

Mark 8:34-38

³⁴ When He had called the people to *Himself*, with His disciples also, He said to them, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. ³⁵ For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? ³⁷ Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? ³⁸ For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."

What we read this morning is what Jesus has to say about following Him. Now I would like to read to you some quotes from popular so called Christian teachers.

"All it takes is 1) seeing or visualizing whatever you need, whether physical or financial; 2) staking your claim on Scripture; and 3) speaking it into existence."

Here is another.

"First make a clear-cut goal, then draw a mental picture, vivid and graphic, to visualize success. Then incubate it into reality, and finally speak it into existence through the creative power of the spoken word."

Another says this.

"If you develop an image of victory, success, health, abundance, joy, peace, and happiness, nothing on earth will be able to hold those things from you"

And this.

"You were born to win; you were born for greatness, you were created to be a champion in life" (p. 35),

"He wants you to live in abundance. He wants to give you the desires of your heart...God is turning things around in your favor" (p. 78).

"Before we were ever formed, He programmed us to live abundant lives, to be happy, healthy, and whole. But when our thinking becomes contaminated it is no longer in line with God's Word"

Does any of that sound anything like Christ preached? Does it appeal to the same motivations? Does it predict the same outcome?

Not at all.

Jesus was making an appeal to the masses to follow Him. But notice that he does not appeal to a single outcome that would be positive to this fleshly existence.

Oh, there is rich reward. But it isn't here and it isn't now, for the most part.

Imagine Christ with our modern day false prophets that I quoted earlier. It isn't hard to imagine them approaching Christ and "helping" Him. We can imagine the advice they would give.

Jesus, you can't be so negative. People don't respond to that kind of negativity.

They need a positive message. What they want is for their lives to improve. That is what you need to offer to them.

If you want people flocking to you, you need to offer them a better life now. You have to convince them that life, here and now, is going to get better for them. Then they will follow you. Then they will get with your program. Then they will support you. They would say, “no Jesus, you cannot get followers with the message you are preaching.”

But you see, people **were already** flocking to Christ. And Christ knew it meant nothing. Maybe our modern day false prophets don't know that. Or maybe they **do know it** but they don't care because their methods are so lucrative.

Whatever the case, this morning we are going to look at Christ's call to discipleship. We are going to look at the cost of being a follower of Christ. And there is nothing milk-toast about what He is going to say. He lays it all out there.

³⁴ **When He had called the people to *Himself*, with His disciples also, He said to them, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.**

Jesus had just rebuked Peter for Peter's satanic advice intended to “help” Christ. Peter reacted badly to Christ saying that He had to suffer and die. Now Christ calls the crowd around them. We don't see this very often. Christ was usually trying to avoid a crowd. But this time He calls them to Himself, along with the disciples.

And look at the pep talk he gives. What a motivational speech.

"Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.

He is essentially saying, you people have been flocking after me. You have listened to me speak. You have come to me for miracles. But do you really want to be a follower of me? Do you want to be committed to me for the long haul? OK. If you do, this is what it will take.

- 1- Deny yourself
- 2- Take up your cross
- 3- Follow me.

What does this really mean? What does Christ command every single one of His followers to do?

Now, realize this morning, that if you claim to be a believer, these words of Christ are addressing **you**. This text is talking to **you and me**.

First, Deny yourself. The word for deny is a strong term. It means to **have no association with**. To disown completely. It is the same word used to describe Peter's denial of Christ. It is the same word for how Christ will deny those in heaven who deny Christ now.

Christ is not saying, deny yourself certain things. He is not saying, if you want that ice cream cone, don't eat it for my sake. No. What Christ is saying goes much

deeper. It is much more thorough. He is saying we must disown **ourselves**.
Wow. That is all encompassing.

What is the greatest point of failure in the Christian life? Why do we not submit ourselves to Christ's rule of our lives? Why do we make such horrendous mistakes and sin such hideous sins? It is largely because we trust self, we love self, we admire self, and we listen to self. I see what I want and I pursue it. Why? Because it appeals to self.

All humans have the natural predisposition to place self where only God should be. Look at the messes that you have made in your life. Weren't they caused from trusting and following and living for self? Did you get in that self created misery by being obedient and faithful? Unless it is suffering for the sake of Christ, which is actually a blessed thing, we probably created our own misery because we **will not do, or have not done**, this first thing that Christ said.

We need to disown self. We need to take self off the throne of our lives. We have got to quit believing our flesh's every assessment of our situations. Our **self lies**. Our flesh is **deceitful**. The worship of Christ requires emptying the throne of our lives. We have got to get self off the authority seat. We must disown and dethrone self.

To deny one's self is to cease to make self the object of one's life and actions.

To say **Christ is Lord** is to say that there is **no other Lord** of our lives. It means He has the absolute say of what goes and what stays in our lives. It means we do **His bidding His way**. And there is no room for ourselves and Christ in that spot of authority and leadership.

Have you ever done business with this? Have you ever truly received Christ as the absolute ruler in your heart? Have you ever considered that being a Christian is the surrender of all your other preferences to the rule of Christ. Maybe that is the problem with people who proclaim to be Christians. Maybe this why many marriages are wrecks, many lives are powerless, our hours are pointless, and our years seem meaningless.

I have learned the hard way that value is found through commitment. We will only feel as valuable as that which we are committed to. If I am committed to Jon Zeigler, I am living for something that has little value. So I will feel that way. But if my life is continually committed to Christ and His Will, I will experience His value. I will know that I am simply a little servant, but I am committed to a great God. Life takes on greater meaning and purpose. And it becomes filled with hope. And that hope will never disappoint.

If we are believers, we must deny ourselves, we must disown our precious selves, we must take ourselves off the throne of our lives. We must accept that God has the only right to be the absolute dictator of our lives. And that is the way of peace and joy.

let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.

I have been in discussions about what our cross is. And the participants in the discussion talked about difficult things in their lives as if they were their crosses to carry. Maybe it was a difficult mother in law, or a rebellious child.

That kind of thinking completely missing how this statement would have blown the disciples' minds.

The disciples all would have received this statement of Christ in one way. They knew about crosses. There were probably 30,000 crucifixions of Jews during Christ's lifetime. They would be memorable. As you would be walking into town you would see a person, maybe someone you knew, in agonizing torture along the side of the road. He would be dying one breath at a time. There was nothing cool or heroic about it. It was designed to be a very belittling death.

The Romans designed this type of punishment to dissuade anyone else from doing crimes against the state that the crucified person had done.

Our equivalent today would be the electric chair. Except that the electric chair is far kinder. But we get the point. It is something to die on.

And the point here is that **Christ is worth dying for**. Christ was not appealing to us to suddenly enjoy getting tortured. His point is basically that He is worth dying for. In fact, He is worth suffering **anything** for. His value is so great, that we embrace death for His sake as an honor. We know that if we suffer because of our identification with Christ, we are very blessed. We are being honored by sharing in His sufferings.

So when we sign on, if we want to follow Christ, we are accepting the willingness to show a loyalty to Him that will accept torture and death as a worthy consequence of following Christ.

Do you see your life that way? Do you see following Christ as being worth that? In our evangelism, it is easy to get a person to sign up for a Jesus who is going to improve the things they love the most. When I was young there was an evangelistic campaign that used the slogan, "Things go better with Jesus". Really? Is crucifixion our idea of **better**? No, if **what we expect** is for Christ to improve our **here and now circumstances**, we are signing up for the wrong reasons. He never promised to do that.

The false teachers promise that all day long. And they get lots of followers. But they are not **true** followers of Jesus until they are ready to spend the things they care about selfishly to have the things that last forever.

Are you a follower of Christ? Have you taken up His cross?

This is what Christ said about following Him.

John 15:18-21

¹⁸ "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before *it hated* you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰

Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. ²¹ But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me.

Christ said, deny yourself, take up the cross, and then Christ said-
and follow Me

What does it mean to follow Christ? Let's look at an instance where Christ used this word.

John 10:27

²⁷ **My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.**

We might think of **following** a certain diet or **following** a certain philosophy. But when we think of it that way, we miss the point. Christ didn't mean we decide to submit to some philosophical construct. Christ meant it like sheep following a shepherd.

A sheep owes its very existence to the shepherd. Everything it needs will be coming from the shepherd's hands. And the shepherd, in this case, owns the sheep.

What we see here is a tender, obedient dependent relationship. That is how a Christian is to follow Christ. We go where Christ goes. We do what He does. We own what is important to Him. We stay away from the dangers. We feed on the good things He gives us. Our eyes are continually and dependently upon Him. When we minister to people every year at the fair, there are a bunch of people who see themselves as Christians. Sometimes they will say that they prayed a prayer and got saved. Yet you see them living with no real concern for God in their day to day choices. They don't know the answers to simple questions from scriptures. You don't get the sense that their lives have changed at all. Their lives show no sign of following a Good Shepherd. This is not a Christianity that Christ was describing. It has nothing to do with denying self, accepting the cost of one's life as being worth trading for this relationship, and obediently submitting to and following the Lord.

Maybe your life is like that. If so, today is a wonderful opportunity to repent. Come to Christ on Christ's terms. Surrender your life to His control. And truly follow Him, going where He leads, wanting only to know how you can best please Him. See your life as existing only for His pleasure and His glory. It is no longer

your own. It is his, and you are His servant. That is what the true Christian life looks like.

³⁵ **For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.**

In this verse we see what the problem is in those who are not following Christ. They desire to save their own lives. They desire to get as much pleasure out of this life as they can. And they will protect that pursuit jealously.

Is that what your life is about? When you get up in the morning, is that what is primarily in your thoughts? Are you absorbed with having your best life now? Do you only cling to Christ for the ways He can add **selfish things you want** to your life. Well if your present life is based around **you**, you are essentially trying to save your life. And Christ says the outcome will not be good. It isn't like you will just squeeze your way into heaven. This verse says you will be lost. If your life is lived for you, you will lose your life. You may cram a bunch of pleasure into this life now, but it will be lost for eternity. If you are living to save it, you will surely lose it. If you live merely for here and now, here and now is all you are going to have.

But Christ goes on-

but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.

This is what it looks like when a person denies himself, takes up the cross and follows Christ. That person loses his life. Sometimes he loses it because he is killed for following Christ. His life is taken from him. We have brothers and sisters in Syria today who are being butchered for following Christ. It is happening often in Muslim territories.

But sometimes these lives are given over to the Lord's work one day at a time. Believers are giving up selfish pursuits to do those things they know the Lord cares about. They could be wealthy, but they chose other things. They could be popular, but they choose other things. They could be comfortable, but they chose other things.

As I am reading this, I need to ask the question, what are our lives absorbed with? Is it the same things that all of our worldly associates are absorbed with? Is there really any difference in how **we spend our time** and **they spend their time**?

Really, if they saw the hours of our days and how we fill them, would any of it cause them to wonder why we do it? Would any of it shock them? Or would they simply conclude that **we are just like them**.

If our lives do not reflect things that are different about us, can we really claim to be followers? Can we deny ourselves, take up the cross and follow Christ, and have lives look identical to those who don't even know Christ?

How are we losing our lives a day at a time for Christ's sake and the gospel's sake? How are those things costing us anything? How does it show up in our schedule, in our hours and minutes?

Is it possible that is why we have so many problems that look just like the world's problems? Is it possible that is why so little happens in our lives that looks like the power of Christ? Is it possible that is why our world looks so much different than it did a hundred years ago in terms of a Christian witness?

³⁶ **For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?** ³⁷ **Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?**

If we follow the thought through, we see that those who are trying to save their lives are the ones who are seeking to gain the world. And to make the point clearly, Christ takes it to its extreme.

Suppose you are one of those who have life by the tail. You have it made. You have all the money you could ever need. You have power. You have prestige. Suppose you reach the level that most of the rats in the spinning wheels are trying to reach. Suppose you were able to go even further. Suppose you were to get it all, all that the world has to offer. Every pleasure. Every power. Every whim of your heart would be given to you. Suppose you could have it all. Maybe you are here thinking, wow, that would be pretty good. That is what I have wanted. That is what I have been working for.

Now weigh that against living forever. Which is more profitable? Which has more value? Which is worth more?

The difference between a believer and non believer is that a non believer would say, give me the world. A believer will say, give me my soul. Someone who truly knows God knows that what God has in store for us for eternity **far surpasses** anything that this world can offer us.

There are many people in our world that will tell you straight out that they do not believe this. They have their hearts set on here and now. And they don't think there is anything better out there for them.

A believer trusts God to the point that he will give up pleasures now trusting in what Christ will provide him later. Money is a tool **now** to use for eternal purposes. Time is a tool **now** to use for eternal purposes. A believer's view of God and life will shape his use of time and money. There will be a difference in a believer's life because of what He believes about what life is for.

And **what will a man give in exchange for his soul?**

The problem is that there is nothing a man CAN give in exchange for his soul. He cannot buy his soul back. Most humans accept what this world has to offer as being worth more than their souls. But once that deal is made and finished in death, it cannot be unmade. There is no turning back and trading something for one's life at the end. A man cannot gain the world and then use part of his

earnings to buy eternal life. It cannot happen. So the question serves to emphasize what a bad deal most people make regarding their souls. What a thought provoking question this is. What is your soul worth? Is it worth all the trinkets and experiences you can gain over a lifetime? Is it worth everything this world could possibly offer you? No. Never. To trade your soul, your eternity with Christ in an existence without sin, is a fool's trade. Yet that is exactly the trade that most humans think is a good deal.

³⁸ For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."

Again there is a flow of thought here. The person who seeks to save his life is the same person who tries to gain the world. It is this same person who is ashamed of Christ. They are all three part of the same mindset.

ashamed means to despise, reject, or refuse to accept.

This is interesting. A follower of Christ is someone who denies himself. He essentially writes himself off. He has no trust in his old way of thinking, in the person that he was. In fact there is always a degree of shame regarding the old man. Paul captures that clearly in his writings. He is ashamed of who he was and what he did.

But Paul is not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. He says:

Romans 1:16

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.

What it comes down to is if we are seeking to gain the most from this life and trying to gain the world, we will be ashamed of Christ and His word. Because Christ and His word shines the light on us and everyone else. And it will be offensive to all those who we are seeking to use to get our own way. It will offend political allies, business partners, and romantic interests. Christ's words will stand in our way of getting what we are after in the here and now. The gospel will either draw people **to** Christ, which in itself will make them more difficult for us to use for our ends. Or the gospel will repel them **from** Christ and us, if we identify with Christ.

So our identification **with** Christ or our **refusal** to identify with Christ shows what **we are really after** in this life. And we might be confused about it, but God is not. We are told that if we are ashamed of Christ, if we despise Him and reject Him and refuse to stand for Him, even at the cost of our lives, He will despise us and reject us and refuse to stand for us at judgment.

It is very important we look very carefully at our lives. What difference does Christ really make to us? Have we really denied ourselves and taken up the cross

and followed Christ? Does that define our lives and our use of our time and energy? Or is our life primarily a pursuit of the here and now stuff. Are we losing our lives for Christ's sake, or are we trying to gain our lives and the world? This isn't optional stuff. What we see tells us about what we are really living for, and whether we are a believer or a non-believer. What does your life say? Are you ashamed of yourself or ashamed of Christ? What does your **life** say?