

**- Saint John's Pulpit (February 28, Second Sunday in Lent)
- "Pass or Fail?" Mark 8:31-38**

³¹ Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Registering a pass / fail class: Good or Bad?

In 2004, I was in Evanston, Illinois because of my master program at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. One hundred fifty years old history and an incredibly beautiful campus shared with Northwestern University near the lake of Michigan.

At that time, Garrett had the most famous professor by students. Surprisingly not from some main theology areas, but a Jewish Rabbi who was teaching Judaism. He had taught at Garrett for 49 years. Simply speaking, he covered 1/3 history of the seminary. Respected by students, faculties, and all alumni. His classes were very popular, so students had to be hurried to register!

What made his classes so popular? Not only his profound teaching as a renowned Jewish rabbi but also his classes had no mid-term/final term exams! All his classes were pass/fail systems without grading. So, what students need to do is to submit one reflection paper at the end of the semester. How fantastic it was!

As an international student, I wanted to take his class because I needed more time adjusting myself to the first semester of speaking/writing in English. What I was required was to attend his class and hand in one paper... it was a God-send class!

His class made my first semester go smoothly and somewhat easy. Actually, the rabbi did not require lots of works, however, I did not know that I would be in troubles several years later when I have to take Judaism class in Doctoral coursework. No basis and knowledge at all! Had to study from the front pages again! Certainly, the pass/fail class was a sweet temptation! But it was bitter when my study is incomplete! If I could have studied more... this was my lesson learned.

Depending on your study, potentially you would be failed even if you passed it! So, what about Jesus' disciples? Were they good disciples to pass all exams by Jesus? This is a question to ponder this morning.

Jesus' Disciples – Did They Pass or Fail?

Apparently, the text today blamed Peter's fail because he insisted on his plans, not God's plans when he heard about Jesus' Death and Resurrection. This is a big irony. In Mark 8:29, Peter got an A plus because he understood who Jesus was exactly!

²⁹ He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." Mark 8:29 NRSV

Not every disciple did this. Only Peter did it! It looks like Peter got an admission to the Kingdom of God by an early decision. But immediately he failed!

Foretelling Jesus' Death and Resurrection... was done three times by Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This announcement looks like Jesus's final exam plan for his disciples. Jesus had to wait to do this when his disciples were ready. Presumably, Peter's wonderful response in verse 29 became a trigger to move on the next mission in Jerusalem-Jesus' passion, death, and Resurrection.

Surprisingly, Peter failed to pass this exam. More surprisingly, all disciples failed too in the second and third foretelling by Jesus Christ! Let me tell about Jesus' second foretelling his Death and Resurrection, which is in Mark 9:30-32. Right after this announcement, you can see this uneasy scene in Mark 9:31-34.

³¹ for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." ³² But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. ³³ Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" ³⁴ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. Mark 9:31-34 NRSV

Yes, Jesus' disciples failed to understand what Jesus' Death and Resurrection meant. They were not qualified!

So, what happened among Jesus' disciples when they heard from Jesus about his upcoming Death and Resurrection? The third foretelling is in Mark 10:32-34. This time, we can see that Jesus' disciples, especially James and John failed to understand. Please look at Mark 10:35-37.

³⁵ James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." ³⁶ And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" ³⁷ And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Mark 10:35-37 NRSV

Peter, James and John, and other disciples shared everything with Jesus for three years. They attended all meetings, training workshops, and worship services. Even Peter, James, and John experienced Jesus' transfiguration

clearly! It was no doubt for them to pass all exams by Jesus, but actually, they failed!

What about me? I attended all lectures faithfully by the Jewish rabbi teacher. I submitted a quite good final paper before due! I did everything to meet the class requirement. But I was not sure that I could understand his teaching completely! Looking like I passed, but questionable!

Your Exam this Lenten Season

One thing we need to do this Lenten season is to double-check our faith journey. I don't think that Jesus wants to do grading for your faith. No, Never! But a real grading should be on us because we know ourselves very well. What others see you does not matter. What you need is how closely relate with Jesus Christ. Your achievement yesterday does not guarantee another success tomorrow.

Peter got an 'A plus' when he confessed 'you are the Messiah' in front of Jesus. But very soon, he was rebuked by Jesus, the same Messiah. James and John were called the beloved disciples, but their concern was in glory and power by Jesus. Jesus taught his disciples to serve people humbly, but they were arguing with one another who was the great, greater, and greatest.

If so, how can we pass the exams from Jesus? To the question, Apostle Paul gives a really good tip in 1 Corinthians 10:12.

¹² If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall. 1 Corinthians 10:12 NLT

To make our journey humbly day by day... I believe this is the best way to come closer to Jesus. Please remember this. The Kingdom of God is always open to those who are humble. It was given to one of two criminals when he was humble in front of Jesus. So, his grade was switched from Fail to Pass!

⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Luke 23:42-43 NRSV

If Jesus blessed and welcomed the criminal at the last minute, so don't you think that the same grace would be upon us? Hope we all pass life & faith exams in His Grace!