

What makes a person a Christian? Paul and John emphasize *believing* in Jesus. Matthew stresses *obedience* to the law, authoritatively interpreted by Jesus. Luke emphasizes *compassion* and *justice*. Mark establishes three conditions: *deny self, take up one's cross, and follow Jesus*.

The call is not to deny one's self chocolate for Lent, nor to indulge in self-hatred. It is to deny the acquisitive self that craves more . . . more security, more money, more power, more prestige.

Hear the parable of the Mexican fisherman who docked his small boat at a pier as an American businessman watched. Inside the boat were several large yellowfin tuna. The American complimented the Mexican on the quality of the fish and asked how long it took to catch them. The Mexican replied, *Only a little while*.

*Why not stay out longer and catch more fish?*

*I have enough to support my family's immediate needs.*

*What do you do with the rest of your time?*

*I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take a siesta with my wife, stroll through the village each evening, sip wine and play guitar with my friends. I have a full and busy life.*

The American scoffed, *I have an MBA from Harvard. I could help you. You should spend more time fishing and with the larger profits purchase a bigger boat. With a bigger boat you could catch more fish and purchase several boats. Soon you would have a fleet of fishing boats.*

*Instead of selling your catch to a middleman, you could sell directly to a processor, eventually opening your own cannery. You would control the product, processing and distribution. You could leave this small coastal village and move to Mexico City and eventually to New York where you will run an expanding enterprise.*

*How long will that take?*

*Fifteen to twenty years. The best part is when the time is right, you would announce an IPO and sell your company stock to the public and become very rich.*

*Then what?*

*Then you could retire, move to a small coastal village, fish a little, play with your kids, take siesta with your wife, stroll the village, sip wine and play guitar with your friends.*

By then, however, the children will be grown and off on their own, perhaps with children of their own, whom the fisherman may or may not know. What will twenty years of missed siestas mean for his marriage? His friends will have twenty years of memories that don't include him. *What profit is there if you gain the whole world and forfeit life?*

According to Mark, the cross is not something Jesus carries for us, each of us must carry our own. The cross is not the pain and suffering that comes from being flesh and blood, from living in a material world. The cross is whatever redemptive action we take for others. We have no better nor more poignant example at the moment than the witness of Alexei Navalny.

As Jesus made clear his solidarity with the poor and the outcasts, he ran afoul of entrenched political and religious powers. As suspicion of him turned to resistance and then to hatred and fury, he began to prepare his disciples for what he was to suffer.

Peter's plea might even have caused Jesus to waiver momentarily. Why else the painful cry *Get behind me, Satan!* Perhaps in that brief scene we have a glimpse of Jesus battling resistance not only in his small intimate circle, but in himself. (Elizabeth O'Connor)

The third condition for being a Christian, according to Mark, is to follow Jesus. The promise is that if we give our lives for the sake of the gospel, as Jesus did, then we will be raised as Jesus was.

This promise puts us in the shoes of Abraham and Sarah. They were promised, twenty-five years earlier, to become the father and mother of a multitude of nations. Yet, they remained childless and are now old, very old, beyond childbearing years by decades.

Paul claims no distrust made Abraham waver concerning the promise of God, that he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God. Paul omits the fact that Abraham and Sarah fell out laughing upon hearing the promise, knowing how preposterous and impossible was its fulfillment. Their faith wavered so much that Sarah gave Hagar, her slave, to Abraham for procreation.

The promise hinged, not on Abraham and Sarah's faithfulness, but on God's. The promise that we will save our lives by losing them for the sake of the gospel is as hard to believe as was the promise that Abraham and Sarah would birth a multitude of nations. Our faith in the promise may waver, as did theirs. The good news is, the promise is not dependent upon our faith, but on the steadfast love of God.