

Putting Jesus First

Last month we looked at the vision for our church. We considered three aspects of "Who we are, What we do and Why would you join us."

If you remember, the "who we are" determines "what we do!" Therefore, teaching and church activities are organised around three themes: sharing, developing, and serving.

This morning I would like to look a little closer at the 2nd theme of developing.

This theme is arranged into four topics:

1. Putting Jesus First
2. Following Jesus' Teachings
3. Fruitfulness
4. Love for other disciples.

Our topic today: "Putting Jesus first" is found in Mark 8:34-38, also in Matthew 16:24-27 and Luke 9:23-26.

In these three Gospel accounts Jesus teaches his followers how to find life and warns them about losing it. He affirms that if anyone wants to come after Him (be a disciple) they must do three things:

1. Deny themselves
2. Take up their cross
3. And follow Him

Seems simple enough, but is it, can we be confused by this command; can we arrive to a different conclusion about what other scriptures teach on finding life?

To avoid being misled we must always read the word of God through the lens of grace, as scripture never contradicts itself, even if we don't understand it at first.

What I want to establish before we study Mark 8:34-38 is that we cannot earn our salvation, only Jesus could have paid the price to redeem mankind from sin. However, I do want to say that there will be a change in the born-again believer. There will be a witness too and evidence of, someone who is saved by grace and follows Jesus.

Ephesians 2:8-9 *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works so that no one can boast.*

Titus 3:5 *He saved us not because of righteous things we had done but because of His mercy, he saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.*

Scripture is clear that we cannot save ourselves by what we do but in whom we believe. So why would Jesus ask us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him; isn't that having to do something?

This is at the heart of our study this morning.

Let's start with the context in which this scripture was written.

Context: Peter has just confessed that Jesus is the Christ, revealed to Him by God, not by man. Jesus then goes on to speak of His death, as He turns His face toward Jerusalem in His final week on earth; Peter rebukes Him, saying *God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.* Peter was never backward at coming forward!

Jesus replied *"Get behind me Satan! You are a hindrance to me; You are not on the side of God, but of men."* Amazing, Peter heard from God one moment and the very next, spoke on behalf of the devil!

The disciples thought Jesus had come to overthrow Roman rule and set up His Kingdom. However, he revealed to them that He must suffer and die, and on the third day rise from the dead. It was difficult for them to understand, even after spending three years in discipleship school!

Mark 8:34-38

34 *And he called to him the multitude with his disciples, and said to them, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*

35 *For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.*

36 *For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?*

37 *For what can a man give in return for his life?*

38 *For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."*

1. Deny yourself (vs. 34)

This does not mean self-denial. Self-denial is giving up something good you enjoy (like English breakfast) or depriving yourself of something good you like to do.

"Deny yourself" simply means to put Jesus first, let Him be the Lord of your life, not just on Sunday but every day and over every area of your life.

The chorus we often sing declares it well: I surrender all, all to thee my blessed Saviour, I surrender all.

It is interesting how the word "deny" was the same word used when Peter denied knowing Jesus on the night He was betrayed. Take comfort if you have done the same and messed up big time, as Peter was later restored and became an influential leader in the church.

Let's look back to the night Jesus was betrayed when the purpose for His mission on earth was about to be fulfilled.

Mark 14:36 *And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what you will."*

God has a plan and a purpose for you also and in laying down your will and submitting to His, you will find purpose in life.

To conclude our first point, to deny yourself is to put Jesus first.

2. Take up your cross (vs. 34)

Again, these words are often misunderstood. They don't mean a burden that must be carried throughout life (like accepting the tantrums of an angry and demanding boss!) or some physical deficiency or inadequacy, which we must grin and bear. The cross meant only one thing in Peter's day i.e. an excruciating and painful death, a walk of shame to a place of no return.

We know the full story and understand why Jesus had to go to the cross but at that time His disciples hadn't quite got it! They struggled accepting why "the Christ" had to endure such shame and suffering at the hands of sinful men. They *would* come to understand, just as we have, and a few weeks later at Pentecost their lives would never be the same again - just as ours are never the same again when we receive the Holy Spirit by faith.

Therefore, the actual sense of taking up our cross, is to identify with Jesus, yes, in a sense in death, but more of being ready and willing to lay down our life for His name's sake and to serve others. Not to be ashamed of our beliefs but to eagerly seek the purpose for which God has called us into a new life in Christ.

Romans 1:16 *do not be ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe, first for the Jew then for the Gentile.*

Luke adds to Mark and Matthew's recollection, that we are to take up our cross daily. This makes more sense in context, as we are not called to be crucified physically but perhaps it is a metaphor for death, death to self?

Paul writes to the church in Rome and speaks about the ongoing battle between the old nature (the flesh) and the new nature (the Spirit). This again makes sense, as we take up our cross daily and overcome the carnal nature by the power of the Spirit living in us. We are enabled by grace to live by faith and walk in step with the Holy Spirit, to God be the glory!

The Apostle Paul writes:

Galatians 2:20 *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

We are not our own, we have been bought at a price and we honour God as we deny ourselves; we honour the Lord as we take up our cross and live by faith, laying down our will to that of the Father; Trusting in Jesus who loved us and gave himself for us.

This is what it means to deny ourselves and take up our cross.

Now to the third point:

3. Follow Him

The definition of a disciple is one who follows a teacher, one who learns and identifies with him.

Jesus said the Father will send the Holy Spirit in His name to teach us all things.

John 14:26 *But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you.*

Essentially to follow Jesus is to learn from Him, to become like Him. To do what He did in loving the lost and having compassion for the broken-hearted.

Recap: to find life we must do three things: deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus.

Why are these three steps so vital to finding life?

35 *For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.*

What does Jesus mean?

He means that if we value our old life (the life of gratifying the flesh) more than the new life He wants to walk in (the life of the Spirit), and if we choose to hold on to it and reject Him, we will never find it. It's a paradox, we must let go to hold on!

Simply put we cannot serve two masters.

He goes on to say why:

36 *For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?*

Look at the value Jesus places on our life. Many spend their entire life building up their kingdom on shifting sand only to find they have gained nothing of true and lasting value.

The word life and soul in Greek are the same (*psyché*). Jesus warns that there is everything to lose; but gives great encouragement that there is everything to gain through Him; this world is passing away and few take any steps toward the life that He promises in denying oneself, taking up our cross and following Him.

He goes on to say:

37 *For what can a man give in return for his life?*

The devil tried to deceive Jesus, when testing Him in the wilderness.

Matthew 4:8-10 *Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"*

Imagine somehow you did own the whole world, could you bargain with God to save your life, your very soul? Remember, you are saved by grace through faith, not by works or the value of your real estate! After all, God owns it all anyway!

Jesus concludes this teaching:

38. *For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."*

When we identify with Jesus and openly confess Him, there will be a battle and, in any war, there is a cost and there are casualties.

We may lose some we thought were friends; we may be criticized, humiliated, or even persecuted as followers of Jesus Christ.

Many perishing in the heat of the battle cannot understand a life sanctified and consecrated to God; to one we are the stench of death, to the other the aroma of life!

However, the cost of following Jesus is nothing compared to the great reward we receive when He comes in the glory of His Father with His angels.

When we receive the life Jesus offers, everything must and does change. We have a new love for Him as Lord and Saviour; we rejoice at being part of His body to love and serve others; we want to gather to study His word and understand His teaching; we choose to submit to His will and His ways; our new life develops daily, as we pray and grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour.

Challenge this week:

In setting your plans, be careful to listen to the Lord; are your plans in agreement with His will for your new life in Christ; is He calling you into a deeper relationship to share and serve with Him?

If He is, then remember you are saved by grace through faith. The Lord will never ask you to do anything He doesn't equip or enable you to do, by that same grace. He will never give you a vision for life and then leave you to work it out on your own. He is with you on every step of the way, so just trust in Him!

Take God at His word this morning and let this be the season in which you grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, as you deny yourselves, take up your cross and follow him.

Amen