



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## Dying Must Be Learned

Mark 6.7-13; 8.31-38

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### *Hard Sayings*

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer reached the climax of his five chapter introduction to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount with these comments:

The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins: the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. *When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die* (my emphasis).<sup>1</sup>

Bonhoeffer wrote that in the context of a rebuke of the Lutheran Church of his native Germany, the state church that was co-opted by the Nazis. He charged the church with a longstanding practice of "cheap grace" (Bonhoeffer, 43). Based on Jesus' teaching, he urged "costly" grace as a correction to both license and legalism. Only in costly grace is true freedom in Christ found.

Because of our corrupted nature (see Eph 2.3), we recoil at Bonhoeffer's demanding stance. But read Jesus' words in Mark 8.31-38, which Bonhoeffer quoted at the beginning of the chapter from which the above comes, and it's obvious he was right. Jesus calls us to "absolute discipleship" (Bonhoeffer, 40). We can't get around that.

But, we can do better at understanding it as Jesus intended. Think about this. How could Jesus call every one to "deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8.34) and also say that the yoke we put on is easy and the burden we assume is light (Matt 11.30)? The resolution of that conundrum is found in remembering that we are called [1] to follow Jesus in a relationship, "not merely a certain code of conduct,"<sup>2</sup> and [2] we are called to a way of life that he demonstrates, teaches, and nurtures, not just commands.

### *Keep the Story in Mind*

I want to show that from a survey of the section between our texts and then focus on 6:7-13.

First, let's recall that Mark wrote to tell Jesus' story, how he brought God's ultimate reign into existence, and then called all people to submit to him as King. There is great value in mining the

individual parts of that story for the wonderful lessons each provides. But, doing that can lead us to focus on the trees and miss the forest.

I like Hans Bayer's summary of the purpose and theme of Mark: "*to present and defend Jesus' universal call to discipleship*" (Bayer, 1890; his emphasis). I like his elaboration even more.

Mark's central effort in presenting and supporting this call is *to narrate the identity and teaching of Jesus*. This fact implies that discipleship for Mark is essentially a relationship with Jesus, not merely following a certain code of conduct. Fellowship with Jesus marks the heart of the disciple's life, and this fellowship includes trusting him, confessing him, taking note of his conduct, following his teaching, and being shaped by a relationship to him. Discipleship also means being prepared to face the kind of rejection that Jesus faced (Bayer, 1890; his emphasis).

How does Mark develop the story to show these things about Jesus? Commentators typically outline the book by dividing it into two major sections. The first (1.16-8.26) focuses on episodes from his ministry up to the time of Peter's confession. It can be sub-divided into early works he did in Galilee (1.16-3.12), later works he did in Galilee (3.13-6.6), and works he did beyond Galilee (6.7-8.26) (Bayer, 1891-1892).

Because of the way it parallels the second sub-division, the account of the empowering of the twelve (6.7-13) is considered to be the beginning of the third sub-division. In 3.1-12, a public rejection of Jesus is followed by ministry to a variety of people after which Jesus empowers the apostles for a brief time of service (3.13-19). In 6.1-6, we see another public rejection followed by a commissioning of the twelve for a period of service (6.7-13).<sup>3</sup>

Between 6.7 and 8.26 is a series of episodes that demonstrate Jesus' values and priorities, showing that he is worthy of being followed and what it means to follow him. As we work through these sections, we also notice that the disciples, who often fail to understand and act as they should, are at the same time growing in their faith and involvement in Jesus' work.

- In 6.14-29, the martyrdom of John the Baptist, who had stood for right against the opulence and indulgence of the world—in the same way Jesus' disciples were being called to stand—shows the nature of kingdom values and priorities.
- In 6.30-56, three miracle stories show the nature and compassion of this One with authority who would be our King.
- In 7.1-23, the true nature of the moral and religious purity to which Jesus calls us is demonstrated.
- In 7.24-37, faith is found in the most unlikely of places—among the Gentiles and other outcasts—people whom Jesus welcomed.
- In 8.1-26, we see a King with spiritual concerns and values, and are reminded that coming to fully see him is a process of nurturing.

It is in light of these things that Jesus invited his disciples to evaluate him and Peter responded, "You are the Christ" (8.29).

### *Trained for Dying (6.7-13)*

Let's now consider the commissioning of the twelve in 6.7-13, 30.

1. They were called to do what Jesus was doing (6.7, 12-13).
2. They were called to act with the kind of absolute commitment Jesus had (6.8-11).

- They were to carry no provisions, nor take along even the extra garment commonly used to ward off the cold or be used as a bedroll (see Hurtado, 93).
  - They were to remain in the lodging that would be provided / offered.<sup>4</sup>
  - If rejected, they were to perform a symbolic act of warning and move on.<sup>5</sup>
3. They returned to Jesus for a post-mission briefing, then were led by him “to a desolate place [to] rest awhile” (6.30-31); in other words, they were nurtured in their relationship.
  4. Finally, don’t miss this: they had to actually go and do in order to be growing followers.

### *Let Us Learn to Die*

I’ve shared before—and do so again without apology—T. R. Glover’s analysis of how the Christians, generally seen to be “a ludicrous collection of trivial people”<sup>6</sup> who were sneered at by the movers and shakers of the ancient world, overcame the established gods and traditions of that world to the extent that those entities effectively ceased to exist. They were followers of the King who advanced his values without compromise. As Glover summarizes,

Here we touch what I think [is] one of the greatest wonders that history has to show. How did the Church do it? If I may invent or adapt three words, the Christian “out-lived” the pagan, “out-died” him, and “out-thought” him” (Glover, 200).

The same strategy is necessary for us to persevere in the spiritual war in which we remain engaged. Beyond that, Glover’s three words provide a useful outline for examining the teaching of the New Testament in order to learn how to faithfully follow Jesus. So, we’ll begin with some lessons from Mark on what Jesus shows and teaches about out-dying the world. Those lessons will stretch us, prod us, make us uncomfortable, and, if we are willing, change us.

Because that is so, we will very likely find them hard to hear. So, keep this in mind: Jesus didn’t just command us to die. He said, let me show, nurture, and teach you how to die. For it is in dying that you will live.

Let us, then, learn to die!

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller, with some revision by Irmgard Booth, rev. ed., (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1959; First Touchstone ed., 1995), 89.

<sup>2</sup> Hans F. Bayer, “Introduction to Mark,” *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1890.

<sup>3</sup> Larry Hurtado, *Mark*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1983, 1989), 93.

<sup>4</sup> Hurtado takes v. 10 to mean that “when provided with accommodation, they were to accept it and were not to move to better quarters if offered them by more prosperous members of the village. The instruction indicates that the disciples were not to be lured by what people could provide” (Hurtado, 93).

<sup>5</sup> Both the account of the twelve’s commission in Matthew 10.16-25 and the comparable commission of the seventy-two in Luke 10.10-16 elaborate on this rejection theme and include language to the effect that the disciples were to keep in mind that it was Jesus whom the people were rejecting, not the disciples. That calls for another level of trust in following him.

<sup>6</sup> T. R. Glover, *The Jesus of History* (New York: Association Press, 1917; New York Public Library reprint), 199.