
Carry your Crosses to Christ (Mark 1:29-39)
2/4/2018 Sermon by Pastor Jason Liebenow



This Epiphany season, we've focused on the call of Christ. We've seen the power of that call, the kinds of people who receive that call, and our powerful God who sends that call. In our service today, we focus on the effects of that call. What is life going to be like now that we have received this call of Christ. As we read in Mark 1:29-39, we'll see that people receive that call with all number of problems in their lives; all kinds of different obstacles to accepting Jesus' call, but Jesus is strong enough to conquer those burdens so we do heed the call. Today, God calls you to Carry Your Crosses to Christ.

Did you notice the kinds of people Mark tells us came to Jesus? They all seem to have these debilitating problems! Seems like none of these people actually have their lives together. They all either have some illness or even demons possessing them!

But then again, maybe that shouldn't be all that surprising. All of us have our struggles. All of us have unique problems that make life hard. We have physical infirmities. We have demonic lies embedded in our heads since we were kids from growing up in a sinful world. We have things we do regularly that we know deep down are wrong, but we keep doing them. We have people who have wronged us and who make our lives difficult. We all have doubts and worries, inadequacies and misunderstandings.

We are, gathered here, not a bunch of perfect people holding each other to a standard that we ourselves could never reach. Instead, we are a bunch of broken sinners. We come from sinful families. We have sinful pasts. We live in a sinful world. We have sinful habits and attitudes. We make sinful choices. But we are gathered here to bring that sin, to bring all those hardships to Jesus.

Notice how Jesus responded to those problems. He doesn't say, "Come on, people! Get it together!" Instead, we see Jesus healing the sicknesses. We see him casting out the demons. You know, it's kind of strange. You'd think that the problems would keep people away from Jesus. You'd think that people would be too busy with all those issues to spend time on Jesus. I remember a man telling me, "I'll come to church after I figure some things out." But Mark shows us the very opposite. It's our problems and struggles that actually bring us to Christ!

The apostle Paul speaks about this a lot in his letters. He even talks about boasting in our sufferings. He says, "When I am weak, then I am strong." What he means by that is when we have everything figured out, we don't feel the need for God. We've got too much else going on. We think we are strong enough on our own.

But when the tough times come, when the rug is pulled out from under us, when we realize just how little control we have over things, then we do turn to God. Then we turn to the one who does have control over all things, the one who can solve our problems and our ultimate problem.

Did you notice the emphasis on words that Mark gives us here? As Jesus is healing sicknesses and casting out demons, we hear that Jesus wouldn't let the demons speak. A curious detail. Then, Jesus tells his disciples that they are going to go somewhere else. Why? So that Jesus can *preach*. Jesus even says that is why he came!

Jesus is talking about the gospel message: that God sent his Son into the world to save the world from sin. You see, our real problem is not our sicknesses or the bad people out there. Our problem isn't bad habits and choices we've made. Our problem isn't lies, hypocrisy, and a lack of meaning in our lives. Those are all symptoms of our real problem; the problem in each of our hearts: sin.

Sin has contaminated our human nature to the point that we are born God's enemies. Already at our conception, that sin clings to us so that we stand guilty before God, and we deserve eternal death in hell. It's that sinful nature in us that shows itself in sinful actions from us and from other people. It's that sinful nature that has corrupted even the world around us to cause so much suffering.

This is what Jesus came to save us from. This is what he came to preach about. This is why Jesus silences the demons, so that we can hear the gospel message that alone can fix our real problem. The message of Jesus, who suffered, died, and rose to pay for our sins and assure us that we are forgiven, to assure us that we will not get the hell we deserve, but to the heaven that Jesus deserves, that gospel message is the solution to our real problem; the solution to our sinful natures.

It is that gospel healing, healing of our sinful nature, that heals the other struggles in our lives. That gospel message teaches us to trust in God, not only for eternal salvation, but for guidance and blessing in our lives now. It shows us that God is the one who rescues and relieves us from all our burdens. It builds faith to trust God's Word over Satan's lies and our own sinful reason. It builds faith to see heaven as our ultimate goal and that God can use anything even all the hardships we talked about earlier, all to push us further down the path of trusting in him.

God can use our inadequacies to keep us looking to him for fulfillment. God can use our sins to give us even greater joy in our forgiveness. God can use our weaknesses to remind us of his strength. God can use our sorrows to fix our eyes on the unending joys of heaven!

God can use the people who let us down to build our faith in Jesus who will

always keep his word. God can use our enemies to teach us just what it means that God forgave us when we were still his enemies, and to teach us to be like our God by forgiving and loving our enemies just as Jesus died for us when we were his enemies.

The healing that Jesus brings gives meaning even to our hardships. Now, instead of meaningless suffering, they become the way that God strengthens us, the way God matures and sharpens us. Don't be afraid of the struggles in your life. Don't fear them. Instead trust your God's promise that he will use them for your good and for the good of others.

We see something really important at the end of our lesson here. God shows us the wrong way to respond to the healing that Jesus brings. All these crowds of people had been around Jesus, but he goes off by himself to pray. This isn't the point yet, but also very important. Jesus is a busy guy, right? He's got all kinds of people to heal, problems to solve, but he found it vital, and you see this throughout the gospels, he found it extremely valuable to go off alone and just talk to God.

That's good for us too. There's so much to do every day, it can get easy to just keep going through the motions of life without taking the time to actually think. We can end up like someone who is so busy digging that he doesn't realize he's dug himself into a deep hole with no way out. It would have been better if he stopped digging a long time ago. Take the time to think about what you are doing, to match that up with God's Word, to pray for God's guidance and strength as you face the coming day. I believe it was Martin Luther who said that he spent time every morning in prayer, but on the really busy days, when he didn't have much time, he would spend double the time in prayer! If they found prayer time that important, probably good for you and me too, right?

Back to the lesson, Jesus is alone with his Father, the disciples find him. Everyone's looking for Jesus, and what does Jesus say? Does he go and heal those people? Does he go and fix more of the problems of the people there?

No. He leaves. That's kind of harsh, Jesus! Those people need you! How could you abandon them? What about all the people with real problems that couldn't make it to Jesus the first time around? Notice what Jesus says. He wants to go to the other villages, *so that he can preach!* That is why Jesus came!

Those crowds kept coming to Jesus, not to hear him preach, but so he could fix those earthly struggles. They were missing the point. The point was that gospel message: that Jesus saves us from sin. That is why Jesus went elsewhere, because more people needed to hear that message. The world needs to hear the gospel message more than a solution to all its other problems.

Don't respond to Jesus' healing by demanding heaven on earth, by demanding the good life now and mere solutions to your individual, earthly problems. Don't be like the crowds that kept endlessly searching for the surface solutions that this sinful world simply can't offer. Yeah, God provides for us every day. Yeah, he defends us from evil. But sometimes he allows that lack in our lives. Sometimes he allows that evil to come near. It's not because he doesn't care. No, he wants us to have the right focus. Keep heaven in your sights, not the world right now.

Instead, learn from Simon's mother-in-law. When Jesus healed her, what did she do? She got up and served him. She put Jesus' words into practice by serving someone other than herself.

Dear friends, I'm praying for you. You've got hard lives and hard struggles. We all have unique burdens to carry. But we have an even greater God who uses those burdens to bring us to him and who strengthens our faith by overcoming the real problem underneath: our sin. Bring your struggles to Christ. Receive the healing that only he can give. And put your faith into practice by loving and serving just as our Savior has loved and served you. Amen.