

“The Cost of Discipleship”

Mark 13:1-13

March 11, 2007

We move closer and closer to Christ’s passion: his suffering, his crucifixion, and ultimate resurrection. Chapter 13 is known as the Olivet Discourse, based upon verse 3. It is the longest narrative teaching by Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. It forms the bridge between Jesus’ confrontation with the authorities and Jesus – and their rejection of him – and the passion narrative that begins in Chapter 14.

A quick review: Chapters 1-8 of Mark raised the question, “Who is this?” It culminates in Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ.” Mark 9-12 turns attention to Jesus’ rejection by the chief priests, scribes, and the elders in Jerusalem. Chapter 13 is the Olivet Discourse. Chapters 14-15 describe Jesus’ passion: his betrayal, suffering, crucifixion. This will culminate in the Roman centurion declaring (on behalf of Gentiles), “Truly this man was the Son of God.” Then, Chapter 16 tells of Jesus’ victory over death, his resurrection.

Mark 13:1-13.

Judgment on the Temple

Some background might be helpful in understanding what Mark is describing.

Mark makes the point that Jesus “came out of the temple” and then “sitting down on the Mount of Olives.” The disciples take this opportunity to ask Jesus about the judgment on the Temple; they seem to have in mind a series of movements prophesied in Ezekiel 9, 10, and 11. In Ezekiel, God enters judgment against Jerusalem for its faithlessness, and the “glory of the LORD” moved from its original location to the threshold of the house (9:3), then moved to the east gate of the house of the LORD (10:19); and finally to the mountain east of the city; the Mount of Olives (11:23). In between each of these movements, the prophet declared God’s judgment upon Jerusalem for its rejection of God and God’s covenant.¹ The disciples are wondering what Jesus’ declaration of the destruction of the Temple meant; whether it meant that the prophesied “end of days” and “day of wrath” was imminent. Without answering the question of timing, Jesus makes it clear that the Temple and Temple authorities would not continue.

Second, the prediction must have seemed wild at the time. The buildings were massive. They were constructed by the Herodians (the Herod family). The stones were massive and the facility was considered an architectural marvel. As much as the Herodians were despised by the rabbis, they did acknowledge how great was the construction, “He who has not seen Jerusalem in her splendor has never seen a desirable city in his life. He who has not seen the Temple in its full construction has never seen a glorious building in his life.”² To predict the total destruction of the Temple seemed to be ludicrous given its massive proportions.

¹ Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Commentary, p. 454.

² *Ibid.* p. 451.

Third, as incredible as it was, the Jesus' prophecies about the destruction of the Temple came true. For the believers in Rome to whom Mark was writing, they would have heard the news about the sacking of Jerusalem. Because Jesus declared it ahead of time, the message was clear: just as God raised up Pharaoh in order to demonstrate his might, so also Rome worked into the hands of God.

It is important to know that Jesus' prophecies came true; it gives us confidence to know that the unrealized promises – the second coming and the hope of the resurrection – will be fulfilled in God's time, too. Remember some of the other prophecies:

- Jesus told Simon and Andrew they would become “fishers of men” (1:17);
- Jesus told them about finding a colt on Palm Sunday (11:2-6); and,
- Jesus told them multiple times about his death and resurrection (8:31; 9:9;12; 10:32-34).

Within the gospel, several other predictions and their fulfillment are yet to come:

- The preparations for the upper room/Last Supper (14:13-15);
- Betrayal by one of the twelve (14);
- Desertion by the disciples; (14); and,
- Peter's denial. (14)

Mark's readers in Rome would know that all these came true as well. The point here is that Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy, he reveals God's plan before it happens, and what Jesus reveals comes true.

The remainder of the Olivet Discourse that we read this morning warns disciples about the tribulations they would face. Jesus takes the original question about how judgment was going to be entered against the Temple and transforms it to a discussion of the coming of the Son of Man. We are not going to cover all of it today; instead, I want to pick up several things between verses 9 through 13.

The Attacks Are Real.

What becomes clear very quickly in Jesus' teaching here is that there will be conflict and controversy regarding the faith. First are the imposters and those who use current events to claim to be the Christ. Second are the challenges that believers will face; challenges that will be difficult and, sometimes, even deadly. The ultimate point is there is a spiritual battle taking place. Jesus is the victor, but the battle rages on for now. Jesus' entire point here is to remain faithful and watchful – knowing that the suffering and the trials we endure bear witness to a reality far beyond this world's power.

Many times it does not seem like we are in a battle. We can come to church on Sunday mornings, the songs are bright and cheery as we praise God, the service does not go on too long, we get to greet friends and, perhaps, meet some new people, and it is all good.

10:00 I know the bulletin inserts for songs can become cumbersome; however, the blue hymnal intentionally left out militaristic-sounding hymns such as “Onward Christian Soldiers.” They were considered too aggressive, too confrontational, too controversial.

Yet if we look outside the grounds of this congregation and into our community, we do not have to go far to see where the truth of Jesus’ words about spiritual warfare are taking place all around. Imposters abound, attacks are real, and martyrs are bearing witness all the time.

In Rancho Santa Fe on March 19, 1997, thirty-nine members of the Heaven’s Gate group committed suicide believing that their leader, Marshall Applewhite, was the Son of God. He was a continuation of Jesus, brought back to complete the work of the ushering in the Kingdom of God. Thirty nine people were deceived and voluntarily committed suicide based on this man’s claim that “I am he.” Jonestown, Waco Texas, how many others in our own country?

Looking more worldly, Christians are being killed because they are Christians. In Pakistan and India, and Africa, missionaries risk their lives to share the good news of Jesus Christ. There was the poignant example a few years ago where two young women in Afghanistan were charged with promoting Christianity; they faced a potential death sentence if the international community had not intervened. Here’s how the Taliban responded to the situation: The Taliban Deputy Minister for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice told Reuters: "We have our concerns too . . . these people strongly insulted our religion and traditions. The concern shown by foreigners is not justified." The gospel message is an insult.

The persecution is real, but when their stories are told, we marvel at their faith and are encouraged. We need encouragement these days because the efforts to discourage are very powerful.

The gospel is described as *bad* news for many Americans, with regard to sexuality. From Friday’s *Union Tribune*, the headline was “**Anti-Gay** Ministry To Gather in San Francisco, Testing Tolerance” (emphasis added). Note how Christian ministry is identified as “anti-gay” – and how the gospel “tests” the limits of “tolerance.”

A two-day event called BattleCry starts today at AT&T Park, the downtown baseball stadium. Organizers say the gathering, which includes performances by Christian rock bands and inspirational speakers, is a way for young Christians to speak out against what they view as destructive cultural elements, including sex on television, obscene music and violent video games. The event comes to San Diego in April.

“This culture is really hammering this generation,” said Ron Luce, founder of Teen Mania, the Texas-based ministry that sponsors and promotes BattleCry. “Whether it’s being accosted with horrible, sexually suggestive messages or the garbage in the video game world, corporate America is raping and pillaging American teenagers. And everyone is just walking by.”

But several prominent San Francisco political leaders say Luce’s group is the one doing the damage, using its young members as a conduit for a message of intolerance.

“They are being fed, spoon-fed, hate,” said Tom Ammiano, a member of the city's Board of Supervisors who is gay. “And it is incumbent on any group receiving that hate . . . to speak out.”

Aaron Peskin, the board's president, called BattleCry “reckless and irresponsible.” (http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20070309/news_1n9battlecry.html)

Scripture's declaration of the sinfulness of homosexual behavior is now “reckless and irresponsible.” Standing with Christ and proclaiming a message of hope for sinners is now equated with “hate” speech. “You will be hated by all because of my name.”

Simply leaving others alone is not an option. For years, Christians have believed the lie: if they kept their faith to themselves, then everything would be fine. No one would be offended, no one would be critical, no one would have anything against us. Not true.

A Christian leader -- we'll call him Steve --as traveling recently by plane. He noticed that the man sitting two seats over was thumbing through some little cards and moving his lips. The man looked professorial with his goatee and graying brown hair, and Steve placed him at fifty-something. Guessing the man was a fellow-believer, Steve leaned over to engage him in conversation. "Looks to me like you're memorizing something," he said. "No, actually I was praying," the man said. Steve introduced himself. "I believe in prayer too," he said. "Well, I have a specific assignment," said the man with the goatee. "What's that?" Steve asked. "I'm praying for the downfall of Christian pastors." "I would certainly fit into that category," Steve said. "Is my name on the list?" "Not on my list," the man replied.³

My point here is not to scare you; it is to make you aware. These things are going on – this spiritual battle is real. Jesus makes it clear that the gospel will be controversial, it will draw active opposition, and it will be costly. We should expect nothing less than the reaction Jesus himself received. Whether we are called to be martyrs – which, by the way, means “witnesses” – at the cost of our lives or simply to bear witness with our lives, we should not expect that the road will be smooth.

The Battle is For Jesus To Wage

Fortunately, we are not left by ourselves. Jesus tells us that these trials will be “for his names’ sake” – in other words, that the trials we face for our faith are to bear witness to God’s grace and salvation. Success is measured by faithfulness, not by military victory.

"Do you believe in God?" they asked Cassie Bernall. [The killers at Columbine High School] knew full well she did. The girl who had once indulged in the occult (as the killers now did) had moved into a realm of peace when she learned to center her heart on Christ. She became a church-goer and a worker among those who needed Christ. Often she brought her Bible to school.

³ *Common Ground*, Vol. 10 No. 7.

She was reading it in the library when the killer pointed his gun at her. Did she believe in God? "Yes, I believe in God," she replied.

"Why?" asked the boy in the dark trenchcoat. Without waiting for an answer, he pulled the trigger.

Cassie Bernall was not alone – she knew a reality bigger than a bullet, bigger than fear, bigger than evil. The end of her life was tragic, and yet victorious. We marvel at her faithfulness. Her story is told: she is remembered as a hero, a life celebrated.

Make no mistake: evil exists. Evil exists but has no power to withstand the power of the gospel.

Cassie Bernall knew what to say in her moment of trial. In my own strength, I do not know that I would know what to say. I am in good company here: remember Moses' objections when God spoke to him from the burning bush? But here is where Jesus' words are a great comfort, "Do not worry beforehand about what you will say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you who are speaking but the Holy Spirit."

The battle is not ours to wage alone. Friends, here is where the disciplines of faith are so important: reading Scripture, regular personal prayer, regular prayers together as a community of faith, evangelism, mission, and discipleship. These are so important so that if – and when – we have the occasions in which we are called to bear witness, we might recognize and be comforted with the "peace that passes all understanding" because we know that the Holy Spirit is testifying through us. What a privilege, what a blessing, what a comfort it is to know that we are not left to fight these battles on our own.

Each year on Reformation Sunday, we sing "A Mighty Fortress." Martin Luther was not shy about declaring the warfare that takes place:

A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing:
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great, and, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing:
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He;
Lord Sabaoth, His Name, from age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.

And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us:
The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.

That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him Who with us sideth:
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.

Friends, as we walk with Jesus these final steps toward the cross, we do so in the confidence of the victory Jesus already has won. We pray for strength, we pray for courage, we pray for obedience, we pray for grace, we pray for one another.

Conclusion:

The disciples marveled at the big stone buildings. Jesus said, “no.”

The temples we see are not the temples of power. Wall Street, Capitol Hill, the White House, movie studios, and any other creation have no eternal power. The Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the only real power – but believers need to understand that there are forces that will seek to destroy and deceive. The Olivet Discourse begins and ends with the same word: Watch. Watch.

That's scary, but it is nothing to fear. We know the end of the story; we know that Jesus is the victor. When we walk out of this sanctuary, when we walk off of this campus, we are Christ's disciples, Christ's ambassadors, Christ's soldiers in this battle. We engage in the battle for Christ's name and for Christ's glory. And we have the peace of knowing that we are not alone; Jesus has promised that we need not worry, that we are not alone in the time of trial.

“When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak but the Holy Spirit.”

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

8:45 prayer & offering

10:00 offering

Breakpoint: prayer