

# Trying is Not an Option

Mark 8.27-38

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St Mark's Lutheran Church

What are your non-negotiables? Those things, people, or values, to which you are uncompromising in your commitment? Each of us has our own personal list of our non-negotiables. Whether our non-negotiables are positive or negative, most of our lists are quite small. In today's text Jesus provides us with his list of non-negotiables necessary for being a follower of Christ and a bearer of the Gospel. They are: denying oneself and taking up one's cross. Today's sermon, entitled "Trying Is Not An Option," will focus on these two non-negotiables.

Though this sermon title includes the word "trying" you will not find this word anywhere in the ancient Greek or Hebrew languages. "Try" and "trying" simply do not exist. They are not words. And if language, if words and the absence of words, express our realities, then this means the concept of "try" did not exist in the ancient middle east. This is important for us to consider as we look at today's text. Jesus is not telling people what they must **try** to do in order to be followers of Christ. Trying is not an option. Jesus is telling people what they **must** do in order to be followers of Christ.

To be clear, Jesus doesn't say that all people must be his followers. He gives people the choice. He calls the disciples and crowd together and he says to all of them, "If you **want** to be my follower then here is what you **must** do." And he lays out a short list for those who choose to live their lives based in Christ.

Non-negotiable 1: Deny oneself. What does this mean? Does this mean to deny our wants? Does this mean to deny our needs? According to the Greek word for deny "apar-neh-om-ahēe," the answer to both questions is "yes." To deny oneself means to surrender oneself, to declare Uncle to the rat race of our not-yet attained wants and needs. And to instead declare allegiance to the needs and wants of

Christ. Denying our wants is one thing. But denying our needs? Would Jesus really expect this of his followers? Yes, he would. He does. Just a few chapters earlier Jesus sent his disciples out into the mission field with almost nothing. They were permitted to take with them a walking stick, pair of sandals, and only the clothing on their bodies. Nothing else. They were denying, surrendering all of their wants and needs in order to have life in Christ, for sake of the Gospel.

Non-negotiable 2: Take Up One's Cross. Without a doubt, this concept shocked the disciples and everyone else. The cross was an instrument of torture and death. Crosses with dead bodies punctuated the Greek landscape like wind farms punctuate Southern Wisconsin. The man-made, ever growing constellation of crosses were a constant, oppressive, terror-inducing reminder of what would become of someone who got out of line, who dared to shake up the status quo. And Jesus was telling people that to be his follower they must carry their own cross. They **must** die. This is a non-negotiable.

These two instructions are related. They are inseparable, in fact. Denying oneself of one's wants and needs is a form of death. The death of fear, doubt, and distrust. And the cross Christ requires his followers to carry is the tool for each of these deaths. Because the cross is not only an instrument of death but it is also the gateway to new life and in new life there is true freedom.

If the idea of denying one's needs seems irresponsible to us, it is only because we do not trust God.

Because we doubt that God will take care of us.

Have you ever lost your job or your home?

Have you ever hit rock bottom?

When you did, did your situation become permanent or was it temporary?

And while you were laid low, did God provide for your needs?

If I were to ask you right now, could you stand up and tell a story about how God turned your test into a testimony? I suspect most of us would be able to say yes.

Now, in today's text Jesus is not talking about **losing** a job or a home. Nor is he suggesting you give it all up just for the heck of it. Jesus is talking about intentionally choosing to walk away from the rat-race of life for the sake of new and different life in Christ and the sharing of the Gospel. To do this, we **must** trust God. If God provides for us when things just fall apart, when we lose control, why wouldn't we trust God to provide for us and our needs when we **choose** to give up control in order to be closer to God? Why would we doubt the ability of the Creator of the Universe to provide for us and our, by comparison, very small needs? Why would we doubt the willingness of the one who died on the cross to care for our needs? Our doubt is a symptom of our distrust.

To follow Christ means trusting ourselves and our lives entirely to God. This sort of radical trust is not something we can "try" to do. "Trying" does not lead to trust. In this case, "trying" is just another word for not committing. "Trying" allows us to tiptoe on the edge of doubt. For followers of Christ and bearers of the Gospel, "trying is not an option." Because "trying" does not lead to death. "Trying" does not offer us a test. Without a test there is no testimony. And without death there is no resurrection.

Once we have died to our fear, doubt, and distrust we are resurrected to life in Christ. And it is in our resurrection stories, our testimonies, that we are best equipped to bear witness to the power of God, the freedom of life in Christ, and the transformative message of the Gospel.

When Jesus asked the disciples who they believed him to be, Peter said, "You are the messiah" and yet it wasn't until after the resurrection, until Peter had come through his own test and to the point of testimony, that Peter understood what it meant for Jesus to be the messiah. Jesus, the human manifestation of God, is called by many names. Prince of Peace, Emmanuel – God with Us, Lord, and Messiah. When we surrender ourselves and allow ourselves to rely completely on God, it is then that the names of God begin to make sense of us.

When we experience a peace which defies explanation, then we understand the name Prince of Peace.

When we feel comforted in our loneliness, then we understand the name Emmanuel - God with us.

When we submit to God's will and are taken care of, then we understand the name Lord.

When we've come through darkness and into light, then we understand the name Messiah.

When we intentionally surrender ourselves to God, die to our distrust, then we become followers of Christ.

And when we emerge with a testimony, then we are prepared to be bearers of the Gospel.

For through our test and our testimony we receive the courage and strength and faith necessary to live out the Gospel, God's manifesto to the world: The way to peace is through justice.

But as the Prince of Peace has shown us, the road to justice is not always peaceful.

As Emmanuel has shown, the road to justice is filled with seemingly Godless places and spaces.

As the Lord has shown us, the road to justice does not always course through the Kingdom of God.

As the Messiah has shown us, the road to justice is filled with many dark nights with only flickers of light.

And as Jesus has shown us, the road to justice is filled with injustice and requires a much larger cross – a cross that all of Christ's followers must carry with him.

But in order to carry this cross, one needs to have courage, faith and trust – the products of surrendering oneself to God and having lived through a test into a testimony.

The invitation to follow is open to all of us. And it is an on-going invitation. The Greek verb tense that Jesus uses when he speaks of following, in both wanting to follow and acting out the following, imply an on-going process, with on-going opportunities. Every moment of every day is an opportunity to either choose to follow Christ or to recommit to this choice. Jesus' invitation to us to become his followers is open and unending. So, while in the past we have had the desire but not the courage to follow; and in the future we may find ourselves once again wanting but not doing; and in this moment today, we may be wishing but paralyzed with fear, we are fortunate for the invitation to follow, to choose a life in Christ, is always there.

Some of us will accept this invitation and “choose to follow Christ and begin again.” Most of us will spend far too long hovering in the “betwixt and between,” in a state of “trying” without making any progress. Regardless of where we are in our process, we can find comfort in knowing that our inability to claim Christ’s invitation does not negate Christ’s claiming of us. Though not all of us will always choose Christ or choose to carry Christ’s cross with him, Christ, in his own cross, has already chosen all of us for always.

The trouble with Christ’s invitation is that it comes via free-will and the irony of free-will is that the freedom it purports to offer is actually and most profoundly realized when we give up free-will and surrender ourselves to God.

And not only surrender ourselves to God but make the needs and wants of Christ our non-negotiables. Make the cross of Christ our non-negotiable. Make the Gospel our non-negotiable.

When we no longer try, but to instead commit to, choose to, without fail, uphold in deed and word those things which are true to the Gospel – that is our freedom. This may feel scary, for we want to have control over how things work out and how things go. But this is the point. Our freedom is found in committing ourselves, choosing to trust God’s will over our will. Committing to, choosing to believe that what God will do for and through us is better than that which we could manage on our own.

Committing to, choosing to take up our crosses and die to our fear, our doubt and our distrust. And then be raised into the freedom of new life.

**Amen.**