

Today's gospel has more than one memorable verse. More than one piece of this passage has been quoted, repeated and woven into our cultural understanding of Jesus, Christianity and the church. The phrases are a part of how we may define ourselves and most certainly have had an impact on the way our culture views us as Christians. And curiously, two of these verses are the titles of American rock songs.

The first phrase is Jesus' tough words to Peter. Whether it was said in anger, or exhaustion or frustration – it must have been hard to hear Jesus say, "Get behind me Satan!" Peter had scolded Jesus for saying that rather than being a triumphant Messiah King – Jesus would suffer and die on the cross. And for telling Jesus off - Peter gets it right back and then some.

People use the phrase all the time when someone tempts them to try a fattening dessert or buy some pricey thing that they know isn't really in their budget. It's the title to a "White Stripes" recording, but it's also an old Ella Fitzgerald tune, which includes these words.

Get thee behind me, Satan. I mustn't be kissed

But the moon is low, and I may let go - Get thee behind me.

Ella's words are a response to temptation, but Jesus' words aren't about being tempted. Instead they are a way of marking the distance between God's view of what needs to happen and what a human being like Peter might come up with. It's Jesus way of telling Peter in no uncertain terms, that he was wrong about what it meant to say that Jesus was the Messiah. He would be king, but he wouldn't be a king the way that Peter and others might have imagined it. Jesus pulls Peter up short so that he can clearly understand what it is to be a disciple.

The only one tempted in this story – is Peter.

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The second phrase comes when Jesus is explaining discipleship. He calls Peter and the others to know that following him means that they will have to take up their own cross. They will have to bear their cross just as he would carry his.

When the Allman Brothers band recorded "My Cross to Bear" I don't think they totally understood what Jesus was talking about. And the sad truth is that a lot of people miss the point on this one.

If you search out the phrase "cross to bear" you'll come up with stuff like this. A cross to bear is

"A difficult responsibility or burden that someone must handle on their own." For example,

When Nancy's husband passed away, she was left with quite a cross to bear having to raise four children on her own.

A second example said,

"if you have a cross to bear, you have a responsibility or a difficult situation which you must tolerate. Success has brought astonishing levels of media attention and that is a cross the young player has to bear.

The cross is seen as a burden or trial one must put up with, as in *Alzheimer's is a cross to bear for the whole family*, or in a lighter vein, *Mowing that huge lawn once a week is Brad's cross to bear.*

People use the phrase all the time. Sometimes kiddingly and sometimes quite seriously, but there is something about cross bearing that is frequently forgotten. Jesus isn't talking about something that we have no control over. It isn't something that we tolerate. It isn't a chore or a burden that has been foisted on us. It isn't a consequence of some other trouble. Jesus said, that following him meant that we need to take up our cross. We **pick up** the cross. We don't catch it on the fly. It doesn't randomly fall on our shoulders. It isn't a surprise or an accident. Cross bearing is a decision. It's a choice that we make.

Every time we choose to do something for God or for God's children – that's cross bearing.

David Lose wrote, "We've been trained somewhere to think that when Jesus talks about "taking up the cross" he's referring to some major spiritual travail. Or at least significant suffering or sacrifice, preferably on behalf of the faith. But what if it's simpler than that? What if it's more ordinary? Here's what Alan Culpepper says:

"The language of cross bearing has been corrupted by overuse. Bearing a cross has nothing to do with chronic illness, painful physical conditions, or trying family relationships. It is instead what we do voluntarily as a consequence of our commitment to Jesus Christ."

If that's true - and I think that it is – then we are invited to take up our cross and in doing so - our lives are shaped by our commitment to Jesus. And it can happen anywhere at any time by doing just about anything.

When you give your time - your energy - or your talents to God - you are bearing your cross. When you let your life be shaped by your faith and your commitment to Christ, that's bearing your cross. There are all kinds of things that we might do every day - at home or at work or school that matter to God and make a difference to the world.

It's in the kindnesses that you share – not randomly – but intentionally. Christianity isn't about random acts of kindness. It's about choosing to do something for someone else. It's in the words that you choose and the ones you leave behind. James is right - the tongue is a dangerous tool and too often we are reckless with the words that we use. We set fires that can be so hard to put out.

It's in the way you respond to the challenges of life.

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Now, maybe that sounds too easy or gentle. After all, Jesus does go on to talk about losing our lives *for his sake, and for the sake of the gospel*. But, taking up our cross doesn't come without consequences. Cross bearing means being willing to be faithful even if it's difficult. It means putting Jesus' priorities and purposes ahead of our own comfort or security. It means being willing to give of our selves so that others might experience God's love and care and protection. And that can be hard to do. Our instinct is to protect what's ours. Looking out for ourselves is something we're really good at.

Which makes us no different than the disciples. They tried to save their lives. James and John wanted Jesus to promise them the best seats when he hit the big time. They wanted to be his right hand men when they got to heaven. They weren't thinking about the cross. And Peter who got the answers right a lot of the time, not only ran away from Jesus, he lied about even knowing him.

We might wish that things had happened differently, that Jesus had followed a more dignified, Messiah-like path, and that his disciples had been more heroic, but that is not the story we have before us. What we have before us is a story about a Messiah being tortured and killed by the powerful and abandoned by his closest companions. And yet Mark has announced from the beginning that this story is good news. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ. And yet, all through Mark, Jesus is telling people to keep his true identity a secret. But we don't need to worry.

Did you ever read "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy?" In the story there is a book called "The Hitchhiker's Guide" and printed in big bold letters on the outside of the book are the words, "Don't Panic." I sometimes think they should do that with the Bible. Put "Don't Panic" right on the cover, because we need to read and remember the whole story. The whole story tells us that Jesus was faithful all the way to the cross and beyond, even though his friends were faithless in every version of the story.

We know that God was faithful and beyond, raising Jesus to new life. And because of this, we know that God's life-giving power is far stronger than the worst thing humans might choose to do.

Because of this, we know that there is no sin or failure so great that it can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ.

Jesus gives us hope for the future, but in this text, we are called upon to follow him not just for the future, but in this life. Not only that, he promised that following him now, means a life more abundant. Or as one pastor said, “we follow Jesus not just to be saved or to go to heaven; we follow Jesus because it’s worth it.”

I’ve thought about this a lot and if when it’s all said and done, I find out I was wrong. I’ll be okay with that. If I find out that this whole story about Jesus is just fiction and that everything my parents told me about God was just made up and there is no heavenly kingdom of God- there is no after life- that’s okay. I still want to have lived my life this way. Being a Christian isn’t just about what happens when we die, it’s about the way we live our lives now. It’s about all the choices we make every single day. Will we serve God or not? Will we take up our cross and follow Jesus?