

THE WAY TO LIVE

In today's text from Mark, Jesus is giving directives on how to live— how to live life, now!
This not a parable, nor is it a narrative lesson, and there is nothing touchy / feelie about it.

We tend to be more comfortable with theology in a song, than this direct and to the point approach.
We'd rather harmonize with our emotions, than have them provoked through the discord of our reactive thinking.

Regardless, Jesus spoke straight forward and succinctly. He presented a three step action plan, and verse 35 states the reason/ the purpose for it.

His three step plan is for those desiring to rescue their lives / to resuscitate hope and full potential.
The message is for those seeking to truly live.

In addition, Jesus notes that life is not about accumulating things or strengthening one's strong hold.
Those patterns are not really living, and they will not help prepare us for what's next.....

Jesus presents the requirements for his conditional statement, "If you want to become a follower?" / if you want to live the model that God has presented to you?

Jesus' declaration is not new to us; we know it well. Moreover, I think we've become hardened / almost immune to messages that declare: "Here is what you must do / here is what you need."

Everywhere we look, someone or some commercial is giving us "insightful tidbits" on how to improve our lives.

Mass media is saturated with the latest insight / the newest and best techniques or ways to enhance our health, expand our potential or to make us happy and content, ... once and for all.
And, those axioms seem to change over time, too, which can be confusing.
"15 or so years ago, we told to consume more vitamin E, and now we are told too much is unhealthy.

Also, many "self help" pronouncements are "warnings" with dire consequences if ignored.

Sometimes the warnings are baseless and absurd,..... but I don't want to get into American politics.....

Most anything we purchase, comes with a warning, including, for some, the warning not to remove the warning label.

And, some of those "warnings" are really obvious. Leslie recently purchased a hair dryer, and it's red print label warned, "Do not use while taking a shower."

If you buy hot coffee to go, you'll read on the cup, "contents are hot" <
My lawnmowers has the warning, "Do not reach under the mower while the blade is engaged."..... <

Speaking of hands,..... on the other hand,..... maybe we need those warnings? Maybe cell phones should warn about the risk of cancer?

Maybe our computers should have a big warning sign, “Nobody in Nigeria is going to give you a million dollars,..... and don’t respond to spam and don’t click on web site links that promises you something you didn’t ask for.

Also, I think cheap beer should have the warning, “drinking this stuff will not cause beautiful women to party with you as the TV commercial implies.”

And, maybe horses should come with a warning tag that says, “Do not try to break this horse if you are over 50 or the opposite will happen.”

Perhaps, we do think more from our gut than from our head?

Perhaps, we do need to be warned about making bad choices.

But,..... would we heed the advice if we didn’t like it.

We tend to “hear” what we want to hear, and alter the facts to fit our visceral /gut desires.

It may be too late to respond to Global warming, even so, we really are not trying to respond to all the warnings.

We keep over consuming; we continue to waste money on the military, and wonder why our quality of life is shrinking.

We keep getting hurt by the same mistakes,..... and to that broken pattern of thinking the Proverbs passage rubs salt into the wound.

Verse 22: “How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple”

OUCH,..... and it continues.

Verse 25: “....And because you have ignored all my counsel, I will laugh at your calamity and will mock you when panic strikes.

Of course, that passage is addressed to others.....

But,..... maybe all is not well. Maybe, life is not unfolding in a rejoicing or satisfying manner?

And, maybe,..... just maybe..... what Jesus said was / is true? Perhaps.....we better receive / heed his advice.

Nevertheless, when it comes to declarations, news or advice, always do the research – check the source.

Don’t trust news from the TV or the radio or the newspaper. Do some research and cross referencing.

In this case, we are using the Bible which has survived as a reliable source for over 2,000 years.

Moreover, before Jesus made this 3 step declaration, he clarified, in verses 27-29, that he was not just a rabbi or a prophet. He let it be known that he was the Messiah.

Jesus was speaking for and from God.

Here is Jesus' 3 step plan.

The three steps to be Christ like / to become a follower of Christ.

1. Deny self.
2. Take up your cross.
3. (Seems obvious,.....yet it is dynamic in its depth of meaning). Three is to follow Jesus.

Deny self: ummmm.... that sounds a bit uncomfortable. Let's move on to the next step.

Take up your cross???? This is the 21st century, so what does this mean? Crossbow? Cross stich? Motocross? Lacrosse? Cross eyed?

Well, it likely refers to the Roman device for execution,..... so.... what's used for execution these days: a syringe? A noose? A gun? Missiles from drone plans? Carrying those things would be weird.

Next.

Follow Jesus. Now, if Jesus was here, then that would be a lot easier, or would it be?

Okay, the point is we know this passage: deny self, take up cross and follow; however, if we do pause and contemplate it.....we'll find it is perplexing, even quite challenging.

And, that is why we have seminaries..... to figure this stuff out. :)

Speaking of seminary, a professor once told me, "Folks really don't care what Bonhoeffer thinks or Kant..... or what Karl Barth wrote. People want to know what you think."

Well, ... here is some self revelation, I find this command in Mark 8 really hard to assimilate / to totally embrace.

This mandate is tough!, andit is a command, not a suggestion. It's very hard to adhere to..... that's my opinion.

Now, a good charismatic preacher could work us all up to an emotional affirmation to this message, and we say, "Yes, yes this is great / we love it." Then, we'd go home.

I seem to be a "next day" preacher.

For all those desiring to rescue their lives / to resuscitate hope and full potential / to live in peace and contentment, Jesus said we must first, deny ourselves.

In the church tradition, Self Denial too often has been twisted into an art form. A practice that included numerous prohibitions, and having too much fun could render the charge of being a sinner.

Asceticism, self flagellation to simulate Jesus' pain and depravation for their own sake is NOT what Jesus is suggesting.

Following the path of an Olympic athlete maybe painful, isolating and limiting. Yet, pain, isolation and a concentrated focus, by themselves, will not make an Olympic athlete.

Neglecting, admonishing or rejecting self... is NOT the way of Jesus.

I think God wants us to enjoy life, and that's why we have this message from Jesus.

To enjoy life / to fully live we need to realize that we are not alone in this world. We are not God. Thus, we are not in charge. We must not live as if everything / all the burdens depend on us. Feeding our fears, our needs and accumulating mortal power is way off track.

We are part of something bigger. Not only are we in a community, but we are interdependent on each other, and God is the one who presides over the community.

Denying self is denying the burden, the shame and the pressure to be independent and the pressure to be someone we are not.

The stress to keep it all together, to impress others and to control our lives is killing us. We need to be saved from ourselves; We need to deny self.

Recently, Maclean's magazine reported on how many young adults are feeling overwhelmed, stressed out and depressed.

They apparently have unrealistic expectations on themselves with the driving need to be self satisfied, and failure at anything is not an option.

[Macleans 9/10/2012]

It seems, self has gotten way out of control.

Self focus is destructive, even for good reasons.

New research is revealing that children and young adults of middle or affluent income parents are too preoccupied with a world they think they can control. They are living in a false reality of entitlement and instant gratification. [Macleans 9/10/2012]

Computer games obey commands, and texting / instant messaging renders a sense of community..... in self absorbed isolation.

Rare are the moments of boredom that beckons outward searching creativity or the lessons from failure that cry out comfort from someone else.

In addition, the youth think that good behaviour / hard work must bring tangible or monetary rewards. More often than not, when asked to do something, the reply will be, "How much will I be paid" or "What will I get out of it?"

Perhaps, that attitude is much broader. Maybe these are traits of our culture.

Any more, decisions are made based on our economic possessions, instead of a higher ideal/ virtue, and we trust our own power instead of each other and in God.

We are not as powerful as we think, and functioning with that assumption is destructive.
Deny self..... is in essence, freeing self to trust in others and God. It is releasing our god crown.

Take up the cross.

In ancient Roman times, those who were condemned to death, by Roman rulers, had to endure the added insult and abuse of carrying their own cross to the place of public execution. ... sort of like digging one's own grave.

Note: this was NOT done voluntarily, and no one chooses to be executed.

Carrying the cross was Not a show of humble self sacrifice. It wasn't, "Oh look, I'll sacrifice doing "whatever" for the church / or for someone."

NOT at all.

In this context, Carrying the cross revealed that you went against the culture in power. You stood up against a bully.

You didn't hide or keep quiet.

You spoke out or acted out against an unjust political power.

You risked self for a greater good..... for God's way.

Carrying the cross means the willingness to not live in fear or intimidation. And, it is a declaration that followers of Christ will call out / confront those who act unjustly, regardless of the consequences.

The acceptance of carrying a cross is frightfully significant, and it also demands..... trust in God.

Follow me / following Jesus:

We believe that Jesus was the Messiah—God's presence on earth, and that Jesus taught and lived the will of God / God's way.

With that understood, we must admit that it is extremely problematic to attempt to follow someone who is no longer living among us.

We have God's Spirit, but we can not see God's spirit, and that makes following difficult.

How does one follow when one can not see?

A blind person, must carefully listen and/or hold on.

Following in that manner demands a great deal of trust.

Following Christ requires / necessitates constant prayer—listening.

And, we better hold on, too.

The church is the body of Christ; let us hold tightly to each other.

In addition, we have an idea where we are heading, so that helps.
Our journey will be much like where Jesus went—done the path of peace, justice, love and grace.

And now, as my professor suggested, my thoughts:

These three steps are very difficult, and I often stumble and fall or get sidetracked, from time to time,..... when I focus on what I'm doing.

I wander off when I start thinking about what I must do or shouldn't do.

I trip up when I worry about what others think about me, how they will judge me.
And, I really mess up, when I don't pause and listen enough to God..... and when I fail to rely on grace.

To live, really live, we must trust and be gracious:
Trust each other and be gracious to each other.

And, we must trust that God is taking care of God part in this journey of following Christ.

We are not alone, and there is grace.
Let us lift each other up, and continue the journey together.