

Follow Jesus
Mark 8:31-38
Key Verse: 8:34

“Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said, ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.’”

This week we are beginning a new fall semester on our Chicago area campuses. We are also beginning a new semester in Jesus’ discipleship training according to Mark’s gospel. Our professor is Jesus. Our classmates are Jesus’ disciples and the crowd. In today’s passage, the course titles are: 1) The work of the Christ, 2) Have in mind the things of God, and 3) How to follow Jesus. As we begin this new semester, let’s make a new decision to follow Jesus.

I. The work of the Christ (31).

Look at verse 31. “He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.” This was quite a new teaching to Jesus’ disciples. Until now, Jesus had focused on revealing his identity to his disciples. Jesus allowed them to see his divine power and compassion through feeding the five thousand, healing the sick, and even raising the dead. Peter confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior King promised by God. Peter received an A+, and he and the other disciples advanced to the second semester. Now the focus of study changes. Jesus teaches the work of the Christ. According to Jesus’ words, the Christ would suffer, die and rise again. This was quite different than what the people of Israel had expected. They expected the Christ to be a mighty conqueror, like King David. They expected the Christ to establish an earthly kingdom of peace and prosperity with Israel at the center of the world. We can understand this. Down through the generations, it has been the dream of mankind to live in an earthly utopia. At the turn of the 20th century, many thought that this utopia had come through science. Then there was the rise of Communism. Many were willing to die to try to achieve its utopian promise. Men want to establish paradise on earth because we were made to live in paradise. The desire to make the world better is good. But so often, men ignore the sin problem, and focus on economic, military or political solutions. Many want a president who will improve the economy and foreign policy. They would hesitate to vote for a man who told them that sin is the real problem and that people need to repent.

However, Jesus taught clearly that the Christ must suffer, die and rise again. This aspect of the Messiah’s ministry was a mystery to the Israelites. It was there in the Scriptures, but it was hidden--like God’s love for the Gentiles. Jesus was revealing this mystery, and he spoke plainly about it (32). Jesus’ voice had a ring of absolute certainty. It must have made chills run down the spines of the disciples. How often does a healthy young man predict his imminent death? No one expected Missionary Barnabas Kojo to pass away at the African Summer Bible Conference. When Jesus predicted his death, it was hard to accept. Why did Jesus suddenly begin teaching this to his disciples?

Look again at verse 31. Jesus refers to himself as “the Son of Man.” This is a Messianic title found in Scripture. According to the Scriptures, the Christ must suffer, die and rise again. It was God’s will. Here in Mark’s gospel, Jesus simply stated the facts about what would happen, but he did not say why. The prophet Isaiah explained why. Isaiah 53:4-5, says, “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” The Christ had to suffer and die to solve our sin problem. Later, Peter realized the meaning and wrote in 1 Peter 2:24, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” Jesus breaks the power of sin in our lives and sets us free from the grip of sin. When we believe in Jesus, God accepts us as his children. He pours love into our hearts, enabling us to live for righteousness. This gives us true meaning and happiness. This teaches us that God is love. God loves fallen mankind so much that he willingly offered his most precious only Son as a sacrifice for our sins. This also teaches the humble obedience of Jesus. Jesus knew God’s heart and God’s will. The only way to vindicate God’s righteousness and to save fallen sinners was for Jesus to suffer much and die. However, death was not the end. On the third day, Jesus rose again. God did not leave Jesus in the grave. God raised Jesus from the dead and gave him everlasting victory. God demonstrated his sovereign rule over all things. God showed us that he is the living God. This living God gives us living hope in the

kingdom of God. Jesus was telling his disciples the facts of the gospel, and it is the good news of great joy for all mankind. However, they did not understand this yet.

II. Have in mind the things of God (32-33).

On hearing Jesus' words, Peter was shocked. Then he began to shake his head, thinking that Jesus was out of his mind. He could not bear the thought of Jesus' death, for he loved Jesus dearly. He could not imagine that the Christ of God would be defeated and die. So Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, "Surely not, Lord!"

Jesus turned and looked at his disciples. They were all agreeing with Peter. They were hoping that Jesus was not serious. But Jesus was very serious. Verse 33 says, "But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. 'Get behind me, Satan!' he said. 'You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.'" It was indeed a moment of spiritual crisis. Satan was working through Peter to tempt Jesus. It was a temptation to enjoy the love of his disciples and to seek a more reasonable way. Yet Jesus did not waver. Jesus rebuked the devil and helped his disciples to stand on the side of God.

Here we must think about Peter's problem. Just before Peter had confessed that Jesus was the Christ, his King and Lord. Now, Peter is under the influence of Satan and, with the same mouth, is rebuking Jesus. Why did this happen? Jesus said that Peter had in mind the things of men, not the things of God. Peter loved Jesus from his heart, but his mind was full of human ideas instead of God's word. Peter's mind needed to be changed.

What, then, are the things of men? They are human thoughts that are not inspired by the truth of God. Since the time of Descartes, who said, "I think, therefore I am," men have tried to find their meaning and basis for truth in the thoughts of man. But man's thoughts are often poisoned by the sinful nature. According to Romans, godless man's mind has become futile. It is gripped by the power of death and full of darkness. In his depravity, fallen man wishes to enjoy an easy and comfortable life on earth without any suffering. He wants to be a straight A student without studying, to make a lot of money without working, to eat everything he likes without gaining weight, and to look like a teenager forever. He hates the word "suffering," even though he suffers so much in reality.

What, then, are the things of God? This refers to God's will and purpose to save people from their sins and to restore his reign over all creation. Inevitably it involves suffering. Jesus was ready to suffer and die to fulfill God's will. Peter had a different idea. Peter wanted to enjoy success and glory without suffering. How easy it is to be like Peter. According to Romans 12:2, our minds need to be transformed by the word of God until the things of God occupy our minds. When our minds are renewed we can appreciate the good and pleasing will of God. We are happy to suffer to obey the will of God. So Peter wrote in 1 Peter 4:13, "But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ..." One young man married by faith and established a house church. He demonstrated commitment to Jesus and love for Jesus. But in his mind, he was still merely daydreaming about the future without any idea to suffer to bear fruit to God. Through Bible study he gradually realized his problem and began to pray about it. Then God gave him a new vision for his life to be a missionary. Now he has in mind something from God, and is willing to suffer to fulfill God's will. Through sincere Bible study with a repentant heart, we can have in mind the things of God.

III. How to follow Jesus (34-38).

Look at verse 34. "Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'" Jesus deliberately called the crowd to him. It was to emphasize that his teaching applied universally to all people. The disciples had been specially chosen by Jesus. But this did not exempt them from what Jesus was about to teach about how to follow him. Look at verse 34 again. "Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said, 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'" Anyone who would come after Jesus must do three things.

First, he must deny himself. What does it mean to "deny himself"? It does not mean to become like Buddhist monks. They try to empty themselves until they dissolve into the oneness of the universe. However, Jesus' disciples do not deny their unique existence or their personality and identity. Rather, they deny their own ideas which are contrary to Jesus' words. These include the strong ideas that pleasure-seeking is best, or that money-making is best, or that pursuing one's selfish dream is best. To deny ourselves, we must give up these ideas and accept Jesus' words. We must also deny the sinful nature. As God warned Cain, "...it desires to have you, but you must master it" (Gen 4:7).

Jesus taught his disciples that they needed daily forgiveness (Mt 6:12). We must come to Jesus daily, claim his grace, and live by it. 1 John 1:8-9 says, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

Second, he must take up his cross. The cross had a very specific meaning for Jesus. It was a wooden instrument on which he would suffer and die for the sin of the world. This was precisely God's mission for him. Jesus says that each of us has his own cross, that is, his mission from God. Broadly speaking, this mission is found in Matthew 28:19-20a: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." We are all called to teach the Bible and to raise disciples, though our way of participation may vary. When we are honest before God, we know what our cross is. We must decide to take the cross, in addition to fulfilling our basic duties to study well, work successfully in our careers, raise our families in the knowledge of God, pay taxes, and so on. Paradoxically, as we carry the cross, we experience the love and power of Jesus personally. We find true rest and peace (Mt 11:28-30). Let's each decide to take up our cross this Fall.

Third, he must follow Jesus. Finally Jesus said, "...and follow me." The words "follow me" have a specific meaning. When Jesus called Matthew, he said, "Follow me." It meant, "Learn of me and become like me." What Jesus wants most is not our achievement. He wants us to be like him in the inner person. Jesus wants us to be humble like him, loving like him, holy like him, compassionate like him, joyful like him, courageous like him, and so on. So Philippians 2:5 says, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus...." As we suffer with Christ, Jesus shapes us into his own image. Those who follow Jesus become like Jesus.

Jesus taught that following him involves sacrifice, suffering and a life commitment. Yet this is the only way of true salvation. Look at verse 35. "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." Those who live a selfish life in this world make a desperate effort to save themselves in many ways. But in the end they lose everything. On the other hand, those who live sacrificially for Jesus may seem to lose many things, but they receive true salvation and eternal life. After I accepted Jesus through one-to-one Bible study as a college student, I decided to lose my life for Jesus and the gospel. So I made several major decisions with this principle in mind, such as to become a campus shepherd, to marry a woman of God by faith, and to devote myself wholeheartedly to cowork with Dr. Samuel Lee without regard for future security. What happened? Jesus blessed me abundantly. Most of all, I know Christ and his love and presence daily. The Lord used me in his world mission work and bore many spiritual fruits. My wife is happy and stable and my children are basically growing well. When I think about all of God's grace, I have a great assurance of eternal life in my soul. Jesus gives me true salvation! I strongly recommend that you lose your life for Jesus and the gospel.

Look at verse 36. "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" Some people are ambitious enough to try to gain the whole world. But the world and all that is in it will perish, spoil and fade away. On the other hand, a person's soul is immortal. Only a fool would exchange his immortal soul for fleeting things of the world. We must know that one person's soul is worth more than all the diamonds in South Africa, all the gold in Fort Knox, and all the stocks on Wall Street. We must properly value our own soul and the soul of each person made in the image of God. Jesus shed his blood and died to save the souls of men. Wise people are willing to sacrifice temporal things to save eternal souls. Missionary Jim Elliot wrote, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." With this conviction he was willing to offer himself as a martyr to share the gospel with the Waodani people of Ecuador. God blessed his sacrifice, together with other martyrs and saved the souls of many people. In fact, the seeds of the gospel planted through his martyrdom are bearing fruit around the world and throughout eternity.

Look at verse 38. "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels." The generation we live in is adulterous and sinful. Hollywood movie stars are praised for their beauty and philanthropy even though they are adulterers at heart. Many high school students live according to their sinful nature, in great spiritual ignorance, and pressure others to do the same. In this kind of world, there is pressure to be sinful and adulterous. We can overcome this by holding on to Jesus and his words. But when we know Jesus we come to value purity of life. We come to value holiness, and we abhor sin. We can shed many tears of thanks for the sacrifice of the Son of God. We can proclaim the love of God and the saving grace of the gospel. Though the world may scoff, Jesus sees what we are

doing. And someday Jesus will come in his Father's glory with the holy angels. Jesus will reward his people. But those who were ashamed of him will be shamed.

In this passage we learned that Jesus Christ had to suffer, die and rise again to obey the will of God. It was the only way to save us from our sins. It was the only way to restore the spiritual order of God's world. We also learned that the best way of life is to follow Jesus. Let's decide to follow Jesus so that we may save our lives for eternity.