

# “Following Jesus: 2) The Denial of Self”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina

February 28, 2010

**Text: “Then he called to his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.’”  
(Mark 12:43)**

During the five weeks of Lent we are looking at the Gospel of Mark as a guide on our Lenten journey.

One of the most puzzling aspects of the Gospel of Mark is the role that the disciples play in story of the ministry of Jesus. As Paul Achtemeier once observed, “If there is any progression in the picture Mark paints of the disciples, it appears to be from bad to worse.”

At first, it appears that the disciples simply do not understand Jesus. He speaks in parables, but the disciples do not understand. He performs healings, but they do not understand. He feeds a multitude, but they do not understand.

But, it goes beyond misunderstanding. They reject him. When Jesus tells them at Caesarea Philippi that it is necessary for the Son of Man to undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mark 8: 31ff.), Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes Jesus, so that Jesus has to say to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan, for you are on the side of man and not God.”

At the end of the gospel, the rejection of Jesus by his disciples is complete. Peter denies him. Judas betrays him. Peter, James and John cannot even remain awake for a hour in Gethsemane, when Jesus faces one of his greatest challenges and knows that he must drink of the cup of crucifixion (Mark 14:32-42). Surely, one of the saddest verses in the New Testament is found in Mark 14:50 when Mark writes of the disciples, “They all deserted him and fled.”

## I.

In contrast to the disciples, who both failed to understand Jesus and who finally rejected him, there are within the Gospel of Mark several individuals who represent what it means to follow Jesus.

One of them is this poor widow that Mark describes in chapter 12. Between the Court of the Gentiles and the Court of the Women there was a place in the temple called the Gate Beautiful, a place where Jesus might have gone to rest. In the Court of the Women there were thirteen collecting boxes called “The Trumpets” because of their shape. Many people came there to place their gifts. Some people brought lavish gifts. This woman brought two small coins. The Greek word is “lepton,” which means “thin ones.” Some translations call these coins a farthing. Others a penny. Still others a copper coin or a penny. The point is that they represented the smallest amount of money that a person could give.

But Jesus saw in her gift something that his disciples could not see. Others had given out of their wealth. She gave out of her poverty. Others had given a part of what they had. She gave all that she had.

## II.

This widow that Jesus mentions is a manifest of an important dimension of what it means to follow Jesus. She is an embodiment of Jesus’ call for the denial of the self. In his charge to his disciples at Caesarea Philippi Jesus said to his disciples, “If any would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”

John Calvin, the great Reformer, used these words of Jesus to speak about the Christian life. The practice of the Christian life, Calvin believed, is, above all, self-denial which has primary reference to the attitude and disposition of the human heart and cross-bearing, which is the outward expression of the inward disposition. For Calvin the basic sin is unbelief, lack of trust and confidence in God the Father, but the primary expression of that sin is pride or self-centeredness. This self-centeredness is overcome by the practice of self-denial, which is both a dying unto self, and also becoming alive to God and to one’s fellow human beings.

But John Calvin not only wrote about the Christian life, he lived it. There were plenty of things that you could criticize about John Calvin, but no one ever accused him of not giving his all. In a recent edition of *Theology Today*, George Hunsinger of Princeton Seminary reminds us that Calvin’s life was not a life of ease. Hunsinger writes about Calvin, that “beset by a dizzying array of illnesses, Calvin lived in constant pain.” The list of his medical ailments included chronic gout, kidney stones, pulmonary tuberculosis, painful breathing caused by pleurisy, the coughing up of blood, recurring fevers, intestinal parasites, bleeding hemorrhoids, and migraine headaches.

As if that were not enough, his only child, a son, was lost in infancy and his wife, Idelette, died at the age of forty. In the midst of such pain and difficult circumstances, this pastor and leader of the Reformation churned out some 20 sermons a month, including the New Testament lesson on Sunday morning, the Old Testament text on weekdays, and the Psalms on Sunday afternoons. In addition, he also wrote a two volume work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which today

remains one of the most important classics of the Christian faith. He also wrote commentaries of every book of the Bible (except for the book of Revelation), as well as letters to Christian leaders all over Europe.

For Jesus, the key to the denial of self was expressed in the words that the “Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.”

This past Wednesday, when Jim Rogers spoke at our church about the future of Charlotte, he mentioned what he called “cathedral building.” He noted that when the great cathedrals were built in Chartres, Canterbury, Paris, and Florence, that often it took a hundred years to complete the cathedral. That meant that the architects who designed the cathedral, the stone masons who laid the foundation, and those who built the first part of the cathedral knew they would never live to see their work complete. That would only come in subsequent generations. But they realized that they were part of something greater than themselves.

Today, we live in a culture of self-actualization. People are trying to find themselves, to fulfill themselves, in their marriages, their jobs, their families. But what if Jesus is right and the self is not the solution; it is the problem. Real fulfillment only comes when we take ourselves out of the center and place God in the center of our lives. Real fulfillment comes when we see that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. Real fulfillment is in “cathedral building,” doing our part for the next generation.

### III.

There is another individual that reflects Mark’s understanding of discipleship, and this is a man by the name of Joseph of Arimathea. Now we don’t know a lot about Joseph of Arimathea. He was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, the council that had condemned Jesus. He was apparently a wealthy man who owned a number of burial plots. Joseph of Arimathea was a secret follower of Christ in a manner that would not threaten his livelihood, his status, or his money.

But after the crucifixion of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea did something remarkable. He went to Pontius Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus so that Joseph might bury him.

The question is, why would a person like Joseph with wealth and status to lose, become an open follower of Christ?

I think I know the answer. Joseph watched Jesus die on the cross and in the death of Jesus saw something that changed his life forever. I think he gritted his teeth and said to himself, “I will never cower again. I will never waver again when God asks me to make a tough decision.”

I wonder if there is someone here this morning in the sound of my voice who needs to have his or her bell rung? Many of us, if the truth be told, are still mostly talk. We know that there are some tough decisions that need to be made, but we feel like there is too much to lose. We hide behind the veil of good intentions.

Can you imagine what would happen in the church, in our community, in our nation, if every one of us demonstrated the courage to do what Joseph of Arimathea did?

Throughout the church's history there have been those who gave their all for the cause of Christ. Hardly a Lenten season goes by that I am not reminded of the courage of a young man by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who opposed the reign of Hitler and who was hanged by the S.S at the German concentration Camp at Flossenbug on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1945, just two days before the concentration camp was liberated by the Allied army. His last words to his fellow prisoners before the guards took him to this death were these: "This is not the end of life for me, but the beginning."

Or I think of the words of Sir Thomas More, who had the courage to refuse to go along with King Henry VIII's divorce of his wife Katherine to marry Anne Boleyn and who was finally convicted of treason and beheaded at the Tower of London. His last words were these: "I die the king's good servant, but God's servant first."

#### IV.

I want to return to the question with which I began this sermon this morning, namely the role of the disciples in Mark's gospel. They were such an unpromising group: Judas, who betrayed Jesus and then later hanged himself; Peter, who denied Jesus, Thomas, the doubter, James and John who could not even stay awake for an hour in Gethsemane.

But that is not the full story. Something happened to this group of disciples. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, this group of disciples suddenly found courage that before had been totally missing.

Peter became the head of the church in Jerusalem and wrote three letters that are now a part of the New Testament. Tradition has it that he eventually went to Rome where he was crucified by the Romans for his faith.

The disciple John also became one of the early Apostles of the Church. According to the earliest witnesses of the church John went to Ephesus and there wrote the Gospel that bears his name. He too underwent persecution and was exiled on the small island of Patmos, where he wrote the Book of Revelation.

The call of Jesus is a call to "deny one's self, take up a cross, and follow Jesus." So my question to you this morning is this: "Is there any cause for which you would totally give yourself, is there any cause for which you would give your life?"

Because if that is true about you, you are simply unstoppable. Jesus saw a poor widow give two small coins to the temple treasury and he said to his disciples that she had given more than all the wealthy who had given much more than this widow. She gave her all and Jesus saw it.

What would he say about us?

Amen.