

How you package a product makes a big impact on its sale. I have a friend in the paint business who tells me they had several colors that sold poorly until he changed their names. For instance, no one bought "chalk white" paint until they changed the name to "china white." Then it sold big, even though it was the same color. The same thing happened when they changed "ivory" to "oriental silk" and "berber beige" to "almond tone." An ordinary product presented in a better way sells.

In last week's Gospel we heard Jesus ask "Who do you say that I am?" Peter responded, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." To use the language of advertising, Peter recognized in Jesus a great product that with proper packaging would sell big. Today we hear Jesus tell the disciples, "I'm going to suffer and die, and you must take up a cross to follow me." Peter, the salesman, tells Jesus, "Bad idea. You've got a great product, but the wrong package. Self-denial will never sell."

And Peter has a point. He made Jesus angry, but his prediction was right: Many people keep Christianity at arm's length when they come to the insight that self-denial is part of the package. People accept prayer, they like the idea of holiness, they'll be all for communion, ashes, and palms, but self-denial is a bitter pill.

Jesus' mission is to bring salvation to us all. The basic message is love God and love your neighbor. But to love means to be selfless. It means giving up some things we'd rather have for ourselves for the good of someone else. We all have cravings for money, sex, and power, but the Gospel says take up the cross: Be giving, not greedy; be loving of others, not self-centered; be humble, not proud. When you think of it, Christianity has poor packaging, and in many cases it just doesn't sell.

It's a lot like an athlete. You don't bring just anyone into the hall of fame. It takes discipline and self-denial of the body to merit the crown. Many of you in marriage know the fruits of self-denial. The way women's roles have changed in the last generation is a good example: Many women now are working an extra job while trying to be faithful to family. They give up many personal preferences out of love for others. It's even more true of single parents, many of whom carry a personal tragedy on top of their other responsibilities. But the practice of self-denial which is so much a part of family life brings with it the reward of loving unions and healthy relationships with children. Every sincere friendship, either with another person or with God, demands love in spite of personal preference.

What Jesus preaches is good news--eternal life. But he doesn't hesitate to tell the bad news--love of God and love of neighbor will cost us. Promotional material for the kingdom of God could have read, "Follow Jesus, it's fun!" But it doesn't. It reads, "Follow Jesus, and deny yourself."

The rewards are inner peace, true love, and eternal life. The rewards go beyond fun, for those who pick up a cross and follow Christ.