

Isaiah 50:4-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

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 rebellious, I did not turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.

Mark 8:31-37 (New Revised Standard Version)

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

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. 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, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?"

Back when I still made my living in the corporate world,
I worked hard on an extensive market and cost analysis report,
which my boss passed upward to her boss and so on,
until it finally reached a senior vice president.

He arranged for me to fly out to corporate headquarters in Chicago,
and laid out a couple of career paths that he had in mind for me,
describing the work & responsibilities, & compensation to expect.

It was all very exciting, impressive and enticing
to consider where I'd likely end up economically & professionally,
as the reward for taking a pathway he'd mapped out & set before me.

But once back home, I thought about it all more deeply and carefully.
I imagined where I'd be and what I would have acquired at the end,
and I wasn't sure I'd be satisfied with what I done with my life...
... for when my career was over, what would I have really accomplished?

Ironically, as I thought about all that he was offering to me,
I realized that it wasn't enough, that it wouldn't nearly enough.
It was in fact that trip to Chicago and the ensuing conversations
that lead me to consider going to seminary and becoming a pastor.

If you drive up to Albuquerque and take a right going East on I-40,
eventually you'll end up on Market Street in Wilmington, NC.
So too, the life paths that we choose have consequences,
and will end up leading us to a specific destination...

... so it only makes sense to make sure that the road we're on

**is the one that leads to where in the end, we want to be,
and that the seeds we plant are really what we want to harvest.**

The Gospel of Mark describes the life, ministry and mission of Jesus.
And from Caesarea Philippi onward there is a shift in focus
toward **preparing the disciples** for the events of the Passion
& spreading the Good News after his resurrection & Pentecost.

At that point Jesus is directing his disciples to listen and focus,
preparing toward the challenges they'll face after his ascension.
And just before the passage that we read earlier,
Jesus asks the disciples, who do people say that he is.

Then Jesus asks the disciples, but who do you think I am,
and Peter answers quite correctly, "You are the Messiah".

And even though Peter does have the essential facts straight,
it turns out that Peter's understanding was incomplete & defective,
because faithfulness to God also includes sacrifice and struggle.

Peter, like most of the people of Israel,
expected the Messiah to be a King David-like conquering hero,
who would overthrow the hated Roman occupation,
and return things back to the glory days of Israel.

But then Jesus explained what was really going to happen, vs. 31,
Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the
elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

The passage we read from Isaiah 50 points ahead toward Jesus, vs. 4, 6~7.
The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a
word... I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide
my face from insult and spitting. The Lord God helps me... therefore I have set my face like flint...

Having received the word given by God, though faithfulness is costly,
he will proclaim and teach that word of God to the weary,
and be like flint because the Lord helps and sustains his servant.

In the next scene,
Peter tries to dissuade Jesus from suffering and death
in direct opposition to God's will, design and purpose,
and so he earns a sharp rebuke from Jesus, vs. 33.

"Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

So why is Jesus so harsh in his response to Peter?

You remember that just after Jesus was baptized by John,
he was alone in the wilderness where Satan tempted him for 40 days,
trying to entice him to turn aside from true obedience to God.
Peter was doing the same thing, following the same pattern as Satan,
in trying to dissuade Jesus from obeying and fulfilling God's plan.

And that is also an enticing challenge that we too face in life,
compromising our faith & discipleship to go along with this world,
not fully submitting our lives & desires to God's will & purpose.

Discipleship is responding to God's gracious love through Jesus
with our obedient trust, an open and receptive heart,

and offering ourselves as God's faithful servants,
for that's how the Lord nurtures & enlarges our faith.

So the question is more than if I have invited Jesus into my heart,
but also, **what have I done with Jesus since he got there?**

If in my heart I do truly know and **submit to who Jesus is**,
then that is reflected in my walk and my ongoing relationships,
because trusting Jesus will influence every aspect of my life,
so at issue **is how we live and love and how we serve.**

Jesus describes and explains discipleship in the next section, vs. 34.

Jesus 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.

As Jesus explains, If any want to become my followers,
then there are **three conditions that will define discipleship:**

First condition: Let them deny themselves
not necessarily a call to avoid life's pleasures and delights,
but it is learning to say: "Not my will, but thy will be done."
It is to focus and trust in God, rather than ourselves.

It's handing over the keys & control over our lives and pet projects,
and increasingly expose our life's every nook and cranny to Jesus,
daring to open even our most secret closets and dark places
by saying: "Lord, you take charge and rule throughout."

deny yourself means to maintain our priorities always in harmony
with what Jesus told us in the two Great Commandments in Mark 12,
Love God, with all our heart, mind and soul, and love our neighbors.

Second condition: Take up your cross
that was a terrifying and shocking image of torture and death,
of being prepared to die and having surrendered one's life.

Take up your cross
refers to our own particular cross, not someone else's,
and not some other more desirable cross of our own choosing.

In fact my cross is probably the one I most don't want to take up
and that makes me feel troubled, anxious, fearful and insecure.
taking up our cross **is a choice we make in order to follow and obey God.**

Third condition: Follow me
This is the same language as the original call to the disciples
and in this passage it defines Christian discipleship---
- which means that following Jesus will often come with a cost,
a sacrifice for the sake of faithful obedience to the Lord.

Since Jesus explains this in the Gospels in 6 different places,
it must be very important for us to hear and to heed, vs. 35-37.

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, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

If our center and focus is on Jesus Christ **as revealed in Scripture,**

then that will absolutely define our relationship with Christ,
and that living, growing & deepening relationship does have
the power to guide and transform every aspect of our living,
which is the appropriate response for what the Lord has done for us.

And this is not a static, one-time decision and then we're all done
but it's a progressively deepening relationship with Jesus,

so that as we live and experience life with Jesus,
as we grow deeper and get to know the Lord better,
then that faith & relationship, over time, **transforms us...**

... as following Jesus faithfully reshapes our life, values & purpose,
as God's gracious love resets, retrains & guides our affections,
which redefines, redirects, decides everything else -

- how we choose to relate to other people and God's creation
- how we deal with disasters, disappointments and failures
- how we interpret life's events, trials and circumstances

**I am describing the progressive process of growing spiritually,
for which there is no fast-track or shortcut or easy escape.**

It's been my honor to know a number of spiritually mature Christians,
and such spiritual maturity has always been **the blessed result**
of having experienced & endured trouble & tribulation over time,
toward a patient & trusting, faithful & authentic relationship.

It derives from having walked a long and bumpy road with the Lord,
through many years, challenges and struggles in life,
and of living through both successes and failures.

And this is the life-guiding question that I've learned to ask,

**what best fits and matches the gifts, passion and abilities
that the Lord has given & entrusted for me to use & to serve?,
all for the sake of usefully following Christ more faithfully?**

Jesus asks, and **demands that we answer**, do you really know me?

Do you really love me?, and do you really believe me
enough, that you deny yourself, take up your cross?

And will you **fully commit to following me**,
even when it is difficult, demanding, inconvenient or costly?,
because following Jesus will affect every aspect of life
as that will guide how we actually live out in the world.

Lent is the perfect time to deepen our walk and commitment with God,
and one approach is to ask ourselves, "who is Jesus to me?",
has my faith in Jesus grown this year? has it progressed?

Am I satisfied that the road I am on leads to where I want to end up?

We answer those questions by honestly examining our lives,
contemplating the path and direction that our life is taking,
and by looking at the signs that point toward our destination.

Jesus is talking about discipleship – the committed Christian life
and he calls for an extreme faithfulness from those who follow
in faithful-obedient response to God's gift to us through Christ.

There are any number of goals we might pursue in life,
and they may or may not be wrong or sinful in themselves.

But the call of faith is to set our priorities on **our ultimate goal**,
for who we are and who we become will be determined by our response
by who we believe Jesus is, & what we choose to do with that truth.

The question is: **"What or who do I really love deeply enough,
that I am willing to give up my life for it?"**

Until we have identified and know what we are willing to die for,
only then will we really know for what purpose we are living for.

For when our relationship with God is clear, alive and appropriate,
then all our other priorities in life will fall right into place.

And this is not a static, one-time decision and then we're all done
but it's a progressively deepening relationship with Jesus...

... that as we live and experience life with Jesus,
**as we grow deeper and get to know Jesus more closely,
that relationship of faith will over time, transform us
to share in the redemptive-healing work of God in this world.**

Today as a matter of your own spiritual journey of faith and growth,
I encourage all of us as a part of our private Lenten devotions,
to reflect on some of the stages, steps and turning-points
of how you came to faith, and how your faith changed & grew,
write your own **spiritual-adventure autobiography**...

... and consider how life's adventures have helped shape your faith,
and have made a significant difference in your faith development.

Then at the end to be able to look back and say that the way I lived,
yes, my life did have purpose and meaning, integrity & connection,
and I can be satisfied for having lived out my life well.

As Paul wrote to the Christians living in Corinth (2 Cor 13:5, 1Cor 16:13-14)

Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that
Jesus Christ is in you? Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done
in love.

For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they
give in return for their life?