A TRUE DISCIPLE OF JESUS

Mark 8:31–38

Key Verse: 8:34

“Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’”

Our times have been called “The Age of Narcissism.” “What’s in it for me?” (WIIFM) is a popular motto. Our thinking revolves around self, making ourselves better, enjoying ourselves. Sometimes we bring this mentality into Christianity. Some use it to get what *they* want. If they think church doesn’t fit them or fulfill their needs, they check out. Of course God wants to meet our needs and help us through our problems. But the gospel goes deeper than that. Today Jesus says what it really means to believe in him. If we believe in him, we need to follow him. And Jesus isn’t an easy act to follow. To follow him, he says we need to deny ourselves and take up our cross. No one gets an exemption or special privileges. We may think Jesus was the one with the cross, but surprise, surprise: we each have our own cross! Wow. What does it mean to have our own cross? What does it mean to deny ourselves and take it up? And how can we do that? May God open our hearts to learn and to truly accept his word today.

As we saw in the previous passage, throughout his ministry Jesus has been trying to help his disciples realize who he is. Now that they confess him as the Messiah, he begins to tell them what he came to do. Look at verse 31. This is the first of three times he tells them about his suffering, death and resurrection (9:31; 10:33,34). He wants them to grasp it as the core of why he came. He refers to himself as “the Son of Man.” This expression was used in the Old Testament. God called the prophet Ezekiel “son of man” over 90 times, to emphasize his lowly status in comparison with God, and to show how much he would suffer to give his people God’s message. On the other hand, the prophet Daniel used the phrase “son of man” to describe the Messiah in his final power, glory and victory (Da7:13,14). Jesus applied this title “Son of Man” to himself to teach his disciples that, contrary to what people were expecting, he’d come to be a humble and suffering Messiah, and then and only then, a glorious Messiah.

Next Jesus says he came to “suffer many things and be rejected.” This is definitely **not** what the disciples had signed up for. They’re expecting that after three years of fruitful ministry Jesus will be welcomed as Israel’s Messiah and life is going to get much easier. That wouldn’t happen. Instead, the entire religious establishment would persecute and reject Jesus. And it’s not even going to stop with suffering and rejection. Jesus says that he “must be killed and after three days rise again.” We need to notice that Jesus uses the word “must.” Why “must” these things happen? It’s because many Old Testament prophecies predicted this would happen to God’s Messiah (9:12; 14:21,49; cf. Ps22; 69; Isa53). Many Jews were waiting for God’s Messiah to come. But they hadn’t paid attention to what God had said would happen to him. Why not? It was because they didn’t *like* those things. They paid attention only to the parts of Scripture that they liked. They had their own dreams and expectations of what God would do. We’re no different. To the disciples, Jesus’ prediction is baffling. What’s the point? Jesus doesn’t explain at all, but verse 32 says that he speaks about it boldly.

How do they respond? Verse 32 says that Peter takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. It’s the only place in the Bible where Peter rebukes Jesus. What is Peter thinking, *rebuking Jesus*? Maybe he thinks Jesus is trying to be too humble. Maybe he’s worried that if Jesus insists on this, the others will run away. Maybe he’s saying this because he loves Jesus so much and doesn’t want to see bad things happen to him. In any case, Jesus’ teaching about suffering, rejection and death has touched a nerve in Peter. We may be thinking, “Hey, *I’d* never rebuke Jesus!” But Peter is pretty much just like us all. Nobody naturally likes suffering, rejection and death. Everybody wants an easy, comfortable life. Everybody wants to be accepted. Everybody wants to live, not die.

How does Jesus respond to Peter’s rebuking? Read verse 33. Wow. Jesus severely rebukes Peter back, and he does it in front of all the other disciples. It’s so painful and uncomfortable but he wants this to be clear to everyone. He calls Peter “Satan” and tells him to get behind him, meaning get out of his way. He’s saying Peter has become a stumbling block to him, maybe even a temptation. And Jesus tells them and us Peter’s problem: He doesn’t have mind God’s concerns, but merely human concerns. It’s so easy to fall into this. We naturally get consumed with our own concerns, and God’s concerns aren’t anywhere on our radar. Jesus is saying that his suffering, rejection, death and resurrection are *God’s concerns*. What does this mean? It means that God really wants those things to happen. They’re at the heart of what God wants to do. He’s been waiting for so long to accomplish these things. God is so concerned about Jesus’ suffering, rejection, death and resurrection because through them he provided the solution to our real problem, our sin. Through them, even though we’re sinners, we can come into a close, intimate relationship with God again. Through them, God opens the way for us to enter his glorious, eternal kingdom. Through the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus God is going to bring people of every tribe and language and nation to his kingdom. It’s normal to have our own concerns. But are we engrossed in our own concerns? Or do we care about God’s concerns? Disciples of Jesus get focused on God’s concerns, like he was.

Read verse 34. Here Jesus opens up the invitation to discipleship to anyone. If Peter and the rest of the Twelve won’t accept his teachings, Jesus believes others will. It tells us the painful truth that God does not show favoritism; he blesses anyone who listens to Jesus and accepts what he taught. Jesus also mentions a “cross,” the first time he does so. He’s hinting that his own suffering, rejection and death would actually be on a cross. And he says that in a sense, all his followers also will have a cross. Many of the early followers of Jesus, including Peter, were actually executed on crosses like Jesus was. But not all believers end up getting martyred like that. Some think this cross means any hardships in life. But Jesus isn’t talking about a general kind of suffering. He’s talking about a cross that’s involved in *following him*. The Bible says that Jesus’ suffering was once and for all (Heb7:27; 9:12,26; 10:10). Nobody’s sufferings can ever do what Jesus’ did—save and heal us. But the Bible also says that as we follow Jesus, we’re called to share in his sufferings (e.g. Ro8:17; 1Pe4:13). It means we’re called to participate in his mission to save our fellow sinful human beings. Later, Jesus will teach his disciples, “…whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:43–45). Jesus is calling us all to follow him in serving and saving others. And to save sinful people always involves enduring a cross.

But what does it mean to take up our cross? It involves making a choice: We can either put it down or take it up, embrace it or avoid it. Jesus says that to take up our cross we first have to choose to deny ourselves. It’s not a once-in-a-lifetime thing, but a daily choice, in the way we spend our time, our resources, and in the way we relate to people. To take up our cross, we’ll always have to deny ourselves, because in our natural selves we don’t want to do it. Self-denial isn’t some weird kind of false humility like self neglect, self abuse or self hatred. And it isn’t just a matter of struggling with our own sins, although self-denial definitely means to crucify our sinful passions and desires (Gal5:24). Simply, to deny ourselves means to be willing to sacrifice ourselves in order to serve God and others. Self-denial means living for God’s will and other’s salvation ahead of ourselves. To do that, we need to die to our own pride and self-centeredness and to the values and desires of the world (Gal2:20; 6:14). In his practical life Jesus showed us the example of how to do this. Each day he focused on God his Father and on others, not on himself. He especially showed us an example in his prayer just before his arrest. He prayed, “Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (14:36). He prayed to deny himself so that he could take up his cross. To deny ourselves and take up our cross, we too need to pray really honestly and fervently to God. Let’s read verse 34 again. It’s good to remember what Jesus says last here: “…and follow me.” To follow Jesus, we need to focus on him, consider him, look to him, think about him. The author of Hebrews says we need to be “fixing our eyes on Jesus” (Heb12:2). As we follow him we need to be learning his faith to endure his cross with the hope of sharing in God’s glory. We don’t follow Jesus to hell but to heaven. Yes, we follow in his footsteps to endure suffering, rejection and death to self, but like Jesus we also depend on God to save us, raise us and give us his victory. Some people deny themselves and suffer, but they don’t follow Jesus. We need to deny ourselves and suffer *in order to follow Jesus*.

Let’s read verse 35. Jesus knows that following him is hard, so he gives us some promises. His first promise is that if we focus on saving ourselves, we end up losing ourselves. So many people made this mistake in life. They find out too late that a self-absorbed life is actually a wasted life. It’s a paradox. Jesus’ second promise is that if we lose our lives for him and for the gospel, we end up saving ourselves. It’s another paradox. Smart people may think it’s crazy, but it ends up being true. Again, there are so many examples. People who went against the trends of this world, who didn’t pursue their own job or finding their own life partner, but pursued following Jesus, found that God blessed them with the best life partner, and, with all the material things they needed, and he blessed their children, too. Jesus’ words in verse 35 remind us that to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus, we need personal faith in God’s promises.

Let’s read verses 36,37. Here Jesus puts the emphasis not on gaining things like a job or a life partner or great kids; he’s really talking about our souls. And he’s using language everybody can relate to, to help us see what’s really valuable. What do you want to gain? What are you willing to forfeit or give up? We all exchange money for products or services. What are we willing to pay? This same thing applies to our ultimate life issue. What if we gain all kinds of good things in this world, but end up losing our souls? What good is that? So following Jesus is a matter of our eternal soul. What’s the smarter investment—life in this world for seven or eight decades, or eternal life in the next? Jesus is promising that as we follow him, we’re likely to lose the things of this world, but we’re promised eternal salvation and God’s eternal kingdom. So following Jesus turns out to be not so foolish in the end after all. Read verse 38. Why does Jesus say this? It’s because he knows that a decision to follow him will make us look really foolish to many people. Friends will make fun of us. Society will label us. Peer pressure makes us ashamed of our faith in Jesus. Jesus wants us to be ready to take the shame involved in identifying with him.

Let’s read our key verse again. We can’t be superficial. We can’t hide our selfishness with the icing of knowing some Christian jargon and doing a few activities. What are we really living for? Ourselves? Or Jesus? What are we really following? The ways of this world? Or Jesus? Are we calculating? May God give us the faith to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus.