

Date: *The hard sayings of Jesus*

PRAY Lord, help me to follow you more closely today.

READ Mark 8:31 – 9:1

REFLECT

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. This is one of the most misunderstood statements Jesus ever made.

How many times have you heard someone sigh and say in reference to some minor irritation, 'Well, we all have our cross to bear, don't we?' But, for Jesus, taking up his cross was not just a coping mechanism. It was a symbol of all-out obedience to his Father's will. He was on his way to die.

Let's back up for a minute. Peter has just stumbled into one of his greatest 'Aha!' moments; he's finally come out with who Jesus really is (8:29). You'd think Peter would get a gold star for his answer.

Instead, Jesus gives a serious lecture; he teaches the disciples (8:31) and then rebukes Peter (8:33). Why? Because although they could now say the right things about Jesus they still didn't understand who he was; they viewed him from a human rather than divine perspective.

That presents a challenge for us today. Those of us who are surrounded by Christian teaching – in churches, sermons, books and so on – can quickly learn to say the right things about Jesus without understanding what they mean. True understanding comes when we put into practice the things Jesus said and did.

That's part of what Jesus meant by saying, 'Follow me'. Jesus gave up his rights as the Son of God to die for the sins of the world. For us, following Jesus will mean that the focus of our lives will no longer be the pursuit of happiness. Rather it will be to draw closer to Jesus and to become more single-minded about sharing him with others by our words and actions (8:35). We must die to our own agenda and live for Jesus' agenda.

APPLY How would you describe the focus of your life? In what ways have you taken up your cross to follow Jesus?

PRAY Father, I find it so easy to focus on the things of this world and so difficult to focus on the things that matter most to you. Please help me to live with your priorities today.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: THE HARD SAYINGS OF JESUS

After you've completed the five readings in this section, get together with another person or group to talk about the things you've learned. Begin by sharing the insights you gained from your own reflection on the passages. Then use the following questions to help you continue the conversation.

- 1 Of all the things Jesus said (both those mentioned in this section and others you may have read in the Gospels), which are the most difficult for you to understand? To obey? Why?
- 2 Was there ever a time in your life when you were moving 180 degrees away from God? What was it like? How did you turn around?
- 3 Have you ever experienced a specific answer to your prayers? What happened and how did it affect your relationship with God?
- 4 Have you ever failed to receive an answer to a specific prayer? What happened and how has it affected your view of God and prayer?
- 5 How do you usually resolve conflicts with people who have offended you?
- 6 Which is a bigger priority for you – pursuing happiness or following Jesus? What evidence can you offer?