

Understanding Discipleship

- Mark 8:34-38
- Last week we spent time on verse 34 and Jesus' call to discipleship. We saw that the call to take up our cross indicates an absolute claim on the allegiance of the disciple to Jesus, and an absolute surrender of all that one is and all that one has, all of our resources, given gladly to the Lord. We often think of that in metaphorical terms and sing "All to Jesus, I surrender" without blinking. But not the people who first read this Gospel. The people living in the first century would understand, as James Edwards writes, "that their adversity under Nero was not a sign of abandonment but rather of their identification with and faithfulness to the way of Jesus himself." When they sang, "All to Jesus, I surrender," they meant all. Life, limb, reputation, property...all. Billy Graham used to say, "Salvation is free, but discipleship will cost you everything."
- Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him, and then he gives us four statements in the next four verses that will underscore what discipleship means and give us four reasons for taking up the cross and following Jesus. Let's look at these four reasons.
- **The first statement is a paradox. (verse 35)** And when I say a paradox, I am not talking about Mark Kemp and Chris Davis. A paradox is a statement that appears self-contradictory but is in fact, true. Jesus says, "anyone who tries to save his life will lose it, and anyone who loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." The first reason for taking up the cross and following Jesus is that it is the only way to save your life! And the word used here for life is "psyche" which can mean physical life but more often refers to "personhood," or "soul." This has to be what Jesus is referring to because taking up the cross for the first disciples would certainly mean physical death, but would not mean soul death. If you die from a disease or from an accident you lose your physical life, but if you are a follower of Jesus, your life is just beginning. You have gained eternal life by giving up your physical life to follow Jesus. Jesus does not ask us to do what he has not done. He took up his cross, and gave up his physical life, so that we would have eternal life if we were willing to take up the cross and follow him. Here's the promise: the one for whom the way of Jesus is more important than his own personhood will be given his personhood and Jesus for eternity, but the one for whom his own personhood is more important to him than the way of Jesus will end up losing his personhood *and* Jesus!
- Notice that Jesus also said we are called to lose our lives for the Gospel's sake. Jesus is known to the world through the proclaimed message of the Gospel. So, for those of us who take up the cross, compartmentalization of our so-called "secular" life and "sacred" life is not possible and is not safe.
- **The second and the third statements go together. (verses 36-37)**
- "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?" Jesus asks two questions here that we must honestly consider. What do we call a man who goes to Vegas with his whole life savings, the title to his house and car, and loses it all at the roulette wheel? A sucker. What a fool, we say! But what about the man who goes to Vegas and ends up winning every penny in the whole town and then ends up owning Nevada and then he owns the U.S. and then

North America, and eventually the whole world? And then he dies and because his soul belonged to him, he loses it and spends eternity in hell. Jesus calls him a fool. He has won what he cannot keep and lost what he can never have again.

- I pray through part of a list of prayers for pastors and church leaders written by Tim Challies every morning as part of my prayer time. This list is good for anyone to use and pray through. I will send it to you all. But the morning I wrote the first draft of this sermon, this is what I had prayed from that list. The heading was, “Not a lover of money,” which comes from the list of qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3.
- “I pray.....that I would not make material possessions the ambition of my life. ... that I would refuse to pursue financial gain above eternal things, preferring to store up treasure in heaven than on earth.... that I would not sacrifice my family or my spiritual health on the “altar” of my job.... that I would not be greedy or covetous, but instead be generous and quick to give to those in need.... that I would give a generous portion of my income to the church and rejoice when doing so.”
- What good is it to gain the whole world and lose my soul? What does that tell you about the value of the soul? Of your soul? That apart from God there is nothing more valuable in all creation. It tells you that there is no price that can save a soul, except the price that Jesus gave on the cross. Jesus did not die for the earth or for the animals or for the angels or for the other galaxies or for anything else in all creation. He died for your soul and mine. Our souls are bought and paid for with the precious blood of the sinless Savior.
- **The fourth statement has to do with those who are ashamed of Jesus. (verse 38)**
- This is not a paradox but a plain promise. Whoever is ashamed of Jesus and his words *here* will find that Jesus is ashamed of him *there*, on that day when there comes here, and when the end of time is now, not then. Jesus called that generation “a sinful and adulterous generation,” repeating the language of the prophets that there were so many who honored God with their lips while their hearts were far from him. Is this generation any different? No, and only those who receive him in this generation will be received by him on that day, when heaven comes down and glory fills our souls.
- You say, “Well, I don’t want to be ashamed of Jesus and his words and I want to be a bolder witness, but I just don’t know how.” Look at **1 Timothy 1:7-8**.
- “...for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control. Therefore, do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God.”
- First, we can lay hold on that which was given to us, by faith. God gave us a spirit of power, love, and self-control. Power to be bold on the most important thing we need to be bold about: the testimony about our Lord. Why is it that we can be bold as a lion when it comes to politics and pandemics and, dare I say it, church practices... and we become wilting flowers when it comes to the Gospel of Jesus Christ? What do we need to do? Lay hold on the power of the Spirit.
- Add to that love. We have been given a spirit of love. It must be love that engages the power, or we can drive people *away* from Christ with our testimony. We *love* because he first loved us. When we really love lost people with the love that the Spirit gives us for them, then we are ready to speak.

- But use self-control. We have been given a spirit of self-control, which does something very important. It eliminates the excuse we have filed away for use whenever we feel like we need it, the excuse that says, “Well, I just couldn’t speak up at the time. I was afraid of how the person would respond. Or I was afraid I would say something wrong.” No, we have been given self-control, not situation-control, not sinner-control, and certainly not salvation-control. Self-control, standing on top of power and love enables us to speak up, and leave the results to God. His love compels us to speak, and only his love can compel someone else to really hear, and receive the gospel. And it will not always happen the way we expect.
- I would like to close with this from the story of Jim Elliot. He was 28 years old, and he and his team had been preparing and planning and praying for years about the moment that finally came on January 3, 1956, when they landed a plane in the jungles of Ecuador. They wanted the Auca Indians to know Christ and they were aware that the Aucas were notoriously dangerous. No one had reached them. Some had exchanged gifts with them but had been attacked every time by the Aucas. For three months, these five men that included Jim Elliot, had been flying over the area where the Aucas lived and dropping gifts and shouting greetings. Then they landed on January 3 and built a hut, waiting for the Aucas to come to them. They knew the risks. But as Jim Elliot said, they went because they belonged to God. He was their creator and redeemer and they had no choice but to obey him, and that meant taking the gospel to every lost person and every lost tribe on earth. Tim Chester wrote this:
- On Friday, January 6, three Aucas—one man and two women—approached them. They exchanged greetings. The missionaries showed them rubber bands, yo-yos, and balloons, and the man was taken up in the plane. On Sunday, January 8, they were due to radio in at 4:30. There was silence. When no message came, a plane was sent and then a rescue party. Four of their bodies were recovered—all lanced to death. The fifth was never found. It seems they were ambushed. All five were martyred for the sake of Christ. All were married, and four were fathers. Ed McCulley’s wife was 8-months pregnant with her third child. Her three-year-old was heard to tell the new crying baby a month later, “Never you mind, when we get to heaven, I’ll show you which one is daddy.”
- Jim Elliot once said: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” Jim Elliot had seen through the lie of consumerism. He had seen the emptiness of all this world offers. He had realized the far greater value of the new creation that God promises.
- Jim Elliot’s diary was found by the rescue party. These were the last words he wrote as they waited for the Aucas Indians to come to them:
- “I walked out to the hill just now. It is exalting, delicious, to stand embraced by the shadows of a friendly tree with the wind tugging at your coattail and the heavens hailing your heart, to gaze and glory and give oneself again to God—what more could a man ask? Oh, the fullness, pleasure, sheer excitement of knowing God on earth! I care not if I never raise my voice again for him, if only I may love him, please him. Perhaps in mercy he shall give me a host of children [i.e., converts] that I may lead them through the vast star fields to explore his delicacies whose finger ends set them to burning. But if not, if only I may see him, touch his garments, and

smile into his eyes—ah then, not stars nor children shall matter, only himself. O Jesus, Master and Centre and End of all, how long before that glory is yours which has so long awaited you? Now there is no thought of you among men; then there shall be thought for nothing else. Now other men are praised; then none shall care for any other's merits. Hasten, hasten, Glory of Heaven, take your crown, subdue your kingdom, enthrall your creatures."

- What can a man give in exchange for his soul? What can we do, by God's grace, to reach another soul? We don't have to cross an ocean. We just have to take up our cross and follow Jesus. If we are doing that, we cannot help but take the Gospel with us in deed ***and*** in word!
- Prayer