

Following Christ
Mark 8:34-38

Before we turn to Mark, I want to read for you from Matthew chapter 7 in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Something that Matthew records for us; this simple statement by Christ. In Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus says, "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." Jesus seems to be making a simple but bold statement in that analogy and that picture of a narrow gate and a narrow path that few will find leading to life. It doesn't take long to consider Jesus' words there in Matthew 7 and consider the landscape of the world and even America (and what people claim as far as their religious status) to start to feel like we have a contradiction happening with over half of America saying that they're Christian and actually a follower of Jesus of some sort. And we think about these words by Jesus and we start to think, how is this possible? I thought Jesus made it clear that "few" would in fact find the narrow gate - "few," not many, not the majority, but "few." Was Jesus wrong? I think, as we're accustomed to answering as we study the life of Christ, that's never the right answer that He was wrong. He knows what He's talking about. He is clear in His teaching and absolute and certain in His prophecy even.

The more realistic and truthful explanation is that we just have to question the majority of those who claim to be Christian in the first place. On what basis you might ask? How can we actually question whether or not people are legitimately saved and have this conversion? Well, I think it's simple, and it comes from our text this morning. On the basis on what they understand, it means to follow Jesus - what it truly means to be a disciple of Christ - what Jesus demands from us - what Jesus demands from His followers. This is something that has been so clouded and confused. As people have brought their views to Jesus on who He is, they've also brought their own beliefs, they're own opinions, as far as what Jesus wants and what Jesus is all about. He's all about love. He's about helping and tolerance - come as you are - stay as you are - bring your baggage and your burdens - it's no big deal. The reality is a majority of people saying that they're Christian have failed to come to grips with what it means to actually be a follower of Jesus Christ. And that's why this morning's verses are so

important for us to examine. So, let's look at them together now. Mark chapter 8 - we finish the chapter. Mark 8:34-38; "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. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. 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? 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."

This morning's teaching, we see, is just building off of what we've covered the last time we were in Mark. It's building off what we just looked at, and if you just look up, you're reminded very quickly and succinctly. We talked about the two core components of the gospel and how Jesus presents it - that is who He is and what He does - the person and the work of Christ; that Jesus is in fact the Messiah, the chosen One of God, the anointed One, promised of the Old Testament, fulfilled in His coming and expected even again in His second return. The gospel revolves around the truth of who Jesus is and His identity. And another piece of its cornerstone is found in the fact of what Jesus does, and that's when we saw Him for the first time predict His death and His resurrection. Speaking to His disciples that were slow to hear as we've seen so often, He lays this out there for the first time in very clear terms, making it certain they can understand what He's saying. This isn't a parable. This is Him, alone with His disciples, able to explain explicitly who He is and what He's come to do. As you remember how it ended, Peter was not too happy with the idea of a suffering Jesus and a suffering Messiah, to which Jesus responded with rebuke; "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." This is still the case. When people come to this place of calling themselves a Christian, of identifying with Christ or so to speak, they have failed to set their "...mind on the things of God..." but instead, they're still setting their mind "...on the things of man." As Peter was doing, and so, too, people today carry this attitude, this approach to Jesus, they're thinking of themselves. They're thinking of what man likes to think on rather than what God's plan, God's will, is.

And so, we turn to our text this morning and verse 34, and we see these four different aspects that come forth of what it really means to follow Christ.

And we have to start and build a foundation here in verse 34 with the requirements. We have to get the requirements laid out and clarified, and Jesus does that immediately in verse 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.” Notice just the beginning of how Jesus starts this. He was in this intimate close-knit setting with His disciples, explaining clearly who He is and what He’s come to do, an intimate moment, and now, He broadens it. Now, He takes the opportunity to call in the masses once again. He had no problem with people following Him in His miraculous ministry and His teaching and His supernatural abilities as we’ve seen so far in Mark’s gospel, but this was a different moment, an attempt to withdraw again and be with His disciples, but now for this important teaching, everyone needs to hear this. This is for everyone. He calls the crowd, not just the disciples, everyone needs to hear this clear teaching. This is indeed a message for His disciples. They needed this message, and they would, in fact, follow and obey this message. But it’s beyond that. It’s for those that are seeking, for those that are still in this system under the Jewish leadership of Pharisees and lawyers and Sadducees, and they’re confused, and they’re trying to find their way. They’re trying to understand Messiah and who He is. And for those that are completely lost, just caught up in the movement, everyone, doesn’t matter who you are, you need to hear this message. And it’s the same this morning for everyone - everyone here - we all need to hear this message.

Two clear requirements when you look at this verse - two explicit and clear requirements. First, a denial of self, really - a denial of self; “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself...” - a denial of self. This is what it means to follow Jesus. Following Jesus demands this self-denial. This couldn’t be clearer. Once again, let’s just be reminded of how Jesus has functioned thus far, how He has interacted with people, how He’s tried to keep things basically secretive, how He’s tried to even limit how much He’s given to people in this teaching, how He’s even gone to the extent of withdrawing away from people or kind of cloaking His teaching with these parables and stories. That’s not the case here. You could not be more clear. It was clear two thousand years ago, and it’s still clear today; “If anyone would come after me...” (What does it mean to follow Jesus?) “...let him deny himself...” ... “...let him deny himself...” It’s a simple but profound requirement. Following Jesus, simply put, requires saying no to every other ambition, passion, desire, dream, goal that we might have. We don’t live for

money. You stop living for people and their approval. You don't live for the future and your retirement and what could be. You don't even live for Friday and the weekend. You don't live for vacation and when the next one might come and where else to travel. You don't even live for family. So often we hear these expressions that we say, and we understand what we mean; oh, family - that's everything, isn't it? That's important. But the reality of what Jesus is saying right here is it confronts all of those claims. It confronts all of those plans that we so often have. To follow Jesus means you do not live for those things. There can be no competing desires. That's what it comes down to. When it comes to Christ in your life, there is nothing that comes close in competition as far as a goal, ambition or pursuit.

You think, well, I mean, how can you begin to identify this? Do you start to quantify and add up the time that you spend in your Bible and praying? Is that what it means? Some try to go down that road, and it's tricky because you quickly get into this scary spot of some type of legalism; you have to read the Bible more than you talk to people or something like that. How about simply asking yourself this - if whatever this passion or goal or pursuit or aim is right here in front of me, if that was removed from me, would it be devastation for me? Would it break me? If this friendship was removed, if this relationship was taken away, if this car was totaled, if this house was burned to the ground, if this money was stolen, if the retirement was drained, if I lost the physical ability to walk - and see if any of this or all of it was taken from me, how would I respond? If there's absolute devastation, and you are broken at the thought of losing any of these things, it's very possible that you have a competing desire with Christ. There can be no competition; that is what it means to deny self in following Christ.

And this isn't the only requirement that Jesus gives that's very clear. First, you must deny self, but second, you must be devoted unto sacrifice, devoted unto the point of even sacrifice. As He goes on, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Simply put, following Jesus contains an expectation of death - sacrifice. You think, how clear is that? How do we know that for sure? Once again, Jesus could not be more clear to the people He's talking to; "...take up [your] cross and follow him." ... "...take up [your] cross..." This is where it helps for us to kind of rewind and go back in time and try to recall what these words meant to them in that very era, rather than what they, at face value, mean to us right now. Just think of the cross for instance; it wasn't to them as it appears to us

today. Right? This emblem, this idea that we have now taken and made it into a fine piece of jewelry even, or we take it and many people use it as a good luck charm somewhere in their house or in their life. This is not what the cross meant to them - not even close. It was explicitly and clearly a symbol of death. That's it - a symbol of execution. There's no confusion of what it means to "...take up [your] cross..."

If you want a modern-day equivalent, if Jesus was talking and saying this statement to us now, He'd be saying, "...let him deny himself and..." enter the gas chamber -, "...let him deny himself and..." and sit in the electric chair. It's execution. There's no clearer way to say it then, when He says to take up his cross "...take up his cross..." To be even more clear, here's an extended quote here from a commentator regarding the whole process and idea of crucifixion and the cross. He states, "Prior to the Romans, the Persians, Greeks, and others practiced crucifixion as a means of exposing an executed corpse to shame and humiliation. The Romans perfected this method, and it became for them a favorite method of execution. For the worst of criminals and the greatest of enemies, the goal was to produce maximum torture and humiliation. Crucifixion was also meant as a weapon of terror to warn any would be revolutionaries of the consequences of opposing Rome. Most crucifixion sites were near major roads to make them visible to the populace and passing travelers. Generally, the upright stake was left at the place of execution while the crossbeam was carried by the victim. The victim would then be tied or nailed to the cross and allowed to slowly die from exposure, festering wounds, and asphyxiation. Death on a cross could take many days. The body would often be left as a carrion for birds or dogs which increased the shame since an honorable death required burial in one's ancestral tomb."

It was clear to this crowd. When Jesus required not just a denial of self, but also a taking up of your cross, He meant a willingness unto sacrifice, a devotion to Him that would go to the point of sacrificing one's life. And isn't this what it means to follow Jesus? It demands all of us. We sing this way; "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." Paul writes in Romans 12:1, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." As a form of sermon review and what we just covered in Acts 20:24, "But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry

that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.” Following Jesus - right out the gate, Jesus lays out the requirements. You must deny yourself. There is no competition with Christ. That has to be settled in your own life. ...and your commitment level? It has to be the greatest commitment possible. You’re not a fair-weather fan. You’re not a band-wagoner. You’re not an enthusiast. You’re not one who likes to be entertained. You’re one who’s committed unto death; you will take up your cross and follow after Him. These are the requirements of following Jesus, and just these two simple requirements here are what have chopped off so many people from the reality, the actualization, of following Jesus even though they say they do. There’s a disconnect of what words people use for their relationship with God and what their life actually represents, denial of self devotion unto sacrifice.

In verse 35, Jesus goes on, and He really gives us the reality of all this and what this means. He states and lays out the requirements as basically a shock and awe statement to the crowd, and then He goes on to explain for the rest of our text. You see the word “for” that kind of starts each verse - in verse 35, “for” (or since or because) - in verse 36, “for,” – in verse 37, “for,” – in verse 38, “for.” He’s explaining Himself now. He’s laid out the initial demands here, the requirements, and now he explains it, and we see the reality first in verse 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.” So, we have two options here. Jesus goes on to explain this and, again, very clear terms. He’s not holding back. He’s not trying to be cryptic and vague. He’s being specific, precise, and He’s hitting everybody in the face.

First option - save your life now. That’s the first option. Right? The reality is you could choose to live your life in this way where you aim to save it now and preserve your life now, as He states, “For whoever would save his life...” That can be what you do, but the result “...will lose it...” Some would hear Jesus’ previous statement and decline the offer to take up the cross. They think, wow, that’s pretty big. I’m not there yet. I’m not sure I’m up for that, that level of commitment? Not only having these desires that I have as no longer competing with You, but even giving my own life as a sacrifice of some sort unto death? Surely there’d be many thinking this. They’re not ready for this type of sacrifice, commitment, or devotion. Well, here’s a fool-proof way to determine someone’s conviction on any given topic. How much are they willing to sacrifice for their beliefs. You want to

call yourself a follower of Me? How far are you willing to go? You want to say that you love Me? How far are you willing to go? This is what Jesus is doing. How far can you take this? And the reality is saving your own skin in this life has a very costly price in the next. As He says very clearly, you could - you could at some point give up and say I'm sorry Jesus, I'm going to choose to save my life. I'd rather not go to that point of being martyred or killed for my faith in You. So, I hold onto my life, and He says fine. You can choose to preserve and save your own life, but you will lose it; you will lose it in the end.

So, He gives the second option in the second half of the verse. You save your life for later. As He goes on, "...but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." This is a good example. After the bad example of what you could do, He lays out the more proper and fitting option here. You'll notice the play on words that you couldn't really avoid; "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." It's kind of back and forth here. It's probably best to understand this as a kind of temporal, time-related statement, almost as if we could paraphrase it and say it again. Jesus is saying save your life now, lose it in the end. Or, lose your life now, save it in the end. Those are your options. That's the reality. That's what's before you. If you choose to lose your life now, notice the reasoning for it. Jesus gives that. The reasoning is "...for my sake and the gospels..." There's a purpose behind it, and this is exactly what all the apostles would come to believe with full conviction because when it came to that moment when the rubber did meet the road and they were required to make a decision, they remained steadfast to Christ, and they lost their life. In this body, on this earth, they lost their life for Christ's sake and for the gospel, for the sake of the good news. That's how important it was to them. They would sacrifice themselves for this person and work of Jesus Christ, and Jesus' promise stands true for them; they would find their life saved in the end.

The reality is if someone is saying that they believe in Christ, if someone is confessing this and saying that they are a follower of Christ, then there is no sacrifice that's too great. This statement isn't scary. It's not too massive (the idea of losing your life, that kind of sacrifice, taking up your cross) if there is a true belief that God has created in your heart, if there is actual saving faith toward Christ. Others have said it in different ways. These are different missionaries who have stated this in a wise manner. C. T. Studd says, "If

Jesus Christ be God and died for me then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him.” David Livingston, “If a commission by an earthly God is considered an honor, how can a commission by a heavenly King be considered a sacrifice? In other words, there’s no problem; whatever Jesus wants me to do, it’s done. He is the King of kings. He speaks, and I listen and obey.” And famous Jim Elliott who gave up his life, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain that which he cannot lose.”

And you think about the severity of these verses and how strong they come across, and you might start to tremble in your seat a little and start to think, is this what I have to do right now? Do I have to go find myself in a martyrdom kind of scenario? Do I have to go place myself under the sword somewhere? Or, I will die for Christ? Is that what I’m to do? Must we all lose our lives overseas in some missionary service unto Christ? Is that the point? No. That’s not the point. You don’t seek out the suffering. You don’t seek out this opportunity to die. It’s not like we all have to leave these doors and go find a place to die for Christ, but your mindset, your ambition, your approach, must be as equally tenacious. You must have this equally clear, settled mindset, desire, and goal of conviction that has you in this place - you’d be willing to give up your life - you’d be willing to lay it all down for the sake of your Savior and for the sake of the good news that the world needs. Either you’re living to preserve and save your life now, or your living to lose your life now for Christ and the gospel.

To learn a little bit more, what about the outcome for those who preserve and save their life now? Jesus continues down this path, and rather than talking about the joy and the glory of living for Him and losing your life, He talks about the shame and the disgrace and the condemnation of those who choose to live for themselves. Next, in verses 36-37, we see the risk - the risk, in 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?” In order to show the folly of this idea, if this is what you want to do, if this is what your wrapped up in - I’m scared. I want to hold onto my life. I want to preserve what I have. I don’t want to give it all up. I’m not ready to do that. I don’t desire to do that. I love these things too much. Jesus has to go there and talk about the eternal to show how foolish this decision would be, and He does it by painting this somewhat of a hypothetical scenario of a man, a hypothetical scenario of this mystery man. And he gives him the benefit of the doubt; He says this mystery person here was able to gain the whole

world. That's what He says, this man who gains the whole world. He has all the money. He has all the prestige and prominence. He has all the power. In this life, he's played his cards just right, and all who really look at his life and consider him are envious of what he has. What good is such a status when encountering God and eternity? What good can any of that do if all it is combined into one person and one life? What will that do for you when you encounter God and eternity?

And let's assume, say this man could actually reason with God. Is there any way he could somehow convince God to save his soul? I mean, imagine the conversation; Lord, I give you my earthly bank statement and financial portfolio. Jesus or God responds, I already own all that actually, and I was the One who made it available to you. Unfortunately, it appears that you have failed to store up any treasure up here in heaven. The man responds, but Lord, consider my charitable donations; I gave away more than any other on the planet. God responds, sure, those were kind gestures, but you fail to realize you were not doing that giving for Me. It merely garnered you more support and prestige among men. The man starts to get nervous and says, well, speaking of prestige, Lord, consider all my contacts and relationships on earth; surely, they can vouch for me and my good will. God responds, no doubt you were well known and a friend to many; however, "I never knew you..." (Matthew 7:23) The man says, God, I'm a good person, accept my lifetime of generosity, kindness and love for my fellow man. God responds, this is the difference between us, what you see as good deeds are only filthy rags in my sight. I demand perfection, and you have fallen short. You rejected My Son, and instead, you worked so hard to save your life on earth, and now the time has come for you to forfeit your soul for all eternity.

What could you do? What could any person try and offer God? You're hopeless in that scenario even if you have the whole world, you've gained it all. We already know about this in the confession in Ecclesiastes of King Solomon, a man who set his eyes on whatever he wanted, and he got it. He had it. He obtained it, and he confesses throughout the book of Ecclesiastes how it didn't matter the woman, the wealth, the wisdom, the respect - all of it was empty. And his conclusion was to "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil." (Ecclesiastes 12:14) Jesus asks the question, "For what can a man give in return for his soul?" What option is there, what could you possibly offer to

God for this valuable item of one's soul, one's life. We already actually have the answer in Scripture in Psalm 49:7. The psalmist states, "Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice, that he should live on forever and never see the pit." What could you offer God that He would accept? There's nothing, nothing that can be done. This is the risk that people run. They want to save their life. They want to preserve it, and even if they had the perfect life on this earth in terms of what they were able to accumulate and mass up for themselves, it's worthless to God. You can't purchase a spot in heaven with your own good deeds, with your own money, with your own possessions.

Jesus delivers what really is kind of the final blow in verse 38, and He gives a greater description of the tragedy in losing one's soul, forfeiting one's soul. And that is the reckoning that He gives in verse 38- the reckoning in verse 38. He states, "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." Wow. Jesus' point is so clear. You understand why He's calling in the crowds. This is a message for everyone. Be on guard! Watch yourself! If this is the way you choose to live your life, this is what you can expect, this ending, this tragedy. When He says "...whoever is ashamed of me..." He's basically saying whoever fails to identify with Me. If you're ashamed of Me, and you do not want to be connect, you do not want to identify either with your words or your actions, you're ashamed of Me. And this is what tended to happen in the early church. Jewish people, generally speaking, were ashamed of this idea. They were ashamed of the concept of Jesus somehow as a suffering Messiah, and it was a stumbling block for them, and even the Gentiles, those that weren't Jews, heard the idea of God coming to earth and dying and they thought that's foolish. It was a message that was hard to believe, to even wrap your mind around, and so many were ashamed, ashamed of Christ. And many still are. They fail to fully identify with Him. Yes, they identify, but only in some half-hearted way or fashion.

Failure to identify in the way that Christ demands, that's what's being talked about here, failing to identify with Christ in a way that you'll devote yourself unto Him, even unto the point of sacrifice and self-denial; and failing to identify with Christ in this way is essentially participating with the adulterous and sinful generation that Jesus was ministering to. It's as if

James would say, “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” (James 4:4) Your options are clear. You can’t be in this neutral position when it comes to Christ. To be ashamed of Jesus now means He will be ashamed of you when He returns. This is a tragedy. It has to be understood as such. This is no light matter. This is not a joke, and this is not light in a sense that Jesus will come back and will simply ignore you because you kind of ignored Him. Or, He’ll come back, and He won’t be as good of friends with you as He is with other people because you weren’t as good of friend with Him as you were with other people. No. This means that Jesus will come back and flat out reject you because you rejected Him. There’s no neutral position. There’s no half-hearted commitment. It’s either all in, self-denial, sacrificial devotion unto Christ, or rejection and hatred of the Savior. And this is Jesus’ warning - choose wisely - choose wisely what you do with Christ and whether or not you will identify with Him completely and wholly. Or else, He will come and be ashamed of you and reject you.

This sacrifice that we’re talking about, this is perfectly demonstrated in what Jesus Himself was willing to do. He was not one that called people to go somewhere that He wasn’t willing to go. He called people to follow Him, to follow Him in this devotion, in this commitment, in this self-denial, in this sacrifice of giving up His life. That’s the sacrifice that we get to remember this morning, and it’s the same sacrifice that we must be willing to make for His glory.