



Speaker:  
Paul Forrest

## The Death of Self

Series: The Gospel of Mark • 28 of 28

11/29/2020 (SUN) | Bible: Mark 8:34

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Let's read together from Mark's Gospel, chapter 8, beginning at verse 34.

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You may remember from last week there was this incident with Peter. Jesus had decided it was time to tell his disciples and others about the real purpose for his visiting this Earth. **He came to suffer and die.** And though he explained he was to rise from the dead and ascend back to his Father's side, it was hard to believe.

It hit Peter especially hard. He was embarrassed that the long-awaited Messiah had come yet was talking about his apparent defeat. The disciple made this clear confession that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, or Christ. Yet somehow how he believed the Messiah had made some kind of mistake. Peter took him to one side to explain that he shouldn't be talking so negatively.

We remember the rebuke Jesus comes back at him with— one of the most severe Jesus ever used. This week, we jump back into the story where we left off. No sooner has Jesus rebuked Peter that he turns to all the people to make another shocking statement.

The essence of it is this. **If someone wants to be Jesus's disciple, he must be prepared to suffer like Jesus. He must be prepared to even DIE like Jesus.** If the disciples found it hard to imagine their Lord would suffer, how much harder it must have been to be told this bad news!

The Christian life is to be one of denying yourself, bearing your cross, and following Jesus— no matter where he leads. The believer needs to understand that, just as Jesus had the victory through suffering, so our part in that victory comes in the same way.

And remember: this isn't just for his disciples. It says here he called all the people to him, together with the disciples. Those who agree to the recruitment into the army of Jesus must understand *they're going to war*. And even though the victory in that war is assured, they need to prepare themselves for injury and death before they can enjoy the end of their warfare.

I want to digress for a few moments to comment about the end of our reading. Chapter 8 finishes with a reference to the coming of the Son of Man with the holy angels. We finished with the first verse of chapter 9. And he uses similarly dramatic language there too. *The kingdom of God coming with power*, it says.

If you thought verse 38 was referring to the end of the world, with the return of Jesus Christ as Judge, I'd say that was a fair assumption. But if you also thought the beginning of chapter 9 was referring to the same event, you have a problem. Jesus says this event will be so soon, some of the people standing in front of him would see it!

I don't think I need to say it, but Jesus wasn't mistaken. He didn't believe the final judgement would take place within just a few years. The answer to the riddle, I believe, is **he's talking about two different things**. It's very likely in verse 38 he's talking about the final judgement.

Can I remind you that the Bible often uses very dramatic language in describing important events. I've mentioned to you examples you in Revelation and Acts where an important event or change is described as the coming of God in power. And when the coming-in-power type of language is used in the Old Testament, it's the language of war.

Let me be clear then: any manifestation of God, especially in an attitude of judgement, could be referred to in the way Jesus does here. We're left to make educated guesses as to what Jesus was referring to. Was it the transfiguration some of the disciples would soon witness? Was it his glorious resurrection? Was it the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70, where the pagan armies led by the Son of Man would deal a final crushing blow to that old, useless religion of the Jews?

Perhaps it was all of these. Perhaps it was all these *and more*. Certainly, they'd see the beginnings of the gospel age that would see victory upon victory over the span of thousands of years as untold millions of God's elect are drawn in.

Let's take a look now at Jesus's short message.

## What it is to deny yourself

Our use of the word "deny" today is not the same as what we see here. Today, we'd use it about someone who was accused of something then *denies* it was them. But you might say you didn't want to "deny yourself" the good things in life, so you bought a box of chocolates to eat.

Denial here is about disowning something. It's not just about doing without something or doing without lots of things. Denying yourself isn't what we call *asceticism* some Christians have practiced where they deprive themselves of food and hurt themselves.

I'll go further and say denying yourself isn't even about disowning certain sins, although that's part of it. **To deny yourself is to renounce the self**. By our very nature, the self dominates our lives. The way of Jesus is to put aside what *you* want and make what *he* wants the most important thing in your life. Galatians 5:24 tells us, "And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts." The person you were when you came into this world needs to be killed!

It'll help us to understand more clearly what denying ourselves means if we think about what denial of Jesus meant. Think about poor Peter again. That runaway mind and runaway

mouth of his was to get him into trouble again and again. His most tragic failure had to be when he denied Christ. After boasting he'd never disown his master, he did just that—and very passionately as well.

In his denial of Jesus, he claimed not to know the man. He was ashamed of him. And I'm sure he spoke about him in a bad way. The denial of self, then, is similar. What do you do with the old man that haunts your soul with temptation to sin? **You have nothing to do with him.** You show you're *ashamed* of him. You speak badly of him. You're now a new man or woman, on a new path, following a new Lord, and in your thoughts, words and actions you show Jesus is now everything to you.

You're to take up your cross. It's refers, of course, to the method of execution used by the Romans. As a final display of humiliation for the criminals, they're forced to carry on their own shoulders the very means by which they were to die.

Remember, at this point there's been no mention of how Jesus will die. Yet he uses the manner of his coming sentence and execution to represent those things his followers need to steel themselves for. Peter would later write in one of his letters, in 1 Peter 4:12, "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you."

The Christian life is to be ideally a joyful one, but we should be prepared for harshness. If any of the disciples eventually witnessed Jesus being paraded through the town on the way to Calvary, I expect this message would be ringing in their ears. Only then would the full force of Jesus's saying hit them. *These are the lengths I need to be prepared to go to in order to have Jesus as my Lord. A man must sacrifice his present life in order to obtain a better one—an eternal one.* And it'll do you good, brethren, if you have always in the back of your mind the thought you're maybe hours from literal death too. It puts things into perspective and deters you from clinging to the things of this world.

There are those who exercise a form of self-denial, but it's not for God. It's only to showcase their own, self-made righteousness, which is none at all. The tendency is everywhere, and it's wicked. But there are warnings in scripture for Christians, too. They need to make sure *they're* not ashamed of Jesus or his doctrine. In 2 Timothy 1:8 it says, "Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God." So, instead, we speak about him freely to all, whether family, friends or strangers, whenever we can.

## Why deny yourself

Jesus essentially uses four arguments here in verses 35 to 38.

Why deny yourself? **Because to do otherwise would be to lose your life** (v.35). The two words you see in our passage, "life" and "soul", are the same word. They mean the same thing. So on the surface of it, Jesus's argument makes no sense. *Do you want to save your life? Then you need to die. Do you want to die? Then you need to stay alive!*

It's clear Jesus is using a play on words. He's referring to life in two different ways. What he means is this: **if you preserve the sinful life you have now, the end will be eternal destruction. If you sacrifice your sinful life now, the end will be eternal life.**

This business of being short-sighted can be explained more with an illustration. Imagine if you went to Joe Bloggs with a proposal. You give him a choice. His first option is to receive £10 in his hand today. His second option is to give up the chance of the £10 but with the promise that in a year's time he'll be given £10,000. It goes without saying he'd go for the second option. Yes, he could take the £10 and do something nice with it. But it'll soon be gone, and it's then he'll start to regret his decision.

We can use that illustration, with caution, regarding the choice Jesus presents men with. They can sacrifice the pleasures of this world—sacrifice their own selves, even—for a season, but with the future promise of a glorious and happy eternity. Or they can just live for the moment and carry on as normal, chasing after the distractions of this world. Then their “£10” will soon be gone. And they'll have an eternity to think over, and regret, and cry and mourn about the insanity of the decision they made.

There's a famous example in Genesis of someone who thought in this way. If you take a look at Genesis 25:34, you read, “Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.” Esau had been hungry. And that can be very unpleasant. But rather than suffer a little longer for the future inheritance, he instead satisfied his immediate lusts and so despised his birthright.

Why deny yourself? **Because to do otherwise will get you nothing** (v.36). If you *do* choose unbelief and continue on as normal on that broad road which leads to destruction, you'll eventually realise you have nothing.

- If you happen to gain lots of money, it'll eventually go—wasted by yourself or handed over to bickering children in your will.
- If your heart and soul's in your career, you'll soon be finished, replaced by someone younger and quickly forgotten.
- If your life revolves around celebrities, like rock stars and actors, you'll have to watch as they get old and grey just like you. And if you live long enough, you'll get to see them all die one by one.

Jesus's example uses hyperbole—exaggerating the idea of a man's material success to the point where he owns the whole world. Imagine it though: imagine a man arose who'd end up ruling the whole world and owning everything in it. A world's dictator the likes of which has never been seen. There'll come a point when he's lying on his deathbed. His money can't save him. His worldly power can't save him. And his friends can't save him either. Luke 12:20 puts it like this: “But God said unto him, ‘Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee. Then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?’”

Such a man is a fool. He's about to meet his maker and he must stand before the judge penniless, naked and already condemned.

Why deny yourself? **Because to do otherwise means your life can't be redeemed** (v.37). When we sin against God, we build up a debt. If someone harmed an animal, they'd be prosecuted and received a sentence. But if they harmed a human in the same way, the sentence would be greater. And so we understand there's a relationship between the importance of the person offended and the penalty that must be paid by the criminal.

Think about God. Think about him and his holiness, his righteousness, his beauty—think about all his perfections. He is so much higher than us, and so much more important than any man, **an offence against him who is of infinite worth must demand an infinite penalty.** No amount of money can EVER pay off the debt. Even our super billionaire guy couldn't afford to bail us out.

Turn in your Bibles to Psalm 49:6–7—"They that trust in their wealth and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches...none of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him." When a man or a woman or a child realises they're in trouble with God, they'll also realise there's no one in the whole world who can get them out of this trouble.

But what if there *was* a man who could? Not a man with a van load of cash. But a man who would take our place. He couldn't pay off the debt, but he could take the punishment for us by presenting his own life as payment.

But there's still a problem. The value of a man's life isn't nearly great enough to be sufficient payment for our crimes against God. Only one possibility remains. And the idea is so out of this world that if I hadn't heard it already, I couldn't even imagine it. **GOD MUST BECOME A MAN.** The God who is completely sinless must come down and give his own life as a ransom for those he wishes to save.

This is what Jesus Christ, the Son of God, did for us. The master plan of the Ages was drawn up in the council of the Trinity. It was agreed: the Son was coming to this world born of a woman so that he might become the sacrificial lamb for all those God ordained to salvation. Only the blood of Jesus Christ can save us! The old hymn goes:

*Oh precious is the flow that makes me white as snow  
No other fount I know  
Nothing but the blood of Jesus*

Why deny yourself? **Because to do otherwise means a lost eternity** (v.38).

Jesus is coming back soon. His idea of "soon" is, of course, very different from mine! But we're in the last days, and every 24-hours that passes gets us one more day closer to his return.

When he comes, he will split the whole human race who ever lived into two classes. On one side will be all his children. These were given the gift of salvation. These are the ones Jesus came into this world to save. Both in their lives and in eternity, they'll be trophies to the great and glorious grace of God in Christ.

On the other side of this divide will be those who don't belong to God. They're not God's children. He *detests* them. They snubbed the good things they received in their lives, choosing to live for themselves rather than for God. Many of them will be those who at one stage in their lives claimed to be followers of Jesus Christ. They claimed Jesus as theirs. They sang the songs and hymns all about him. They even prayed to him.

But when the tiniest bit of opposition came their way, they denied Jesus. Imagine an upstanding churchgoer in our generation. They turn up at the meetings and talk very highly of God. But when hostility comes, their false profession is betrayed. They become embarrassed by being associated with Jesus. They agree with the opposition that the doctrines of the Bible are extreme and old-fashioned. The God of the Bible is not their God, they declare.

It breaks my heart to think about these people at the end when Jesus comes. When Peter denied Jesus, the look the Lord Jesus gave him was one of disappointment mixed with love. Not so for these people. The look Jesus the judge will give them in that day will be one of utter contempt and hatred. They might plead they belong to Jesus, but he will say those chilling words: *Who are you? I don't know you. Get away from me. I never want to see you again.*

Brothers and sisters, we've considered what it means to deny yourself. We've considered how foolish it is not to deny yourself, to trade eternal happiness for some short-term gain. Here's my final point.

### **What you get if you deny yourself**

You know what the most marvellous thing is about this arrangement the Christian has? He's not asked to have a short but miserable existence followed by a never-ending state of happiness. Now if that's the way it was, I'd still do it! But it's so far from being like that.

Jesus tells us to expect suffering. He tells us to so ready ourselves that we would be prepared for a martyr's death. But he also sends his Spirit into our hearts. And God, *God the Holy Spirit*, brings with him an abundance of good things. We're given a list of those things which characterise the person in whom the Spirit lives. In the first three alone we see the gifts of love, joy and peace:

- A love higher than anything we had previously
- A joy money can't buy
- And a peace existing in us even in our darkest hours.

I'm tempted to say it's a great deal! *But salvation isn't a deal.* Men can't take it or leave it. Salvation is a fixed purpose whereby God elects, justifies, sanctifies and forever glorifies those who he determined to deliver before the world was. And I'm so thankful he didn't make salvation a take-it-or-leave-it offer. I'd never have chosen Jesus of my own accord—not in a million years. And with respect friends, neither would you! Thank God he forced his way into our lives and changed us so we desired him above all other things.

We must deny ourselves each day. We have to offer our entire selves as a living sacrifice, day by day. 2 Timothy 2:11 tells us, "It is a faithful saying. For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him." J C Philpot put it like this:

*"Just in proportion as we're delivered unto death, and execution takes place on what the creature loves, so does the life of Jesus begin to rise and make itself blessedly manifest."*

In other words, the more dead we are, the more *alive* we are!

And remember: this talk of taking up your cross is serious. We sometimes talk about some minor issue. It could be that someone said the wrong thing to us after the meeting. And we talk of it being "a cross we have to bear". Well, while trouble comes in all forms in this Christian life, carrying your cross in those days was a real and powerful picture. They could be killed any day, not worry about mistakes in etiquette. I think in the modern Western church it's almost impossible for us to appreciate the sacrifice those early believers were prepared to make—those in a right walk, anyway—but it should be our aim.

Those of us who are saved are not like those who are ashamed of Jesus. We love him. We talk about him all the time. We want to read more about him. We love to tell others about him. And so we work on, waiting for that glorious day. 1 John 2:28 says, "And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming."

What do we get if we deny ourselves? Peace and joy in this life, with the promise of an eternity of unmixed and unparalleled happiness.

Amen.