

**JESUS' TEACHING ABOUT DISCIPLESHIP IN THE "WAY SECTION"
IN MARK 8:22-10:52:
A CHALLENGE AND ENCOURAGEMENT FOR JESUS' FOLLOWERS**

**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Licentiate in Sacred
Theology (S.T.L.) of the School of Theology and Ministry, Boston College**

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**Boston College
April 2021**

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INTRODUCTION

Thesis Statement

Mark uses the “way section” to emphasize Jesus' teaching about the way of discipleship in light of his self-revelation as the suffering Messiah. This way has been both a challenge and an encouragement for disciples, not only in Jesus' time but also for the contemporary Church, especially in Vietnam.

Purpose of the Thesis

Discipleship is an important theme in Mark's Gospel. It is also a central issue in every age, including within our contemporary Church. Jesus' teaching about the way of discipleship in the Gospel of Mark confronts us with a rich reflection on and source for what is entailed in discipleship. Mark has indicated the importance of this theme by locating it in the very central section of his Gospel (8:22-10:52), known as the “way section.” Jerusalem is Jesus' destination where he will encounter rejection, suffering, and death (and resurrection). While John depicts Jesus entering Jerusalem three times, Mark describes only one visit. When the Markan Jesus sets out for Jerusalem, he acknowledges what awaits him there. Furthermore, he recognizes that his followers still lack understanding of his mission, as well as of the necessary characteristics of being his disciples. Therefore, he uses their journey to Jerusalem as a classroom to help his followers to recognize their incomprehension, provoke them to overcome it, and implement his guidance on how they can be his true disciples.

Jesus' method is rooted in open-ended, creative instructions and examples of discipleship. Mark begins and ends this critical section with two narratives of the healing of a blind man. What is Mark's intention in using this sandwich technique, this bracketing of the way section with two

healing stories, in connection with the centrality of discipleship? Jesus' acts of compassion subtly prefigure the gift of spiritual healing for the disciples, as he restores the vision of the blind men. Their physical blindness symbolizes the disciples' spiritual "blindness" concerning the nature and destiny of the Messiah and what these entail for their discipleship.

Even though the disciples have followed Jesus from the beginning of his public ministry, they still do not understand him. He heals their spiritual "blindness" by disclosing insight into his messianic nature: Jesus is the Son of Man who must pass through suffering, rejection, and death, thereby becoming a ransom for others (10:45). Such a revelation is in complete contrast to the image of a royal and authoritative messiah that the disciples hold. The disciples must comprehend Jesus' true identity, because it is necessary for them to know more deeply whom they are following. Such knowledge also helps them properly understand the nature of their own discipleship, what it will cost them to follow him. Jesus' disciples are invited to go the same way as their master; the destiny of Jesus is to be their destiny. This understanding functions like a "compass," helping the disciples perceive and accept what Jesus will require of their discipleship. It will cost them their illusions—it will cost them everything!

Similar to the worldly ambitions we see in the disciples in Jesus' time are our own ambitions: the desire for honor, privilege, or power blocks our vision from seeing what Jesus' identity is and what following him means. Jesus wants us to accept the suffering involved in discipleship following his model. Thus, the examples he provides to his disciples are also necessary for all of us who continue the disciples' mission today. We have probably heard his teachings many times; however, some of us ignore their important role in our own contexts, or hesitate to put them into action thoroughly. Consequently, we lose sight of the true meaning of discipleship.

This thesis analyzes Jesus' teachings in the "way section" (8:22-10:52), identifying two primary issues: what did Mark want to communicate to his readers then? And how can Jesus' followers in the contemporary Church apply his exhortations in our current circumstances? Today, those circumstances are many, each unique in its own environment. My environment is Vietnam, and I will try to discern what discipleship can mean there. The former issue, Mark's immediate intention, raises several questions: Why does he portray the disciples so negatively on this journey to Jerusalem? What do Jesus' teachings about self-denial, cross-bearing and servanthood really mean to his disciples? Why is his exhortation so challenging? How is it good news?

For the second issue, I will focus on the Church in Vietnam, characterized by its uniqueness as well as the precarious environment in which it is situated: people have struggled greatly to live and keep their Christian faith under both the restrictions from the governing authorities' hostility to religious belief, as well as from the temptations specific to the Vietnamese culture. Jesus' teachings confront his followers in Vietnam with their intimacy, immediacy, and practicality. From this perspective, how shall they identify the kinds of spiritual "blindness" that need to be removed by Jesus' teachings? How does his challenge apply here and now? And will they find in his demands hope and encouragement sufficient to overcome the crises assailing our discipleship in the challenges of today's Vietnam?

How does *this* thesis communicate with Vietnamese believers? Hopefully, by examining Jesus' teachings about the conditions and characteristics of discipleship, it will serve Catholics there as a resource and provide them with the opportunity to recognize their current incomprehension and temptations which limit their vision of discipleship. Consequently, this might deepen their understanding of Jesus' teachings and effectively heal their "blindness." Second, his teachings may help them to be true disciples no matter what the social, political, or

religious challenge or limitation they will encounter. As Jesus' disciples, they are thus called to be witnesses who proclaim God's presence to a nation where more than 92% of the population does not yet know what God's presence means.

To address these issues, I will divide this thesis into four chapters. Chapter One will analyze Mark's purpose in employing the structure of the sandwich technique, especially as it appears in the "way section." What significant emphasis accounts for the two outer slices: the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida (8:22-26) at the beginning of the journey, and that of the blind beggar Bartimaeus at the end (10: 46-52)? What relationship do these stories have with one another, and with the inner portion, the "meat" of the sandwich?

In Chapter Two, I will examine why the disciples are still "blind" so that Jesus needs to heal them. In their spiritual "blindness," they miss the point about whom they follow and what being his disciple means. They cling to their image and their hopes of Jesus as a royal and authoritative messiah. Consequently, their failure to recognize this model of discipleship will mean thoroughgoing suffering. Thus, in this chapter I will put forth an argument regarding Mark's reason why he portrays the disciples so negatively in this central portion of his Gospel.

Chapter Three provides an exegesis of the content of Jesus' teachings about discipleship: denying oneself, bearing one's own cross to follow him (8:34-38); being first by being last (9:33-37); and exercising leadership through servanthood (10:43-45). It also demonstrates why Christology is relevant to discipleship. The integral relationship between these two dimensions expresses Jesus' perfect embodiment of his teachings throughout his earthly mission. Thus, he becomes the rule for discipleship.

Chapter Four will focus on the implications of Jesus' teaching about discipleship in the context of Vietnam, both as a challenge as well as an encouragement for my people. I give a brief

summary of the historical background of trauma which Vietnamese Catholics have endured, followed by hypothetical scenarios of how they can apply Jesus' teachings to this specific end. Identifying situations demonstrating the spiritual "blindness" of Jesus' followers in Vietnam may awaken them to renounce their habitual ways as folly and, with his teachings, help them to see more clearly. Finally, I will demonstrate that these teachings are not inspired through some idealistic concept of discipleship, but rather are Mark's realistic model forging the suffering of Jesus into a template through which those who are suffering martyrdom in Vietnam may understand and transform that way of suffering into a way that promises life.

Methodology

My primary methodology in this thesis is narrative criticism. I will delve into the original text of Mark's Gospel with its focus on five key features: character, narrator, setting, plot, and rhetoric.¹ Narrative exegesis using these five features shows that the characterization² in Mark's narrative of Jesus, the disciples, and the blind men enables us to recognize Mark's artistry and profound theology.

The Gospel authors' perspectives are influenced by the cultural, social, and historical contexts of their time. Background knowledge of their first-century Mediterranean world provides helpful assistance to understand Mark's messages and insights. Similarly, experience of the cultural, religious, and historical background of the Catholic Church in today's Vietnam will assist the demonstration of why Jesus' teachings function as such a challenge and an encouragement for

¹ David Rhoads, *Reading Mark: Engaging the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 6.

² Michael Macchia defines, "Characterization is the way the narrator brings characters to life in the narrative. There are several methods of characterization in Mark: typecasting of characters, setting characters within Mark's overall standard of judgment, comparing and contrasting . . . , and the assignment of traits." see Michael D. Macchia, "The Healing of the Blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52): A Narrative Approach to the Issues" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2017), 98-99.

Catholic believers in this country. Therefore, besides narrative analysis, this paper also uses historical criticism to support its arguments.

Setting of Mark 8:22-10:52 and Function of ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ

Mark 8:22-10:52 is bookended by the healing story of the blind man at Bethsaida (8:22-26) and that of the blind beggar Bartimaeus (10:46-52). The narratives of Peter's confession, Jesus' three predictions of his passion, death, and resurrection, and his teachings about discipleship are inserted between these healings. Mark 8:22-10:52 is located in the central part of his Gospel; it is often called the "way section."³ This passage recounts Jesus' journey after he completes his proclamation of the Kingdom of God in Galilee (1:1-7:21). It is his entry upon the path to his destination of rejection, suffering, and death (11:1-16:8).⁴ Scholars such as John R. Donahue, S.J., and Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., divide Mark into three major sections: 1) 1:1-8:21: Jesus' proclaiming the Reign of God through his powerful words and deeds in Galilee; 2) 8:22-10:52: Jesus' journey to Jerusalem where suffering, death, and resurrection await him; and 3) 11:1-16:8: Jesus' conflict, passion, death and resurrection in Jerusalem.⁵ This division of Mark is not unanimously accepted among scholars.

R. Alan Culpepper suggests that the "way section" begins with the narrative of Jesus' first prediction of his passion in Mark 8:31, not the incident of Jesus' curing of the blind man at

³ Thomas D. Stegman, *Opening the Door of Faith: Encountering Jesus and His Call to Discipleship* (New York: Paulist, 2015), 30-1. Also see Daniel J. Harrington, *The Church according to the New Testament: What the Wisdom and Witness of Early Christianity Teaches Us Today* (Chicago: Sheed & Ward, 2001), 102-3.

⁴ M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 4.

⁵ John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina 2 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2002), 49; Mark L. Strauss, *Mark: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 45; and R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Paternoster, 2002), vii-viii.

Bethsaida in Mark 8:22-26.⁶ Other scholars, such as Augustine Stock, O.S.B., maintain that the “way section” begins with Peter’s declaration about Jesus’ identity as the Messiah: σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστός (8:29).⁷ As a result, they do not consider Mark 8:22-26 part of Mark’s central section, noting that ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ, one of the key characteristics of the “way section,” is absent in this passage. Indeed, ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ appears in the first verse of Peter’s confession narrative and the last verse of the healing of Bartimaeus. In total, this phrase is used seven times in 8:27-10:52 (8:27, 9:33, 34; and 10:17, 32, 46, 52), a heavy concentration of the sixteen occurrences found throughout the Gospel.⁸ The exclusion or inclusion of the healing of the blind man as part of Mark’s “way section” affects how one understands Mark’s structure.

I argue that the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida in 8:22-26 is actually the beginning narrative of the “way section,” thereby delineating its important role, revealing implications of Mark’s profound theological insights during Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. Though ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ does not appear in 8:22-26, it is geographically implied, since Jesus and his disciples are leaving Galilee, commencing their journey to Jerusalem. Bethsaida is one of the stations on their way. Furthermore, including Jesus’ healing of the blind man at Bethsaida makes more sense of the story in that its theme seems to go well with that of the whole “way section.” Mark uses this journey to pinpoint the disciples’ spiritual “blindness” that requires Jesus’ healing (8:27-10:44) so that they can go with him to Jerusalem just as does the beggar Bartimaeus (10:52).

⁶ Culpepper supposes that the way of the cross, block 8:31-52, is set from the first prediction unit 8:31-9:1. See R. Alan Culpepper, “An Outline of the Gospel According to Mark,” *Review and Expositor (Berne)* 75, 4 (1978): 619–622, at 620.

⁷ Biblical scholars have based on different categories such as theological or geographical plans to give a structure for Mark’s Gospel. See more details in Augustine Stock, *The Method and Message of Mark* (Wilmington, DE: M. Glazier, 1989); José Enrique Aguilar Chiu, “Mark,” in J.E. Aguilar Chiu et al. (eds.), *The Paulist Biblical Commentary* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2018); and Strauss, *Mark*, 44-45.

⁸ Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Hermeneia Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 398; and Boring, *Mark*, 37.

Mark uses the term ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ not only to indicate the geographical journey of Jesus and his disciples from Galilee to Jerusalem, but also to illustrate a symbolic meaning. The road metaphor symbolizes the “way of life” or the “way of the Lord,” which is inspired by Isaiah 40:3: “Prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness.” Scholars such as Joel Marcus and Rikk Watts consider the Isaiah pericope as God’s offering a second exodus to God’s people.⁹ M. Eugene Boring suggests that it is the Lord’s (Yahweh’s) own way in which the Lord walks at the head of his redeemed people to give them life and land.¹⁰ This meaning fits well with Mark’s depiction of Jesus, particularly because he is on the way to Jerusalem where he will give his life as a ransom for others.¹¹ The way to Jerusalem is the way of the passion, and also the way of salvation.

“Way” also carries the transitional role of mediation that connects and contrasts the two main localities of Jesus in the Gospel.¹² Galilee is the place where Jesus shows his power through mighty deeds and authoritative teachings, summoning the disciples, performing miracles, exorcising demons, and proclaiming the coming of God’s Reign. Jerusalem, in contrast, is the place where Jesus’ power is gradually overshadowed by the Jewish authorities and the Roman Empire. Jesus seems to be powerless among his religious and political opponents. While in Galilee, Jesus is praised and hailed as a good teacher and authoritative healer. In Jerusalem, however, he is treated as a criminal. Eventually, he is crucified between two criminals. Jesus shows his disciples that such a fate could also be theirs, and attempts to guide them to be true to their identity as disciples who will face this challenging way.

⁹ Rikk Watts, “Mark,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, eds. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 114. See also Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord* (Louisville: Westminster, 1992), 22.

¹⁰ Boring, *Mark*, 36-37.

¹¹ Macchia, “The Healing of the Blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52), 12.

¹² Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 21-22; and Boring, *Mark*, 4.

Moreover, the phrase “on the way” can be interpreted as “an ethical calling to follow” or “a transformative symbol of Christlike discipleship.”¹³ Peter Rožič explains that, “as a key Markan symbol, the ‘way’ represents a disciple’s ongoing quest of identification with Jesus as a transformative path to God who is Himself this way.”¹⁴ In Mark, it is God’s own way that is revealed through Jesus, who himself walks from Galilee to Jerusalem to bear rejection, suffering, and death. Jesus’ example becomes yet more vivid through his call to discipleship. It is no longer an ambiguous or ideal way, but rather one in which Jesus already traverses the way of suffering. The disciples, in turn, are called to join him on that very path. Through Jesus’ way to the cross, the triumph of God will be truly revealed. For Jesus, and consequently for his disciples, the way of suffering, rejection, and death finally leads to the triumphant end.¹⁵ Jesus’ teachings purposely help them to approach this end. Thus, the “way section” is vital not only because of its location at the center of the Gospel, but because its role sets forth the Gospel’s central teachings.

¹³ Peter Rožič, “The Way According to Mark: A Transformative Symbol of Itinerant Discipleship,” *Studia Gdańskie*, 37 (2015): 52–62, at 52-53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

CHAPTER ONE

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TWO STORIES OF THE HEALING OF THE BLIND

MEN IN MARK 8:22-26 AND 10:46-52

Each evangelist employs a particular literary technique in the composition of his Gospel's narrative. The structure of these narratives is an important element through which each evangelist expresses his theological message. The evangelist Mark is no exception and displays his own proper style in communicating his insights. It is no coincidence that Mark brackets 8:22-10:52 with an *inclusio* of similar episodes, two stories of the healing of a blind man (8:22-26 and 10:46-52). In order to understand more deeply the profound insight generated by this technique, in this opening chapter I will first analyze the role of Mark's employment of the "sandwich" technique. Second, I will consider whether 8:22-10:52 is an example of Mark's intercalation methodology. If that is the case, then what is Mark's intention in using this method in this particular section? What are the significant points of each slice of the sandwich and of what lies between those slices? And how do they associate with one another?

1.1 The Markan Sandwich Technique

Mark often utilizes the literary technique of intercalation, sometimes called the "sandwich" technique. This device has three elements: (1) an opening narrative is interrupted by (2) an inserted story, and then is subsequently completed by (3) a return to the completion of the first narrative.¹⁶ This technique may be illustrated with the schema A-B-A', as first identified by Ernst von Dobschütz.¹⁷ While A and A' are parts of the same story, the B-episode is often an independent narrative. For example, in chapter five, Mark begins to tell the story of a synagogue ruler, Jairus,

¹⁶ Aguilar Chiu, "Mark," 973.

¹⁷ Marcin Moj, "Sandwich Technique in the Gospel of Mark," *Biblical Annals* 8, 65/3 (2018): 363–77, at 363.

who begs Jesus to heal his daughter (5:21-24). That story is interrupted by the insertion of another story, the healing of the woman with a hemorrhage (5:25-34). Mark then returns to the story of Jairus's daughter who now has died, and whom Jesus raises from the dead (5:35-43). Another example of intercalation is 6:7-30, where Mark introduces the mission of the Twelve (6:7-13), then inserts the account of the martyrdom of John the Baptist (6:14-29), and finishes with the story of the return of the Twelve (6:30-33).

The device of the pattern A-B-A' is also called the interpretative intercalation technique. Some scholars name it as a framing technique. George Wright, however, disputes this framing designation. He thinks that the framing technique is used to underline the outer slices of the "sandwich," and gives less focus on the middle story. But this is not what Mark intends. Mark utilizes two bracket stories in order to shed light on the interior story.¹⁸ Wright's opinion causes us to pay more attention to the literary significance when Mark uses this technique. It is true that in each sandwich unit, the two outer slices function to emphasize the inner section. For example, the sandwich block of the two stories of a miraculous feeding (6:34-44; 8:1-10) bracket the narratives of Jesus' walking on the water (6:45-52), of Jesus' healing of many sick people at Gennesaret (6:53-56), of the casting out the demon from the daughter of the Syrophenician Greek woman (7:24-30), and of the healing of a deaf man (7:31-37). While the two outer episodes present Jesus' feeding the physically hungry crowd, the inner slice (the "meat" of the sandwich) emphasizes Jesus' "feeding" their spiritual needs, which for Mark is of deeper significance.

It is possible to identify six "sandwiches" in Mark's Gospel:¹⁹

¹⁸ George Wright, "Markan Intercalations: A Study in the Plot of the Gospel" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1985), 16.

¹⁹ Scott G. Brown, "Mark 11:1-12:12: A Triple Intercalation?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 64, 1 (2002): 78-89, 78; Moj, "Sandwich Technique in the Gospel of Mark," 364; and Frans Neirynck, *Duality in Mark: Contributions to the Study of the Markan Redaction* (Leuven: Leuven University, 1988), 133.

- 1) 3:20-21 [22-30] 31-35: Jesus' relatives and the Beelzebul controversy;
- 2) 5:21-24 [25-34] 35-43: Jairus's daughter and the woman suffering from hemorrhage;
- 3) 6:7-13 [14-29] 30-33: the mission and return of the Twelve and the martyrdom of John the Baptist;
- 4) 11:12-14 [15-19] 20-21: the cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple;
- 5) 14:53-54 [55-65] 66-72: Peter's denials and Jesus' inquisition before the Sanhedrin; and
- 6) 15:40-41 [42-46] 15:47-16:8: women at the cross and at the empty tomb and Joseph of Arimathea's request for Jesus' body.

James R. Edwards discovers three more sandwich units to add into this list:²⁰

- 1) 4:1-9 [10-13] 14-20: the parable of the sower and the purpose of the parable;
- 2) 14:1-2 [3-9] 10-11: the betrayal of Jesus and the anointing of Jesus at Bethany; and
- 3) 14:17-21 [22-26] 27-31: Jesus' prediction of his betrayal and the institution of the

Lord's Supper.

The sandwich technique is thus a means of conspicuously juxtaposing two narratives or episodes.²¹ The key point is that this technique makes the two narratives mutually interpretative: "The two related stories illuminate and enrich each other, commenting on and clarifying the meaning, one of the other."²² Indeed, all the above units suggest connections between the three layers based on their points of contrast, contact, irony, simultaneity, similarity, or parallels.

Literary intercalation also often contains a repetitive word, phrase, or motif.

²⁰ James R. Edwards, "Markan Sandwiches the Significance of Interpolations in Markan Narratives," *Novum Testamentum* 31, 3 (1989): 193-216, at 197-198.

²¹ Brown, "Mark 11:1-12:12: A Triple Intercalation?" 78.

²² David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 51; Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "How Does the Story Mean?" In *Mark and New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, edited by Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, 23-49 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 39; and John R. Donahue, *Are You the Christ? The Trial Narrative in the Gospel* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1973), 42.

What is the function of Mark's sandwich technique? Ernst von Dobschütz thinks that Mark's technique serves only a literary purpose: Mark uses this device in order "to impress the reader by distancing the two parts of a framing episode by introducing the inner story rather than placing A1 and A2 in a natural order."²³ The evangelist intends to establish a relationship between the stories and to mark a boundary around each of the interconnected events. However, scholars such as Robert Stein, John R. Donahue, Mateusz Kusio, and James Edwards²⁴ believe that the purpose of the Markan sandwich technique is not merely literary but theological. This device is used to reveal the deeper sense of the two juxtaposed narratives. Donahue also emphasizes that "Mark uses the technique of intercalation to underscore two major themes of his gospel, the way of suffering of Jesus, and the necessity of the disciples to follow Jesus on this way."²⁵ Indeed, these two themes are also the main themes the Gospel as a whole. Mark devotes over half of his text to describe Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and his passion upon his arrival. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus' teaching focuses closely on what it means to be a disciple. This teaching is particularly emphasized in Jesus' movement between Galilee and Jerusalem. Overall, indeed, Mark uses the sandwich technique as a literary device to highlight his theological insights.

²³ Mateusz Kusio is quoting Ernst von Dobschütz's information. See Mateusz Kusio, "Theological Implications of Markan Interpretative Intercalations," *Ruch biblijny i liturgiczny* 68, 3 (2015): 265-288, at 268.

²⁴ Robert H. Stein, "The Proper Methodology for Ascertaining a Markan Redaction History," *Novum Testamentum* 13, 3 (1971): 181-198, at 181; and Kusio, "Theological Implications of Markan Interpretative Intercalations," 268.

²⁵ Donahue, *Are You the Christ?* 61.

1.2 The Function of the Two Healing Stories

1.2.1 Is the “Way Section” a Markan Sandwich Technique?

Mark 8:22-10:52 does not appear in the list of six or nine sandwich units I demarcated in the previous section.²⁶ Perhaps it is because this section does not fit exactly within the accepted definition of intercalation.²⁷ Mark 8:22-10:52 is bracketed by A and A', which are two distinct narratives of the healing of the two different blind men. Another possible reason for not seeing Mark 8:22-26 as integral to 8:22-10:52 is because this passage also functions as the second “slice” of the previous sandwich with the following schema:

A: 7:31-37: Jesus' healing a deaf mute with saliva;

B: 8:1-21: Jesus' feeding miracle for four thousand and its explanation; and

A': 8:22-26 Jesus' healing the blind man at Bethsaida with saliva.

There are striking parallels between these two miracles involving organs of perception in A and A',²⁸ which reflect the “deafness” and “blindness” of the disciples and emphasize the importance of the disciples' discernment of Jesus' identity and mission in their journey of discipleship.²⁹ The healing of the blind man at Bethsaida is the second slice in 7:31-8:26. However,

²⁶ See also Scott G. Brown, “Mark 11:1-12:12: A Triple Intercalation?” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 64, 1 (2002): 78–89, 78; Moj, “Sandwich Technique in the Gospel of Mark,” 364; Neiryneck, *Duality in Mark*, 133; and Edwards, 197-198.

²⁷ The sandwich technique has three elements: (1) an opening narrative is interrupted by (2) an inserted story, and then is subsequently completed by (3) returning to the completion of the first narrative. Also see Aguilar Chiu, “Mark,” 973.

²⁸ Abraham Kuruvilla, *Mark: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 164.

²⁹ Kuruvilla, *Mark*, 164.

I contend that this story also serves as the first slice of the sandwich that is 8:26-10:52.³⁰ It is considered a “transitional giving-of-sight story.”³¹

In 7:31-8:26, the 8:22-26 slice serves as a conclusion of Jesus’ ministry before his journey to Jerusalem, and in the 8:22-10:52 block (the “way section” in Mark), it functions as a summary of what will happen along Jesus’ journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. The pattern of this larger sandwich can be delineated as:³²

A: the healing of a blind man at Bethsaida (8:22-26);

B: Peter’s confession; Jesus’ three predictions about his suffering, death, and resurrection; Jesus’ teachings about discipleship (8:27-38; 9:30-37; 10:32-45); and

A’: the healing of the blind beggar Bartimaeus (10:46-52).

1.2.2 The Function of the Healing of the Man at Bethsaida.

The “way section” is introduced with the first outer slice, the story of the healing at Bethsaida, which marks the preparation for what will happen in the central part of the sandwich.³³ As we will see, it signifies the spiritual “blindness”³⁴ of the disciples and the process by which Jesus will heal them during the journey to Jerusalem. This healing story is immediately followed by Peter’s recognition of Jesus as the Messiah (8:27-29). That Peter’s understanding is only partial is evident from the way he protests Jesus’ explanation of how he will fulfill his messianic mission

³⁰ Macchia, “The Healing of the Blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52), 116-7; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New Haven: Yale University, 2009), 686; and M. J. J. Menken, “The Call of Blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10: 46-52),” *Hervormde Teologische Studies* 61, 1 & 2 (2005): 273–90, 284.

³¹ Vernon K. Robbins, “The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus (10:46-52) in the Marcan Theology.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92, 2 (1973): 224–43, 237; and Norman Perrin and Dennis Duling, *The New Testament: Proclamation and Parenthesis, Myth and History* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), 309.

³² Kuruvilla, *Mark*, 166.

³³ Ernest Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1981), 136-7. Kuruvilla, *Mark*, 234.

³⁴ Abraham Kuruvilla explains more clearly about the use of blindness as a metaphor which is used in “both Greek (pre-Socratic and Platonic works) and biblical traditions (Isa. 6:9 and Jer. 5:21).” See Kuruvilla, *Mark*, 166; also see Collins, *Mark*, 395.

in Jerusalem. In addition, the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida prefigures the incomprehension of the disciples after each of Jesus' passion predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:32), which he then has to correct.

These predictions share the same three-part pattern: first, Jesus' announcement of his passion; second, the disciples' incomprehension; and third, Jesus' teaching about discipleship in which he emphasizes to his followers that their fate and destination will be the same as their master's. The first prediction (8:31) is followed by Peter's rebuke and attempt to dissuade Jesus from fulfilling his mission (8:32). Jesus takes this opportunity to teach Peter and the other disciples that a true disciple needs to "deny himself, take up his cross, and follow" Jesus (8:34 NRSV). The second announcement of the passion (9:30-32) is followed by the disciples' incomprehension, manifested by their argument about who is the greatest (9:33-35). Jesus recognizes their reaction and teaches them: "If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all" (9:35). Similarly, in the third prediction of the Son of Man's coming suffering and death (10:32-34), Jesus' message is met by his disciples' insensitivity, particularly in the ambition of the sons of Zebedee, James and John, who request powerful positions in Jesus' glory (10:35-37). Jesus then contrasts how Gentile rulers lord over others with the status of his disciples: "It is not so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all" (10:43-44). Jesus then declares that he has come to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many, rather than to be served (10:45). Likewise, his disciples are to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. Peter and the disciples cannot understand that their footsteps must retrace his path through suffering, service, and death in order to attain glory. Their lack of perception reveals their "blindness" and requires Jesus' further teaching to help them attain their "sight."

The narrative of the blind man at Bethsaida illustrates this process of healing. One of the most remarkable aspects of this story is that the healing requires two stages. In all the other Gospel stories, healing is instantaneous except for this blind man at Bethsaida. The blind man regains only partial sight at Jesus' first attempt to heal (with saliva); it is only after the second attempt (by the laying on hands) that the man can see clearly. As Camille Focant explains, "The slowness of the healing is echoed in the 'extraordinary difficulty of the revelation that Jesus seeks to unveil to human beings'."³⁵ It is true that the fullness of sight or the knowledge about Jesus cannot be received all at once; rather, it requires a gradual process. This two-stage healing story accords well with Peter's partial understanding of Jesus' messiahship and his later insight following further teaching by Jesus. That is why it is not a coincidence that Mark locates this narrative just prior to a depiction of Peter's confession and subsequent protest of Jesus' prediction of his upcoming passion (8:27-38). Peter acknowledges Jesus as the Messiah; however, Peter holds on to his hope that Jesus' messiahship will be that of a triumphant and glorious messiah. Thus, when Jesus declares that he is the Son of Man who must go through suffering and death to resurrection, Peter cannot accept it (8:32). Peter's rejection of Jesus' announcement is so severe that Jesus has to rebuke Peter forcefully: "Get behind me, Satan! You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (8:33). Peter's and the disciples' spiritual blindness is underscored by the blind man who needs Jesus' healing action two times. His healing, like that of the apostles, is a process.³⁶ They need Jesus' continuous healing so that they can comprehend fully and correctly what kind of messiah he is. Such knowledge also helps them properly understand the nature of their discipleship, what it means to follow Jesus.

³⁵ Focant is quoting Lamarche's information. See Camille Focant, *The Gospel According to Mark: A Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 328.

³⁶ Kevin W. Larsen, "A Focused Christological Reading of Mark 8:22-9:13," *Trinity Journal* 26, 1 (2005): 33-46, at 45.

1.2.3 The Function of the Healing of the Beggar Bartimaeus

The healing of Bartimaeus (10:46-52) forms the second outer slice of the sandwich that is 8:22-10:52. It marks the end of the “way section.” Similar to the function of the first outer slice, the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida, the healing of Bartimaeus also serves as a “transitional giving of sight story.” It is both the conclusion to the central part, the “meat,” of the “way section” (8:27-10:45) and an anticipatory summary for what will happen to Jesus in Jerusalem (11:1-16:8).³⁷ To begin with, the blind beggar calls out to Jesus with a royal title, “Son of David” (10:48). “Son of David” is a common title for the messianic king (e.g., 2 Sam 7:12; Ps 132:11; Ps. Sol. 17:21). The blind man’s acclamation introduces the narrative about Jesus’ entrance to Jerusalem as its king.³⁸ This is the only time Jesus’ title as Son of David is announced through a human voice. Abraham Kuruvilla hypothesizes that proclaiming Jesus’ royal title here is appropriate because the passage refers to Jesus as the king who prepares to visit his capital and enter his palace.³⁹ The narrative of the healing of Bartimaeus is the singular instance in Mark’s Gospel in which the healed person is named. It is also the last healing miracle in Mark’s Gospel. When Bartimaeus’s sight is restored, he follows Jesus, the king, into “his palace.” This singularity and finality make it a crucial story to transition from the way section to the final part of Mark’s Gospel.

Similar to the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida (8:22-26), the healing of Bartimaeus (10:46-52) functions to underscore the spiritual “blindness” of the disciples in the “meat” of the sandwich. Mark uses the story of Bartimaeus to draw a remarkable contrast between Bartimaeus and Jesus’ disciples. The story of Bartimaeus shows a striking association with the closest narratives preceding it: Jesus’ third prediction and the request of James and John (10:32-35).

³⁷ Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, 304.

³⁸ Chiu et al., *Commentary*, 1008.

³⁹ Kuruvilla, *Mark: A Theological Commentary for Preachers*, 234; and France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 423-4.

Innocent Uhuegbu Olekamma points out five notable contrast elements between the responses of the beggar Bartimaeus and the sons of Zebedee: (1) manner of approach, (2) what was asked, (3) Jesus' response in each case, (4) motive of the request, and (5) disposition.⁴⁰

The blind beggar is sitting by the roadside. When he hears Jesus passing by, he tries to attract Jesus' notice by shouting out ἐλέησόν με ("have mercy on me") (10:47d). Even though he is sternly rebuked by the crowd, the beggar continues to reach out to Jesus with the same plea: ἐλέησόν με (10:48d). The humble attitude of the beggar is opposed to the presumptuous demand of the two brothers, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you" (10:35). They ask Jesus as if they are giving him an order.

Furthermore, the blind beggar does not ask for material assistance, as beggars often do, but rather for physical sight. What is the importance of sight for a beggar? Will restoration of vision help him to earn a living more easily? That is not his purpose. The intention of the beggar's request is to serve God by following Jesus as a disciple.⁴¹ The beggar knows what he should request, and that is why his request is accepted. Olekamma explains, "The one who knows how to ask properly is a true disciple who would be able to follow Jesus adequately. ... This is because the object of the request would be such that could be employed in service."⁴² Bartimaeus's intentions are proved through the way he throws off his cloak (ἱμάτιον)—all that he possessed—and follows Jesus. The sons of Zebedee, in contrast, know neither what they are asking for, nor how they should ask properly in order to receive an immediate and favorable hearing from Jesus. They ask for the privileged positions in order to rule over others, roles that true followers of Jesus should not seek.

⁴⁰ See more details and explanations in Innocent Uhuegbu Olekamma, *The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus (Mk 10,46-52) in the Markan Context: Two Ways of Asking*, (New York: Lang, 1999), 166.

⁴¹ Olekamma, *The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus (Mk 10,46-52) in the Markan Context*, 296.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 298.

The beggar Bartimaeus is portrayed as a model of a true disciple who has faith in Jesus and “immediately”⁴³ (εὐθύς) stands up and follows him. Thus, we see that faith is a vital element in Mark’s Gospel. José Enrique Aguilar Chiu cogently observes here “Mark’s intention of presenting the events not only as cures but also as ‘acted parables’ of the miracle of faith.”⁴⁴ Jesus says to the blind man, “Your faith has made you well” (ἡ πίστις σου σέσωκέν σε; 10:52). These same words are said to the woman suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years when Jesus heals her: ἡ πίστις σου σέσωκέν σε (5:34). It is faith that helps the woman and the blind Bartimaeus overcome all boundaries to approach Jesus. It is also faith that provides the beggar the courage to leave his ἱμάτιον and to dare walk with Jesus to Jerusalem, where he will suffer.

The Bartimaeus narrative not only serves as a healing story, but also contains characteristics of a call story.⁴⁵ A unique feature of the Bartimaeus episode is that he is the only recipient of a miracle who is named in Mark’s Gospel (and in the entire Synoptic tradition).⁴⁶ The call to discipleship is distinguished by having all the disciples both called and named (1:16, 19; 2:14; 3:13-19).⁴⁷ Thus, Bartimaeus’s being named may imply that he is called to follow Jesus as a disciple. The healing of the blind Bartimaeus is placed at the end of the “way section,” forming a conclusion with the ultimate purpose of showing an ideal disciple.⁴⁸ Such a one recognizes Jesus’ true identity and definitively gives up his former life in order to follow Jesus to the end of his earthly journey. Bartimaeus provides a model of discipleship for all who would follow Jesus. In

⁴³ “Immediately” (εὐθύς) shows an air of urgency with no delay in action. The beggar’s reaction of following Jesus after regaining his sight shows his utter appreciation and courage to walk with Jesus on the way to Jerusalem. See more in Olekamma, *The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus (Mk 10,46-52) in the Markan Context*, 301.

⁴⁴ Aguilar Chiu, *Mark*, 997.

⁴⁵ Joel Marcus, “A Note on Markan Optics.” *New Testament Studies* 45, 2 (1999): 250–56, 250-4.

⁴⁶ Lazarus is the direct recipient of Jesus’ miracles in John. See Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 687.

⁴⁷ Kuruvilla, *Mark*, 233.

⁴⁸ Olekamma, *The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus (Mk 10,46-52) in the Markan Context*, 295.

contrast, Jesus has to try to restore “sight” for his disciples so that they may also enter Jerusalem with him.

When will Jesus restore his followers’ full vision? While the blind man at Bethsaida needs the two-stage healing, Bartimaeus is cured immediately and fully at Jesus’ first healing action (his word). This instantaneous healing symbolizes what happens when the disciples attain true comprehension of Jesus’ messianic identity. When does that happen? John Meier and Ernest Best believe that the disciples’ eyes will be opened completely only by Jesus’ resurrection.⁴⁹ In fact, the disciples in Mark remain in blindness to the very end of the Gospel. As Camille Focant suggests, “The realization of this total restoration is not described as such in Mark’s gospel. It is only hoped for in relation with words such as the promise of the Holy Spirit (13:11).”⁵⁰ Indeed, at the end of Jesus’ earthly mission, when Jesus must undergo his passion, his disciples are frightened and seek to escape from their potential suffering. As Jesus hangs on the cross, it is a Roman centurion, a pagan—and not the disciples—who is at Jesus’ feet and who proclaims, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (15:39).

However, the disciples’ struggle to recognize Jesus should not discourage believers today. In contrast, the fact that Jesus heals the blind man brings hope for those who faithfully follow him: he will restore our vision to understand who he is, and to accompany him on his way.

Conclusion

The “way section” (8:22-10:52) is considered the heart of Mark’s Gospel, not only because of its location but also because of the vital insights revealed therein.⁵¹ Jesus no longer goes about

⁴⁹ Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 687; and Ernest Best, *The Temptation and the Passion: the Markan Soteriology* (New York: Cambridge University, 1990), 108.

⁵⁰ Focant, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 328.

⁵¹ Stegman, *Opening the Door of Faith*, 30.

from place to place to proclaim the Reign of God through his authoritative words and mighty deeds as he did in Galilee. He now makes his path straight toward a goal, Jerusalem, the destination for his rejection, passion, and execution. Mark uses this journey narrative to reveal two profound themes: Jesus' true identity as the suffering Messiah and his teaching about what it means to become a true disciple. The Markan Jesus devotes his attention here to his closest disciples, trying to help them understand that the way of the cross is awaiting him in Jerusalem, and that the way to be his disciple is to share with him in this suffering.

The two-step healing of the blind man at Bethsaida marks the beginning of the “way section,” with the purpose of symbolizing the difficult process of Jesus' healing the spiritual blindness of his disciples. It marks the beginning of Jesus' journey where the disciples' eyes need Jesus' continuous efforts to lead them to “sight.” The “way section” is concluded by the healing of Bartimaeus whose sight is fully restored at Jesus' command. The healed man immediately joins Jesus' company as they arrive at the villages near Jerusalem. Bartimaeus shows the characteristics of an ideal disciple: to recognize Jesus and, leaving behind all possessions, to follow him. This meets the categories that Jesus set for the first disciples at the beginning of his public life. When Jesus summons the Twelve on the mountain, Mark emphasizes a double assignment of discipleship: to be with Jesus and to share Jesus' ministry (3:13-18). In the first purpose clause, to be with Jesus is to get to know him and his ways. To follow him is to share his mission, the second part of discipleship.

Bartimaeus is healed in order to respond. How about Jesus' disciples? How well do the disciples meet Jesus' requirements for discipleship? How do they reveal their knowledge about Jesus' identity? Why are they still “blind” so that Jesus needs to heal them? What method does Jesus utilize to bring “sight” to them? Mark suggests that the answers are revealed in Jesus'

teaching about discipleship, particularly through the narratives of the disciples' incomplete messianic recognition (Mark 8:27-30) and their inability to comprehend the implications of Jesus' messianic plan (Mark 8:31-33; 9:33-34 and 10:35-41).

CHAPTER TWO

THE SPIRITUAL “BLINDNESS” OF JESUS’ DISCIPLES IN THE “WAY SECTION”

The disciples’ incomprehension is a recurring theme throughout Mark’s Gospel (e.g., 4:40; 6:51-52; 8:4, 14-21; 14:68-72). Their lack of understanding is very prominent in the “way section.” Similar to the blind man of Bethsaida who needed Jesus’ touch to regain his sight, the disciples’ spiritual “blindness” also requires Jesus’ healing so that they will be able to “see” and enter Jerusalem with him, as does the healed Bartimaeus. This chapter will respond to two questions: What kind of spiritual “blindness” of the disciples requires Jesus’ healing? And why does Mark portray the disciples more negatively in this central portion of his Gospel?

I will first evaluate how Peter’s leadership develops tensions in 8:27-33 to consider whether Peter attests to Jesus’ identity of his own accord or whether he represents the group of the Twelve in general. I will then examine what meaning Peter conveys by calling Jesus the Χριστός when responding to Jesus’ questions. Second, I will expound upon the disciples’ misunderstanding about the implications of Jesus’ messianic plan after his three predictions regarding his passion (8:31-33; 9:33-34; and 10:35-41). Finally, I will investigate why Mark highlights these negative portrayals of the disciples in the “way section.” Is it because Mark dislikes the disciples? What if the disciples’ misunderstanding is not itself historical? If this is the case, what possible alternatives can we see? New Testament scholars have offered different analyses of Mark’s depiction of the “blindness” of the disciples. I will argue that Mark’s ultimate purpose is to create a context for Jesus’ teaching on discipleship.

2.1 The Incomplete Messianic Recognition (Mark 8:27-30)

2.1.1 The Role of Peter among the Twelve

When discussing Peter's role in Mark's Gospel, Terence Smith and Theodore Weeden each propose that Mark singles out Peter for his negative portrayal: "the author highlights Peter's failure as a polemic against a pro-Petrine group in the early church and their Christology."⁵² Robyn Whitaker, however, suggests that Peter functions as the spokesperson for the disciples on many occasions, except in the account of Peter's denial of Jesus in the courtyard (14:26-31).⁵³ I think that Whittaker's perspective is convincing.

To prepare Peter for his role, Mark makes him appear more frequently and in the most important events of Jesus' ministry. Peter is one of the first disciples called by Jesus. Moreover, his name appears at the head of the list in various groupings of disciples: the Twelve (3:16), an inner three (5:37; 9:32; 14:33), and a group of four (1:29; 13:3).⁵⁴ Peter's name is also mentioned more than any other disciple's name in the Gospel—twenty-five times to be exact—whereas some of the disciples are not mentioned again after the initial listing in 3:16-19, where Jesus chooses the Twelve.⁵⁵ Peter is present at Jesus' most significant events: his raising the daughter of a community leader from the dead (5:37), his Transfiguration (9:2), and his struggle in Gethsemane (14:33-41), among others. Peter also merits prominence by virtue of being individually mentioned at the end of the Gospel (16:7). His role is given particular attention in the Gospel, shown by Mark's highlighting his initial call in Galilee (1:16-18) and Jesus' eventual return: "But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told

⁵² Terence V. Smith, *Petrine Controversies in Early Christianity: Attitudes towards Peter in Christian Writings of the First Two Centuries*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament. 2. Reihe 15 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1985), 190; and Theodore J. Weeden, *Mark-Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 50.

⁵³ Robyn Whitaker, "Rebuke or Recall? Rethinking the Role of Peter in Mark's Gospel," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 75, 4 (2013): 666–82, at 668.

⁵⁴ W. S. Vorster, "Characterization of Peter in the Gospel of Mark," *Neotestamentica* 21, 1 (1987): 57–76, at 65.

⁵⁵ Whitaker, "Rebuke or Recall?," 669.

you” (16:7). Peter is clearly given prominence in Mark’s Gospel, which strongly suggests a leadership role.

In portraying Peter’s intimate relationship with Jesus from the beginning to the end of his earthly ministry, especially in significant events, Mark presents Peter as the representative of the disciples. He epitomizes their thoughts and general attitudes throughout the Gospel, including their failures (5:37; 8:27-33; 9:2-13; 10:28-30; 13:3; 14:29-31, 32-42, 54, 66-72; 16:7).⁵⁶ The one exception is Peter’s personal denial of Jesus (14:66-72). On the many occasions when the Gospel indicates who in the group of the disciples speaks, and even when Jesus’ questions are addressed to all of the disciples, Peter is the one who speaks or responds.⁵⁷ In some places, though Peter is the one speaking, he uses first person plural pronouns, which also suggests his seniority in the group of Jesus’ disciples and his function as their spokesperson.⁵⁸

Peter’s role as spokesperson is seen in the conversation between Jesus and the disciples at Caesarea Philippi in 8:27-33. Jesus poses a question to the disciples in general, καὶ αὐτὸς ἐπηρώτα αὐτούς, ὑμεῖς δὲ τίνα με λέγετε εἶναι; (“But who do *you* say that I am?”) (8:29). Peter responds, speaking for all the disciples. I agree with Agustí Borrell who concludes that “[h]is words express the opinion of all those present and there would be no reason to suspect that he had a view any different from the others. This is confirmed by the subsequent order of Jesus to all of them that they were not to tell anybody about him.”⁵⁹ This brief analysis allows us to infer that when Peter

⁵⁶ Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 260; Vorster, “Characterization of Peter,” 67; and Kevin Wayne Larsen, *Seeing and Understanding Jesus: A Literary and Theological Commentary on Mark 8:22-9:13* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005), 90.

⁵⁷ Agustí Borrell, *The Good News of Peter’s Denial: A Narrative and Rhetorical Reading of Mark 14:54.66-72*, University of South Florida International Studies in Formative Christianity and Judaism; vol. 7 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998), 150.

⁵⁸ Here are some examples of Peter’s voice as represent the other disciples as well, such as at the transfiguration, “ῥαββί, καλὸν ἐστὶν ἡμᾶς ὄδε εἶναι, καὶ ποιήσωμεν τρεῖς σκηνάς” (“Rabbi, it is good for *us* to be here; let *us* make three dwellings”) (9:5). Similarly, in the scene with the rich man, Peter responds with a plural, “ἰδοὺ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν πάντα καὶ ἠκολουθήκαμέν σοι” (“we have left everything and followed you”) (10:28).

⁵⁹ Borrell, *The Good News of Peter’s Denial*, 149.

makes his confession about Jesus, or seeks to prevent Jesus from going to fulfill his messianic plan, this understanding and attitude are shared by the other disciples present.

2.1.2 The Disciples' Knowledge about Jesus as Messiah

When Jesus and his disciples are on the way to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, he begins the conversation by asking his disciples about the opinions of various people: τίνα με λέγουσιν οἱ ἄνθρωποι εἶναι; (“Who do people say that I am?”) (8:27). Opinions include John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. But then, Jesus wants to know how his closest followers evaluate him. He gives them an opportunity to look even more deeply into themselves by focusing his question: ὑμεῖς δὲ τίνα με λέγετε εἶναι; (“Who do you say that I am?”). It is Peter who responds by proclaiming Jesus to be the Messiah (8:29), indicating Peter’s significant advancement beyond the opinions of the others. However, does Peter’s confession reveal properly what Mark wants us to believe who Jesus is?

Though Peter’s confession about Jesus is also described in Matthew 16:13-20 and Luke 9:18-20, the context in Mark is different. Peter’s proclamation about Jesus’ identity in Matthew and Luke follows a gradual preparation in the narrative. Prior to Peter’s confession, Matthew and Luke have not intended any criticism about the disciples’ incomprehension. For instance, in the scene where Jesus walks on water, Matthew does not mention the disciples’ hardness of heart as Mark does: “for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened” (Mark 6:52); rather, the disciples worship Jesus and say, “Truly you are the Son of God” (Matt 14:33). Matthew also recounts how Peter’s faith empowered him to approach Jesus on the water, an incident omitted in Mark. And in yet another boat scene, Matthew concludes Jesus’ parable about the leaven of Jesus’ opponents, “then they understood that he had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matthew 16:12); while in

Mark's account, Jesus acerbically concludes, "Do you not yet understand?" (8:21).⁶⁰ Moreover, after Peter's confession in Matthew, Jesus highlights the divine origin of his confession: "...flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven" (Matt 16:17). Overall, these incidents indicate Matthew's more positive assessment of Peter and of the disciples' recognition of Jesus' identity.

Throughout his Gospel, however, Mark highlights the disciples' incomprehension regarding Jesus' actions and teachings. When Jesus walks on the water, the disciples are terrified and "their hearts were hardened" (6:51-52), their incomprehension further mirrored in their inability to grasp the significance of the loaves (6:52).⁶¹ Nor do the disciples comprehend what Jesus means when he preaches about the tradition of the elders. When they enter the house, they need to ask for his explanation, to which Jesus replies: "then do you also fail to understand?" (7:18). And later, the disciples' misunderstanding of Jesus' warning about the leaven of the Pharisees and Herodians provokes him to unleash a barrage of questions: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?" (8:17-18). In contrast with Matthew, Mark prepares his readers to have a very different assessment of his followers' astuteness before Peter's confession. In addition, Mark's narrative of the blind man at Bethsaida just prior to Peter's confession serves to strengthen his symbolic allusion to the ongoing theme of Peter and the disciples' spiritual "blindness." Therefore, Mark's readers are not prepared for Peter's confession. They do not see any motivation or logic leading to Peter's insight concerning Jesus' identity when Jesus suddenly asks him, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter's

⁶⁰ Frank J. Matera, "The Incomprehension of the Disciples and Peter's Confession (Mark 6,14-8,30)," *Biblica* 70, 2 (1989): 153-72, at 166.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

insight makes the reader wonder: how can Peter suddenly yet confidently confess Jesus as the Messiah, while he and the disciples have not been able to comprehend what they have seen so far?

Especially following upon and in light of the story of the blind man at Bethsaida, Peter's confident confession regarding Jesus as the Messiah seems unlikely at this time. Jesus' question is his way of touching Peter's "blind eyes." Peter's sight is restored in part (i.e., his confession is partially correct), but he does not come to full vision yet, as in Jesus' first healing attempt of the blind man at Bethsaida.⁶² Peter confesses Jesus as the Χριστός, transliterated in English as "Christ," the literal translation of which means "anointed one." In Jewish tradition, anointing was used in the inauguration ceremony of priests and kings. A king was elected and anointed in order to protect God's people, Israel, by defeating her enemies.⁶³ In 8:29, although Peter's naming of Jesus as Christ is correct, his understanding of Jesus is only on the level of "messiah" as understood in Jewish tradition for kings: an anointed person who has authority to save and rule the people.

Peter's knowledge about Jesus may be influenced by Jewish history. It is not a coincidence that Mark locates the conversation between Jesus and Peter in the villages of Caesarea Philippi, a territory evocative of emperors, rulers, and kings. This region was formerly a center for Baal worship. During the time of Herod the Great, a splendid marble temple was built in which the Roman Emperor was honored as a god. Herod's son, Herod Philip, was granted this territory as well.⁶⁴ Given these details of this region, Peter may only be able to see Jesus as a royal messiah with nationalistic political objectives, like other powerful earthly kings.⁶⁵ Similar to (at least some) Jewish expectations, Peter considers Jesus to be a militaristic messiah who can free Israel from

⁶² Ernest Best, *Disciples and Discipleship: Studies in the Gospel According to Mark* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 165.

⁶³ Boring, *Mark*, 249.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁶⁵ Larsen, *Seeing and Understanding Jesus*, 92; and Joseph B Tyson, "The Blindness of the Disciples in Mark," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80, 3 (1961): 261–68, at 265.

Roman oppression.⁶⁶ Adela Yarbro Collins recognizes that “placing the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi makes the point for those aware of the imperial cult practiced there that Jesus is the agent of the supreme deity, not the emperor.”⁶⁷ Jesus, as well as Mark, wants to underscore his greater significance over any other earthly ruler. Moreover, Mark reminds his readers that Jesus is not the one who came to be served and honored as the rulers of this world are; rather, he is the one who serves and gives his life as “a ransom” for many (10:45). Peter’s incomplete understanding prefigures that of the onlookers who mockingly hail Jesus in the crucifixion. They demand that Jesus come down from the cross in order to show that he is the Messiah (15:30).

Jesus is, as Elizabeth Malbon suggests, not only “a powerful healer and teacher (Peter’s Christ) but also as one who serves, even when persecuted (Jesus, ‘Son of Humanity’).”⁶⁸ Peter apprehends only the first part of this identity and misses the second part. Hence, after Peter’s declaration, there is no response from the narrator nor from the Markan Jesus. This silence suggests that Peter’s confession does not encompass the whole truth.⁶⁹ Kevin Larsen proposes that “Jesus’ response of secrecy might be best understood as a preventive measure. Because Peter does not ‘get it,’ Jesus does not want him spreading false information or false hope. Thus, Jesus tells Peter to stay quiet until he can correct his understanding of Messiah.”⁷⁰ Because Peter’s understanding of Jesus as a political messiah is inadequate, Jesus does not want the crowd to know yet.⁷¹ Peter’s selective and incomplete understanding about Jesus’ Messiahship mirrors the perspective of the

⁶⁶ Whitaker, “Rebuke or Recall?,” 670.

⁶⁷ Collins, *Mark*, 401.

⁶⁸ Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Mark’s Jesus: Characterization as Narrative Christology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2009), 223.

⁶⁹ Aguilar Chiu, “Mark,” 998.

⁷⁰ Larsen, *Seeing and Understanding Jesus*, 33.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

other disciples,⁷² their inadequate understanding tellingly expressed through the way they respond to Jesus' three predictions about his passion.

2.2 The Disciples' Incomprehension about Jesus' Messianic Plan

2.2.1 The Disciples' Response to Jesus' First Prediction (Mark 8:31-33)

That Peter's understanding of Jesus' messiahship is deficient is illustrated more clearly through the way he responds to Jesus after he predicts his impending persecution, death, and resurrection. Mark's words about Peter are startling: προσλαβόμενος ὁ πέτρος αὐτὸν ἤρξατο ἐπιτιμᾶν αὐτῷ ("having taken him aside, Peter began to rebuke him") (8:32). That is, Peter harshly protests that he will not accept the fate Jesus foresees. How could God allow such suffering for God's anointed, the rescuer of Israel? Peter cannot understand how a powerful messiah can be rejected and crucified.⁷³ The Messiah's entering into the passion and suffering of this world, and then put to death, was something totally unanticipated and unforeseen in conventional Jewish messianic expectation. Thus, for Peter, the death of Jesus is a "scandal," paralleling how the Jews and Gentiles will later think of the crucified Jesus.⁷⁴ This is mirrored in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians: "We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:23). Peter presumes Jesus' messianic destiny must meet humanly limited historical expectations, as Robyn Whitaker describes: "Peter, whose mind is on earthly things, expects Jesus to triumph at a historical level (8:33), whereas Jesus speaks of a cosmic, eschatological triumph (8:38)."⁷⁵ Peter believes that Jesus is a messiah who can perform mighty deeds and who will free Israel from Roman oppression. Peter may also suppose that "if Jesus is God's Messiah, then God

⁷² Borrell, *The Good News of Peter's Denial*, 149.

⁷³ Ronald J. Allen, "Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost: Mark 8:27-38," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 44, 4 (2017): 31-36, at 34.

⁷⁴ Aguilar Chiu, "Mark," 999.

⁷⁵ Whitaker, "Rebuke or Recall?," 670.

would not allow him to be rejected and killed.”⁷⁶ Peter’s alluring objection parallels Satan’s temptation of Jesus in the wilderness (1:13).

Peter not only fails to perceive God’s perspective; he also signally fails in his role as a disciple. Peter’s immediate response to Jesus’ announcement is προσλαβόμενος (“having taken”) (8:32), a verb that manifests Peter’s disrespectful attitude. As Kevin W. Larsen points out:

The term is used in the sense of taking someone aside, perhaps confidentially, ‘to take or lead off to oneself.’ Often the term is used in contexts of the stronger or wealthier coming to the help of weaker or poorer persons (Acts 18:26; Romans 14:1, 3; 15:7). Given the popular stereotype of a triumphant Messiah, it is natural for Peter to view Jesus as being the weaker individual, as having a mistaken view of Messiahship.⁷⁷

Peter’s position conflicts with that of his master. Peter’s unseemly reversal of the status of master/disciple is revealed more clearly in his next reaction. Peter’s temerity is shown by Mark’s use of the verb ἐπιτιμάω (“rebuke”). Peter is Jesus’ student (the basic meaning of the Greek word for “disciple”), yet he dares to undercut his teacher’s authority, spuriously replacing it with his own. Mark uses ἐπιτιμάω to indicate who exerts the more powerful stature. For instance, the disciples rebuke the children, denying them approach to Jesus (10:13); and the crowd rebukes the blind man Bartimaeus for shouting out to Jesus (10:48). More ominously, according to Whitaker, “ἐπιτιμάω is the language of exorcism.”⁷⁸ It is the word often used when Jesus casts out demons (1:25; 3:12; 9:25), as well as the chaotic wind and sea (4:39). Peter now dares to “rebuke” Jesus. Ronald Allen has even surmised that, “[a]ccording to Mark, Peter initially thinks that Jesus is possessed by a demon when Jesus points to the way of suffering as part of the way to the Realm.”⁷⁹ Peter’s is a demeaning response and attitude, not that of a disciple. This inversion of the roles of

⁷⁶ Aguilar Chiu, “Mark,” 999.

⁷⁷ Larsen, *Seeing and Understanding Jesus*, 103.

⁷⁸ Whitaker, “Rebuke or Recall?,” 671.

⁷⁹ Allen, “Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost,” 34.

teacher and disciple derives from Peter's fundamental misreading of his master's true identity and mission.

However, is Peter's misapprehension here shared by the other disciples? Pointedly, when Jesus so vehemently rebukes Peter, he does so in front of the other disciples (8:33). Scholars have differed about Jesus' attitude here, some suggesting that Jesus does not intend to rebuke them along with Peter. Timothy Wiarda, however, interprets Jesus' action as suggesting that "Jesus thinks the disciples, too, are likely to be affected by the kind of thinking Peter has evidenced, and perhaps that Jesus intends them to overhear what he says to Peter."⁸⁰ Joel Marcus hypothesizes that Jesus knows that the disciples hold the same opinion, explaining that his "awkward stage direction" indicates their sharing in Peter's opinion. Jesus' intention, in contrast, instructs all of the disciples (along with the crowd) of the necessity of sharing in his suffering (8:34-38).⁸¹ This perspective is the more convincing, since Peter is often considered the disciples' spokesperson in Mark. Here, where Peter has just confessed Jesus as Messiah on behalf of all the disciples (8:29), Mark's emphasis of Peter's role makes sense. Jesus' rebuke functions to challenge Peter for the opinion shared by all the disciples, with the purpose of letting them all know that they still see reality in a merely human manner, and that their attitude is not appropriate to their role as Jesus' disciples. They must return to Jesus' way of discipleship on this critical journey. That is, they need to be cured of their spiritual blindness.

2.2.2 The Disciples' Response to Jesus' Second Prediction (Mark 9:33-34)

And yet, after Jesus announces his passion a second time, Mark notes, οἱ δὲ ἠγνόουν τὸ ῥῆμα, καὶ ἐφοβοῦντο αὐτὸν ἐπερωτῆσαι ("but they did not understand what he was saying and

⁸⁰ Timothy Wiarda, "Peter as Peter in the Gospel of Mark," *New Testament Studies* 45, 1 (1999): 19–37, at 29.

⁸¹ Joel Marcus, *Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Bible. English. Anchor Bible. 1964 v. 27 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 607.

were afraid to ask him”) (9:32). Mark now explicitly attributes incomprehension to *all* the disciples. Worse, they dare not ask him to explain. Biblical scholars propose different reasons for their fear. According to Adela Yarbro Collins:

The specific moment that they were afraid to ask him about the saying, however, suggests that they did not want to hear about Jesus’ being handed over and killed, the same could happen to them. In fact, Jesus already stated, ‘If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me’ (8:34). So, their lack of understanding is related to resistance to Jesus and his teaching, a classic example of ‘hardness of heart’ (6:52; 8:17).⁸²

Similarly, Ernest Best and Darrell Bock propose that the disciples’ fear is out of self-preservation: they sense that Jesus’ answer may foreshadow their own suffering.⁸³ Robert H. Stein, on the other hand, does not consider their concern for their own possible suffering inappropriate. He suggests the disciples’ experience a “holy fear” inspired by Jesus’ mighty deeds (4:41; 5:15, 33; 6:50; 11:18; 16:8).⁸⁴

Mark himself does not provide any explanation for their reaction. However, based on subtle clues both in the context of this passage and in the Gospel in general, I propose that their fear in this moment may result from a plausible reason: the disciples do not want to admit that they do not yet understand. The disciples’ fear comes immediately after οἱ δὲ ἠγνόουν τὸ ῥῆμα in the same verse (9:32). The Greek word ἠγνόουν, the imperfect form of ἀγνοέω, illustrates that the disciples’ spiritual blindness is a continuous state or condition. They have not understood Jesus’ teachings and deeds previously (4:13; 7:18; 8:18, 21). Jesus has also rebuked them when they came to ask for his explanation for the parable of uncleanness (7:17-22), retorting οὕτως καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀσύνετοί

⁸² Collins, *Mark*, 441.

⁸³ Best, *Following Jesus*, 73; and Darrell L. Bock, *Mark*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York: Cambridge University, 2015), 260.

⁸⁴ Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 440.

ἐστε; (“Then do you also fail to understand?”) (7:18). In order to avoid the repetition of such a mortifying admonition, the disciples hide their “blindness” by venturing no question.

When Mark uses ἠγνόουν to describe the disciples’ incomprehension in 9:32, the verb can mean not only “not to understand,” but also “to be ignorant.” This latter meaning, “to be ignorant,” may be inferred from the way the disciples make no response to Jesus’ prediction of his suffering, but precipitously move to another topic. Bock highlights Mark’s use of διελογίζεσθε, which means “argue” (Mark 2:6, 8; 8:16-17; 11:31).⁸⁵ Here, the disciples argue with one another about which of them is the greatest (9:34). Is this not opposite to what the reader might expect? When the disciples are afraid to ask Jesus about what he predicts, would they not more likely have sought to understand Jesus’ meaning? That is probably Jesus’ expectation also.⁸⁶ Do the disciples maintain silence because they do not want to admit that the object of their conversation is not Jesus, but their striving for the greatest position among themselves? Such a conversation is extremely ironic, given the way that Jesus has been leading and teaching them. While Jesus is talking about the way of the cross through suffering and death, the disciples are arguing with one another about which of them is the greatest.

It is interesting to note a difference between Mark’s and Matthew’s accounts concerning the disciples’ debating the same question: Who is the greatest? In Matthew’s version, the disciples frame a more respectable response when they ask, “Who is the greatest **in the kingdom of heaven**?” (Matt 18:1). In contrast, in Mark’s Gospel, the disciples seem only to seek human greatness among themselves (Mark 9:34).⁸⁷ Once again, the Markan disciples not only try to ignore the prospect of Jesus’ suffering and their own suffering as a consequence; they also want to

⁸⁵ Bock, *Mark*, 261.

⁸⁶ Focant, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 379.

⁸⁷ Donahue, *The Gospel of Mark*, 284.

compete with one another for greatness.⁸⁸ While they are on “the way” with Jesus, the way that leads to the cross, and while Jesus teaches suffering as his and their destiny, the disciples are enamored only by their personal reputation. Jesus recognizes what they were talking about and seeking on the way. It leads him to pose a rhetorical question which may help the disciples understand the juxtaposed irony between his teaching and their expectations.

2.2.3 The Disciples’ Response to Jesus’ Third Prediction (Mark 10:35-41)

The third instantiation of the disciples’ incomprehension on the “way section” is James’s and John’s request for positions of prominence (Mark 10:35-37). This request is also found in Matthew 20:20-21, where it is the mother of James and John who asks Jesus on behalf of her sons. Matthew uses the mother of James and John to soften their responsibility for their ambition. Mark, on the other hand, puts the request on the lips of the disciples themselves: it is *their* failure, not their mother’s. This prompts Jesus’ teaching them about servant leadership.

When Jesus predicts his coming passion for the third time, the disciples do not show any comprehension about the implications of his teaching. In contrast, they think only about their personal advancement. James and John approach Jesus, asking him to fulfill their request. Their request and attitude contrast with those of the blind Bartimaeus in the story that immediately follows (10:46-52). The disparity between the beggar and the sons of Zebedee is clearly demonstrated in the following table:⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Collins, *Mark*, 444.

⁸⁹ English from Greek is my translation. See more details and explanations in Olekamma, *The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus*, 166.

	Mark 10:32-45	Mark 10:46-52
Manner of approach	διδάσκαλε, θέλομεν ἵνα ὃ ἐὰν αἰτήσωμέν σε ποιήσης ἡμῖν (35b, c) ("Teacher, we wish that you would do for us whatever we might ask you")	υἱὲ δαυίδ, ἐλέησόν με (47d, 48d) ("Son of David, have mercy on me")
What was asked	δὸς ἡμῖν ἵνα εἷς σου ἐκ δεξιῶν καὶ εἷς ἐξ ἀριστερῶν καθίσωμεν ἐν τῇ δόξῃ σου (37b, c) ("Grant to us that we might sit one at your right and one at your left in your glory")	ραββουνι, ἵνα ἀναβλέψω (51e) ("Rabboni, let me regain sight")
Jesus' response	οὐκ οἶδατε τί αἰτεῖσθε (38b,c) ("You do not know what you ask")	ἡ πίστις σου σέσωκέν σε. καὶ εὐθὺς ἀνέβλεψεν (52c, d) ("Your faith has healed you." And immediately he regained sight")
Motive of the request	Prestige: καθίσωμεν ἐν τῇ δόξῃ σου (37c) ("that we might sit in your glory")	In order to see and follow Jesus: καὶ ἠκολούθει αὐτῷ ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ (52e) ("and he was following him on the way")
Disposition of requester	Fear: οἱ δὲ ἀκολουθοῦντες ἐφοβοῦντο (32d) ("and the ones following were afraid")	Faith: ἡ πίστις σου σέσωκέν σε (52c) ("Your faith has healed you")

The blind beggar Bartimaeus is not in the inner circle of the disciples, but he recognizes Jesus as the Son of David and knows how and what to ask in order to receive Jesus' favor. He humbly and respectfully approaches Jesus: ἐλέησόν με ("have mercy on me") (10:47, 48), asking for the physical sight that will enable him to follow Jesus on the way. The disciples, on the other hand, particularly James and John who, with Peter, are allowed to share the most vital moments of Jesus' ministry, nonetheless fail to understand him. Their demand, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you" (10:35), recalls Herod's promise to Herodias's daughter: "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." (6:22).⁹⁰ They are interested in Jesus because they view him as a powerful king who can grant his followers whatever they want.

Perhaps their misunderstanding derives from the excitement of coming near to Jerusalem, the "royal" city. They assume that Jesus will be enthroned as king there and that, as his closest followers, they will reap some benefit from his kingship.⁹¹ William Lane explains that, "The request may be for the places of honor at the messianic banquet or for the positions of eminence and authority at the Parousia, when Jesus is enthroned as the eschatological judge."⁹² Their request for future positions of honor and power demonstrates that James and John can only grasp the royal connotations of messiahship; they completely ignore the suffering that Jesus says he must go through, a perspective similar to Peter's, seeing Jesus as a triumphant messiah whom Peter desires to prevent from fulfilling his suffering messiahship (8:32).

The brothers' request provokes the other disciples' irritation. Why do they have this response? One possible reason is that they suppose that James and John are using their kinship

⁹⁰ See more explanations in Collins, *Mark*, 495; and Olekamma, *The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus*, 168.

⁹¹ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 415; and Collins, *Mark*, 495. William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 378.

⁹² Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 379.

relationship with Jesus to “get the edge” to request the positions of honor.⁹³ R.T. France suggests that Mark’s use of προσπορεύονται (“come forward”) refers to the brothers’ attempt to “corner” Jesus with their petition which, unfortunately, the other disciples have overheard.⁹⁴

James and John are probably Jesus’ cousins,⁹⁵ taking advantage of familial relationship to make their request to him. A Vietnamese proverb says that thanks to a person having a position of honor in society, other members in his/her family will benefit. Similarly, John C. Hutchison points out that when “[a] person’s merits begin with the merits (or debits) of their lineage, the reputation of their ancestral house” has much influence in both Greco-Roman and Jewish culture.⁹⁶ Thus, James and John probably expect that they may gain benefits when Jesus comes to rule in his kingdom, based on their kinship relationship with Jesus. They seem to have forgotten that, when the crowd informed Jesus that his mother and kindred came to him, he retorted that his true mother, sister, and brother are those who do the will of God (3:34). Another possible reason for the disciples’ anger is James’ and John’s presumptuous request of Jesus, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you” (10:35). They ask him as if they are giving an order, which falls harshly on their ears. This arrogant manner of asking may be provoked by their notion of sharing family ties with Jesus.

Finally, the other disciples may feel irritated because they also want honor and power, but Zebedee’s sons have pre-empted this possibility.⁹⁷ After Jesus’ second prediction (9:34), they already argued with one another over which of them is the greatest. The other ten react to the two

⁹³ John C. Hutchison, “Servanthood: Jesus’ Countercultural Call to Christian Leaders,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166, 1-3 (2009): 53-69, at 59-61.

⁹⁴ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 415.

⁹⁵ Matthew and John together give clues about the woman standing near the cross of Jesus as the sister of Jesus’ mother. Matthew 27:56 refers to Mary, the mother of Zebedee’s sons, and John 19:25 indicates that woman as Jesus mother’s sister. See more explanations in Hutchison, “Servanthood,” 58-59.

⁹⁶ Hutchison, “Servanthood,” 61.

⁹⁷ Stein, *Mark*, 486.

brothers because they share the same ambitions of seeking greatness and authority. Jesus recognizes that all Twelve miss the point. Therefore, his teaching about greatness and authority is directed to *all* his disciples, not only to James and John.

Yet again, the disciples respond to Jesus' announcement about his passion with a remarkable indifference toward his fate, while seeking glory and authority for themselves. In other words, they refuse to accept Jesus' teaching about his coming suffering. Even more, they may be precluding the prospect of following Jesus on the way to the cross. They are spiritually blind. The healed beggar Bartimaeus, in contrast, takes on their task and enters Jerusalem following the Messiah who will suffer.

2.3 Mark's Intention of Describing the Disciples' Repeated Failures along the Way

In recent years, Mark's negative portrayal of the disciples has received considerable attention from biblical scholars, provoking numerous and varying arguments. William Wrede proposes that the disciples' misunderstanding serves both as a literary device and in function of Jesus' identity, focusing on the "messianic secret."⁹⁸ More recent scholars such as Heikki Räisänen and Joseph Tyson have agreed with him.⁹⁹ In the Gospel, Jesus often appears to be intentionally withholding the revelation of his identity, commanding his followers to remain silent after their having witnessed his performance of miracles, such as when he casts out unclean spirits (1:23-25, 34; 3:11-12) and performs healings (1:43-44; 5:42-43; 7:36; 8:26). After Peter's confession (8:29-30), and even after the Transfiguration (9:9), Jesus does not permit discussion of who he is. José Enrique Aguilar Chiu proposes that this is because "he wants to avoid misunderstanding regarding

⁹⁸ William Wrede recognizes that Jesus seems to hold his nature hidden throughout Mark's Gospel. So, Wrede calls this motif "the messianic secret." This term has common used by later biblical scholars. Also see William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, Library of Theological Translations (Greenwood, SC: Attic, 1971), 231-236.

⁹⁹ Heikki Räisänen, *The "messianic Secret" in Mark*, Studies of the New Testament and Its World (Edinburgh: T&TClark, 1990), 195-222; and Tyson, "The Blindness of the Disciples in Mark", 261.

his identity and he avoids politicizing his mission.”¹⁰⁰ Jesus’ reluctance may suggest that his messiahship remains beyond the disciples’ comprehension. Though he subtly explains it many times throughout the Gospel, the disciples do not succeed in understanding. The disciples are not seen as “foolish” or “stupid”; rather, they are used as a device for Mark’s own point of view. Depicting the disciples’ failure to comprehend allows Mark to emphasize the unique and “secret” messianic Jesus.

Unsok Hur proposes that the disciples’ ignorance and misunderstanding are an invented literary device Mark deliberately created, exaggerating the disciples’ lack of comprehension as the reason for their inability to prevent Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion, not for their failure to understand repeated predictions of his death.¹⁰¹ Hur also does not think that the disciples misunderstand Jesus as a political messiah. Hur explains that the disciples have left everything to follow him (10:28), seeing him as a uniquely authoritative teacher, unlike the teachers of the law (1:22), and having witnessed his miraculous works (4:35-41; 21-43; 6:30-44). These experiences prove that they trust in and are loyal to Jesus.¹⁰² The interpretation that they are unable to understand what Jesus teaches conflicts with this intense personal investment. Hur suggests that, in Mark’s view, during the most critical moments of Jesus’ passion, no one can do anything to prevent him from being arrested and crucified. Likewise, the disciples are no exception. With the disciples helpless to protect Jesus, Mark uses the fiction of their “running away”¹⁰³ to indicate the true incompetence of the historical disciples to help Jesus in any way. This interpretation is an attempt to defend the disciples from being reproached because of their failures. His argument is plausible when it is applied to the case

¹⁰⁰ Aguilar Chiu, “Mark,” 974.

¹⁰¹ Unsok Hur, “The Disciples’ Lack of Comprehension in the Gospel of Mark,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 49, 1 (2019): 41–48, at 45.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 42-43.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 45.

of the disciples' misunderstanding concerning Jesus' predictions of suffering. However, how does this theory explain the disciples' other examples of "blindness," such as their failure to understand the parable of the sower (4:13), the stilling of the storm (4:40-41), or Jesus' walking on the water (6:52)?

Theodore J. Weeden proposes that the conflict between Jesus and his disciples in Mark does not represent actual history; rather, "it is a carefully formulated polemical device created by the evangelist to disgrace and debunk the disciples."¹⁰⁴ Weeden theorizes that the disciples have no value in Mark because they are representatives of Mark's opponents. These "opponents" who set their minds on human motivations, and not on divine things (8:33), are actually people opposing Mark in his own generation. Perhaps Mark considers this resistance equivalent to choices made by Jesus' disciples (14:43-45, 50, 66-71).¹⁰⁵ According to Weeden, Mark attempts to polemicize his current opponents, successfully discrediting their position through underlining the disciples' failures in the Gospel. Robert Tannehill questions how Weeden's construction can stand in light of the positive portrayal of the disciples in the first part of Mark's Gospel (e.g., 1:16-20; 3:13-19; 6:7-13).¹⁰⁶ What is Mark's intention when he describes that the disciples quickly leave behind everything to follow Jesus? If Mark aims to attack the disciples, why does Jesus give them the authority to drive out devils (3:15; 6:7, 13)? I find Tannehill's rebuttal more convincing than Weeden's proposal.

Along with Tannehill, Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Ernst Best offer another hypothesis. They believe that Mark utilizes the negative picture of the disciples as a device to communicate

¹⁰⁴ Theodore J. Weeden, "The Heresy That Necessitated Mark's Gospel," *Zeitschrift Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft Und Die Kunde Der Älteren Kirche* 59, 3-4 (1968): 145-158, at 147.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁰⁶ See more explanations in Robert C Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role," *Journal of Religion* 57, 4 (1977): 386-405, at 394-5.

indirectly with his readers,¹⁰⁷ presenting the mistakes of the disciples in order to sustain them in the face of suffering. Best explains:

If a writer wishes to talk about discipleship using men as examples, there are two obvious approaches. He may either set forward a series of examples of good discipleship with the implication that these examples should be followed (so Daniel 1-6; 2 Maccabees; 4 Maccabees) or he may instruct through the failures of his examples (so many of the stories about the patriarchs and David). Mark chose the latter course.¹⁰⁸

I find this suggestion persuasive. Mark may recognize that his early Christian community shares the same thoughts and views attributed to the disciples. He composes his account of the disciples' weaknesses in order to help his readers recognize themselves in the disciples. Such a reflection may encourage them to avoid similar failures and choose paths different than those of the disciples. Paradoxically, the very critique of the disciples becomes a message of hope for Mark's community if they can distance themselves from the disciples' failures.

I propose that Mark has situated the disciples' incomprehension in the "way section" of his Gospel with the purpose of emphasizing the motif of Jesus' teaching about the way of discipleship. Mark intentionally brackets the "way section" with the two stories of healing of blind men in order to characterize the spiritual blindness of the disciples and the necessity for Jesus' healing. The journey to Jerusalem is the urgent occasion for the disciples' need to see properly and accurately what constitutes Jesus' messiahship, and what being a disciple of the suffering Messiah means, so that they can enter Jerusalem with Jesus.

¹⁰⁷ Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark," 403; Malbon, *Mark's Jesus*, 105; and Best, *Following Jesus*, 12.

¹⁰⁸ Best, *Following Jesus*, 12.

Conclusion

In the “way section,” Mark utilizes Peter’s confession and the disciples’ response to Jesus’ predictions to his passion in order to illuminate two specific kinds of incomprehension. The primary misunderstanding is that the disciples hold onto the image of Jesus as a glorious and triumphant political messiah. Consequently, they also fail to grasp the necessity of a suffering discipleship.

With these convictions, Peter, on behalf of all the disciples, proclaims Jesus’ messiahship as royal and authoritative. Therefore, it is impossible for Peter to accept the notion of a suffering Messiah when Jesus announces that he will go to Jerusalem to be rejected, ridiculed, and ultimately put to death. This prospect is also beyond all the disciples’ comprehension, even after Jesus emphatically predicts it two more times. In the second and third predictions, Jesus’ foretelling his suffering again elicits the disciples’ ignorance. They fail to ask what he means or how such a fate can happen to him. Worse, their primary motivation in remaining with him is seeking their personal greatness and having a share in power and glory. They excitedly expect that they will gain some benefit from Jesus in his glory when he arrives at the “royal” city, Jerusalem.

The disciples miss the point that Jesus’ glory comes through the pathway of his passion and death. They do not understand that Jerusalem is the place where he will undergo such crucial challenges. It is also the way through which they must go, the unavoidable path that discipleship demands of them. Mark’s purpose in the “way section” is to demonstrate definitively that knowledge of Jesus’ messiahship entails the way of suffering discipleship and that, without this understanding, they are unable to walk with Jesus into Jerusalem. Mark intentionally exposes their two forms of incomprehension before entering Jerusalem so that Jesus can bring proper “sight” to them, as he guides them to join him on the way of the passion that awaits him.

CHAPTER THREE

JESUS' TEACHING ABOUT THE WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP

Jesus' three discipleship discourses follow a similar sequence: first, he explains that he must suffer and die; second, the disciples betray a certain level of incomprehension at his prediction; and third, Jesus attempts to bring "sight" to his disciples to heal their spiritual "blindness" so that they can think in terms of the things of God rather than in human terms (8:33). In the discipleship discourses, Jesus teaches his disciples to deny themselves and take up their own cross to follow him, to become great by being last, and to become servants to others—especially in their roles as leaders. Jesus' teachings are not based on a mere ideal of discipleship, but rather on his own example: he himself is the measure of the way of discipleship he teaches.

Using the road to Jerusalem as his classroom, Jesus discloses to his followers that to become his disciples, they must walk like him in their lives. This way of rejection, suffering, and death—a seeming contradiction—in fact leads to a triumphant end. The "way section" becomes the "way of life."¹⁰⁹ Jesus himself enacts this paradoxical way of life and reveals its meaning to those who want to follow him. His passion, death, and resurrection purchase redemption. Likewise, if anyone wishes to follow Jesus' path of suffering, it will lead them into his glory and triumph.

In this chapter I will focus on the following primary questions. What are significant points of Jesus' teachings about discipleship? Why is this teaching difficult? Why do Jesus' followers need to deny themselves, take up their own cross, and follow him? How does Mark show the integral relationship between Christology and discipleship? I will respond to these questions by examining Jesus' three particular teachings: denying oneself and bearing one's cross to follow him (8:34-38), being first by being last (9:33-37), and being the leader through service to others (10:43–

¹⁰⁹ Watts, "Mark," 114; and Marcus, *The Way of the Lord*, 22.

45). Finally, I will demonstrate how Jesus' life manifests his teaching. In other words, I will show how Mark describes Jesus' teaching about discipleship as based on Jesus' own life and experience.

3.1 Teaching on Self-Denial and Cross-Bearing to Follow Jesus (Mark: 8:34-38)

Jesus' first disclosure about the conditions of discipleship (8:34-38) follows Peter's rebuke when Jesus gives the opening announcement about his coming passion (8:31-32). Peter does not accept a suffering Messiah. But this also means that he refuses to follow Jesus along the path of suffering. Jesus instructs Peter, as well as the other disciples, to know that they are setting their minds according to human interests, not divine ones (8:33).

Jesus emphasizes more clearly that the requirements made of his disciples are self-denial, cross-bearing, and following him. Mark begins Jesus' teaching with *καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος τὸν ὄχλον σὺν τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς* ("And calling the crowd with his disciples, he said to them"; 8:34). Jesus extends his audience beyond the small circle of disciples (8:27-33) through the unexpected inclusion of *τὸν ὄχλον* ("the crowd"). The crowd here is not limited only to the Jewish people, but includes Gentiles who may wish to join Jesus' movement.¹¹⁰ The evangelist situates Jesus' teaching in the villages of Caesarea Philippi, a region where most of the population was Gentile.¹¹¹ Mark is highlighting that Jesus' call to self-denial and cross-bearing to follow him is universal.

¹¹⁰ In Mark, the Gentiles are also interested in Jesus' miracles and teachings. For instance, a Gentile of Syrophenician origin begs Jesus to help her little daughter who has an unclean spirit (8:24-30). Jairus, a Roman official, also begs Jesus to save his daughter from the point of death (Mark 5: 21-24, 35-43). Thanks to their faith, their daughters are healed.

¹¹¹ Jesus teaches his disciples after Peter's confession and Peter's rebuke taking place in the region of Caesarea Philippi. Matthew L. Skinner explains more that, "In this region a small Jewish contingent probably lived among Gentiles. ... Mark's general ambiguity about Jesus' activities in this place is consistent with other passages in which Jesus' ministry extends to locations inhabited primarily by Gentiles but never fully immerses itself in their settings (see Mark 5:1-20; 7:24-8:9)." See Matthew L Skinner, "Denying Self, Bearing a Cross, and Following Jesus: Unpacking the Imperatives of Mark 8:34," *Word & World* 23, 3 (2003): 321-31, at 323.

Jesus starts his teaching by saying, εἴ τις θέλει ὀπίσω μου ἀκολουθεῖν (“if anyone desires to follow after me”; 8:34). Using an if-clause here indicates that Jesus underscores the free will of those who want to become his disciples. This is different from his call to the first disciples (1:18 and 2:14-15), where Jesus is portrayed as the one taking the initiative and active control of the situation. Jesus comes to the disciples first and expresses his desire by calling those he wants. They become disciples in accordance with Jesus’ will and initiative, with their full response coming later.

In 8:34, the verb ἀκολουθέω (“follow”) again occurs in one of the three conditions of discipleship: ἀπαρνησάσθω ἑαυτὸν (“let him deny himself), ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ (“let him take up his cross”), and ἀκολουθεῖτω μοι (“follow me”). The use of the verb ἀκολουθέω (“follow”) brings to mind the call narratives of the first disciples (1:18; 2:14-15). Donahue and Harrington call ἀκολουθέω “Mark’s favorite term for becoming a disciple of Jesus.”¹¹² The verb ἀκολουθέω is used when Jesus calls the first disciples to join his ministry. Here, when Mark mentions Jesus’ instructions about discipleship, the verb is used again.

It is intriguing that ὀπίσω μου (“after/behind me”) occurs in verse 33 when Jesus rebukes Peter—ὑπάγε ὀπίσω μου (“get behind me”)—and now in verse 34 as well. Mark’s use of ὀπίσω may indicate their following is respectful, the way in which a student follows his teacher.¹¹³ Jesus’ words, ὑπάγε ὀπίσω μου, are also understood as an order for Peter to resume his appropriate position as a disciple rather than try to control Jesus.¹¹⁴ As Robyn Whitaker suggests, “rather than a command for Peter to leave entirely, ὑπάγε ὀπίσω μου might best be translated something like ‘go and get back behind me’ or ‘get back into line’.”¹¹⁵ Peter is instructed to return to where he

¹¹² Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 263.

¹¹³ Marcus, *Mark*, 180.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 605.

¹¹⁵ Whitaker, “Rebuke or Recall?,” 672.

belongs as a disciple following Jesus.¹¹⁶ Jesus' words, ὀπίσω μου, are a reminder of Peter's initial calling (δεύτε ὀπίσω μου; "follow behind me"; 1:17), a marked contrast with what Peter is doing to his teacher when he rebukes and impedes Jesus from fulfilling his passion mission. In verse 34, Jesus reuses ὀπίσω μου to invite his disciples to stand in the position of the follower so that they can observe easily and learn what their teacher is doing. They should then follow his example rather than, as Peter tried to do, become an obstacle hindering Jesus from accomplishing the Father's will.

In addition, Mark's usage of the verb ἀκολουθεῖτω in the present imperative form indicates following Jesus is a process and involves a continuing relationship between the disciple and Jesus. The phrases ἀπαρνησάσθω ἑαυτὸν ("let him deny himself") and ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ ("let him take up his cross") have aorist imperatives, which emphasize that the acts of denying oneself and taking up one's cross are acts of committal.¹¹⁷ The imperative ἀκολουθεῖτω sounds like an invitation.¹¹⁸ Combining the if-clause εἴ τις θέλει ὀπίσω μου ἀκολουθεῖν with the imperative ἀκολουθεῖτω μοι, Mark highlights that Jesus does not impose his decision on those he calls, but leaves them an open-ended invitation, letting them make their own commitment, since the consequences of that choice entail self-denial and taking up their own cross.

Jesus' call of discipleship first involves self-denial. What does Jesus mean when he commands ἀπαρνησάσθω ἑαυτὸν ("let him deny himself")? Neither Mark nor Jesus give any explanation of this meaning in the passage. However, based on the context of Jesus' teaching on the way to Jerusalem, we can be assured that the call for self-denial is more radical than

¹¹⁶ Larsen, *Seeing and Understanding Jesus*, 104.

¹¹⁷ Best, *Following Jesus*, 32; Stein, *Mark*, 407; Strauss, *Mark*, 372; and C. S. Mann, *Mark*, Bible. English. Anchor Bible. 1964 v. 27 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986), 348.

¹¹⁸ Focant, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 346

relinquishing possessions or one's personal ideas to follow and match the group's decision. Nor does it simply involve asceticism or self-discipline.¹¹⁹ As Matthew Skinner notes:

Nothing about the idea of self-denial in 8:34 suggests a self-destructive form of quietism in the face of gratuitous acts of violation, neglect, or subjugation. Nor does Mark 8:34 issue a call to asceticism that eschews pleasurable experiences and the preferences of one's yearnings. Jesus' imperative does not set one's spirit against the body nor imply that God would always have us choose the most distasteful of two options, lest we be guilty of nourishing self-seeking desires.¹²⁰

Jesus' demand does not mean that he requires us to put asides our own pleasures or give up the things we want. Ernst Best emphasizes that, "It is not the denial of something to the self but the denial of the self itself."¹²¹ The "self itself" is underlined by Mark's usage of the reflexive pronoun ἐαυτόν ("self"), which implies a radical abandonment or refusal of one's own interest, one's own destiny, and self-determination.¹²² "Self" relates to our own deep ego, not to temporary desires or ambitions. As Eduard Schweizer explains, "It indicates a freedom in which one no longer wills to recognize his own 'I'."¹²³ If they are willing to become Jesus' followers, they no longer consider themselves the center of their own universe or as their own top priority, but rather see Jesus as the center of their life so that they dare to leave their own livelihood to follow him (1:20). Paul expresses this insight as 'it is no longer they who live but Christ who lives in them' (cf. Gal 2:20).¹²⁴

This understanding recapitulates the call stories of the first disciples: they deny family and occupational ties in order follow Jesus. Robert A. Guelich says that "Jesus' call, therefore, changes

¹¹⁹ Strauss, *Mark*, 372; and Stein, *Mark*, 406.

¹²⁰ Matthew L. Skinner also cites some examples of different paraphrases of ἀπαρνησάσθω ἐαυτόν: "The Living Bible restates the 'deny oneself' command as 'You must put aside your own pleasure.'" According to the *New Century Version*, would-be-followers of Jesus 'must give up the things they want'." See Skinner, "Denying Self, Bearing a Cross, and Following Jesus," 326.

¹²¹ See more explanations of self-denial in Best, *Following Jesus*, 37.

¹²² France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 340.

¹²³ Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News according to Mark*, (Richmond: John Knox, 1970), 176.

¹²⁴ Aguilar Chiu, "Mark," 1000.

the disciples' vocation implying a radical break with their former way of living. Instead of living by the fishing business, they will live to reach others."¹²⁵ Boat, nets, father, hired men, the very foundations of a person symbolize one's personal living, self-preservation, and hope for advancement. Jesus proffers two challenging choices: either remain in their stable life with family and job, or leave everything and everyone to follow Jesus. When they deny themselves by relinquishing their own autonomy and consider Jesus as the center of their life, they let Jesus intervene in their normal activities, thoughts, and decisions.

Now, when the disciples are on the way to Jerusalem, the self-denial that Jesus demands is more specific: they must be prepared to deny themselves and accept Jesus' path, as well as their own destination of martyrdom, including rejection, suffering, and crucifixion.¹²⁶ Such commitment is completely contrary to what Peter does in Jesus' greatest vulnerability: he denies Jesus three times in the courtyard of the high priest, designated by the verb ἀπαρνέομαι ("deny") in 14:68; 70.¹²⁷ Jesus also used that very verb, ἀπαρνέομαι, to announce Peter's threefold disavowal of Jesus before the rooster's crows (14:30, 31, 72). The verb ἀπαρνέομαι is marked as the designation of "the act of apostasy."¹²⁸ Peter denies not himself but his master: οὐκ οἶδα τὸν ἄνθρωπον τοῦτον ὃν λέγετε ("I do not know this man of whom you are talking"; 14:71). Peter severs himself from Jesus and all the value of Jesus' life and ministry. He asserts his freedom from Jesus in order to guarantee his personal security.¹²⁹ In other words, because of his "self," Peter cuts off his relationship from Jesus that he not be affected by or take any responsibility for his teacher.

¹²⁵ Robert A. Guelich, *Mark*, Word Biblical Commentary 34 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1989), 51.

¹²⁶ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 307; and Bock, *Mark*, 245.

¹²⁷ Mark L. Strauss notes that "The verb ἀπαρνέομαι is used in the NT eleven times, eight of which are related to Peter's denial 14:30, 31, 72; etc.) In these contexts it means the renunciation of any association with a person." See Strauss, *Mark*, 372.

¹²⁸ Focant uses Cuvillier's opinion. See Focant, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 346.

¹²⁹ Skinner, "Denying Self, Bearing a Cross, and Following Jesus," 328.

Peter shows himself a coward when faced with difficulties. He is Mark's negative example for the readers, one opposing Jesus' first condition of discipleship.

Jesus' second demand is ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ ("let him take up his cross") (8:34). This is the first time Mark uses σταυρός ("cross"), a word that will not appear again until 15:21. In the Gospel, σταυρός ("cross") and σταυρῶ ("crucify") occur six times in total, five of which are used in the narrative of Jesus' crucifixion (15:21-32). It is not surprising that when Jesus says ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ, the first reference of σταυρός immediately suggests an association with Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus' demand of taking up one's cross does not only literally mean to carry the crossbeam as Jesus did, but rather to accept a life of hardship with difficulties and even persecution.

Σταυρός refers to all the dimensions of humiliation and pain for the death by crucifixion, evoking both horrifying torture and public shame.¹³⁰ The executed person suffered an agonizing death on the cross. Throughout the long process of dying, the victim was exposed to the view of travelers, and was even entertainment to onlookers because the Romans often situated the place of execution near major roads.¹³¹ Worse, the executed corpse was not buried but left on the cross as carrion for birds or dogs, increasing the shame, "since an honorable death required burial in one's ancestral tomb" (15:20-21).¹³² Because of this intention, crucifixion was used as the cruelest punishment for the worst of criminals and the greatest of enemies.¹³³ Jesus was treated as such a criminal, going through all this merciless pain and scandalous shame. When Jesus integrates

¹³⁰ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 339. Crucifixion is also called "the most pitiable of deaths" or "the greatest punishment of slavery." See John Granger Cook, *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 327 (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); and Helen K. Bond, "A Fitting End? Self-Denial and a Slave's Death in Mark's Life of Jesus," *New Testament Studies* 65, 4 (2019): 425-42, at 431-2.

¹³¹ See more details in K. M. Coleman, "Fatal Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments," *Journal of Roman Studies* 80 (1990): at 44-73; and Bond, "A Fitting End?," 431.

¹³² Strauss, *Mark*, 373

¹³³ Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub, 2001), 244-5; Strauss, *Mark*, 373; and Bond, "A Fitting End?," 431-432.

“taking up one’s cross” into the conditions of discipleship, he underscores that willingness and courage to share with him this suffering path, enduring misunderstanding, rejection, shame, disgrace, and even loss of life his followers might face.¹³⁴

While ἀκολουθεῖτω μοι (“follow me”) sounds like an invitation, ἀπαρνησάσθω ἑαυτὸν (“let him deny himself”) and ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ (“let him take up his cross”) are considered as “warnings or conditions,” harsh demands portending contradictions against one’s will, desires, or interest for those who choose to become Jesus’ disciples.¹³⁵ Such conditions of discipleship will challenge his disciples. They will have opportunities to put into practice Jesus’ teachings, particularly in Gethsemane when Jesus is arrested. However, they prove false: “All of them deserted him and fled” (14:50). Peter, however, then changes his mind and follows Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest. But still, Peter refuses to “take up one’s cross” when witnessing the horrifying terror happening to Jesus. He is not brave enough to accept his relationship with Jesus, because he probably knows that Jesus’ “cross” will also become his own.

Why do the disciples need to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Jesus? If suffering or the cross is the end of the life of Jesus’ disciples, who will dare to give up everything to follow him? The cost of discipleship is unconditionally expensive. They cannot see that Jesus does not offer his followers a pessimistic outcome, but rather a triumphant glory. These paradoxical statements¹³⁶ are presented more clearly in the subsequent verses (8:35-38), where the conjunction γάρ (“for”) is used to provide a justification or a rationale for accepting Jesus’ invitation for discipleship in verse 34.¹³⁷ These verses of verbal paradox provide a chain of

¹³⁴ See more explanations of the meanings of “taking up one’s cross” in Stegman, *Opening the Door of Faith*, 31; Focant, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 346; and Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 263.

¹³⁵ Focant, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 346.

¹³⁶ Boring, *Mark*, 243.

¹³⁷ Focant, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 345.

consequences and reasons for the imperatives of verse 34.¹³⁸ To deny one's self, take up one's cross, and follow Jesus is equivalent to "lose one's life" for the sake of Jesus and of the gospel (v. 35), to lose the whole world (v. 36), and to be unashamed of Jesus and his words (v. 38).

Jesus emphasizes that saving one's life or gaining the whole world but forfeiting one's soul is not a worthy goal. There are no valid reasons for which one should pay with one's life, except for the sake of Jesus and the gospel message.¹³⁹ If one's earthly (physical) life pays for Jesus and his gospel, which requires discernment according to the thoughts of God (8:33), it is reversed in an awesome manifestation of his glory, particularly by "eternal" life (v. 35).¹⁴⁰ In contrast, those who want to gain the world or save their life, which is related to human standards, will lose "eternal" life. Robert C. Tannehill defines it as an antithetical aphorism.¹⁴¹ Such paradoxical teaching or antithetical aphorism elicits the motivation and courage for the radical demand asked of those who want to follow Jesus by refusing to live for their own sake (Gal 2:20).¹⁴² After his teaching, Jesus shows this sign of hope to his followers through the Transfiguration (9:3).¹⁴³ He brings his closest disciples onto the mountain and lets them experience the glory that awaits him. However challenging the content of Jesus' teachings about discipleship, it is also a message of hope and comfort for the ending of the disciples' journey.

¹³⁸ Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, 343.

¹³⁹ Skinner, "Denying Self, Bearing a Cross, and Following Jesus," 330.

¹⁴⁰ See more explanation in Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 313.

¹⁴¹ Robert C. Tannehill defines that, "An antithetical aphorism is a brief and pointed saying which makes a strong, unqualified statement containing a sharp contrast. The contrast is expressed in wordplay, using the same words in negative and positive form or using antithetical words. In Mark 8:35 the antithetical terms (save/destroy) express the conflict between Jesus' call and the human desire for security, a basic motive in our lives." See Robert C Tannehill, "Reading It Whole: The Function of Mark 8:34-35 in Mark's Story," *Quarterly Review* 2, 2 (1982): 67-78, at 68.

¹⁴² Aguilar Chiu, "Mark," 1000.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1000.

3.2 Teaching on Being Greatest in the Reign of God (9:35-37)

Similar to the context of Jesus' first discipleship discourse, his second teaching (9:35-37) immediately follows the disciples' incomprehension about the passion prediction, their fear to ask him (9:30-32), and their desire for recognition (9:33-34). When Jesus and the disciples arrive in Capernaum, Jesus admonishes them with a question: "What were you arguing about on the way?" (9:33). Initially, they are silent because they recognize that their argument about who of them is greatest is not appropriate. While Jesus is talking about the passion and the humiliation of the Son of Man, the disciples discuss among themselves the greatest place of authority. Their concern about hierarchy occasions Jesus to instruct them about the rule of discipleship.

As an authoritative teacher, Jesus sits down¹⁴⁴ in the house¹⁴⁵ and summons the Twelve in order to teach them. Jesus' giving the instructions only to the Twelve after he has just been speaking to them is awkward here. The Twelve were called as the first disciples to share Jesus' ministry, which probably causes them to think that they are important people who will continue his mission as the first leaders of the church.¹⁴⁶ Symbolically, they might be understood as representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Does Jesus want to separate the Twelve from the larger group of the disciples? Does Jesus intend to provide the lesson about authority only for the leaders?

Donahue and Harrington think that since the Twelve belong to Jesus' inner circle, they especially need this teaching.¹⁴⁷ Collins, on the other hand, suggests that "its link to the Twelve in

¹⁴⁴ Καθίσας "having sat down", demonstrates Jesus' role and posture of a teacher. This characteristic is also described in Mark 4:1; 12:41; 13:3; Matt 5:1; 13:1; Luke 5:3; John 8:2. Stein, 443; Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 284; France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 373; Boring, *Mark*, 280; James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Apollos, 2002), 386.

¹⁴⁵ The terms related to οἶκος ("house") are mentioned in 2:1; 3:20; 7:17; 7:24; 9:28; 9:33; 10:10. A. Fleddermann, 58. The house which Jesus and the disciples enter in Capernaum probably belongs to Peter (1:29-31) or Jesus (2:1,15). See Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 284; and Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 385.

¹⁴⁶ Collins argues that, "There is little evidence that all of the Twelve took on leadership roles in the early church, either collectively or individually." See Collins, *Mark*, 444.

¹⁴⁷ Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 285.

its present form suggests that it concerns the style of leadership in the early church. ... it is unlikely that the author of Mark is here criticizing the Twelve. Rather, he uses the group to represent Christian leaders in general. He and those who handed on the saying before him present Jesus as advocating a kind of leadership characterized by service.”¹⁴⁸ Mark does not distinguish between the Twelve and the disciples in this passage to have Jesus give a private saying to the leaders.¹⁴⁹ Note that the disciples are already in the house when they arrive in Capernaum. It does not make sense for Jesus to call only twelve people to listen and to leave out the others. Second, the requirement of being last of all here resembles Jesus’ first teaching about self-denial in 8:34, as well as his third one about being servant of all in 10:42-44. These apply to *all* of Jesus’ followers, not only to the leaders.¹⁵⁰ Mark emphasizes the requirement servant-discipleship for all those who desire to follow him.

Jesus begins his teaching by saying, εἴ τις θέλει πρῶτος εἶναι ἔσται πάντων ἔσχατος καὶ πάντων διάκονος (“if anyone wish to be first, he will be last of all and servant of all”; 9:35). It is worth noting that the word πρῶτος (“first”) has only been used in 6:21 to refer to those of high Galilean society, authorities, or notables invited to Herod’s birthday banquet. In Jewish culture, these people were considered to be at the top of the social ladder: rulers, priests, and aristocrats.¹⁵¹ On the other hand, the last or “servants” refer to those who have no status and authority. Jesus subverts the assumptions about status, turning them upside down,¹⁵² and goes against the grain of contemporary Jewish values. It is interesting that Jesus’ teaching here is similar in structure to

¹⁴⁸ Collins, *Mark*, 444-5.

¹⁴⁹ Harry T Fleddermann, “The Discipleship Discourse (Mark 9:33-50),” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43, 1 (1981): 57-75, at 59.

¹⁵⁰ Collins, *Mark*, 445.

¹⁵¹ Bock, *Mark*, 262; Don B Garlington, “Who Is the Greatest?,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53, 2 (2010): 287-316, at 300; and Focant, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 381;

¹⁵² Stegman, *Opening the Door of Faith*, 31.

8:34, εἴ τις θέλει... (“if anyone desires...”) and 10:43, ὁς ἂν θέλῃ (... “the one who desires...”).¹⁵³

All these teachings are given after Jesus’ predictions of his coming passion. Therefore, Jesus significantly emphasizes the voluntary motivation for suffering discipleship, here involving sacrificing for the sake of others.

Jesus’ concept of greatness is a paradoxical and unexpected reversal of common social aspirations to the privileged rank of life. It is not the last of some aspects, but of all. What does Jesus mean to be last of all and servant of all? How can they be first when they are last of all and servant of all? Prominence or greatness in God’s economy is characterized by two elements: lowliness and service, which is indicated through using the word διάκονος (“servant”). Διάκονος is first viewed as involving table service, but it also refers to all service rendered to others or to a community.¹⁵⁴ Mark’s use of διάκονος here designates the lowest status of society, one who serves other people.¹⁵⁵ There is, however, a certain “upside” to servanthood. James R. Edwards proposes, “The reason why a servant is the most preeminent position in the Reign of God is that the sole function of a servant is to give, and giving is the essence of God.”¹⁵⁶ He adds, “Nothing is greater in God’s eyes than giving, and no vocation affords the opportunity to give more than that of a servant (10:43).”¹⁵⁷

The preeminent value in the Reign of God is not power, prestige, and authority, but service. Jesus’ intentional repetition of the words “last of all and servant of all” shows a double emphasis of the service. His invitation underscores the demand that his followers live for the sake of Jesus and his message, including the service of others, which is similar to his teaching in 8:34: “If any

¹⁵³ See Focant, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 380-1

¹⁵⁴ Focant, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 380. Mark L. Strauss gives a list of jobs which a διάκονος can be such as a “servant,” “helper,” “assistant,” “agent,” “courier,” “deacon,” “minister,” and a range of other service roles and functions. See Strauss, *Mark*, 458.

¹⁵⁵ Bock, *Mark*, 282.

¹⁵⁶ Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 326-7

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 387.

want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

William Lane offers a helpful explanation of some length:

By transforming the question of greatness into the task-orientation of service, Jesus established a new pattern for human relationship which leaves no occasion for strife or opposition toward one another. The disciples’ thoughts were upon the period of glory, when questions of rank seemed appropriate (cf. 10:35-37); Jesus redirected them to his insistence that the way to glory leads through suffering and death. The point of suffering is here located in the service to be accomplished, where service means specifically sacrifice for others. The disciples cannot order their relationship as they please but are to recognize in one another men under whom they place themselves as servants. Jesus thus decided their question in a way which is in keeping with his proclamations of his own messianic vocation.¹⁵⁸

Jesus’ requirement underlines that, to be his followers, they are not to seek their own personal advancement or benefits, but that of others. True greatness is in service. He instructs the disciples to change their priority from themselves to those who are in need. The quest for rank and glory is subordinated to the point of self-denial and taking up one’s own cross.

Jesus demonstrates his teaching through the image of a child: ὃς ἂν ἔν τῶν τοιούτων παιδίων δέξηται ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματί μου, ἐμὲ δέχεται· καὶ ὃς ἂν ἐμὲ δέξηται, οὐκ ἐμὲ δέχεται ἀλλὰ τὸν ἀποστείλαντά με (“Whoever shall receive one of such little children in my name, receives me and whoever will receive me, receives not me, but the one who sent me”; 9:37). How does the child relate to Jesus’ teaching about being last of all and servant of all? What is a child’s style? Of what does a child’s style consist? Who does the child represent? Does the child serve as an example of the humble or innocent? We often tag children as innocent, vulnerable, gentle, humble, and pure. Thus, we assume that Jesus speaks about being childlike. Scholars such as Harry Fleddermann, Eduard Schweizer, and Hugh Anderson share this point of view.¹⁵⁹ Fleddermann explains the

¹⁵⁸ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 340.

¹⁵⁹ Fleddermann, “The Discipleship Discourse, 63; see also Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark*, (Richmond: John Knox, 1970), 192-3; and Hugh Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark: Based on the Revised Standard Version*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 234-5.

meaning of Jesus' instruction: "The disciple must be humble and lowly like a child, not seeking position or honor as the disciples have been doing."¹⁶⁰

However, the issue of status is not what Jesus implies here. Scholars such as James Edwards and Adela Yarbro Collins argue that Jesus' command to welcome or receive children is not an example of humility but something else.¹⁶¹ Unlike our present-day values and perspective on children, in the Greco-Roman world children were viewed as insignificant, having no position, no authority, no privilege: a status that humans ordinarily would not covet.¹⁶² Newborn children were exposed or killed for the benefit of the family, such as to control its size.¹⁶³ In the Hebrew Bible, children were considered to have value only when they contributed in helping their families or perpetuating the family name (e.g., Ps.128).¹⁶⁴ They were also considered as "weak" and not yet "people of the covenant."¹⁶⁵ The words for "child" and "servant" are from the same word in Aramaic, *talya*.¹⁶⁶ Such an association designates the child's lack of prestige.

Mark transforms the meaning of "being last of all" into "receiving a child." Jesus' use ἐν τῶν τοιούτων παιδίων ("one *of such* little children"), rather than merely ἐν παιδίον ("one child"), highlights that children symbolize the groups of people who are considered unimportant, of slight worth, because they have no social status and no position to offer recompense or honor.¹⁶⁷ Why does "receiving a child" make the disciples to be last? Why does welcoming unimportant people

¹⁶⁰ Fleddermann, "The Discipleship Discourse, 63

¹⁶¹ Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 288; and Collins, *Mark*, 445.

¹⁶² Narry F Santos, "Jesus' Paradoxical Teaching in Mark 8:35; 9:35; and 10:43-44," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157, at 625 (2000): 15–25, at 21–22; Strauss, *Mark*, 409; Boring, *Mark*, 281; and Focant, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 381.

¹⁶³ Collins, *Mark*, 445–6. Edwards also notes that, "In Judaism, children and women were largely auxiliary members of society whose connection to the social mainstream depended on men (either as fathers or husbands). Children, in particular, were thought of as 'not having arrived.' They were good illustrations of 'the very last'." See Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 288.

¹⁶⁴ Bock, *Mark*, 262.

¹⁶⁵ Stein, *Mark*, 444.

¹⁶⁶ Bock, *Mark*, 262; Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 285; and Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 270.

¹⁶⁷ Stegman, *Opening the Door of Faith*, 31; and France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 374.

have value in the sight of God? Receiving such a socially unimportant person requires self-denial, humbling oneself because “welcoming a little child (παιδίον) means breaking social norms, lowering oneself to accept another of lower status and thereby risking one’s own position of power and prestige.”¹⁶⁸ Jesus’ followers must identify themselves with these typically inferior persons, part of the lowest class in society.¹⁶⁹ Jesus does not mean for the disciples to become childlike, but rather to become like Jesus, the servant of all who embraces a child and raises the status of the child in the community. Jesus’ love for the children is seen by his blessing them in 10:13-16.

Jesus underscores that if the disciples receive one of such little child in his name, they will receive both Jesus and the Father who sent him (9:37): “by receiving the least significant, the disciples receive the most significant.”¹⁷⁰ Using the name of Jesus serves to connote the real and effective representation of Jesus himself.¹⁷¹ The name of Jesus echoes the Hebrew Bible use of *šem*, “name,” which makes one person present to another: “For as is his name, so is he” (1 Sam 25:25).¹⁷² So Jesus identifies and associates himself with such little children. In other words, he identifies with those in the lowest level of society, which recalls his saying in Matthew 25:40: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Jesus classifies himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and even the prisoner (Matt 25:35-36). Jesus identifies not only with the lowly, but also with his Father. Hence, when the disciples practice their servanthood through caring and attending to the

¹⁶⁸ Strauss, *Mark*, 409; also see Collins, *Mark*, 445-6.

¹⁶⁹ Ernst Best, “Discipleship in Mark: Mark 8:22-10:52,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970): 323-337, at 332; and Santos, “Jesus’ Paradoxical Teaching in Mark,” 21.

¹⁷⁰ Urban C Von Wahlde, “Mark 9:33-50: Discipleship: The Authority That Serves,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 29, 1 (1985): 49-67, at 55.

¹⁷¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 266.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 266.

needs of unworthy, vulnerable, and lowly people, they will experience greatness in the sight of God.

3.3 Teaching on Servant Leadership (10:42-44)

Jesus' teaching concerning servant leadership in 10:42-45 occurs immediately after James and John's request about receiving the two highest positions in Jesus' glory. During their journey to Jerusalem, the two brothers probably have come to see Jesus as a royal messiah and the eschatological Lord who will be enthroned in Jerusalem, from which they can expect to gain some material profit as his disciples.¹⁷³ Even though Jesus' talk has been about rejection, suffering, and death, they are fixated on and enamored with the glory related to their personal power and influence. Their propensities toward self-adulation and their ambition to acquire positions of authority necessitate Jesus' rebuke. He then admonishes the two brothers and the other disciples by emphasizing that in *his* glory, to reign or to govern can only be done through service.

Jesus raises the negative example of the rulers of the Gentiles and how their great men rule over others (10:42): "They convey the oppressive and uncontrolled exploitation of power, the flaunting of authority rather than its benevolent exercise."¹⁷⁴ They impose their power on others and exercise their authority by making demands of others. This is something of which everyone has experience. This common way of practicing authority and dominion in the world is particularly emphasized by the use of the verb οἶδατε ("You know").¹⁷⁵ The status of these great men is publicly recognized because of their rule. This reflects judging by human things and not according to the divine will (8:33).

¹⁷³ Lane, *Mark*, 378; and Garlington, "Who Is the Greatest?," 313.

¹⁷⁴ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 418.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 418.

Jesus rejects this model of leadership by the natural standards of society: οὐχ οὕτως ... ἐστὶν ἐν ὑμῖν (“it is not so among you”; 10:43a). This saying is also found in Matthew 20:26a: οὐχ οὕτως ἔσται ἐν ὑμῖν (“it will not be so among you”). A striking difference between these two Gospels is the Greek verb “be”: Mark uses the present tense (ἐστὶν), while Matthew employs the future tense (ἔσται). Donahue and Harrington suggest that the use of the verb “be” here serves as a command (“it shall not be so”). Mark L. Strauss, on the other hand, explains, “Using the present tense, Jesus does not so much command what they must do, but rather states the way things are.”¹⁷⁶ Similarly, James R. Edwards notes that, “v.43a is thus not an admonition to behave in a certain way as much as a description of the way things actually are in the Reign of God.”¹⁷⁷ As followers of Jesus, they need to contrast the status quo by not following the examples of being “lords over others,” but servants of all.

Leadership in the Reign of God, being a servant, is totally different from the way the world typically operates, and Jesus’ disciples are instructed to follow in his paradoxical path. He underscores greatness in service rather than greatness in perceived power and authority: “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (10:43-44). The preeminent virtue of God’s Reign is to love and show concern for others. Jesus turns the earthly notion of authority upside down: one who is great or first becomes the servant and slave of others (10:43-44). Using these two parallel and synonymous sentences, Jesus insists on a paradoxical way to exercise power in the community.¹⁷⁸ The servant is the last and least of all.

¹⁷⁶ Strauss, *Mark*, 457.

¹⁷⁷ Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 325.

¹⁷⁸ Focant, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 428.

The teaching of servant leadership here echoes Jesus’ previous teaching of achieving prominence in the Reign of God (9:35-37). There is a significant similarity between these two lessons about discipleship.

9:35b	10:43b-44
<p>εἴ τις <i>θέλει πρῶτος</i> εἶναι ἔσται πάντων ἔσχατος καὶ πάντων <i>διάκονος</i> (“if anyone <i>desires to be first</i>, he will be last of all and <i>servant of all</i>”)</p>	<p>ὃς ἂν <i>θέλη μέγας</i> γενέσθαι ἐν ὑμῖν, ἔσται ὑμῶν <i>διάκονος</i>, καὶ ὃς ἂν <i>θέλη</i> ἐν ὑμῖν εἶναι <i>πρῶτος</i>, ἔσται πάντων <i>δοῦλος</i> (“whoever <i>desires to become great</i> among you, will be your <i>servant</i> and whoever <i>desires to be first</i> among you, will be <i>slave of all</i>.”)</p>

Jesus puts his teaching in the conditional clause— “if anyone desires...,” and “whoever desires...,”—in order to underline the willing volition of his followers. The teachings in 9:35b and 10:43b-44 focus on servanthood: being great and first through service. Why, then, does Mark seemingly repeat the same lesson? Is the later one different in some nuance?

The teaching in 10:42-44 appears to be an extension of the teaching in 9:35-37. First, while the teaching in 9:35-37 is general instruction about humble service, the teaching in 10:42-44 specifies servant leadership. This is demonstrated through the context of the teaching. Mark 10:42-44 occurs after James’s and John’s request for positions of authority. Jesus brings up the negative examples of the Gentile rulers in order to show a radical model of leadership in the Reign of God. His instruction here underlines that true leadership is through service.

Second, the role of servant leadership is underscored using two examples of synonymous parallelism:¹⁷⁹ being great replaced by being a servant, and being first by being a slave. This double saying emphasizes that the leadership of the disciples is characterized by service to others and other-centeredness, rather than by self-aggrandizement and self-serving.¹⁸⁰ By combining repetition and intensification, Jesus highlights not only the key condition of servant leadership, but also the increased contrasts of these alternatives: “to be first is better than being great, and to be ‘slave of all’ is lower than a mere servant.”¹⁸¹

Third, the word δοῦλος (“slave”)¹⁸² serves as a device to underline lowliness of service. As Adam Winn states:

Mark’s use of δοῦλος could be understood as hyperbolic language (a literary device used elsewhere in this same unit; see 9:42-44; 10:25), which is used to stretch the boundaries of his readers’ political ideology. Thus, whereas Roman political ideals call rulers to serve the state, Jesus calls his disciples to an even greater service and humility, in their capacity as δοῦλος. Mark may be using Roman political ideals to contextualize Jesus’ teaching on the use of authority and power, but he may also be radicalizing these ideals by pushing them to an extreme.¹⁸³

Mark repeats the near-synonyms διάκονος (“servant”) and δοῦλος (“slave”) as a way to emphasize the utmost humility of discipleship. Moreover, Mark intentionally puts δοῦλος after διάκονος in order to indicate the intensity of their lowliness in service. Mark L. Strauss explains, “Though ‘servant’ (διάκονος) and ‘slave’ (δοῦλος) can be used synonymously, the latter is the more lowly term, indicating complete ownership and subjugation.”¹⁸⁴ He explains that the term διάκονος refers to a broad notion, which can refer to a wide range of service roles, such as a

¹⁷⁹ Stein, *Mark*, 487; Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 313. Collins calls this term as “a double antithetical aphorism.” See Collins, *Mark*, 499.

¹⁸⁰ Collins, *Mark*, 499.

¹⁸¹ Strauss, *Mark*, 458.

¹⁸² The word δοῦλος (“slave”) occurs here in Mark for the first time.

¹⁸³ Adam Winn, “Tyrant or Servant?: Political Ideology and Mark 10.42-45,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 36, 4 (2014): 325–52, at 345.

¹⁸⁴ Strauss, *Mark*, 458.

“servant, “helper,” “assistant,” “agent,” “courier,” “deacon, “minister,” and so on, while the word δοῦλος serves to designate that “the primary connotation is that of ownership by another, for whom total allegiance is given.”¹⁸⁵ The δοῦλος has far less self-determination than the διάκονος. The δοῦλος functions as both serving as well as belonging to the owner. Thomas Stegman defines two characteristics of a slave: “to be a slave is to belong to another and to serve at the latter’s behest.”¹⁸⁶ The social status of the slave is in contrast to that of the leaders who have public authority to command others. Throughout his life, the slave cannot hold back anything for himself. He humbly lives for and serves his master. Hence, Mark’s qualification of service in 10:44 is augmented from being servant of all in 9:35 (πάντων διάκονος) to being slave of all (πάντων δοῦλος). One might observe that, normally, the slave belongs to and serves just one owner. However, Jesus’ teaching about servant leadership here underscores a universal service to all people.¹⁸⁷

As already noted, leadership or greatness according to natural and cultural expectations is measured by lording over others. To become Jesus’ disciples is challenging, because Jesus requires them to go against the grain of these cultural norms. The alternative value scale of the Reign of God demands that the disciples not base their motivation on self-aggrandizing power, but on self-sacrificial empowerment, giving themselves in selfless service to others. True servant leaders are those who identify and serve as a δοῦλος, loyally and devotedly forfeiting their own desire for the sake of others. This is a radical teaching that demands deep and personal humility. The servant leader is therefore called a “Spirit-led leader.”¹⁸⁸ It is only when they think in terms of the divine will that they are able to move in this paradoxical direction. Conversely, if they think in terms of human things, they are unable to understand and exercise this instruction.

¹⁸⁵ Strauss, *Mark*, 458; also see Santos, “Jesus’ Paradoxical Teaching in Mark,” 24; and Lane, *Mark*, 382.

¹⁸⁶ Stegman, *Opening the Door of Faith*, 32.

¹⁸⁷ Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 312-3.

¹⁸⁸ Hutchison, “Servanthood,” 69.

Practicing servanthood gives the disciples the most preeminent position in God's sight, because "giving is the essence of God,"¹⁸⁹ just as Jesus gives his life as a ransom for others. The servant or slave meets this requirement because "the sole function of servant is to give."¹⁹⁰ In the role of a servant, the disciples are concerned with and serve others. It also means that they must "give" themselves for the sake of the needy. Jesus' teaching about servant leadership is a crucial lesson for disciples in his time, as well as for believers in every age. Paul also invites the church in Philippi: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others" (2:3-4).

3.4 Jesus: The Rule of Discipleship

Discipleship and Christology in Mark are mutually supportive. For example, while Mark describes that Jesus initiates the action in the summoning stories, thereby revealing his authority, he also indicates that discipleship is derived from God's will, not from the one who is called. Mark mentions that the first disciples' immediate response to Jesus' call shows them as models of discipleship in a way that also illuminates Jesus' authority, which inspires them to leave everything to follow him and become fishers of people.

Mark shows the integral relationship between discipleship and Christology in particular by demonstrating the way in which Jesus and the disciples live out their calling according to God's will. On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus provides his followers three remarkable instructions about discipleship: (1) self-denial, bearing one's cross to follow him (8:34-38); (2) being great by offering humble service (9:35-37); and (3) servant leadership (10:42-44). These teachings are so

¹⁸⁹ Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 327.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 327.

challenging that some people may think that they are mere ideals that Jesus asks his followers to approach. This, however, is not the case. Jesus' teachings are first embodied by his own life and way of ministering. The disciples are then invited to model themselves on his behavior.

Jesus as the model for discipleship is directly derived from his own words: καὶ γὰρ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου οὐκ ἦλθεν διακονηθῆναι ἀλλὰ διακονῆσαι καὶ δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν ("For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many"; 10:45).

Jesus is recognized and praised as an authoritative teacher, Son of David, or a powerful political messiah (8:29), but Jesus' own words repeatedly identify him only as ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ("the Son of Man"), especially when predicting his approaching suffering and self-sacrifice.¹⁹¹ The title is reminiscent of "the son of man" in Daniel 7:13. However, "the description in Daniel refers to the Son of Man in heaven and in glory ("coming with the clouds of heaven"), while Jesus refers here to his earthly mission."¹⁹² Aguilar Chiu suggests that,

The title 'Son of Man' was perfect for Jesus, since it allowed him to keep a low profile during his public ministry, avoiding other messianic titles that could lead to a misunderstanding of his mission (Mark 10:37; John 6:15). Furthermore, the double meaning of the title designated well his human and divine nature, the latter of which requires enlightenment by the Holy Spirit.¹⁹³

Jesus' preferred self-designation, ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, following closely Peter's more magniloquent ὁ Χριστός, spoken in the context both of Jesus' prediction of his suffering and his teaching about servant leadership, emphasizes a notable contrast between Jesus' conception of

¹⁹¹ Jesus identifies himself as "Son of Man" mentioned in 2:10, 28; 8:31, 38; 9:9; 10:33; 13:26; 14:62). Also see Aguilar Chiu, "Mark," 974; and Stein, *Mark*, 401.

¹⁹² Aguilar Chiu, "Mark," 1008; and France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 333-4. Similarly, Collins also notes that according to Similitudes, the Son of Man is a heavenly being, while the Son of Man in Mark's Gospel is Jesus who walks the earth as Son of Man. See Collins, *Mark*, 402.

¹⁹³ Aguilar Chiu, "Mark," 975.

what his nature is and what the disciples understand.¹⁹⁴ Jesus indicates that a triumphant and glorious figure, like the ancient powerful leader in the region of Caesarea Philippi, is not his fate, but rather that he will be the Son of Man, a suffering Messiah. He comes, not to lord over others but rather to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. At this moment he is not thinking about the glory that awaits him prefigured in the heavenly son of man of Daniel 7, but rather his sacrifice for others.

The noun λύτρον (“ransom”) occurs in the New Testament only here and in the parallel in Matthew 20:28. Λύτρον evokes the meaning of “the price of release,” such as a payment to rescue hostages, prisoners, or captives, or for the manumission of slaves: “a ‘ransom’ served as a replacement or substitute to the slave owner for the slaves freed in the process of a manumission.”¹⁹⁵ In the LXX, λύτρον is used as payment to preserve life, such as for redeeming a slave (Lev 19:20), captives (Isa 45:13), or a victim’s life (Exod 21:30).¹⁹⁶ The related verb λυτρόω is frequently used to indicate God’s act of saving his people. It refers to God’s liberation of his people from exile in Babylon (Isa 53:2) and to God’s deliverance of Israelites from slavery in Egypt (Exod 6:6).¹⁹⁷

In the New Testament, the verb and its cognate nouns are often used as a metaphor to designate Jesus’ sacrificial death as redemption.¹⁹⁸ The phrase “giving one’s life” serves as a way of referring to martyrdom, as in 1 Macc. 2:50.¹⁹⁹ However, Jesus’ death does not signify

¹⁹⁴ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 333.

¹⁹⁵ Stein, *Mark*, 488-9; see also Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 458; France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 420; David Seeley, “Rulership and Service in Mark 10:41-45,” *Novum Testamentum* 35, 3 (1993): 234–50, at 247; and Boring, *Mark*, 302. Collins gives a detailed comparison of the meaning “ransom” used in different books, from the Hebrew Bible to Paul’s letters. See Collins, *Mark*, 500-504.

¹⁹⁶ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 420; and Aguilar Chiu, “Mark,” 1008. For a full survey of the uses of λύτρον in the LXX, see Boring, *Mark*, 302-303.

¹⁹⁷ Aguilar Chiu, “Mark,” 1008.

¹⁹⁸ Strauss, *Mark*, 458-9.

¹⁹⁹ Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 313.

martyrdom, but rather is “a vicarious and substitutionary death” for “many.”²⁰⁰ The primary purpose of Jesus’ death is shown to be salvific, by which he pays for the salvation of others.²⁰¹ Jesus’ words in 10:45 echo the concept of voluntarily giving up one’s life for the sins of others, as in LXX Isaiah 52:13-53:12. Isaiah said of the suffering servant, “He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity and as one from whom others hide their faces, he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely, he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases” (53:3-4). Isaiah’s servant is rejected and suffers like Jesus.

James R. Edwards also recognizes that “[t]he thought of v.45 actually exceeds the teaching of Isaiah’s Servant of the Lord, for Jesus is not a passive (and perhaps unknowing) instrument of Yahweh.”²⁰² Edwards then explains: “As God’s own delegate, and through his suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus freely and obediently offers his life as a substitute *on behalf of* humanity. Jesus is supremely conscious of offering a payment to God that can be offered by no one else. The ransom Jesus offers in his is not contingent on something outside himself.”²⁰³ Jesus pays this ransom for others by his own life and self-sacrifice.

Jesus’ ransom is ἀντὶ πολλῶν (“for many”). The preposition ἀντὶ can be translated as “for the sake of,” “in place of,” or “instead of.”²⁰⁴ The word πολλῶν causes curiosity for the reader. Does πολλῶν mean “some” or “for a large number but not all”? Does Jesus save only some, not all? To whom is Jesus’ ransom considered to be paid? The majority of scholars, such as Edwards, Focant, and Stein argue that πολλῶν means “all.” It refers to the full assembly that receives Jesus’ redemption, because Mark 10:45 parallels 1 Tim 2:6: ὁ δοὺς ἑαυτὸν ἀντίλυτρον ὑπὲρ πάντων,

²⁰⁰ Stein, *Mark*, 490.

²⁰¹ Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, 303.

²⁰² Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 328.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 328.

²⁰⁴ Hutchison, “Servanthood,” 67; and Stein, *Mark*, 488.

(“the one who gave himself (as) a ransom for all”).²⁰⁵ As the servant in Isaiah 52-53, Jesus also has to pass through rejection, suffering, and death for the sake of his people.

M. Eugene Boring is correct in saying that “Jesus is not just quoting Isaiah 53 but making a statement about his own mission.”²⁰⁶ The stated purpose of Jesus’ mission is identified in his words in 2:27: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” Even though sinners are the primary purpose of his mission, he also reaches out to the outcast of society through his teaching, healing, and compassion.

The best example of ransom expressed through self-denial, cross-bearing, greatness, and being a servant in the Reign of God is Jesus himself. This is expressed when Jesus becomes the lowest of the society by identifying with outcasts. Jesus always receives all the vulnerable and insignificant people. (1) He welcomes and values the status of children and women, who are seen as of no value in the Greco-Roman world. He embraces and blesses children (10:13-16). He also considers women as true participants of the Reign of God, and as models of true discipleship (5:34; 7:24-30). They follow Jesus to the end and are present at his crucifixion (14:41-44). (2) He cares and cures the sick, such as Peter’s mother-in-law (1:30-34), the leper (1:40-43), the paralyzed (2:3-12), the man with a withered hand (3:1-6), the woman suffering from hemorrhages (5:22-42), and all who have diseases (3:10). (3) He exorcises those who are possessed by demons: the man with an unclean spirit in the temple (1:23-26), the Gerasene Demoniac (5:1-20), and the boy which the spirit makes foam, grind his teeth, and renders unable to speak (9:20-27). (4) He reaches out to and feeds the hungry (6:30-44 and 8:1-10). Even though it is suggested that he departs from

²⁰⁵ Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 327; Focant, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 433; and Stein, *Mark*, 489. Paul also calls Jesus’ ransom for all in Romans 5:18-19: “Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.”

²⁰⁶ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 421

the crowds because of the lateness and isolation of the place, he does not let them go away hungry.

(5) His care extends over those who are regarded as sinners. He calls a tax-collector, Levi, to become one of his closest disciples (2:13–14), and he dines with tax-collectors and sinners (2:15).

(6) The objects of his love, mercy, and compassion are not only Jewish people but also non-Israelites. For instance, he heals the daughter of the Syrophenician woman (7:25–30) and the daughter of Jairus, a Roman official (5:22–42). He appoints Thaddeus, a Greek person, to join the inner circle of his closest followers (3:18).²⁰⁷

Jesus extends his partisanship to the vulnerable and marginalized persons of society, including outsiders who are non-Jewish. Jesus wants to indicate the inclusive character of the Reign of God, and he is considered as “patron of the outsiders and the inclusive kingdom of God.”²⁰⁸ He never denies anyone who comes to him. Furthermore, in approaching the outcast, Jesus leaves behind any safety zone. Instead of caring for himself, he shows concern for vulnerable people. Because of his devotion to them, Jesus is therefore also considered an outcast: he is seen as one being “out of his mind” and even as being possessed by Beelzebub (3:20-23), and he thus becomes a target for his opponents. David Rhoads, Joana Dewey, and Donald Michie contend that Jesus’ “crucifixion is the ultimate consequence of a life of service and of his refusal to oppress others to save himself. And in this tragic execution—misunderstood, falsely accused, abandoned—he is least of all.”²⁰⁹ Indeed, his boundless caring and love for these less fortunate people is very significant because his actions may endanger his own life. For instance, the Pharisees conspire

²⁰⁷ Donahue and Harrington recognize that Thaddeus is not a Jewish but Greek because it is a Greek name. See Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 125.

²⁰⁸ Ernest Van Eck, “Mission, Identity and Ethics in Mark: Jesus, the Patron for Outsiders,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 69, 1 (2013), 1–13, at 8.

²⁰⁹ David Rhoads, Joana Dewey and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 111.

with the Herodians how to accuse and destroy him, a plot ultimately resulting in his crucifixion because of this mission.

Jesus as the model for discipleship is also demonstrated through the way he proceeds toward Jerusalem with courage and fortitude, even though he knows how his life will end.²¹⁰ Mark describes Jesus making only one journey to Jerusalem (8:27-10:52), whereas John mentions Jesus traveling there three times (John 2:13; 5:1; 10:22-23; 12:12). Mark designates Jerusalem as Jesus' final destination where he will face rejection, suffering, and death. Mark describes Jesus sharing this knowledge with his disciples on this journey, repeating three times how things will end regarding the Son of Man in that destined city (8:31-2; 9:30-2; 10:32-33). Although Jesus visualizes his coming passion, he never steps back or avoids the ultimate cost. Peter tries to intervene to prevent Jesus from going to fulfill his messianic plan, but is firmly rebuked. Jesus instructs Peter, "For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (8:33). He effectively fulfills his mission, aimed not at protecting his self-interest through violence, but rather his offering is enacted as self-sacrifice for the sake of others.

Jesus' model of discipleship is revealed again with his anguished anticipation of his coming passion in Gethsemane. Jesus is so distressed and agitated by the "cup" the Father sends him that he had to ask his disciples, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake" (14:35). Jesus appears weak and helpless as he faces this severe testing. Terrified and distressed prior to his trial, he prays multiple times (14:35, 36, 39, 41) to find help. He initially asks his Father to let "the hour" pass (14:35) and to remove "the cup" from him (14:36).²¹¹ During this struggle with the extreme suffering he is about to face, where he has a choice over his own

²¹⁰ Bond, "A Fitting End?," 437.

²¹¹ See more explanations in Richard Hicks, "'Emotional' Temptation and Jesus' Spiritual Victory at Markan Gethsemane," *Journal of Biblical and Pneumatological Research* 5 (2013): 29–48, at 31.

death, he ultimately submits his will to that of the Father: “not what I want but what you want” (14:36).²¹² Jesus has to battle against the temptation to satisfy his human will. Choosing to do the will of the Father requires Jesus to pay with his own life. He denies living on his own behalf and forsakes what can bring security to himself. Such an attitude reveals his total self-denial for the sake of others.

Finally, Jesus’ crucifixion is the most perfect embodiment of his teaching about self-denial and servanthood.²¹³ Among the Synoptic Gospels and John, Mark provides the longest narrative of Jesus’ crucifixion, which occupies more than one third of the Gospel.²¹⁴ Mark dwells at length on Jesus’ last few moments, providing details about Jesus’ agony and violent death. He is described and symbolized as the lamb that is slaughtered without resisting (1 Cor 5:7).

Jesus is innocent but condemned, put through an extremely shameful and agonizing execution that was usually reserved for slaves or the most hardened criminals.²¹⁵ Adding to the physical torment, Jesus greatly suffers because of mockeries. Pilate and the crowds taunt him with the title “the King of the Jews.” The Romans executioners cloak him in imperial purple, put on him a crown of thorns, kneel down, and salute him, “Hail, King of the Jews!” (15:16-20). The mockery continues even as Jesus hangs on the cross. The soldiers mount the scornful title “the King of the Jews” on his cross (15:26). The chief priests and scribes also mock him, “Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe” (15:32). Worse, Jesus is betrayed and rejected by his own disciples. When he is arrested and taken

²¹² Skinner, “Denying Self, Bearing a Cross, and Following Jesus,” 325.

²¹³ Bond, “A Fitting End?,” 425.

²¹⁴ M. Goodacre, “Scripturalization in Mark’s Crucifixion Narrative,” *The Trial and Death of Jesus: Essays on the Passion Narrative in Mark* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006): 33-47, at 34; and Bond, “A Fitting End?,” 433.

²¹⁵ Helen K. Bond describes that, “Crucifixion was the most shameful, brutal and degrading form of capital punishment known to the ancient world, reserved for slaves, brigands and any who set themselves up against imperial rule. It was intended to be public, to act both as a deterrent to others and to provide spectacle, even entertainment to onlookers.” See Bond, “A Fitting End?,” 431; and also see Coleman, “Fatal Charades,” 44–73.

away, all his disciples disappear. Jesus endures the depths of degradation alone. Finally, he dies naked and in utter desolation. Jesus totally submits himself to his Father's will and accepts his cruel death for the sake of others. Robert H. Stein states that "his (Jesus') death is not only the supreme example of what it means to be 'great' in the Reign of God, that is, being a servant and slave of all; it is also the once-for-all sacrifice (cf. Heb 7:27; 9:28) by which he vicariously ransomed humanity from sin and death."²¹⁶ Jesus' crucifixion serves as the best example of what he has taught about discipleship. He uses his own life to teach how a disciple is expected to follow him.

Mark portrays Jesus' life as a journey of self-sacrifice and servanthood, particularly in his crucifixion. There is no other death that causes terror and humiliation as the one which Jesus receives. Mark illustrates that Jesus accepts this passion and does not hold himself back.²¹⁷ Through these examples, Mark demonstrates that what Jesus teaches about the conditions of discipleship is not an ideal, but rather sets forth his own life and experience as a model. As Helen K. Bond emphasizes:

It was surely with this end in sight that Mark composed his carefully integrated central chapters. His artful composition shows that there is no mismatch between what Jesus teaches and his death; he remains true to his teaching to the very end. And, just as significantly, what he demands of others is no more than he is prepared to undergo himself.²¹⁸

Jesus himself goes through the most agonizing torture, mockery, abandonment, and degradation, and in doing so provides a model for those who want to devote their life to discipleship. His vivid example is accurately described by Paul in Philippians 2:5-8. Paul ascribes Jesus' greatest humility: Jesus humbled himself to take the form of a slave and undergo the most

²¹⁶ Stein, *Mark*, 490.

²¹⁷ Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 244-5.

²¹⁸ Bond, "A Fitting End?," 438.

shameful public humiliation and became obedient to death. However, death is not the end of Jesus' life, and it is also not Paul's last teaching about Jesus to the Christians in Philippi. Rather, since Jesus humbled himself, God has highly exalted him and offered him glory in heaven, earth, and even under the earth (Phil 2:9-11). This fate is the same for those who follow him.

Conclusion

The road to Jerusalem becomes the classroom in which Jesus provides key lectures on discipleship. The content of Jesus' teachings is challenging for his followers: if anyone wishes to follow him, they need to deny themselves, take up their own cross, and will therefore become great through servitude to others. This radically paradoxical form of discipleship requires his followers to go against the cultural and natural norms of contemporary society. In order to live in a manner contrary to that which would normally be expected, the disciples need to be humble and self-sacrificing. When they deny themselves, lose their lives, and serve the insignificant and outcast for the sake of Jesus and the gospel, this leads to gaining a glorious future.

Jesus' teachings are challenging to the point of sounding merely idealistic, something impossible to exercise. But in fact, Jesus himself embodies perfectly all that which he teaches. He provides the ultimate example through his life and ministry, and especially his suffering and death. Additionally, the blind beggar Bartimaeus sets a good example of a true disciple: he leaves everything to follow Jesus on the way to Jerusalem (10:46-52). Paul also praises Timothy and takes him as an example for the Philippian community: "I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But Timothy's worth you know, how like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel" (Phil 2:20-22). Jesus is the center of Timothy's concern, and he dares to give his life for the mission to which Jesus calls him.

In the present day, we also measure success by positions of honor, titles, and promotions. We also prefer to be served rather than to serve. How might Jesus' challenging teachings prove to be relevant to his contemporary followers? How can we convey Jesus' teachings in our time? These questions will be addressed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

A CHALLENGE AND ENCOURAGEMENT FOR JESUS' DISCIPLES IN VIETNAM

During his mission of proclaiming God's Reign, Jesus experienced various critical challenges, including persecution. He taught that to follow him on this mission, his followers in later times would also face similar struggles; hence, his teachings about discipleship focus on self-denial, cross-bearing, and service. We have heard these teachings many times. They may become so familiar that sometimes we fail to notice that they are relevant in every age. Each one of us, whatever our different contexts, has our "cross," the difficulties that demand Jesus' disciples to be humble and ready to follow him whatever the cost. Each of us must find how to appropriate effectively Jesus' teachings about discipleship within the unique life experiences given to us.

In this chapter I will focus on how Jesus' teachings about discipleship in Mark's "way section" are challenging, practical, necessary, and pertinent in the context of Vietnam. First, to understand just how difficult to live Jesus' teachings can be in the Vietnamese environment, one needs to become familiar with Vietnam's Catholic background. Cross-bearing by Vietnamese Catholics is not imaginary, but something very real and concrete. Second, I will bring up some specific situations suggesting how Vietnamese Catholics could apply Jesus' teachings. Finally, I will show how faithfully Jesus' believers in our small country have lived out their commitment in an anti-Christian environment. The exhortation remains challenging for Vietnamese Catholics, but we can find encouragement, since Jesus and his many disciples, including people who are probably our neighbors, have lived out his teachings faithfully.

4.1 An Overview of the Catholic Church in Vietnam

Catholicism was brought to Vietnam by French missionaries in the late sixteenth century.²¹⁹ Since that time its fortunes have gone up and down, mirroring Vietnam's own turbulent history. With the arrival of the French Jesuit missionary Alexandre de Rhodes in 1627, followed by the contributions of many successors—Jesuit missionaries such as Francisco de Pina, Francesco Buxomi, Christoforo Borri, Gaspar d'Amara —Catholicism spread rapidly and increasingly became relevant to Vietnam's political milieu. By 1659, approximately 360,000 people in the north and south had been baptized.²²⁰ In that year, the Catholic Church in Vietnam was officially established under the leadership of two French bishops, Francois Pallu and Pierre Lambert de la Motte.²²¹ The Vietnamese Church continued to be shepherded by foreign bishops until 1933, when Pope Pius XI ordained the first native bishop, Nguyen Ba Tong.²²² The Church's governance by foreign leaders was a primary reason the Church in Vietnam soon came to face many tremendous disadvantages. The Vietnamese government considered the presence of the Catholic Church a threat because they feared that foreign leaders would take advantage of religion to oppose the government.²²³ The Church in Rome and the missionaries in Vietnam could not adapt easily to Vietnamese traditions and customs, including the practice of ancestor worship/veneration. Consequently, Vietnamese

²¹⁹ Stephen Denney, "The Catholic Church in Vietnam." In *Catholicism and Politics in Communist Societies*, edited by Ramet, Sabrina P. and Peter Hebblethwaite, 270- 295 (Durham, NC: Duke University, 1990), 270; Phát Huân Phan, *History of the Catholic Church in Việt Nam* (Long Beach, CA: Cứu Thế Tùng Thư, 2000), 112; and Thao Nguyen, "Resistance, Negotiation and Development: The Roman Catholic Church in Vietnam, 1954–2010," *Studies in World Christianity* 25, 3 (2019): 297–323, at 299.

²²⁰ Nguyen, "Resistance, Negotiation and Development," 299.

²²¹ Phan, *History of the Catholic Church in Việt Nam*, 112; and Nguyen, "Resistance, Negotiation and Development," 299.

²²² Thao Nguyen recognizes that other religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism were also imported from India and China in the first couple of centuries CE, but these religions were soon integrated into Vietnamese culture and society, particularly administrated by Vietnamese native leaders. See Nguyen, "Resistance, Negotiation and Development," 298.

²²³ Nguyen, "Resistance, Negotiation and Development," 299.

governors condemned Catholicism as “a heretical religion” and tried to destroy it through severe harassment and persecution.²²⁴

From 1860 to 1945, during the period of French colonization, the persecutions ended and Catholics were free to practice their faith. They were allowed to build churches and open schools, orphanages, hospitals, and other Catholic institutions. However, the Vietnamese faced hardship from high taxes, political oppression, and dependence, which resulted in the Vietnamese fighting against France to achieve independence.²²⁵

The contemporary Catholic Church in Vietnam has been shaped by two remarkable events: the division of the country in 1954 and its re-unification in 1975. In July 1954, the Geneva Accords divided the country into two entities: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north under Communist control, and the Republic of Vietnam in the south, led by anti-Communists. This division caused a massive exodus of people from the north to the south in order to escape the persecution and restrictions of Communism. Out of 900,000 refugees, 700,000 were Catholics, virtually half of the Catholic population of the Church in the north. This great exodus included the departure of five bishops (leaving four Vietnamese bishops and two French bishops in the north) and 700 priests (two-third of the priests in the north).²²⁶ This mass exodus resulted in the reversal of the percentages of the Catholic population in the two parts of Vietnam.²²⁷ The majority of

²²⁴ Nguyen, “Resistance, Negotiation and Development,” 298; Stephen Denney estimated that around 100,000 Catholics were persecuted in the eighteenth century and between 100,000 and 300,000 in the nineteenth century. See Denney, “The Catholic Church in Vietnam” 270-1.

²²⁵ Nguyen, “Resistance, Negotiation and Development,” 300.

²²⁶ Peter Phan also notes that “almost all the male religious and a greater part of the female religious of the northern Church also moved south.” See Peter Phan, “The Roman Catholic Church in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1989-2005.” In *Falling Walls: The Year 1989/90 as a Turning Point in the History of World Christianity*, edited by Herausgegeben von Klaus Koschorke, 243-258 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 243; Denney, “The Catholic Church in Vietnam”, 271; Lan T Chu, “Catholicism vs. Communism, Continued: The Catholic Church in Vietnam,” in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies (Berkeley, CA.)* 3, 1 (2008): 151–92, at 158; and Nguyen, “Resistance, Negotiation and Development,” 304.

²²⁷ The Church in the north was reduced from 1,380,000 to 730,000 and the Church in the south increased from 520,000 to 1,170,000 after the massive exodus in 1954. See Nguyen, “Resistance, Negotiation and Development,” 300.

Vietnamese Catholics have been faithful to their priests, and they followed the priests' example to move to the south and established parishes just as they had done in the north.

After the division of the country into two parts, the Church in the north encountered a daunting period. The Communists had tried to stop the exodus, killing anyone who did not listen to them.²²⁸ They heavily guarded and obstructed all seaways and roads. Many people were locked in the north even though they wanted to leave.²²⁹ The Vatican's hostility toward Communism during that period increased the Communists' hatred.²³⁰ The Communists then established a "patriotic church" in 1955 with the purpose of separating Vietnamese Catholics from the universal Church and the Vatican.²³¹

The Communists attempted various ways to destroy Catholicism. They executed influential priests and lay leaders. They arrested more than two hundred Catholic priests and imprisoned them in reeducation camps for up to fifteen to twenty years.²³² Other priests were isolated in their parishes and were denied any contact with their confreres or their bishops. The priests were only

²²⁸ Stephen Denney mentions that Bernard Fall estimated around 50,000 killed and 100,000 imprisoned during this time. See Denney, "The Catholic Church in Vietnam," 274. Phan Phát Huồn states the experience of those who lived near the banks of Tri Chinh River: they saw many dead bodies without heads, arms, or legs floating on the surface of the river. "At Ba Làng Church, they fired directly into a demonstration of 8,000 people requesting authorization to seek refuge in the south." Phan Phát Huồn quoted Doctor Dooley (who helped the refugees medically in Hải Phòng during 1954-55), "The rehabilitation of organs on the body has become rather familiar to me these days. I have restored many men's ears which had been cut off; women's breasts, and even children's fingers." See more details in Phan, *History of the Catholic Church in Việt Nam*, 827-835.

²²⁹ Charles Keith, *Catholic Vietnam: A Church from Empire to Nation*, (Berkeley: University of California, 2012), 248.

²³⁰ In September 1951, Archbishop John Dooley, an Apostolic Delegate to Indochina, presided at an Indochinese Conference of Bishops in Hanoi with a pastoral letter stating, "The Catholic Church and communism are so completely opposed that our Holy Father the Pope declared that it is absolutely impossible to be at the same time communist and Catholic and that all Catholics who adhere to the Communist party are ipso facto severed from the Church. Not only are you forbidden to join the Communist party, but you cannot cooperate with it or do anything which might lead to power." Stephen Denney quotes from "The Catholics and the National Movement," in *Vietnamese Studies*, 53 (Hanoi: Xunhasaba, 1979), 123. See Denney, "The Catholic Church in Vietnam," 272; and Nguyen, "Resistance, Negotiation and Development," 301.

²³¹ Denney, "The Catholic Church in Vietnam," 272; and Chu, "Catholicism vs. Communism, Continued: The Catholic Church in Vietnam," 159.

²³² "Reeducation camps" is a title the communists used to indicate prison camps. Nguyen, "Resistance, Negotiation and Development," 303.

permitted information given by government propaganda. All foreign missionaries in the north were expelled during the 1950s.²³³ Catholic activities were limited because of lack of pastors, religious staff, and freedom to practice the faith. Catholic religious observance persisted mainly within the family, in which grandparents or parents held worship or prayers for the family and taught catechesis to successive generations. In some areas, the lay leader of the village secretly gathered the believers to worship, such as praying the rosary or sharing the Gospel. Young Catholics were drafted to serve in the military and were trained for the war against the south. Non-Catholics were allowed to have a job in government careers with many benefits, in order to tempt some Catholics to renounce their faith.²³⁴ During these years of persecutions, in order to protect the Church's survival and serve the community, the Church in the north ordained underground bishops and priests.²³⁵

While religious persecution in the north almost paralyzed the Church there, the Catholics in the south, with the support of the Catholic president Ngô Đình Diệm, enjoyed greater freedoms and developed significantly both in number and in ministries.²³⁶ There was a remarkable growth of religious activities and missions, and of a vast network of Catholic institutions such as churches, seminaries, hospitals, schools, charitable organizations, orphanages, etc.²³⁷

²³³ Chu, "Catholicism vs. Communism, Continued: The Catholic Church in Vietnam," 159; and Nguyen, "Resistance, Negotiation and Development," 300.

²³⁴ Nguyen, "Resistance, Negotiation and Development," 306.

²³⁵ Bishop Pham Van Tru was also ordained privately in the residence in Hanoi at night when he had disguised himself as a tricycle driver to arrive at the residence without being caught by the police monitoring outside. Bishop Pham Nang Tinh was ordained on a small boat in a river where there was only present Bishop Pham Van Tru. Many priests were ordained in private, to serve the Catholic communities in performing sacraments and liturgies, also in private. See more details in Nguyen, "Resistance, Negotiation and Development," 307-8.

²³⁶ Chu, "Catholicism vs. Communism, Continued: The Catholic Church in Vietnam," 161; and Nguyen, "Resistance, Negotiation and Development," 310.

²³⁷ It is estimated that in 1960, there were 1,030 elementary and secondary schools, 226 high schools, a university, 41 hospitals, 82 orphanages, 28 houses for the elderly, hundreds of clinics or pharmacies offering free medicine to the poor. See Nguyen, "Resistance, Negotiation and Development," 310.

In 1975, the Communists' victory that resulted in the unification of Vietnam spread this regime's repression to the south. Foreign missionaries were forced to leave the country. About 300 priests were arrested and sentenced to reeducation camps.²³⁸ They were detained in dark and small room for days and nights, and were brutally tortured because they were considered as extremely dangerous reactionaries. Many of them were held captive for the rest of their lives in prison.²³⁹ There is presently a great shortage of priests in the whole country. For instance, the Diocese of Bui Chu had only eight priests to serve forty-four parishes and many other places of worship. Some of these priests were very old, but they were needed to continue the work because the young priests had been arrested.²⁴⁰ The Communist authorities also destroyed many Church structures, confiscated Church properties, and shut down all Catholic schools and healthcare centers. Government approval has been required for most Church activities, such as becoming a candidate in a seminary or a religious congregation, the training or ordination of priests, or participation in priests' retreats, bishops' conferences, processions, pilgrimages, etc.²⁴¹ This requirement remains in force today. Peter Phan recognizes that the government uses a triple strategy toward religion: "elimination of the leadership, demolition of organizational structures, and restrictions of religious activities."²⁴² What happened to the Church in the north from 1954 through 1975 spread to the south and the whole country, which caused hundreds of thousands to flee from the country to

²³⁸ Phan, "The Roman Catholic Church in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 248.

²³⁹ Fr. Đinh Ngọc Quế, a Catholic priest in the communist prison, shares in details his daily experience during his thirteen years in reeducation camps. See more details in Ngọc Quế Đinh, *Memoirs of a Priest Imprisoned in the Communist Reeducation Camp (1975-1988)* (Baldwin Park, CA: Đinh Ngọc Quế, 2000).

²⁴⁰ Denney, "The Catholic Church in Vietnam," 290-293; and Đinh, *Memoirs of a Priest Imprisoned in the Communist Reeducation Camp*, 12.

²⁴¹ Phan, "The Roman Catholic Church in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 248. While Sài Gòn Archdiocese (one of the three Archdioceses in Vietnam: Huế and Hà Nội are the others) had less repression than other dioceses, only eleven priests were allowed to be ordained between 1975 and 1985. See Denney, "The Catholic Church in Vietnam," 292.

²⁴² See more explanations in Phan, "The Roman Catholic Church in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 248.

escape Communism.²⁴³ The purpose of the government is to tighten control over religion, using any method necessary to achieve this purpose.

Nevertheless, in Vietnam today, there is a significant improvement between Church and state. The government gives more freedom to practice religion. However, even though the term “religious freedom” is officially proclaimed, the definition of “freedom” is very different than in liberal and democratic countries.²⁴⁴ The state still inserts itself into Church activities. Lan T. Chu believes that “the state’s support for religious freedom is freedom within the boundaries that are arbitrarily determined by the state.”²⁴⁵ It means that permission is required to join religious life. To assign a priest or bishop for a mission requires government approval. Stephen Denney brings up the example of Fr. Nguyễn Văn Lý, who was sentenced to twelve years imprisonment because of having led an unauthorized procession to the statue of the Virgin Mary at La Vang in December 1983.²⁴⁶

The Communists practice lording over others. Their authority is exercised by continually controlling Catholic activities and taking away Church properties to use for whatever purpose they want.²⁴⁷ They also tried to take my congregation’s property which had been bought for us by our

²⁴³ Most of these migrants fled to the United States of America. Phan, “The Roman Catholic Church in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 243. Thao Nguyen based on the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) shows that between 1975 and 1995, there were approximately two million Vietnamese. See Nguyen, “Resistance, Negotiation and Development,” 311.

²⁴⁴ Chu, “Catholicism vs. Communism, Continued: The Catholic Church in Vietnam,” 169.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.

²⁴⁶ Our Lady of La Vang is the national shrine of Vietnam located in Quang Tri Province and very popular among Vietnamese. The apparition of the Virgin took place around 1798 under the reign of King Can Think when many Catholics were violently killed as a preventive measure because the king feared that the Catholics colluded with the French. Many Catholics went to a remote rainforest in Quang Tri to escape the government persecution. While hiding in the jungle, they contracted a dangerous illness. The Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to them one evening when they were gathering to recite the daily rosary under a banyan tree. She told them how to use the leaves in the rainforest as medicine to cure their illness. Vietnamese Catholics have recognized the historicity of Mary’s apparition, but the hierarchy has not officially pronounced it. Stephen Denney says “the statue... is regarded as a symbol of anticommunism by the government.” Denney, “The Catholic Church in Vietnam,” 289; and Peter Phan, “Mary in Vietnamese Piety and Theology,” *Theology Digest* 49, 3 (2002): 244–52, at 247.

²⁴⁷ In September 19, 2007, the officials of Ha Noi seized the church property in Thai Ha to make a public playground. The Federation of Vietnamese Catholic Mass Media stated, “It is noteworthy that so many properties that once belonged to the church were transferred to the state administration under coercive conditions on the

founder, Bishop Paul Seitz, a French missionary. The Communist authorities searched to find any reason to shut down my congregation.²⁴⁸ Hundreds of sisters prayed, signed a letter petitioning the authorities, and even sat in front of the convent as a fence to prevent government forces from attacking the motherhouse of the convent. Fortunately, we were permitted us to keep it. My brother, on the other hand, did not receive such benefit. He had a large property in a remote area where there were many Catholics. He donated this land to the parish to build a church there so that the poor Catholics in that area would not have to travel several miles to go to Mass. In 2006, when he went to the authorities to transfer his property to the parish, the officers confiscated that property, making it their own. My brother tried different ways to take it back for the parish, but the Communists won. In recent times, Vietnamese Catholics are still encouraged to pray for congregations that have lost their land.

Another significant problem is that, not only in the past but also in the present day, the Communists have surreptitiously sent their people to join the inner circles of Catholic families or the Church's seminaries or religious congregations.²⁴⁹ More dangerously, they covertly offer benefits in order to persuade the very members of these groups to secretly work for them. Fearing to be arrested by those around them, the primary tactics most Catholics rely on in the face of

grounds that they were needed for social purposes. Even when these purposes are no longer met, the properties are seldom returned to their owners. Recently it has been reported that they have been used as financial resources for government officials. Some of them were turned into movie theaters, restaurants, nightclubs or government offices. Some simply were destroyed. Others were sold or provided to select government officials for their personal use." See more details on how escalating tensions between the church and government related to this issue in Federation of Vietnamese Catholic Mass Media, "Government Crackdown on the Church in Vietnam," *Origins* 38, 17 (October 2, 2008): 273–75.

²⁴⁸ The governments even broke into the convent late at night to check out the number of the sisters when the sisters slept. Some sisters participated in the convent's activities during day time, but at night they had to find a place to sleep in parishioners' families nearby the convent.

²⁴⁹ Surprisingly, thought the ones who are sent to Catholic institutions are communists, they are able to follow programs and classes in many years of formation as well as other candidates.

intimidation and injustice are remaining aware and silent. When Lan T. Chu interviewed a priest in Ho Chi Minh City in 2003, the priest said:

Here in Vietnam, it is as if every priest is already in prison. If you're in prison what else can you do? We don't have the freedom that other countries enjoy. By not saying anything publicly, we've simply chosen the lesser of the two evils. If we protest, the state will strangle us – then what good are we? We are silent – we are not happy about it, but we know the consequences.²⁵⁰

This is the fear and knowledge held in common by Vietnamese Catholics. “Silence” means to keep your oral or written words away from any kinds of public media. Yet despite the strong restrictions and persecutions of the state since Catholicism was brought to Vietnam, the Catholic Church in Vietnam has continued to survive and thrive. This essay does not mean to criticize or complain about anyone, but rather to explain how the hostility between Catholicism and Communism has formed over the decades, and to indicate something of how Jesus' followers can convey his teachings in this environment.

4.2 Being Faithful to Jesus' Teachings in Today's Vietnam

After centuries of being implanted in Vietnam, Catholicism is no longer viewed as the threat that our ancestors presumed. Catholics have not collaborated with foreigners to oppose the government. In contrast, this religion has contributed significantly to the country through educating good citizens and building the nation through many activities for the common good, such as helping the poor or taking care of lepers, HIV/AIDS patients in the final stage of the disease, orphans, and people with disabilities. Yet the Vietnamese Catholic Church still suffers under restrictions and oppressions of the government authorities. Vietnamese Catholics might well

²⁵⁰ Chu, “Catholicism vs. Communism, Continued: The Catholic Church in Vietnam,” 178.

wonder, just as Jesus asked those who picked up rocks to kill him, “I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?” (John 10:31).

Jesus acknowledges the passion his followers will encounter in living his teachings on discipleship, especially in his prophecy: “You will be hated by everyone because of my name” (13:13). Vietnamese Catholics also fulfill Jesus’ words in Mark, echoed in John’s Gospel, “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘Servants are not greater than their master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you” (John 15:18-20).

Jesus came to the world to serve all those who are in need, but he was repaid with severe rejection and cruel crucifixion. Even though he was treated inhumanely, he forgave those who persecuted him and asked his Father do likewise: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Cardinal Nguyễn Văn Thuận succinctly commented on this with the insight from his own experience: having a terrible memory is one of Jesus’ five “defects”: he forgets all man’s sins.²⁵¹ This “defect” of Jesus becomes one of the reasons which helped the cardinal live with hope and peace during thirteen years in a Communist prison. Indeed, this servant leader of Vietnam’s Church, in mercy and love, overcame hatred and revenge, truly witnessing to his teachings of self-denial and servanthood completely to the end of his life.

What is asked of Vietnam’s Catholics? Are they commanded by their Master’s exhortation to deny all response of hostility toward the Communist regime? Vietnam’s believers have undergone difficult periods, many sufferings and conflicts, with the result that they share with

²⁵¹ Phanxicô Xaviê Văn Thuận Nguyễn, *Testimony of Hope: The Spiritual Exercises of Pope John Paul II* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2000), 14. He was arrested in Saigon, on August 15, 1975, the Feast of the Assumption and released in 1988.

many Vietnamese citizens a general negative image of the Communist authorities. In their mind, the Communists care only for their own welfare, not for the citizens', so Vietnamese and Vietnamese Catholics often criticize and blame current situations on the state.

For instance, one recent issue is the government's response to Covid 19. When the virus broke out, many Vietnamese who had travelled abroad for their business were stranded. Those Vietnamese citizens in the United States of America needed to register in the Vietnamese embassy and decide their flight according to the embassy's direction. Some were offered flights that would bring them home, but only at a high price making it too expensive.²⁵² There are many unanswered questions related to this issue, and we don't know who stands behind the project of increasing the costly price of the flight. Some people have interpreted it as the government restricting people's arrival from abroad to protect the nation from the spread of the virus, while many Vietnamese, including Catholics, immediately condemn the Vietnamese officials for using this opportunity for their own profiteering rather than serving the needs of the people. The gap between the government authorities and the citizens in general, and Catholics in particular, is huge, inducing people to criticize the state. Might this be an opportunity for Vietnamese Catholics to imitate Jesus' example by being patient in order to continue proclaiming the good news of God's guidance to our nation, especially offering reconciliation and trying to bridge the gap between the state and Catholics? This gap can only be filled by love, care, and welcome. In order to reach out to the authorities, Catholics first need to overcome their hatred. This is the very place where Vietnamese Catholics could apply Jesus' lessons of self-denial and servant-discipleship: being last of all and servant of all.

²⁵² The price of the flight was normally less than \$1,000 for one way. During this time, some people are required to pay more than three to seven times this fare.

“All” means that no one is ignored or excluded from the circle of the disciples’ love and care, including those who treat them with injustice. Jesus’ teachings require the disciples to deny themselves in order to humbly welcome even those whom they have reason to consider their “enemy.” Indeed, this way of being is not easy at all, particularly for those whose youth was destroyed in prison, or who experienced in person their relatives being persecuted under this regime. It is a challenge for them to love and serve these people when the pain of loss is still there.

Jesus’ exhortation is particularly pertinent, reminding Vietnamese Catholics to give witness to their faith through these different ways, including through the teachings of the Vietnamese Catholic Church authorities. The latter have clearly understood the conflict between the Catholics and the Communist Party, and the challenge to work with the Communist regime. Hence, when Communist North Vietnam took over the South in 1975, the archbishops of Hue and Saigon immediately sent out pastoral letters to their Catholics and urged them to collaborate with the new Communist government and build a peaceful, just, and prosperous country.²⁵³ In later pastoral letters of the Vietnamese Bishops’ Conference,²⁵⁴ the bishops have repeatedly emphasized and urged Catholics to live the Gospel’s message within their nation through being good and faithful citizens. Jesus’ message has repeatedly been echoed through pastoral letters of Vietnamese Church leaders. By this they have proved that reaching out, welcoming, even collaborating with the Communist state is an urgent and practical task for Jesus’ disciples. Though all have perceived that they are restricted or subjugated in different ways, they have also been encouraged to return

²⁵³ Vietnam has three archdioceses: Hue, Sai Gon, and Ha Noi. The Archbishop of Hue sent his letter on April 1, 1975. He also sent a second circular on June 12, 1975 also intended to encourage his people to carry out their civic duties imposed by the new regime. See more details in Phan, “The Roman Catholic Church in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 249.

²⁵⁴ The first conference of the bishops of the south after the communists conquered the south gathered on December 15-20, 1975 and the first Vietnamese Bishops’ Conference of both north and south was held from April 24 to May 1, 1980 in Ha Noi. In subsequent conferences, the bishops always focus on the topic of how Catholics live and serve as both good citizens and God’s people. For instance, the pastoral letter of the Vietnamese Bishop’s Conference in 2001 was sent out to call Catholics to live, witness, and proclaim the Gospel.

by living out the Gospel's message with a hope that through their love and welcome, they gradually will make a change in the heart of those who have not yet recognized Jesus.

Besides hostility toward the Communists, a mentality of religious discrimination remains a notable problem in Vietnam. In Jesus' time, there was a barrier between the Israelites and the Gentiles. The Gentiles were considered as "unclean" people who needed to be kept away from things that were "holy." Symbolically, the Israelites were referred to as "the children," while the Gentiles were called "the dogs."²⁵⁵ Because of this discrimination, the disciples did not want Jesus attending to the sufferings of the Gentiles, so they asked Jesus to send away the Canaanite woman whose daughter was tormented by a demon (Matt 15:23). They envisioned their mission as circulating among their own people, causing Jesus to compel (ἠνάγκασεν) them to go to the other side, to Bethsaida, toward pagan lands²⁵⁶ (6:45). But instead of proceeding to Bethsaida, the disciples went to Judaeon area at Gennesaret (6:53). The disciples' hostility toward the pagan world impelled Jesus to open their minds (6:54-8:21). It is not until 8:22-26, when they have finally arrived at Bethsaida, that Jesus heals the blind man in two stages.²⁵⁷ This mentality of religious boundaries also exists in Vietnam. Each religion makes a barrier for its own and thereby excludes others. Vietnamese Catholics consider Catholicism as the "correct" and the "best" religion, disparaging other religions. Hence, there are many limitations on the interaction between Catholics and other religions. For instance, it is difficult for parents to accept their children getting married to a non-Catholic. Some parishes also circumscribe their activities for their own people. When

²⁵⁵ Strauss, *Mark*, 312.

²⁵⁶ Focant, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 264.

²⁵⁷ Jesus opens their mind by polemicizing against the laws of ritual purity (7:1-23), healing the daughter of the Syrophenician woman (pagan) (7:25-30), curing the deaf man in the Decapolis, (7:31-37), and feeding the great crowd in the pagan land (8:1-10). See more details in Focant, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 264-266.

they engage in a charitable project, they usually mainly support Catholics. They consider Catholics to be the appropriate recipients of their service, while people of other religions are not.

Jesus came to the world to serve not only Jews but also Gentiles. because his mission was to become the ransom for *all*, not for only *some*. He requires his followers to know that he came to create a universal community or family, which goes beyond blood relationship. His family includes those who do the will of God (3:35), and it is not a community of rejection but one that reaches out to others. His followers in Vietnam need to let Jesus' characteristics guide them so that they can leave behind their attitude of discrimination and undertake his way of building mutual relationships, to welcome and serve all people although they are of different religions, regimes, and can even include persecutors.

Another lesson for Vietnamese Catholics concerns power and honor. Gaining authority is a common goal for many people, not only for Jesus' disciples in his time, but also his followers in the contemporary church. Even when Jesus' disciples were following him on the way to Jerusalem and were instructed about his coming passion and crucifixion, they still argued and asked for honored positions on his left and right in his glory (9:34 and 10:37). Likewise, Jesus' followers in Vietnam can be trapped in the desire of promotions which are offered by the Communist state. The regime provides many benefits for those who belong to the party. During the severe religious persecutions, some Catholics renounced their faith in order to protect their lives or even to gain a better job in government careers. To be ordained to the priesthood, some candidates (seminarians or brothers of religious congregations) have worked as government informers who report to the state about the activities of other priests and of the Catholic Church.²⁵⁸ The state has established different organizations that encourage the leaders of the Church to participate. Initially, some

²⁵⁸ Denney, "The Catholic Church in Vietnam," 292.

priests thought that they joined the government organization in order to create a good relationship with the state. Lately, however, they have become a “device” of the state to monitor the workers and works of the Church. In some schools and companies, the “communist party”²⁵⁹ is advocated, providing remarkable advantages for those who cooperate. For example, if they are students, they will be given better certification for their studies. The members of this party can also more easily find better jobs in government careers. They also get promotions superior to those of other ordinary people. Most of the richest people in Vietnam are Communist. For anyone who wants to join this regime, one of their conditions is to identify as non-religious. Though many Catholics sacrifice themselves and accept a lower position and disadvantages to keep their faith, some renounce it to receive promotion, eerily echoing Peter who denied Jesus to protect his own safety when he experienced Jesus’ passion. Instead of denying Jesus and his Gospel, Jesus wants his followers to act paradoxically by denying themselves and taking up their own cross in their current circumstances.

The last important lesson which Jesus’ followers in Vietnam can put into action is to be first by being last and servant of all. This is the exhortation Jesus instructed his disciples when he recognized their coveting authority to rule. They argued among themselves about who of them was greatest. James and John even approached Jesus to request from him the two most prominent positions in his glory, something which made the rest of the disciples angry – undoubtedly because they all had the same intention!

The competition for authority in the inner circle of the disciples is also a serious problem in the Vietnamese Church. Clergy are respected and loved because they are considered as pious and holy: they are chosen by God and they sacrifice everything to follow God in religious life and

²⁵⁹ “Communist party” is an organization in which its members participate in the governments activities and also receive many benefits from it.

to serve others unconditionally. Since they have more time to study, pray, and live with God, they are considered as the ones who are close to God and even as God's representatives. Some people come to ask their advice, because they assume that clergypersons are not only holy but also knowledgeable. Their teachings in the Church or in the community are very powerful and influential. One of the most striking examples is how priests could make the mass exodus from the north to the south of Vietnam after the victory of the Communists in the north in 1954. As I mentioned before, out of 900,000 refugees, 700,000 were Catholics and 700 priests, who fled from the north to the south. These Catholics followed their priests' guidance during this great exodus. Catholics were very faithful to their pastors. Stephen Denney even identified "the majority of Catholics as illiterate and simple-minded peasants and fishermen who followed their priests like faithful sheep."²⁶⁰ They readily trusted and listened to the priests. The important position of the clergy in the Church can bring some advantages: their teaching and transmitting God's message are accepted effectively. If they offer any invitation, their parishioners will respond positively.

Besides being respected, the higher the position of the clergy, the more service they receive from other people. For instance, bishops are served by priests and his people. Similarly, general superiors are honored and served by other members in the community. Such honor can cause the clergy to fall into the temptation and desire to seek authority and higher position in the Church, which often leads to division among groups or members in the community. Some people even choose to join religious life because they see this as the fastest way to help them improve or advance both their spiritual and material life. Such behavior is according to human will, similar to the example of the rulers of the Gentiles, which Jesus completely rejected: "it will not be so among you" (10:43). He turned the cultural notion of authority upside down and showed a paradoxical

²⁶⁰ Denney, "The Catholic Church in Vietnam," 271.

model of leadership in the Reign of God: one who is great or first needs to be the servant and slave of others (10:43-44). True leadership is demonstrated through self-giving service, as Jesus emphasized his role, coming not to be served but to serve. Vietnamese Catholics, particularly the clergy, are invited to root out “earthly” ways in order to put on Jesus’ spirit. If all the members in the Vietnamese Church were to reflect Jesus’ self-denial, cross-bearing and servanthood, they could witness and proclaim the presence of God to those who have not yet recognized God. Living witness is more powerful than words of teaching, as Pope Paul VI emphasized in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 41: “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”²⁶¹ Might Jesus’ model of discipleship not offer an unexpected possibility to suggest a change in the Communists’ behavior toward the Church? Incongruous? Improbable? Hopeless? Too much to ask? Are these not precisely the paradoxical characteristics of Jesus’ call to discipleship?

4.3 Sign of Hope Even When Things Seem Hopeless

The price of discipleship is costly. To fulfill Jesus’ teachings properly, his followers in Vietnam have to pay with their careers, fame, conceptions of self, and at times, even their lives. Many are probably anxious and question as Peter did: “Look, we have left everything and followed you” (10:28). The concern is reasonable and understandable, because according to most cultural perspectives, they would be considered as “losers”: they do not have what people generally wish to possess such as wealth, position, or authority in a society where success is measured by these things. Paradoxically, as Jesus’ disciples, they are invited to become servants of all and to identify with the lowest persons to serve in the community. This requirement is a harsh challenge for his

²⁶¹ Vatican Council II, “*Evangelii Nuntiandi*” (December 8, 1975), no. 41. Accessed April 7, 2021, http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html.

followers. If they obey his exhortation, will they end up as losers or failures? Absolutely not! Jesus promised his disciples: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” (8:35-36). Later, Jesus emphasized: “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life” (10:29-30). Jesus’ statements indicate that, although their sacrifice for him and for the gospel message does not lead to vanity, it does foster the creation of a new community oriented to the rewards of eternal life. This result is proven through Jesus himself and through some Vietnamese Catholics who have shared the same context and even persecution.

Jesus provides not only important teachings, but also hope for his followers. The most perfect act by which Jesus brings hope for those who deny themselves, take up their own cross and follow him, is his resurrection from the dead, the very center and hope of Christian faith. Paul underlines that if Jesus has not been raised from the dead, then all our faith, proclamation, and even sharing in his passion are futile; if we have hope in Jesus for this life only, we are the most pitied of all people (1 Cor 15:12-18). Jesus was a suffering Messiah who endured periods of shame and misery in order to become a servant of others. Indeed, suffering is not the end of Jesus’ mission, for he has been raised from the dead. His passion, rejection, and crucifixion—which bring about this most triumphant victory—is an example of this paradoxical salvation for his followers. As Paul O’Callaghan underscores, “Jesus’ rising from the dead provides the promise, guarantee, exemplar, and foretaste of universal resurrection, which may be considered an ‘extension of

Christ's own resurrection to humans."²⁶² Jesus is "the first fruit" (1 Cor 15:20) and the guarantor of life for those who share in his passion. Such a promise brings hope that strengthens his followers to share his passion while on this earthly journey.

This light of hope also shines in the contemporary Catholic Church in Vietnam through the examples of those who have dared to lose their physical life in order to obtain eternal life. Trusting in God's salvation, as Paul insists (Romans 8:17),²⁶³ hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese believers have expressed their belief by being patient and practicing thoroughly Jesus' teachings about self-denial, cross-bearing, and servanthood in their own circumstances, particularly during the periods of severe religious persecution.²⁶⁴ On June 19, 1988, Pope John Paul II held one of the largest single canonizations, honoring 117 Vietnamese Catholics who followed the teachings of Christ and were martyred by government authorities for their faith.²⁶⁵ Moreover, there are yet many more who, in spite of not being praised and honored publicly, have surely received heavenly rewards, because they have sacrificed their lives for the sake of Jesus and his gospel. These examples have reinforced the faith and hope of the Catholic Church in Vietnam, not to mention other virtues, such as fortitude.

One of the most familiar and profoundly striking examples for the contemporary Vietnamese Church is Cardinal Nguyễn Văn Thuận, who proclaimed Jesus as our only hope²⁶⁶ and who has provided us a model for living. He taught that ultimate glory is approached through the way of the cross and servanthood. Similar to hundreds of other Vietnamese Church leaders during

²⁶² Paul O'Callaghan, *Christ Our Hope: An Introduction to Eschatology* (Washington, District of Columbia: Catholic University of America, 2012), 88.

²⁶³ "If, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him."

²⁶⁴ See more details of estimated numbers of Vietnamese martyrs in Peter N V Hai, "A Brief History of the Catholic Church in Vietnam," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 49, 1 (2012): 5–30, at 12-13.

²⁶⁵ Denney, "The Catholic Church in Vietnam," 293; and Jacob Ramsay, "Miracles and Myths: Vietnam Seen through Its Catholic History," in *Modernity and Re-Enchantment: Religion in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam* (Singapore, 2007): 371–98, at 387.

²⁶⁶ Nguyễn, *Testimony of Hope*, 8

the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam in 1975, then-Archbishop Thuận also became a prisoner of the new government regime when the Communists from the north took over the south. On August 15 (the Feast of the Assumption), at the age of 47, he was forced into imprisonment for more than thirteen years, nine of which were in solitary confinement.²⁶⁷ His Christ-like perseverance in the midst of terrible persecution is a testimony of hope and a powerful example of servant leadership. In this time, he also shared his faith with his companions in prison and with others who were facing challenges and suffering for their faith because of the restrictions of the government authorities.

In this new journey during the hardest time of his life, faith and hope in Jesus' salvation—as Paul insists (2 Tim 2:11-12)²⁶⁸—strengthened him, but Thuận nevertheless experienced bitterness of heart and sorrow when his uncles and cousin were executed by the Communists.²⁶⁹ Ngô Đình Diệm, Thuận's uncle, was the president of South Vietnam whom the Communists considered a traitor. In response, the Communist authorities destroyed his family. As a member of this royal family, Thuận was tortured and dehumanized with the harshest form of captivity, especially during his nine years in isolation. He was locked in a painfully narrow and damp cell with four filthy and windowless walls.²⁷⁰ Thuận described these cramped conditions:

When I found myself in the prison at Phù Khánh, confined to a cell without windows, in extremely hot weather, suffocating, I felt myself gradually becoming more lifeless, until I lost consciousness. At times the light in the cell was left on day and night, at other times it was always dark. It was so humid that mushrooms began to grow on my sleeping mat. In the darkness I saw light coming in through a crack at the bottom of the door (to let water run out). So I spent one hundred days on the floor, putting my nose near the crack in order to breathe. When it rained and the water level rose,

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 13.

²⁶⁸ “If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him.”

²⁶⁹ Andre N. Van Chau, *The Miracle of Hope: Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan, Political Prisoner, Prophet of Peace* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2003), 82-3.

²⁷⁰ Phanxicô Xaviê Văn Thuận Nguyễn, *Five Loaves & Two Fish* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2003), vi-vii; and Chau, *The Miracle of Hope*, 202.

little insects - spiders, millipedes, mosquitoes, etc. - came in and I had no strength left to drive them away.²⁷¹

He suffered greatly through torments and humiliations under the heartless regime. Surviving under these remorseless conditions, never knowing if it was day or night or whether or not he would have a future left him, he feared that he was losing his mind. This overwhelmed him with feelings of sadness, uselessness, and tension. The vision of Jesus crucified became a source of encouragement for him, as he recounts: “He was completely helpless ... certainly worse off than me in my prison cell. Then I heard a voice – was it his voice? – saying: ‘At this precise moment on the cross, I redeemed all the sins of the world.’”²⁷² It was thus that Thuận discovered a new purpose and vocation for his life, to take up his own cross in the present moment, sustained only with hope in Jesus.

Thuận’s hope was strengthened because he loved and appreciated the “defects” of Jesus: 1) Jesus has a terrible memory (he forgets humans’ sins), 2) he does not know math (he considers one equal to ninety-nine), 3) he does not know logic (he invites friends to celebrate for finding one silver piece), 4) he is a risk-taker (he has nowhere to lay his head), and 5) he does not understand finances or economics (he pays for the one working from 5 P.M. the same wage as the one working since early morning).²⁷³ The reason why Jesus is encumbered by these “defects” is because he is love (1 Jn. 4:16). Thuận cites Blaise Pascal’s saying, “the heart has its reasons that reason does not know.”²⁷⁴ He explains, “Real love does not reason, does not measure, does not create barriers, does not calculate, does not remember offenses, and does not impose conditions.”²⁷⁵ Jesus’ love helped Thuận to find inspiration and meaning through all the brutal tortures he experienced in prison. As

²⁷¹ Nguyễn, *Five Loaves & Two Fish*, 19

²⁷² *Ibid.*, vii.

²⁷³ See more details in Nguyễn, *Testimony of Hope*, 14-18.

²⁷⁴ Cardinal Nguyễn Văn Thuận cites Blaise Pascal’s perspective. See Nguyễn, *Testimony of Hope*, 16.

²⁷⁵ Nguyễn, *Testimony of Hope*, 18.

Paul stresses, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39).

On November 21, 1988, on the Feast of the Presentation of Our Lady, Thuận was released from prison, but without permission to perform any pastoral work.²⁷⁶ In 1991, he was allowed to travel to Rome, but the Communist authorities denied him the right to return to his motherland.²⁷⁷ Though his family was murdered and he himself was humiliated, abused, and tortured badly in captivity and then forced to live as an exile in a foreign country, his close relationship with God helped him to overcome all hatred and anger in order to forgive and reconcile with those who destroyed him and his family. He replaced the hatred and any negative emotion toward the Communists with love (“love them, to love Jesus in them”)²⁷⁸ and a strengthened hope in Jesus’ redemption. Thirteen years of imprisonment made him embody and deepen in his person the theology of hope through meditating, practicing, and even sharing it with his companions and people. Hope is the primary and compelling theme for his whole life, expressed through his teachings and writings with a great conviction, particularly through *The Road of Hope, Five Loaves and Two Fish, The Road of Hope in the Light of God’s Word and the Council Vatican II, Testimony of Hope, The Pilgrim People on the Road of Hope, and Prayers of Hope*. When Pope John Paul II invited him to preach the Lenten Retreat to the Roman Curia at the beginning of the third millennium in 2000, Thuận chose “Testimony of Hope” as the title of his retreat talks.²⁷⁹

Beyond the testimony of forgiveness and reconciliation, Thuận also embodied the model of servant-leadership. He acknowledged himself as a servant when he was arrested, and when all

²⁷⁶ Chau, *The Miracle of Hope*, 231.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 248-51.

²⁷⁸ Nguyễn, *Five Loaves & Two Fish*, 46

²⁷⁹ Nguyễn, *Testimony of Hope*.

his identity, function, and rights as a minister and even a free person were stripped from him. He reported, “From the day of my arrest, everyone was forbidden to call me ‘bishop, father.’ I was simply Mr. Van Thuận. I could no longer carry any sign of my office. Without warning, I was asked, also on God’s part, to return to the essentials.”²⁸⁰ In this role of servant, he first served his fellow prisoners. Despite facing his own anguish in the harsh conditions of imprisonment, he chose to care for his peers through comforting and encouraging them to maintain hope. His spirit of hope, caring behavior, and intensive listening enabled his fellow prisoners to listen to his spiritual and thoughtful sharing. For instance, in one case his counsel prevented a cellmate from committing suicide.²⁸¹ In this way, he healed the souls of his companions.

Thuận also selflessly extended his thoughts, care, and concern for his people who were suffering to keep their faith under the Communist regime. His manner of care for his flock echoed Jesus’ model. On Jesus’ way to Jerusalem, acknowledging that passion and death were awaiting him, he was more concerned for his disciples than his own suffering. Thus, he spent most of the time during the journey teaching them how to endure through suffering and to live out the model of discipleship. Similarly, while Thuận was in the captivity, he tried to find a way to reach out and encourage his people. He finally found that way, in writing a book with the message of hope. He named the book *The Road of Hope*, an idea inspired by *The Imitation of Christ*, particularly the chapter titled, “Endure All Grievous Things for Eternal Life.”²⁸² With the help of a young boy named Quang, Thuận had the calendar’s small sheets to write down his thoughts. Every day, he wrote his messages and the young boy brought them out at night to print secretly.²⁸³ Very quickly, copies of Thuận’s book from captivity were passed among Catholic communities in Vietnam and

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 13.

²⁸¹ Chau, *The Miracle of Hope*, 209.

²⁸² Ibid., 200-201.

²⁸³ Ibid., 200-2002.

France, and the United States as well. Despite the lack of a named author, the Communist officials discovered his identity and, in a rage, put him in isolation under the most terrible conditions.²⁸⁴

Thuận had been too caring for the sake of his people, risking his life to reach out and teach them.

Though he endured severe humiliation and torment under the Communist regime, his experience of injustice and his contributions to God's people were recognized by the Church. Pope John Paul II appointed Thuận as vice-president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace on November 11, 1994 and as the Council's president on June 24, 1998. On January 21, 2001, the Feast of the Chair of St. Peter, Pope John Paul II elevated Thuận to the College of Cardinals. Cancer took him away on September 16, 2002. Five years after his death, on September 16, 2007, the cause for the beatification of Cardinal Thuận took place in Rome. The Solemn Opening of the Diocesan Inquiry into the life, the virtues, and the reputation of holiness of the Servant of God, Francois-Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận, was celebrated on 22 October 2010. In his farewell homily, Pope John Paul II recounted, "Like his life, Cardinal Văn Thuận's death was indeed a testimony of hope. May his spiritual legacy, like his hope, be 'full of immortality'! He leaves us, but his example remains. Faith assures us that he is not dead but has entered into the eternal day, which knows no sunset."²⁸⁵ Although he is away, his model of hope and servant-leadership remains alive and shining in the Church.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 2002.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 280

CONCLUSION

Mark uses the very center of his Gospel to emphasize Jesus' teachings about discipleship. This central part is also called the "way section," because it recounts the journey of Jesus and his disciples to Jerusalem. Besides its geographical meaning, this term also has the symbolic meaning of the "way of discipleship." Jesus' way to Jerusalem, the destination for his rejection, passion, and execution, becomes the way of life because his way of the cross ultimately leads to the triumphant end of resurrection. Jesus promises this glory as the result for those who share in his path. However, Mark shows that Jesus' disciples are still far from walking with him through his passion, because their eyes are still blinded by the desire for power, prestige, and honor. Their spiritual "blindness" is indicated in two dimensions: they first hold on to the image of Jesus as a glorious and triumphant political messiah; and they expect that, as Jesus' disciples, they will gain some benefit from their authoritative master when they arrive at the "royal" city, Jerusalem. Consequently, they fail to acknowledge the discipleship of suffering. Therefore, they make mistakes and miscomprehend what Jesus says to them, especially the three predictions of his coming passion. These negative depictions of the disciples' repeated lack of comprehension cause some people to form different ideas. For instance, Mark tends to exaggerate their failures as a device to emphasize the "secret" messianic Jesus, or he possibly has the intention of disgracing them because he considers them his rivals with the early churches. The best interpretation of the disciples' incomprehension in the "way section," however, is that Mark wants to emphasize the challenge of Jesus' teachings. By bringing up their misunderstandings and mistakes, the Markan Jesus is given an opportunity to instruct them.

Similar to how Jesus healed the blind man at Bethsaida in 8:22-26 and the beggar Bartimaeus in 10:46-52—the stories that form an *inclusio* around the "way section"—he attempts

to remove the membrane covering their vision to see more clearly his true identity as a suffering Messiah, and the way of the cross and servanthood as the way of true discipleship. The journey to Jerusalem is the urgent occasion for the disciples to see properly what Jesus' messiahship means and, consequently, what being his disciples means. Only when they understand clearly the nature of Jesus and discipleship can they enter into Jerusalem to share in his passion.

Jesus' spiritual healing is focused through his three primary teachings that are presented immediately after the disciples' misunderstandings about the predictions of his coming passion. The first teaching about self-denial and cross-bearing to follow Jesus comes after Peter's incomprehension and rebuke of Jesus for going to Jerusalem to fulfill his suffering mission. In the second and third teachings, Jesus instructs his disciples to become great by being last (9:35-37) and to be leader by becoming a servant to others (10:42-44), which come after the disciples argue and desire to obtain authority or positions of honor. Jesus' paradoxical teachings orient them in the way they need to go, which is against what they expect.

Mark shows that there is an integral relationship between Christology and discipleship, particularly the way Jesus and the disciples live out "the way" according to God's will. Jesus is the ultimate measure of discipleship. This model is indicated directly from his words: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45). Jesus identifies himself only as *ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου* ("the Son of Man") who comes to serve others. Such a statement is demonstrated through his entire mission, particularly in his last days which led to his rejection, suffering and crucifixion. He embodied perfectly in his life, ministry, and dying all his teachings of self-denial, cross-bearing, and servant leadership. The disciples are invited to imitate his model. Only when they follow his footsteps will they gain eternal life.

Jesus' teachings are not only vital for the disciples in his day, but are also necessary for his followers in every age. In our society, the notion of hierarchy or status is measured through power, salary, or high position. The center of this success is our egoistic selves, and all the benefits we gain are merely to promote our personal position and benefit. Jesus' concept is completely in contrast to this. His radically paradoxical teachings on discipleship require his followers to take the opposite path against the cultural and natural norms of contemporary society. We are required to deny ourselves, take up our own cross, and move outward from ourselves toward other people.

To live out Jesus' teachings by taking a path contrary to that which would normally be expected, the disciples need to be self-sacrificing, humble, and persevering. The "cross" always exists, and power, high position, honor, etc. will be constant temptations. As followers of Jesus, we are invited to deny ourselves and live for his sake and his gospel. Such a manner of life requires us to sacrifice our personal desires and to care for others, seeing Jesus in them. We are encouraged to identify humbly as the lowest class in society in order to serve as slaves. Thus, patience and perseverance are also important characteristics for disciples in this earthly journey.

Although we have heard Jesus' teachings about discipleship many times, we may not take and practice them intentionally. Consequently, the radical model of discipleship, including servant leadership, has been lost from sight. Living in a society like Vietnam's, where freedom of religion is still limited and non-Catholics receive more benefits, Jesus' teachings about discipleship are a serious and relevant challenge for his followers. If they don't think in terms of the divine will, but only from a human perspective (8:33), many will find it difficult, even impossible, to practice Jesus' teachings of discipleship properly. Only those who trust in Jesus' promise, "those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (8:35), and trust as well in Paul's promise that "if we have died with him, we will also live with

him; if we endure, we will also reign with him” (2 Tim 2:11-12), will have enough courage to exchange their earthly life for eternal life. Furthermore, such witness to self-giving love against the horizon of resurrection hope will show forth God’s presence for other people, and hopefully the good life of Christians can cause government authorities to have a positive attitude toward Catholics.

Sacrifice and servanthood do not end in vain, but will be granted heavenly rewards as Jesus promises to those who lose their life for his sake and for the sake of the gospel (8:35). His words are guaranteed by his own model, and borne witness to by many of his followers. In the early community, for example, all of the apostles were martyred, except for John. Lately, many Christians have also sacrificed their lives under authoritative regimes similar to Rome in the time of Jesus. Hoping in his salvation has strengthened faith for Christians throughout the centuries suffering under different kinds of persecution. Likewise, some Vietnamese Catholics, recently Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận, have practiced Jesus’ teachings thoroughly and have provided us great examples to strengthen our own capacity for discipleship. This is a vital and powerful encouragement to those who follow Jesus to the end. Some Church leaders are probably not always humble, nor disciples always disciplined in their service. Jesus in his passion was both, and remains with us, sustaining us on our way to Jerusalem.

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