

“The Cost of Discipleship”

Mark 13:1-13

July 19, 2020

Read Mark 13:1-13

This is the Word of the LORD.

Prayer of Invocation

As you were listening to me read those verses, did the thought cross your mind, “Gosh, can’t we have something light and happy and uplifting? Seriously, we are in the midst of this anxiety-producing time; and you are going to use this as your text?” As your preacher I can tell you, it crossed my mind. But here we are. And these *are* words we need to hear.

There are three things here that we need to hear in these days we are experiencing:

1. The circumstances of our days are unique; the hardship of our days is not.
2. Believers need to prepare to persevere hardship **because** we are disciples/followers of Christ; and,
3. We persevere because the promise is assured and the inheritance is awesome.

If all you know about faith is the first two things, you might ask yourself whether faith in Jesus is worth it. You might think that life would be easier and smoother without having to face the cost of discipleship (and, in some ways, you would be correct in thinking that). It is only when we remember the third – that Jesus is faithful to keeping His promises and the inheritance He has promised is awesome – that we find sustaining grace to make it through. In other words, we have to remember to see the bigger picture – what God has done, what God is doing, and what God is going to do – in order to have a good perspective on the here and now.

I want to be careful: I am not preaching a pie-in-the-sky theology where this life does not matter and everything will be peachy in heaven. This life does matter: Jesus came to rescue us **through** this life, not from it. What happens here and now may not be pretty and it may be disheartening, but the truth is that this life is part of our eternal life and we can be living into it now. “The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God *has* come near; repent and believe the good news.”

Chapter 13 is known as the Olivet Discourse, based upon verse 3. It is the longest narrative teaching by Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. It forms the bridge from Jesus’ confrontations with the authorities that Mark has been describing in Chapters 9 through 12 – and the authorities’ rejection of him – to the passion narrative that begins in Chapter 14.

Judgment on the Temple.

Mark makes the point that Jesus “came out of the temple” and then “sitting down on the Mount of Olives.” When Mark changes venue, he changes the scene. The disciples took this opportunity to ask Jesus about the judgment on the Temple; they may have had in mind a series of movements prophesied in Ezekiel 9, 10, and 11.

In Ezekiel, God entered judgment against Jerusalem for its faithlessness, and the “glory of the LORD” moved from its original location to the threshold of the house (9:3), then to the east gate of the house of the LORD (10:19); and finally to the mountain east of the city; the Mount of Olives (11:23). In between each of these

movements, the prophet declared God's judgment upon Jerusalem for its rejection of God and God's covenant.¹ The disciples may have been wondering what Jesus' declaration of the destruction of the Temple meant – particularly when he had just come from the threshold of the house, through the east gate of the house of the LORD to the Mount of Olives. Whether the disciples recognized it at the time is not really that important for our purposes, it just means that Mark wanted his first readers in Rome to draw that connection and realize what Jesus was doing.

What Peter, James, John and Andrew *did* realize was that Jesus was talking about something really significant: things that were *going* to happen. They asked him about what he meant and when would those things happen? Did Jesus mean that the prophesied “end of days” and “day of wrath” were imminent? Without answering the question of timing, Jesus made it clear that the Temple and Temple authorities would not continue.

Jesus' prediction must have seemed wild at the time. The Temple buildings were massive. They were constructed by the Herodians (the Herod family). The stones were massive and the facility was considered an architectural marvel. As much as the Herodians were despised by the rabbis, the rabbis did acknowledge how great was the construction, “He who has not seen Jerusalem in her splendor has never seen a desirable city in his life. He who has not seen the Temple in its full construction has never seen a glorious building in his life.”² To predict the total destruction of the Temple – “not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down” – well, that seemed to be ludicrous given the massive proportions.

As incredible as it was, Jesus' prophecies about the destruction of the Temple *did* come true. The believers in Rome to whom Mark was writing would have known about the sacking of Jerusalem. However, Mark's point was that because Jesus declared it ahead of time, the message was clear: Rome was an instrument of God's righteous judgment. Rome was not more powerful than God; God was powerful enough to use Rome for His own purposes. Just as God raised up Pharaoh in order to demonstrate his might, so also Rome worked into the hands of God.

It is important to know that Jesus' prophecies came true; it gives us confidence to know that the unrealized promises for which we hope – the second coming and the resurrection – will be fulfilled in God's time, too. Remember some of the other prophecies in Mark that the disciples witnessed :

- Jesus told Simon and Andrew they would become “fishers of men” (1:17);
- Jesus told them about finding a colt on Palm Sunday (11:2-6); and,
- Jesus told them multiple times about his death and resurrection (8:31; 9:9;12; 10:32-34).

Within the gospel -- that is, at this point in the narrative of Mark's gospel – there were several other predictions and fulfillments yet to come:

- The preparations for the upper room/Last Supper (14:13-15);
- Betrayal by one of the twelve (14);
- Desertion by the disciples; (14); and,
- Peter's denial. (14)

¹ Lane, The Gospel of Mark, New International Commentary, p. 454.

² Ibid. p. 451.

Mark's readers in Rome would know that all those came true as well. Mark's point here is that what Jesus says is true, and we can trust his promises. In fact, let me put it in stronger terms: what Jesus says is true, and we *must* trust his promises.

The remainder of the Olivet Discourse that we read this morning warns disciples about the tribulations they would face. Jesus took the original question about how judgment was going to be entered against the Temple and transformed it to a discussion of the coming of the Son of Man. We are not going to cover all of it today; instead, I want to pick up several things going through 13. We will get to the second part next week.

The Attacks Are Real.

What becomes clear very quickly in Jesus' teaching is that there will be conflict and controversy regarding faith in him. There are two kinds of troubles he described. **First**, there will be the imposters and those who use current events to claim to be the Christ. That is, there will be people who will try to pull believers away from Jesus by claiming to be him. **Second**, there will be the challenges that believers will face; challenges that will be difficult and, sometimes, even deadly. Here, the problem is that disbelievers will try to intimidate through violence or pressure.

We do not have to look far to see where the truth of Jesus' words about spiritual warfare are taking place. I want to avoid the distortion of the now, so let me look past the orders prohibiting in-person worship. Stay with me – let me point out that Imposters abound, attacks are real, and martyrs are bearing witness all the time.

Imposters.

In Rancho Santa Fe on March 19, 1997, thirty-nine members of the Heaven's Gate group committed suicide believing that their leader, Marshall Applewhite, was the Son of God. He claimed to be a continuation of Jesus, brought back to complete the work of the ushering in the Kingdom of God. Thirty-nine people were deceived and voluntarily committed suicide based on this man's claim that "I am he." There was Jim Jones in Jonestown; David Koresh in Waco Texas; how many others could we name if we carefully culled the newspapers of the last 20 years in our own country?

Beware. Be aware.

Attacks are real.

Looking more worldly, in February 2020, Forbes magazine reported that Open Doors, a non-governmental organization, issued a report about the plight of persecuted Christians around the world.

According to the report, the situation in China continues to worsen as more and more churches in China are experiencing pressure at the hands of the Chinese state. Indeed, in the reporting period, over 5,500 churches have been destroyed, closed down or confiscated. In India, Christian minorities are subjected to extreme persecution which manifested in at least 1,445 physical attacks and death threats against Christians in 2019. In Nigeria, in 2019, approximately 1,350 Christians were killed for their faith.³

³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2020/02/18/persecuted-christians-are-not-given-much-hope-in-2020/#592f23316889>

The list could go on. We saw Christians horrifically executed – beheaded – during the ISIS reign of terror. They were singled out and used as examples of what happens to those who do not capitulate to the demand to renounce their faith.

Here in the United States, the pressure against faith is often more subtle and more coercive than outright violent. There are illustrations of violence, but those are more episodic than systemic. Instead, what we see is a mocking and degrading of the faith. Two weeks ago, *Time* magazine published an article entitled “Regular Christians Are No Longer Welcome in American Culture.” Author Mary Eberstadt wrote,

This new vigorous secularism has catapulted mockery of Christianity and other forms of religious traditionalism into the mainstream and set a new low for what counts as civil criticism of people’s most-cherished beliefs. In some precincts, the “faith of our fathers” is controversial as never before.

Some of the faithful have paid unexpected prices for their beliefs lately: the teacher in New Jersey suspended for giving a student a Bible; the football coach in Washington placed on leave for saying a prayer on the field at the end of a game; the fire chief in Atlanta fired for self-publishing a book defending Christian moral teaching; the Marine court-martialed for pasting a Bible verse above her desk; and other examples of the new intolerance. Anti-Christian activists hurl smears like “bigot” and “hater” at Americans who hold traditional beliefs about marriage and accuse anti-abortion Christians of waging a supposed “war on women.”

Some Christian institutions face pressure to conform to secularist ideology—or else. Flagship evangelical schools like Gordon College in Massachusetts and Kings College in New York have had their accreditation questioned. Some secularists argue that Christian schools don’t deserve accreditation, period. Activists have targeted home-schooling for being a Christian thing; atheist Richard Dawkins and others have even called it tantamount to child abuse. Student groups like InterVarsity have been kicked off campuses. Christian charities, including adoption agencies, Catholic hospitals and crisis pregnancy centers have become objects of attack.⁴

Critics of the faith use economic pressure, political pressure, legal pressure, shaming, disparaging, or mocking of Christians to try to shut down those bearing witness. We ought not be surprised. “Beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them.” Those words have been true in the past, they are true now, and they are going to be true until Christ comes again.

Martyrs.

The persecution is real, but when the stories are told, we marvel at the faith of believers and are encouraged. We need encouragement these days because the efforts to discourage are very powerful.

Simply leaving others alone is not an option. For years, Christians believed the lie: if they kept their faith to themselves, then everything would be fine. No one would be offended, no one would be critical, no one would have anything against us. Not true.

A Christian leader -- we'll call him Steve -- was traveling recently by plane. He noticed that the man sitting two seats over was thumbing through some little cards and moving his lips. The

⁴ <https://time.com/4385755/faith-in-america/>

man looked professorial with his goatee and graying brown hair, and Steve placed him at fifty-something. Guessing the man was a fellow-believer, Steve leaned over to engage him in conversation. "Looks to me like you're memorizing something," he said. "No, actually I was praying," the man said. Steve introduced himself. "I believe in prayer too," he said. "Well, I have a specific assignment," said the man with the goatee. "What's that?" Steve asked. "I'm praying for the downfall of Christian pastors." "I would certainly fit into that category," Steve said. "Is my name on the list?" "Not on my list," the man replied.⁵

My point here is not to scare you; it is to flesh out what Jesus was saying: Beware. Be aware. These things **are** going on – this spiritual battle is real. Jesus makes it clear that the gospel will be controversial, it will draw active opposition, and it will be costly. We should expect nothing less than the reaction Jesus himself received. Whether we are called to be martyrs – which, by the way, means “witnesses” – at the cost of our lives or simply to bear witness with our lives, we should not expect that the road of discipleship will be smooth.

The Battle is For Jesus to Wage.

Fortunately, we are not left by ourselves. Jesus tells us that these trials will be “for his names’ sake” – in other words, that the trials we face for our faith are to bear witness to God’s grace and salvation. Success is measured by faithfulness, not by military victory.

"Do you believe in God?" they asked Cassie Bernall. [The killers at Columbine High School] knew full well she did. The girl who had once indulged in the occult (as the killers now did) had moved into a realm of peace when she learned to center her heart on Christ. She became a church-goer and a worker among those who needed Christ. Often she brought her Bible to school.

She was reading it in the library when the killer pointed his gun at her. Did she believe in God? "Yes, I believe in God," she replied.

"Why?" asked the boy in the dark trench coat. Without waiting for an answer, he pulled the trigger.

Cassie Bernall was not alone – she knew a reality bigger than a bullet, bigger than fear, bigger than evil. The end of her life was tragic, and yet victorious. We marvel at her faithfulness. Her story is told: she is remembered as a hero, a life celebrated.

Make no mistake: evil exists. Evil exists but has no power to withstand the power of the gospel.

Cassie Bernall knew what to say in her moment of trial. In my own strength, I do not know that I would know what to say. I am in good company here: remember Moses’ objections when God spoke to him from the burning bush? But here is where Jesus’ words are a great comfort, “Do not worry beforehand about what you will say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you who are speaking but the Holy Spirit.”

The battle is not ours to wage alone. Friends, here is where the disciplines of faith are so important: reading Scripture, regular personal prayer, regular prayers together as a community of faith, evangelism, mission, and discipleship. It is why we long to be together, to fellowship, to study, to worship together, and to pray. These are so important so that if – and when – we have the occasions in which we are called to

⁵ *Common Ground*, Vol. 10 No. 7.

bear witness, we might recognize and be comforted with the “peace that passes all understanding” because we know that the Holy Spirit is testifying through us. What a privilege, what a blessing, what a comfort it is to know that we are not left to fight these battles on our own.

Friends, as we walk with Jesus these final steps toward the cross, we do so in the confidence of the victory Jesus already has won. We pray for strength, we pray for courage, we pray for obedience, we pray for grace, we pray for one another.

Conclusion.

The disciples marveled at the big stone buildings. Jesus said, “no.”

The temples we see are not the temples of power. In this pandemic, we have seen how Wall Street, Capitol Hill, the White House, movie studios, science and/or any other creation have no eternal power. The Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the only real power – but believers need to understand that there are forces that will seek to destroy and deceive.

That’s scary, but it is nothing to fear. We know the end of the story; we know that Jesus is the victor. And we have the peace of knowing that we are not alone; Jesus has promised that we need not worry, that we are not alone in the time of trial. “When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak but the Holy Spirit.”

Amen.

Questions:

1. Do these verses scare you? What scares you most about being singled out as a witness for Jesus?
2. How are you strengthening your faith? Are you asking God to strengthen your faith? What are you doing during these days of social isolation to encourage, build up, and equip others in their faith – and who are you asking to walk with you to do that for you?
3. What is your hope? How do you persevere when all circumstances can look as if things are headed in the wrong direction?