grow spiritually. If we do not commit ourselves to something greater, then we shrink and diminish and life loses its meaning and worth.

Jesus knew, as modern psychology has confirmed, that each one of us is made up of many selves. There is our mean self, our selfish self, our unselfish self, our rational self, our intuitive

self and more. There is the self that whispers, "Satisfy your every desire now. You deserve it." There is the self that urges us to do our duty, to accept responsibility. We have multiple personalities.

To deny yourself and take up your cross means that you are able to rise above your basic self and selfish desires and to connect with others and with God. Your multiple selves are drawn together into one. That's what Jesus meant when he said "For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."

To put it in other words, when you begin to lose your life, give it away, then you win. You win because your self, your life is stretched, pulled and enlarged, rather than narrowed, shriveled

and turned inward.

The natural by product of this kind of self-denial and the willingness to take up your cross, the willingness to accept and overcome life's problems and difficulties, of adopting a discipline--is a new kind of joy. This kind of cross-bearing is not a sad, grim, unhappy process, but the opposite.

It's a rewarding process because you now are taking responsibility for your problems and you cannot solve a problem until you take responsibility for it.

Yet there are so many people who seek to avoid the pain of their problems, who seek to avoid taking up their cross by saying to themselves, "This problem for me was caused by other peo-

ple, or by social circumstances beyond my control, and therefore it is up to other people who solve this problem for me."

"Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me." Once you begin to practice deferred gratification and accept responsibility for your problems and deal with them, then you are free and no longer a victim. Then you are following Jesus. Amen.