

Hard Work
[Mark 8:27-38](#)
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There's a theory popular on the internet that if you want to become an expert at any complicated skill or talent, you need to practice for around 10,000 hours before you can really call yourself a master. If you want to learn to compose or play music like Beethoven or Paul McCartney, become a chess grandmaster like Bobby Fisher or a world-renowned soccer player like Lionel Messi, really any difficult skill you want to develop, you need to work for it. Yes, you have to start with at least some talent, but that talent needs to be developed through practice, through hard work and determination and hours upon hours of repetitive drudgery before you can call yourself truly great. Ten thousand hours means doing something for three hours, every single day, for almost ten years – that's how long, according to this theory at least, you need to work to be considered a master. And so before you embark on that kind of a quest – before you decide you really, really want to become, say, the best harmonica player who ever lived, you have to ask yourself, is it worth the trouble? Do I really want to spend three hours a day, every single day, for the next ten years, practicing the harmonica, just so I can say I'm really, really good at the harmonica? Is that really a good use of my time? At various points in my life, I have tried to plant a vegetable garden – I built garden boxes, cleared grass and weeds, tilled the soil, bought seeds and seedlings, netting and fencing and all sorts of garden tools, and at the end of the summer, for all the hours of work I put in and all the money I spent, I would have a few tomatoes or zucchini to show for it – the most expensive tomatoes on the planet – and then you start to wonder if all that work was really worth it when you can just go to the grocery store and buy reasonably delicious

tomatoes and zucchini without going to all that trouble. Don't get me wrong – it is a good thing to have a dream, and to work hard at that dream, but before you start the work, you better make sure that it's worth it. If you need to spend 10,000 hours to get good at something, you better make sure that the work you're dedicating your life to is something that deserves all your time and effort and life.

Of course, maybe the internet is wrong. Maybe you don't need to spend 10,000 hours getting good at something. Maybe there's a shortcut. And if you're looking for a shortcut, a quick path to greatness and success that avoids all that tedious 'hard work' and practice, there is no shortage of life hacks and get-success-quick schemes to be found on, you guessed it, the internet. Want to lose weight without worrying about 'diet' or 'exercise'? Try this one weird trick doctors don't want you to know about. Want a guaranteed way to double your money with little to no risk? Invest in this unregulated crypto-currency. If we want the end result without all the hard work and trouble it would take to get there legitimately, humans are all too willing to consider a shortcut, an end-run around the 10000 hours of practice and diligence and prudence that we really don't want to have to do. And of course, the shortcuts don't actually work – if they did, we'd all be harmonica-playing prodigies, with washboard abs and wallets full of bitcoin, and that's just not how the world works. Maybe the 10,000 hour figure isn't exactly right, but there's something to it all the same. If you want to become great at something, if you decide that it's worth it, there are no shortcuts; you're going to have to put in the work.

Keep all that in mind when you read today's passage from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus and his disciples have been working together for some time now, and things have been going well – the disciples have seen Jesus do amazing things, over and over again. He's healed the sick, cast out evil, calmed storms, multiplied

food to feed thousands, even brought the dead back to life. And yes, there's been a few bad apples who have tried to cause trouble – every so often they run into opposition, a few grouches who scheme and fuss and try to slow down what Jesus is trying to accomplish, but so far, those troublemakers have failed to slow down the unstoppable Jesus movement that is barreling onward towards fame and fortune, with all the disciples along for the ride. These disciples figure they've put in their time, put in the work necessary, and now it's time to reap the rewards – to stop with all these small time meet and greets out in the sticks, and head for the main event, head for Jerusalem where Jesus can show the world who he really is. Because they know He's the Messiah – Peter knows it, all the disciples know it, and with the Messiah on their side, they are set for life. Jesus is their ticket to the easy street, he's a shortcut past all the trouble and trauma of dealing with the Romans and their armies and empire. Jesus is going places, and they're going with him, and together, nothing will stop them.

But Jesus isn't as excited and eager to get started on this shortcut to glory as Peter and the rest of the disciples seem to be. As soon as they proclaim that yes, Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus tells them to keep it down, don't tell anyone. And then he starts talking about what's actually going to happen next. The Son of Man is going to suffer. He'll be rejected by the leaders of God's people, and he will die. Jesus is going to die. The disciples think that they've already done all the work, and it's time for the reward, time for the victory celebration, but Jesus reveals that the real work hasn't even started yet. The real work isn't the trip to Jerusalem, the real work starts in Jerusalem, when Jesus willingly lays down his life and picks up his cross, that's the real work Jesus is called to do. And Jesus tells the disciples that that's the work that they are called to do as well. If anyone wants to be his follower, they have to put in the work, they have to pick up the

cross and follow Jesus right into the heart of the pain and suffering and death he's about to experience in Jerusalem. Being a follower of Jesus won't be about taking shortcuts, about easy victories, comfortable positions of wealth and power and success. Being a follower of Jesus will mean sharing in his suffering as he suffers for the sake of the world. Being a follower of Jesus will mean spending your life carrying the cross, step by step on the road to Calvary.

And that's a hard message to hear, and a hard message to understand. It was certainly hard for Peter and the disciples to accept, and it's still hard for us today. But once we accept that being a Christian isn't about having an easy, comfortable life, that there are no shortcuts to the kingdom of heaven, then we can start to hear the rest of what Jesus has to say. He promises his disciples that their road will lead through pain and suffering and death, that they will have to put in the work of carrying their cross each and every day of their lives. But Jesus promises his disciples that the work will be worth it. Following Jesus Christ is always worth it. Carrying your cross, sharing in whatever pain and trouble you encounter on that road to Jerusalem, it is always worth it. Because Jesus tells his disciples that death will not stop him – that after three days, the Son of Man will rise again. It doesn't matter what following Jesus costs you, it will always be worth it. Even if it costs you the entire world, even if it costs you your life, it will always be worth it. Jesus promises his disciples that holding on to their lives, holding on to what they have, trying to find shortcuts and easy ways forward, that can only lead to death, but when they accept that the life of a Christian will have pain and trouble and even death, they will discover that the power and love and grace of Jesus Christ are stronger than death, stronger than anything else in all creation, that there is absolutely nothing that can keep the love of Christ away from his people as they work to follow him. Following Jesus, carrying your cross, it

will cost you something. It might cost you everything. But whatever the cost, following Jesus is always, always, always worth it.

And that's important for us to remember, as Christ's people living in this difficult time. When the world around us seems to be falling apart, it is hard to keep caring for each other, it is hard to keep trusting that Jesus is still in control, that all of the mess we see in the world around us is all somehow part of the plan. But there has always been trouble, there have always been roadblocks and detours on the road towards the kingdom of heaven, there have always been problems, some that we caused for ourselves, some that just fell out of the sky and landed on top of us when we least expected it. Just like Peter and the rest of the disciples, we somehow get the idea that following Jesus should be easy, that he'll take care of all the tough stuff, and just leave us all the blessings, that being part of the church is a shortcut to a safe, comfortable life, and that's never been true. Following Jesus has always involved working, carefully and steadily, through all the trouble, all the pain, all the mess this world can throw at us, little by little growing more and more into the people God created us to be. Following Jesus means confronting the evil we see in the world and in ourselves, and letting God's spirit work in us and through us to overcome that evil with good. Following Jesus means carrying our cross, walking not away from danger, but towards it, pursuing not safety and security but justice, peace and love, for our neighbours and for the world around us. And when we follow Jesus, when we carry our cross, whatever obstacles we face, whatever trouble we encounter, we can know that we do not face them alone. We do not carry our cross alone. Jesus Christ is the one who leads us, he's the one who has already faced the worst possible trouble, the worst possible pain that any human being can possibly face, and he conquered it, he defeated it, he rose from the dead and put an end to death's power once and for all, and if Jesus can do that

to death, then there is nothing that can stand in his way. There is no trouble strong enough to keep Christ's people from doing the work he's called us to do, and we know that in the end, all of it will be worth it, because we're working for Jesus Christ, we're working for his kingdom to come and his will to be done here and now. Today, in all that we do, may we do the work of Jesus Christ, may we carry our crosses wherever he leads, so that day by day, moment by moment, we work out our salvation, knowing that Jesus Christ is at work in us, making us more than what we could ever be on our own, making us citizens of the kingdom of God. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.