

The Real Thing **Week Four: “What is the Cost of Faith?”**

Scripture Passage **Mark 8:34-36 (NRSV)**

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel,^l will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

Weekly Reading Passage

“The cross is neither misfortune nor harsh fate. Instead, it is that suffering which comes from our allegiance to Jesus Christ alone. The cross is not random suffering, but necessary suffering. The cross is not suffering that stems from natural existence; it is suffering that comes from being Christian. The essence of the cross is not suffering alone; it is suffering and being rejected. Strictly speaking, it is being rejected for the sake of Jesus Christ, not for the sake of any other attitude or confession. A Christianity that no longer took discipleship seriously remade the gospel into only the solace of cheap grace. Moreover, it drew no line between natural and Christian existence. Such a Christianity had to understand the cross as one’s daily misfortune, as the predicament and anxiety of our natural life. Here it has been forgotten that the cross always also means being rejected, that the cross includes the shame of suffering. Being shunned, despised, and deserted by people, as in the psalmist’s unending lament, is an essential feature of the suffering of the cross, which cannot be comprehended by a Christianity that is unable to differentiate between a citizen’s ordinary existence and Christian existence. The cross is suffering with Christ. Indeed, it is Christ-suffering. Only one who is bound to Christ as this occurs in discipleship stands in seriousness under the cross.

“... let them take up their cross...’ From the beginning, it lies there ready. They need only take it up. But so that no one presumes to seek out some cross or arbitrarily search for some suffering, Jesus says, they each have *their* own cross ready, assigned by God and measured to fit. They must all bear the suffering and rejection measured out to each of them. Everyone gets a different amount. God honors some with great suffering and grants them the grace of martyrdom, while others are not tempted beyond their strength. But in every case, it is the one cross.

“It is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering that everyone has to experience is the call which summons us away from our attachments to this world. It is the death of the old self in the encounter with Jesus Christ. Those who enter into discipleship enter into Jesus’ death. They turn their living into dying; such has been the case from the very beginning. The cross is not the terrible end of a pious, happy life. Instead, it stands at the beginning of community with Jesus Christ. Whenever Christ calls us, his call leads us to death. Whether we, like the first disciples, must leave house and vocation to follow him, or whether, with Luther, we leave the monastery for a secular vocation, in both cases the same death awaits us, namely, death in Jesus Christ, the death of our old self caused by the call of Jesus. Because Jesus’ call brings death to the rich young man, who can only follow Jesus after his own will has died, because Jesus’ every command calls us to die with all our wishes and desires, and because we cannot want our own death, therefore Jesus Christ in his word has to be our death and our life. The call to follow Jesus, baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, is death and life. The call of Christ and baptism leads Christians into a daily struggle against sin and Satan. Thus, each day, with its temptations by the flesh and the world, brings Jesus Christ’s suffering anew to his disciples. The wounds inflicted this way and the scars a Christian carries away from the struggle are living signs of the community of the cross with Jesus. But there is another suffering and another indignity from which no Christian can be spared. To be sure, Christ’s own suffering is the only suffering that brings reconciliation. But because Christ has suffered for the sin of the world, because the whole burden of guilt fell on him, and because Jesus Christ passes on the fruit of his suffering to those who follow him, temptation and sin fall also onto his disciples. Sin covers the disciples with shame and expels them from the gates of the city like a scapegoat. So Christians become bearers of sin and guilt for other people. Christians would be broken by the weight if they

were not themselves carried by him who bore all sins. Instead, by the power of Christ's suffering they can overcome the sins they must bear by forgiving them. A Christian becomes a burden-bearer — bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2). As Christ bears our burdens, so we are to bear the burden of our sisters and brothers. The law of Christ, which must be fulfilled, is to bear the cross. The burden of a sister or brother, which I have to bear, is not only his or her external fate, manner, and temperament; rather, it is in the deepest sense his or her sin. I cannot bear it except by forgiving it, by the power of Christ's cross, which I have come to share. In this way Jesus' call to bear the cross places all who follow him in the community of forgiveness of sins. Forgiving sins is the Christ-suffering required of his disciples. It is required of all Christians.

“But how should disciples know what their cross is? They will receive it when they begin to follow the suffering Lord. They will recognize their cross in communion with Jesus.

“Thus, suffering becomes the identifying mark of a follower of Christ. The disciple is not above the teacher. Discipleship is *passio passiva* [passive suffering], having to suffer. That is why Luther could count suffering among the marks of the true church. A preparatory document for the Augsburg Confession defined the church as the community of those “who are persecuted and martyred on account of the gospel.” Those who do not want to take up their cross, who do not want to give their lives in suffering and being rejected by people, lose their community with Christ. They are not disciples. But those who lose their lives in discipleship, in bearing the cross, will find life again in following in the community of the cross with Christ. The opposite of discipleship is being ashamed of Christ, being ashamed of the cross, being scandalized by the cross.

“Discipleship is being bound to the suffering Christ. That is why Christian suffering is not disconcerting. Instead, it is nothing but grace and joy. The acts of the church's first martyrs give witness that Christ transfigures the moment of greatest suffering for his followers through the indescribable certainty of his nearness and communion. In the middle of the most terrible torment that the disciples bore for their Lord's sake, they experienced the greatest joy and blessedness of his community. Bearing the cross proved to be for them the only way to overcome suffering. But this is true for all who follow Christ, because it was true for Christ himself.”

– From Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship: Reader's Edition*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015, pgs. 52-55. Used by permission from the publisher.

Weekly Questions

1. Have you given much thought to the role of suffering in the Christian life? What do you think about Bonhoeffer's explanation of the role of suffering?
2. “The first Christ-suffering that everyone has to experience is the call which summons us away from our attachments to this world.” What attachments has Christ called you away from? What attachments do you think Christ might be calling you away from right now?
3. What do you think it means, in practical terms, to bear one another's burdens?