

“Following Your Blocker”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- [Isaiah 55:3a, 6-9](#)
- [Mark 8:31-38](#)

You might remember comedian Yakov Smirnoff. When he first came to the United States from Ukraine he was not prepared for the incredible variety of instant products available in American grocery stores. He says, “On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk--you just add water, and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice--you just add water, and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, ‘What a country!’”²

Smirnoff is joking but we make similar assumptions about the Christian Life. So many people, including Christians, figure that by *claiming* to be a person of faith they can expect a quick fix to any problems they have in life. Our scripture lesson from the Gospel of Mark makes it clear that that’s not the way the Christian Life works. Claiming to be a follower of Jesus Christ does not automatically and instantly eliminate from your life the possibility of difficulty, doubt, hardship or suffering. Christianity is not an insurance policy against discomfort. In fact, deciding to follow Jesus probably brings about a certain amount of discomfort as we realize that our decision to try to live God’s way puts us at odds with the way many people approach life. We vow to care for others rather than caring only for ourselves.

Mark Twain is reported to have said, “Many people are bothered by those passages in Scripture which they cannot understand; but as for me, I always noticed that the passages in Scripture which trouble me most are those which I do understand.” This morning’s gospel story probably would have been one of the latter, because it puts its finger squarely on our most common sin, namely, telling God how to do God’s job.

Let me briefly recap the story. Jesus decides to lay it out for The Twelve. He tells them that he just knows that religious and political powers are going to press him because they’ll view his message as theologically revolutionary and seditious, undermining the government. In fact, Jesus says, he’s sure he’ll lose his life in the process. But then somewhat cryptically he adds that he’ll rise up again somehow three days later.

The disciples see the implication of what he says. After all, the disciples are following in his footsteps, learning at his side, preparing to go out on their own and

¹ Adapted from a sermon originally preached March 16, 2003

² <https://jokojokes.com/yakov-smirnoff-jokes.html>, accessed 8/22/2021

continue to spread his message. Consequently this destiny Jesus is predicting is not just for Jesus but for them, too!

They become pretty distressed by this picture. Peter ambles over to Jesus, puts his arm around his shoulder and steers him away from the crowd. “Jesus,” he says softly, “you know, that wasn’t too smart of you, getting the guys all worked up like that. They’ve not had a decent night’s rest in a week. Our last good meal was long before you fed the four thousand folks a few days ago. And now to say that the provincial police are going to be on our tails, and who knows what they’re capable of...? Jesus, just tell the guys that you were exaggerating, that they don’t have to worry, that things will all work out and no one’s going to get hurt –.”

Jesus stops Peter. “‘I don’t get it??’ Peter, you don’t get it. None of you do. Following God is rewarding, but it’s not easy. You have to give up thinking only about what you want. You have to sacrifice for the sake of others. And people don’t jump at the chance to sacrifice their own comfort for the sake of others. Peter, if you’re going to follow me, follow me – get behind me. Don’t say you’re going to follow me if you plan on telling me how to do what God’s asking me to do.”

Many people who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ are unwilling to pay the price, to give up any of their personal freedom, to give up leading for the sake of following Jesus Christ, serving his kingdom, his church, his purpose. They’re more like “cardboard cutout” Christians – at first glance appearing to be the real thing, but a closer look confirms that they’re not real – they have no depth, no substance.

They’re the ones who claim, “Yes, I want to belong to a lively church, but I don’t have time to participate in any of the mission projects or education programs or fellowship outings or even the worship services all that often.”

Cardboard cutout Christians are the ones who say, “I want to be part of a growing church, but personally it makes me uncomfortable asking my neighbors, my friends or family to join me for worship online or in church.”

Cardboard cutout Christians say, “I really believe in what this church is trying to do,” but candidly, the financial support they give to their church pales in comparison to what they spend on themselves for entertainment or fashion or vacations.

The Christian life seeks to engage the entirety of our lives. When we accept Jesus Christ as Lord, Master and Guide of our lives for God’s sake, we agree to surrender our self-centeredness for the “other-centeredness” that God desires. If we don’t surrender our self-centeredness, it’s as if we’re saying, “God, let me tell you what you really should be doing.”

...Which is what Peter was saying to Jesus: “Jesus, here’s how you should tell others about God in a way that keeps everyone happy and no one gets upset.” That’s

why Jesus held Peter at arm's length, and looking at the other disciples, as well as the crowd that followed them, said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You're still thinking with human desires in mind, not with God's will in mind. Get used to it, Peter – you're going to pay a price for obeying God."

Friends, there's a price to be paid. We pay a price because some people aren't willing to be our close friends when they know we love God. I guess they fear being held to God's standard because they're reluctant to give up things that they think give them satisfaction.

We pay the price for obeying God because we exclude certain choices from our plate of options:

- When we obey God we see war as an absolute last resort rather than an effective means to achieve political and economic goals.
- When we obey God we choose to show respect to all people, not simply those who are like us in thought or lifestyle or appearance.
- When we obey God we don't see weekly participation in services of worship as an onerous burden that keeps us from doing housework or sleeping in after late-night carousing. Instead, as obedient, dedicated servants of God we see weekly worship as a joyful calling that gives shape and energy to our Sunday and weekly routine.

Yes, when we choose to obey God by following Jesus, there's a price to be paid.

But the greatest price was paid by Jesus himself. He gave up personal comfort of decent food and clothing and a comfortable home and a predictable life, all in exchange for a life on the road with a hodge-podge group of slow-learning disciples. Jesus gave up a sense of autonomy, calling his own shots, so he could fulfill God's plan for his life instead. He gave up the desire to be liked by everyone so he could be true to the message of God that we all need to be saved from our self-centeredness so we can learn to care for one another instead.

Jesus told Peter to accept the reality that there was a price to pay for following him as he proclaimed God's kingdom, God's way. The way that Jesus leads us is not easy. It was not guaranteed to be free of stress, or tragedy, or hardship or suffering. But following Jesus is the right way. Following Jesus teaches us how to fashion our lives to serve God's will.

On this weekend when the Cleveland Browns kick off their new season let me describe it this way. Trying to go it alone through life is like a football running back trying to plunge into a defensive line without following his blockers. He's sure to be swallowed up in the ferocity that waits to engulf him. But if we follow Jesus Christ like

a running back following the lead of his blockers, even though we will experience the clutches and bumps that would harm us, we will be helped through the struggle and peril of daily life until we are led to our goal.

Becoming a Christian is no insurance policy against having to struggle with tough times, wrestle with difficult questions, endure situations that really test your patience, your endurance, your faith. Following Jesus Christ is a serious commitment.

But following Jesus also offers tremendous reward, as a story by preacher and scholar Fred Craddock points out. Craddock wrote that a wealthy man went to his priest with a check for fifty thousand dollars made out to the church. He handed the check to the priest and the priest looked at it. It was a lot of money! Then the priest handed it back and said, "Go cash it in. Cash it in for quarters or dollar bills, and spend fifty cents or a dollar at a time doing the Lord's work."

The man exclaimed, "But that will take the rest of my life!"

"That's right!" answered the priest. "That is the point!"

Following Jesus in obedience to God is not an easy calling. It's a life-long commitment. It's no guarantee against hardship, anxiety, suffering. But following Jesus has a reward of *infinite value* and *eternal consequence*. We help bring God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, for as Jesus promised, "whoever loses his life [i.e., gives up life] for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mk. 8:35b).