

One Life. What's It All About?

**Come and Die: What Does It Mean to
Follow Jesus?**

Mark 8:22-38

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Come and Die: What Does It Mean to Follow Jesus?¹

Scripture

Today is the seventh and final week of a seven-week series of messages based on a book that is titled *Christianity Explored* by Rico Tice and Barry Cooper, out of England.

In this series of sermons we have been exploring Christianity by looking primarily at *The Gospel of Mark*.

Let us read Mark 8:22-38:

²² And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. ²³ And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Do you see anything?" ²⁴ And he looked up and said, "I see people, but they look like trees, walking." ²⁵ Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. ²⁶ And he sent him to his home, saying, "Do not even enter the village."

²⁷ And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" ²⁸ And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." ²⁹ And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." ³⁰ And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

³¹ And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of

¹ The material for this message is from *Christianity Explored* by Rico Tice and Barry Cooper (New Malden, Surrey: The Good Book Company, 2002), 76-92.

man.”

³⁴ And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, “If anyone 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, but 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 soul? ³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his soul? 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.” (Mark 8:22-38)

Introduction

A little boy at Sunday school was asked to draw a picture of Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus on their flight into Egypt. The teacher had been telling them about the time in Matthew 2 when an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and warned him to flee with his family from the murderous King Herod. So the little boy carefully drew a picture of a huge airplane and, when the teacher asked him what it was, he pointed out that it was “the flight into Egypt,” indicating Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus who were sitting happily in the passenger seats.

“But who’s that?” asked the teacher, indicating a shadowy figure in the cockpit.

Growing a bit tired of all the stupid questions, the little boy said, “That’s Pontius – the Pilot.”

It’s not only five-year-olds who misunderstand Christianity. There must be millions of people in this country alone who have rejected what they think is Christianity, but who have actually rejected something that is only a pale imitation of the real thing.

There must also be a great many Christians who have lost sight of the basics.

I want to look now at Mark 8 in order to find out exactly what it means to be a Christian. In this chapter, we see Jesus explaining that a Christian is someone who knows who Jesus is, understands why he came, and is prepared to follow him – whatever the cost.

Lesson

The aim of today's lesson is to recap what we have covered so far about Jesus' identity and mission, and then to explain what Jesus demands of those who want to follow him.

Specifically, I want to answer three questions:

1. Who is Jesus?
2. Why did Jesus come?
3. What does it mean to follow Jesus?

I. Who Is Jesus? (8:22-29)

So, first, who is Jesus?

This question has dominated the book of Mark up to chapter 8, and we, the readers, already know the answer. As we've seen, Mark has told us the answer in the very first verse, where he writes that this is a book about Jesus Christ, "the Son of God" (Mark 1:1).

You might think that would drain the book of all interest, but the fact is that the disciples don't know what we know. And so we follow them around, watching as they try to make sense of Jesus.

Jesus, for his part, forces them to ask questions about who he is by doing amazing things – as we've seen. They watch him calming a violent storm, curing an incurable illness, bringing a little girl back to life from the dead. They even hear him claiming to be able to forgive sin. And yet they don't come up with the obvious answer: that this is God's Anointed One, the Christ, the Son of God, the One who had been promised throughout the Old Testament. They were expecting it, were desperately hoping for it, but now that he's there, standing right in front of them, they just don't see it.

One reason they don't see it is that Jesus had two faces: a human and a divine face. The two were obvious, they were there for all to see, but even though the disciples stared and stared for several years, all they could see was the man. They couldn't see the divine face of Christ.

Mark draws our attention to their blindness again and again. For example, he does it in Mark 8:17b-18. Jesus is exasperated with the disciples, and he says to them, "Do you not yet perceive or understand?"

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Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?”

And then, quite strikingly, the next incident we read about is Jesus enabling a blind man to see. Look at Mark 8:22-26:

²² And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. ²³ And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, “Do you see anything?” ²⁴ And he looked up and said, “I see men, but they look like trees, walking.” ²⁵ Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. ²⁶ And he sent him to his home, saying, “Do not even enter the village.”

The miracle is quite unique. It’s the only one of Jesus’ miracles that happens in a two-step process. First, Jesus touches the blind man, and he begins to see, but only vaguely. Then, he touches him again, and this time the man sees perfectly. Mark wants us to see this as a parallel to the gradual opening of the disciples’ eyes. Of course, the disciples aren’t physically blind; they are spiritually blind. But – either way – they still need Jesus to heal them.

Then, in verses 27 to 29, we see their spiritual blindness begin to be cured. They won’t be fully cured until later, when they understand what Jesus came to do and what it means to follow him, but here, for the first time, is an indication that they know who Jesus is. We read these words in Mark 8:27-29:

²⁷ And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” ²⁸ And they told him, “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹ And he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Christ.”

This is a big step forward for the disciples. Finally, they have

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recognized that Jesus is the Christ, the king promised in the Old Testament, who would have the power and authority of God himself. Jesus asks them a scorching question here: **“But who do you say that I am?”** It's very personal.

And at this point in Mark's Gospel it also gets very personal for us:

- Who do we say Jesus is?
- What do we see as we look at the face of Jesus?
- Do we just see the human face or can we see the divine face as well?

But it's not enough simply to know Jesus' true identity. Peter gets the question of Jesus' identity absolutely right here, but when it comes to the question of what Jesus came to do, Peter gets it horribly wrong.

II. Why Did Jesus Come? (8:30-33)

And so we move on to answer the second question: Why did Jesus come?

Look at the next verse – Mark 8:30. Mark says that Jesus **“strictly charged them to tell no one about him.”**

Now that the disciples have seen who he is, what is Jesus' response? He warns them not to tell anyone about him.

You see, at this point, their eyes are only half open. Jesus knows that although they can see who he is, they don't yet see why he's come or what it means to follow him. And that's why he tells them not to tell anyone about him yet.

Then Jesus begins to teach them more about himself. It's as if he's starting to correct their partial vision. Look at Mark 8:31-32a:

³¹ And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² And he said this plainly.

That's why Jesus came. He came to die. In fact, it's necessary that he die. And Jesus knows that very well. He knows that the only way in

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which sinful people can be brought back into a relationship with God is if he dies in our place.

But Peter has this image of Jesus as king so clearly in his mind that it seems entirely inappropriate to him that Jesus would have to die. And he tells Jesus so. He takes him aside and gives him a pep talk. Mark says, **“And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him”** (Mark 8:32b). How on earth can a king bring in his kingdom by dying? That’s ridiculous. But Jesus tells Peter that he’s got it all wrong. Look at Mark 8:33: **“But turning and seeing his disciples, he [i.e., Jesus] rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.’”**

In a way, I don’t blame Peter for thinking like this. After all, there are two ways of looking at the cross. If, as Jesus says, we have in mind **“the things of man,”** there is tremendous weakness at the cross. Jesus seems exposed, humiliated, and defeated. From the human point of view, the cross seems to prove conclusively that Jesus has got it all wrong. He was right about so many things, but if he really was the Son of God, why couldn’t he come down from the cross? A king should be on a throne, not a cross.

But what do we see if we look at the cross from another angle – from God’s perspective? What if we have in our minds, as Jesus says, **“the things of God”**? Then we can see the cross as part of God’s rescue plan. We can see that Jesus chooses to be separated from God so that we don’t have to be, paying the terrible price for our sin, being executed – in our place – for crimes he never committed. From God’s perspective, and from ours if we have in mind the things of God, this is not weakness. In fact, there has never been a more powerful moment in history.

When we have all the details in front of us, an apparently futile death is shown to be purposeful, daring, and amazingly loving. Jesus’ death is all of those things. He died as part of a rescue mission. In his amazing love he came to earth and died in our place, taking the punishment that we deserved, so that we could enter into a relationship with God. He was forsaken so that we need never be.

There are two ways of seeing the cross. We can see it from a

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human perspective, as a pathetic and needless death. Or we can see it from God's perspective, as our only means of rescue.

Our lives, as well as our deaths, will be determined by the way in which we respond to what Jesus did on the cross.

III. What Does It Mean to Follow Jesus? (8:34-38)

That leads us to our third question: What does it mean to follow Jesus?

It is not enough to recognize who Jesus is, or even why he came. Just like the disciples, we also need to understand what it means to follow him. Look at Mark 8:34: **“And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.’”**

According to Jesus' words here, following him requires a change of allegiance. It also means responding to Jesus' call to die. Then, because these things are not easy, he goes on to give us a convincing reason for following him.

First, Jesus demands a change of allegiance. “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself. . . .” Denying self means no longer living for ourselves.

And if you're not sure that you do live for yourself, answer this question: Who has the right to tell you how to live your life?

Surely our instinctive response is to cry, “No one! No one has the right to tell me how to live, apart from me. I'm the only one who should decide what I do.” But God made us, he sustains us, we are dependent on him for everything we have, and it is absurd to live in God's world as if we are the ultimate authorities over our lives.

So Jesus tells us to deny ourselves. He puts it another way in Mark 1:15, when he tells us to “repent and believe in the gospel.” The word “repent” literally means “to change one's direction.” To “repent and believe” means I stop going my own way and instead say, “Lord Jesus, I recognize who you are, and from now on I will allow you to take charge.”

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself. . . .” It's a simple and brief instruction, just half a verse, but I want us to see

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that it is profoundly radical. There are real issues to grapple with:

- My time and how I use it.
- My money and what I do with it.
- My work and how I approach it.
- My sexuality and how I view it.
- My family and how I relate to them.

Second, Jesus issues a call to die. You see, Jesus' call is more than self-denial. You may have noticed that there's an additional ingredient to Jesus' command: **“And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself *and take up his cross*. . . .”** Not only must we deny ourselves if we are to follow him, we must also take up our cross.

Remember where Jesus himself is going at this point. He is heading for the cross, as he's just told the disciples. It is striking, and not a little disturbing, to see Jesus immediately turn his attention from the cross he must take up to the cross we must take up. Jesus warns potential followers that if they are to follow him, they too must head for the cross. Although it's unlikely that any of us will face a literal cross, the command is still a chilling one. Jesus is telling us here that if we commit ourselves to him, it will mean a martyrdom of one kind or another. So this is Jesus' offer to his hearers: “I will die for you, but you must be prepared to die for me, if you want to follow me.” It's a call to come and die.

Of course, Jesus isn't saying that everyone who follows him will face a violent death. But, at the very least, they will face suffering. His followers can find themselves marginalized, misunderstood, and isolated. Why? Because friends, family, colleagues, and those around you may find your beliefs and conduct uncomfortable or even offensive. For example, if you stand up for Christ's claim to be “the way, the truth and the life,” insisting that no-one can know God except through him, then you will face opposition.

A Christian is not only someone who sees clearly who Jesus is and why he came. A Christian is someone who is prepared to follow him, whatever the cost.

So with Jesus' call for a change of allegiance comes a call to die.

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If you've grasped what that means, you will want to think very seriously before committing your life to Christ. There seems an awful lot to lose. With that in mind, Jesus goes on to give us a convincing reason for switching our allegiance to him.

And so, third, Jesus gives a convincing reason to follow him. If we think about following Christ in purely earthly terms, the cost seems too high. So Jesus' aim in Mark 8:35-37 is to give us the right perspective. Look at those verses with me:

³⁵ “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but 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 soul? ³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his soul?”

This passage insists that our “souls” are the most precious thing we have. If we lose our soul, there is nothing we can do to get it back.

By nature we tend to focus on our present circumstances. If something won't pay dividends now, people aren't very interested. But here Jesus wants to lift our eyes from the present and fix them on the future. And the Bible says that the future is vitally important because it is eternal. When we die, it is not the end. Jesus teaches us here that there is a connection between how we live now and what will happen after death.

And there's a twist, because those who try to save their lives will lose them, while those prepared to lose their lives will gain them. Jesus well knows how much we want to cling on to our lives, to do what we want to do when we want to do it. But he warns us that if we live in that way, then ultimately we'll lose the very thing we are so desperate to cling on to. He tells us that if we really want to hold on to our lives, there's only one option open to us: we must allow him to take control.

Christ will judge the world, whether we like it or not. And we can choose whether or not this judge will also be our rescuer. And ultimately, we will be treated very fairly. We will be treated by Jesus in exactly the same way as we have treated him, as he tells us in Mark 8:38: **“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.”

Because Jesus is the person who will return to judge the world, it is not a suicidal gesture to entrust him with my life. In doing so I know that my life will be saved. Moreover, whatever we might lose by following Christ pales into insignificance when we consider what awaits us in heaven. Jesus pleads with us to give up the very things that will destroy us – self-love, self-worship, self-will – and he pleads with us not to waste our souls.

Conclusion

In 1000 AD, 186 years after the death of Emperor Charlemagne, officials of the Emperor Otto re-opened Charlemagne’s tomb. Before them was an extraordinary sight. In the midst of all the finery buried with him – the gold, the jewels, the priceless treasure – there was the skeleton of Charlemagne himself, still seated on his throne, still wearing his crown. In his lap, there lay a Bible, and a bony finger rested on Mark 8:36: “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?”

I wonder what answer Charlemagne gave.

What answer will you give?

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons
2. www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp
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PRAYER:

Perhaps you are already a Christian. You've responded to what Jesus did on the cross by asking him to forgive you. You want to live a life that pleases him, in gratitude for all that he's done for you. Keep on living in submission and service to Jesus.

Or perhaps you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, and you've still got questions, but you want to know more. I hope you will keep coming back and keep looking for answers to your questions – and let me say how grateful we are that you keep giving your time to understanding this.

Finally, perhaps you know that you are not a Christian, but you've been persuaded by what you've heard. You believe that Jesus is who he claims to be. You can see your own rebellion against God, your own need for rescue, and you want to accept God's forgiveness. Well, if that's you, then I want to give you a prayer that you can pray if you are ready to repent and believe. You are not under any pressure to do this but, if you are ready, this prayer gives you words to express what is in your heart. Pray quietly:

Heavenly Father, I have rebelled against you. I have sinned in my thoughts, my words and my actions – sometimes unconsciously, sometimes deliberately. I am sorry for the way I have lived and ask you to forgive me. Thank you that Jesus died on the cross so that I could be forgiven. Thank you that I can now see clearly who Jesus is and why he came. Please send your Holy Spirit to help me follow him whatever the cost.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!