

February 4, 2018

# Gospel Urgency and the Cross

Mark 8:31-38

For the sake of Christ and his gospel true disciples willingly trade their comforts for a cross.

LTS: Matt. 10:24-29

It is my ambition as the preaching pastor of this church to instill within you a knowledge of sound doctrine, the ability to engage in personal ministry, and the courage to unashamedly speak of Christ and His gospel wherever you have opportunity.

In this short series of sermons leading up to the Gospel Urgency Conference, this third ambition – to make us courageous with the gospel – has been the focus. I want every believer who calls Calvary Bible Church home to be courageous with the Gospel. It's NOT good to keep it to ourselves. It's NOT biblical to keep it to ourselves. It's not good for the lost in our world who will face eternal judgment in Hell if they don't hear and believe the gospel. And, as Jesus infers in our text this morning, it is dangerous to keep it to ourselves.

Read Mark 8:31-38

I see two major themes in this text,

I. The Cost of True Discipleship: (34-35)

II. The Test of True Discipleship: (36-38)

1. It seems clear to me as I read this text that the disciples were operating under a paradigm of successful Christian living that Jesus did not share. They were convinced in their hearts that all the struggles and difficulties they faced as followers of Christ would eventually result in the establishment of God's earthly kingdom over which they would help rule. They believed the course of their lives was destined to become infinitely better than what they had experienced thus far. To them, suffering was a temporary but obligatory exception to the rule. It was not to be thought of as normative.

2. Oh, sure, it would take a little time to rally the troops around Jesus, overthrow Rome and establish Christ's rule. But soon and very soon they would begin living in the comforts of the kingdom. No more fear. No more worry. No more unfair taxation or racial discrimination. Heaven and earth will bow before the throne, the lion will lay down with the lamb and, all will be well!

3. Imagine the shock, therefore, when Jesus, after admitting He is indeed the promised Christ, said to His men: “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” (8:31).

4. So shocked was Peter at these words, in fact, that He took Jesus by the arm, turned Him around and rebuked Him! To which Jesus responds, “Get thee behind me Satan: for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s” (8:33). Why did he say that? Why was He so harsh with Peter?

- A. Perhaps it was because Peter wanted and expected the same thing that Satan offered in his last temptation of Christ when he took Jesus to the mountain top, showed him the nations and promised, “I will give you all of this if you will fall down and worship me.”
- B. Notice in v. 30 – immediately after Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Christ – Mark tells us that Jesus strictly charged them to tell no one about him. In other words, don’t tell people that I am the Christ. Why? Because they needed time for Jesus to explain who the Christ really is. They needed to learn that he had NOT come to establish a kingdom on earth but to reconcile sinners to God by his death on the cross.
- C. All of this was terribly perplexing to the disciples. They imagined the climax of Jesus’ story would feature Him sitting on a throne. But He came to hang from a cross.

5. But wait, it gets even worse. Jesus then calls the crowds to Himself and announces, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up His cross and follow me” (8:34)

6. This, beloved, was an absolutely earth-shattering declaration. But what does it mean? Let’s take a few minutes to wade through it together.

## I. The Cost of True Discipleship:

Read v. 34

1. The first thing we should observe here (34) is that Jesus is not just speaking exclusively to the 12 anymore. He calls to Himself a group of people who are unrelated to His ministry with the disciples.

2. It seems clear then, that whatever Jesus intends to communicate He is saying it to everyone who wishes to follow Him and not just His apostles. “If anyone” means just that; everyone who chooses to follow Jesus. That includes you and me.

3. Notice also that there are two qualifications connected to following Him.

- A. First One must “Deny himself.” The word “deny” here is used again by Mark in chapter

14, when he speaks of Peter's denial of Jesus after the arrest.

- 1) To deny literally means to dissociate oneself completely from someone else, or to sever a relationship.
- 2) So to deny oneself means to refuse to be guided by one's own interests, impulses, or ambitions and to surrender control of one's destiny to someone else (cf. NIGTC Mark, p. 340).
- 3) It means that you put someone else's interests above your own. It is the very opposite of what Jesus accused Peter of one verse earlier when he said, "you are NOT setting your mind on God's interests, but man's."
- 4) So the first qualification is that one must deny himself.

B. The second qualification for following Jesus is that (v. 34) one must "take up his cross and follow Me."

- 1) Contrary to what many are teaching today, the "cross" of a believer is not some kind of mystical or spiritual identification with Christ. Nor is it what some call a "crucified life."
- 2) Taking up one's cross is not about bearing up well under the mundane problems of life. Your cross is NOT your lazy husband or your nagging wife. It isn't the exorbitant repair bill on your car.
- 3) We need to be careful not to domesticate Jesus' metaphor into an exhortation merely to bear up under hardships patiently. Of course, we should do that, but that's not what Jesus is speaking about here. Rather, He is saying that the terms of discipleship require that one be prepared rather to face physical death rather than to deny one's Lord.

C. Kent Hughes writes:

A cross comes from specifically walking in Christ's steps, embracing his life. It comes from bearing disdain because we are embracing the narrow way of the Cross – that Jesus is 'the way and the truth and the life' (Jn. 14:6)... It comes from embracing weakness instead of power. It comes from extending oneself in difficult circumstances for the sake of the gospel. Our crosses come from and are proportionate to our dedication to Christ. Difficulties are not an indication of cross-bearing; difficulties for Christ's sake are. We need to ask ourselves if we have any difficulties because we are following close after Christ.<sup>1</sup> (Mark, Vol. 1; p. 202)

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<sup>1</sup> Kent Hughes, *Mark Vol. 1* (?????), 202

4. You see, the world says, “Look out for Number One. Save yourself. Love yourself. Pamper yourself. Promote yourself; Live for yourself; obey your thirst. Trust your heart and You deserve it!

5. Unfortunately, many Christians live by an unstated code that is not much different. We have grown to believe that discipleship is all about good church friends, moral kids, fun music and a relatively pain-free life. God’s call upon us, we suppose, is to read the Bible consistently, vote on election day, love our wives, spend quality time with the kids and pay our taxes. But that’s not what Jesus is talking about.

6. In verse 35, He connects discipleship to losing your lives “for My sake and the gospel’s...”

7. In verse 38, He contrasts it against “being ashamed of Me and My words.”

8. This isn’t about bearing up under the mundane difficulties of life. It’s about suffering as a result of speaking and living faithfully for Christ. These are such foreign concepts to us. “Deny yourself and take up your cross.” It means instead of living for love, respect, advancement and comfort, we Live for Christ and His gospel. It is the call to associate ourselves with the despised and rejected Christ knowing that to do so means that from time to time you too will be despised, rejected, spoken badly of, and (for many believers around the world) killed for Jesus’ sake.

9. This is foreign to us because in our culture it is so easy to circumvent suffering. All we have to do is remain quiet when God wants us to speak; remain passive when God wants us to get involved; Fudge a little so no one suspects we are moral fanatics. But Christ calls us to a much riskier kind of lifestyle.

10. Paul understood the cost of discipleship. It seems he was always in trouble (sometimes Life Threatening trouble) for the sake of the gospel. On numerous occasions being faithful to Christ and speaking about His gospel landed him in jail! But he’s not the only one. Through the ages faithful disciples of Christ have willingly paid the Cost of Discipleship.

When the Roman Proconsul commanded Polycarp (in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century) to swear allegiance to Caesar, saying, “Swear, and I will set thee at liberty; reproach Christ”, Polycarp responded, “Eighty and six years have I now served Christ, and he has never done me the least wrong; how, then, can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?” So they tied him to a stake and burned him alive.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1940’s when Rev. Richard Wurmbrand and his wife, Sabina, attended a congress of Joseph Stalin and 4,000 religious leaders in Romania, they sat and

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Walter, *The New Encyclopaedia of Christian Quotations* (Grand rapids, Baker Books, 2000), 724

listened to one priest after another pastor proclaim that communism and Christianity are fundamentally the same. At one point Richard's wife could take no more. Wurmbrand writes; "My wife and I were present at this congress. My wife sat near me and told me, 'Richard, stand up and wash away the shame from the face of Christ! They are spitting in His face.' I said to my wife, 'If I do so, you lose your husband.' She said, 'I don't wish to have a coward as a husband.'"<sup>3</sup> And so he did... and for it he was tortured, and spent 14 years in prison. And later, he was used by God to launch what we know as "Voice of the Martyrs."

11. Is it any wonder Paul said, "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied"? The way he lived his life didn't make any sense if there is nothing better to gain than momentary comforts. If life is really only about experiencing as much temporal pleasure as possible before you die, then Paul's life was foolish! And for that matter, so was Christ's. But maybe it's our vision of life that is foolish in God's eyes

12. If Christ has indeed risen from the dead and the gospel is true, then Paul, and Polycarp, and Richard Wurmbrand, and a million other Christians throughout church history were the ones who saw life through Jesus' eyes. These were the kinds of genuine disciples Jesus was speaking of in Mark 8:34-38.

13. Do we lack Gospel Urgency? Perhaps it is in part because the call to suffering for Christ is not even on our radar. The joy of suffering for His sake is as foreign to us as life on another world.

- A. We know nothing of what Peter and John experienced when, after they were threatened and beaten by the local authorities for preaching Christ, they "rejoiced that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41)
- B. We know little of what motivated Paul to write, "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering."
- C. The words of Christ fail to resonate with us when He says, "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Mat. 5:11-12)

14. But Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Follow in His shame before the world. Follow in His rejection and ridicule from the lost. Taking up your cross is not for "Super-Christians." It for all Christians. This is the cost of true discipleship. And it comes with a promise and a warning.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ* (Voice of the martyrs) 16

- A. The warning is (35), if you strive to save your life, you will lose it. That is, if you play it safe; if you strategize for comfort, ease, and lack of conflict with others, you may very well waste your life and have nothing to show for it when you see Jesus at the Resurrection.
- B. The Promise is (35), if you are willing to lose your life for the sake of Jesus and His gospel you will save it. If you take the risks required of disciples and trust God with the results, you will NOT lose your life, but save it. Richard Wurmbrand once said, "I have found jubilant Christians only in the Bible, in the Underground Church and in prison."

15. This the cost of true discipleship. But we also have here,

## II. The Test of True Discipleship:

Read. 36-38

1. The mark of true discipleship is NOT the doctrine you know, but the life that you live. It is possible to be a religiously minded person but lose your own soul in the end. How? By trying so hard to protect yourself from every discomfort and loss in this life that you never become a true disciple of Christ. Jesus is saying this is a fundamental test of true discipleship.
2. If you live for Christ and actually talk about Christ to unbelievers you know, you may lose face, or lose money, or lose your health, or even your life. But Jesus is saying, those things should not be of ultimate value to us. The most precious things in the world to us should be Christ and his gospel (35).
3. In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship* Dietrich Boneoffer said, "When Christ calls a man He bids him come and die." In our tolerant American culture that may NOT mean that we will actually be killed for our faith, but it will mean that in any given situation we will be willing to trade our comforts for crosses for the sake of Christ and His gospel.
4. This is a mark of a true disciple. You see, we need Gospel Urgency NOT only for the sake of the lost people we know. We need Gospel urgency for our own spiritual well-being. I have to ask myself from time to time, do I claim to be a Christian because of the personal benefits I enjoy? Or am I a Christian because of Christ and His gospel.
5. The test Jesus lays down here is this: Are you ashamed of Christ and his gospel? "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in the glory of His father with the holy angels."

6. Paul once said to Timothy (2 Tim. 1:8) “Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God...”

7. And Paul said of himself, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God for salvation to all who believe...” (Rom. 1:16).

8. We need Gospel Urgency because we need to examine ourselves from time to time to see if we are true disciples. This may sound shocking, but true disciples talk about Jesus. We talk about the things we love. We talk about our children and grandbabies. We talk about football and basketball. We talk about our hobbies and precious possessions. And we talk about them because we love them. We would never be ashamed of them. And as true disciples we talk about Jesus because we love Him; he is the most valuable thing in all the world, and we are willing to sacrifice much for the joy of proclaiming his excellencies in all things, to the glory of God in the joy of all peoples.

9. Do you consider yourself a true disciple of Jesus? Do you know the cost of discipleship? Do you bear the mark of Discipleship? Cultivating Gospel Urgency is NOT only for the unbelievers you talk with, it is also good for you. It authenticates your claim to be a follower of Christ and fills us with His joy.

Conclusion:

“Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.”

Are you afraid of what people might think or do if you become a follower of Christ? Jesus said (Lk, 12:4) “Do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more than can do. But... fear Him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell.”

There is something infinitely more important than maintaining peaceful relationship in this life, for what will you give in exchange for your soul? I plead with you to cast yourself completely upon Jesus Christ and trust him with the temporary and eternal results. You will find that He is everything he promised to be for you, and more than you can imagine.

*For the sake of Christ and his gospel true disciples willingly trade their comforts for a cross.*