

## Mark 8:31-38 “The Temptation of the Easy Path”

We're in our second week of Lent still working on the question, “What is Lent all about?” And here we are. In our Church 101 Class, we've been talking about how there's always been tension in the church because Jesus' followers over the last 2,000 years have had a hard time agreeing on their understanding of Jesus' ministry, mission, divinity, priorities, teachings ... you name it. And what's funny is that part of Jesus' mission was to help folks work through their misunderstandings about God! The reality is, none of us has it all worked out. We're all on a journey of discovery together. We're all spending some time in the wilderness, as our theme suggests. We started out the season by talking about the temptations Jesus faced not only during his 40 days in the wilderness, but all throughout his ministry and how those temptations find their way into our lives too as we seek to follow Jesus' path.

But before we get into our gospel lesson, I want to go back to this passage from Romans that we started out with today. In this letter that Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, he talks about how Abraham, the father of God's people ... the forebear of three of the world's largest religions ... is a prime example of how we all became the beneficiaries of God's promises. God made Abraham the father of *many* nations. Not just the “nation” of Israel, but many-many more. Paul is writing about how Abraham and his descendants came to be the insiders to that promise. It has nothing to do with belonging to a particular nation. It has nothing to do about living in some holy land. It has nothing to do with following a particular religious code. This promise is for everyone and *reaches* everyone who puts their trust in God and in what God promises. And we even have to be careful about that too, because there's no requirements for having a certain *level* of trust or faith that you have to measure up to. It's just that if you don't trust the gift giver, you probably aren't going to trust the gift enough to accept it. So one has to trust the gift giver to be able to receive the gift.

You've got to understand how radical this is. What Paul is saying is that trust and faith are much more important than law-keeping. Remember, Paul and the vast majority of the early followers of Jesus came out of a tradition that said God favored those who kept the law and whose behavior conformed to a particular set of religious codes. This was scandalous and caused a ruckus among the early churches. Some folks were saying, "What do you mean faith is more important than law?! That's how we know you have faith! You keep the Law!" Sadly enough, this understanding has been passed down from generation to generation and is alive and well today! Now if you ask, most Christians will say, "Sure, salvation comes through grace by faith alone!" But most of us also subscribe to certain ... *conditions* that we feel *sure* must be part of the whole package. "Sure, salvation is by grace through faith alone ... *except*." My gosh, that word "except" has been the biggest *nuisance* in the history of God's people since *day one*! "Salvation comes by grace to those who have faith alone ... *except* for anyone who even *looks* like they have anything to do with whatever current hot-potato moral evil is in vogue" You have to stop violating this law that we hold sacred if you're going to be among the chosen. But Paul says, "There is now no law, so neither is there any violation." The people of that time had imagined that God was going to wipe out the violators, but instead God wiped out the laws so that people *could no longer be seen as violators*. See?! It was scandalous then, and it's scandalous today!

Cut to our gospel reading – Something similar is going on over here. Jesus is telling his disciples that his path will lead to rejection, suffering and death. Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him for saying this. "What are you talking about? This isn't the right path for you! No one is going to follow you if it leads to suffering and death!" I love Jesus' response. He calls Peter a "satan." "Get behind me, you satan." Remember last week we talked about how "satan" isn't a name so much as it is a title. Satan means "accuser" or "tempter." Do you know what the prosecutor in a Jewish court was called? "The satan." The satan's job is to make a case for why you should be punished. Okay then, if the satan is the prosecutor, what's the defense counsel called? That's

the “paraclete.” Guess what word Jesus used to describe the work of the Holy Spirit? “Paraclete!” See how this relates to what Paul was saying about the law? Because if the satan is trying to prove you guilty under the law and have you condemned and punished, the Holy Spirit is there to stand up in your defense! The Holy Spirit is there to argue that now there is *no* law on which God judges us, and so there is therefore no violation of the law that can be prosecuted. “I call for an acquittal your honor!”

Okay, Jesse, this has been fun bouncing back and forth between these two scriptures, but would you get to the point please?! What does all this “court of law stuff” have to do with Peter? And what does it have to do with *our* journey of faith and all these things about how Jesus tells us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him? Okay. Remember one of the temptations that Jesus faced out in the wilderness was to take the easy path. Go ahead and use your fame, power, glory, influence ... whatever you can ... to accomplish your mission. And remember, Matthew and Luke’s gospels were pretty specific about naming those temptations, but Mark didn’t spend a lot of time on what went on between Jesus and Satan during his time in the wilderness. That doesn’t mean Mark didn’t mention them. They were just spread out all over his gospel. This is one of those places. Peter tries to get Jesus to take the easy path, and Jesus calls him a satan. “Do not tempt me to take the easy path. This path that *I* have chosen (and *you* by agreeing to follow me have chosen as well) will not end the way you think. Or want.” Jesus will not take the easy way out, and Jesus does not want us to take the easy way out either.

So here’s how I see this tying into our scripture from Romans and how I see it applying to our journey of faith. Being a “letter-of-the-law” kind of person is quite frankly the easiest path to follow. Legalism is actually the easiest way to deal with anything. You don’t have to think. You don’t have to be bothered with considering all of the implications and nuances about anything or anyone. You don’t have to be bothered with asking questions or taking time to look any given situation from all

angles. You just need to “trust and obey ‘cause there’s no other way!” The harder path is grace. Some might say, “Oh, you are *so* full of it preacher. It’s easy just to go all willy-nilly and let everything slide. It’s *tough* to follow the law to a T! It’s difficult to just write someone off because they don’t live up to our expectations or fit into our molds. Terribly difficult! No, the easier path is to stop and weigh things out ... it’s easy to take time to get to know people and their circumstances and figure out why they are who they are. It’s a cinch to discover the image of God in another human being and how that person is as worthy of grace as I am because I’m not perfect either. Yeah, that’s easy!” Really?! Because to me it seems like the smooth and easy road is to just say, “Nope. The law says it, I believe it, that’s that. To hell with this person. Literally.” Doing all that other stuff sounds like hard work! It seems like a *much* more difficult path! And believe me, I’m just as guilty as anyone else when it comes to taking the easy way out. I don’t particularly want to do all of that messy, uncomfortable work. That’s not worth my time or effort. I’ve got better things to do and I’d much rather take the easy road.

Peter wanted that easy road and he was sure he could convince Jesus that this road would be better too. But Jesus would have nothing to do with Peter’s plan. “That is not my path, and neither is it yours if you really want to follow me.” So what *does* it mean to follow Jesus? Jesus lays it out for Peter and all his disciples -- “Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.” If you cling to your life, you’ll lose it. If you let it go, however, you will find abundant life. Can you see how in light of what he has just been saying to Peter what this means for us? This means we need to stop trying to be the winners in the big “I’m more holy than you” game. We have *got* to give up trying to show the world what a great, desirable institution for good successful religious people we are! We have got to give up siding with the prosecutor ... the satan! And you know what, by refusing to side with the satan, *we* risk becoming the accused. *We* risk being rejected. *We* risk being one of the suffering ones who are condemned to carry a cross to a place of shame and death.

Geez, preacher, do you have to sugar coat this so much? No, listen. It is what it is. If, like Jesus, you say no to identifying with the super-righteous and go about your life condemning others – you will very likely be regarded by the righteous as going soft on sin. You may end up being accused of giving comfort to whoever the current “enemy of the state” happens to be. You might even be accused of being un-Christian. Or *maybe* even un-American. You may find that people who used to welcome you as “one of us” will start looking at you with suspicion or keeping their distance. By saying, “no” to the accuser ... the tempter ... the satan ... the one who wants you to take the easy path, you will have taken sides with the one who knew his journey into Jerusalem would lead to his rejection, suffering, and death on the cross. And if you take sides with him, and continue to follow him on into that valley of death, then you may indeed find yourself as insiders to God’s promises. And you may find yourselves emerging from that valley of death into the promised land of resurrection life and the wide open spaces of God’s limitless love. That’s what Lent is about.