

Living for the Saviour who died for you * Mark 8:27-38 * On the road to the Cross
February 26, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

Like many evangelicals, I have an odd relationship with Lent.

When I was younger, I did the whole 'give something up for Lent' thing a few times but I don't think that it really helped me to grow as a Christian. If anything, probably made me grow as a sinner, making me more self-righteous and self-reliant so that I could say 'look how good I can be' (as long as I'm not around brownies).

So there was a time when I would have ignored Lent altogether and yet I'm not sure that that is the best way to handle it either. As Leo the Great said around the 400's:

"...With the return of ... [Lent], we are summoned more urgently to prepare ourselves by a purification of spirit... [When we are born again we] are made new by the rebirth of baptism. Yet we still require a daily renewal to repair the shortcomings of our mortal nature, and despite whatever progress has been made everyone must continue to grow in holiness."ⁱ

And *that* I think is why Lent is important. It gives us a special time, every time of year, to focus on the Cross, to deal with the shortcomings of our sinful nature and to grow in holiness as we prepare for Easter.

To do that, we're going to spend the next six weeks together looking at the last half of Mark's Gospel. In the first half of Mark, it seems like Jesus doesn't have much of an agenda beyond saying that the Kingdom of God is at hand. Chapters 1-8, He's just wandering around, preaching, teaching, healing people, calling them to repentance.

In the middle of chapter 8 though, there's a watershed moment where something clicks in Him – His time has come - and for the rest of the Gospel, Jesus is relentlessly focused on going to the Cross.

It's a bit like a game of musical chairs. You know how in musical chairs, you go around and around the chairs while the music's playing but when it stops, you go straight for the chair? That's the Gospel of Mark. The first half of Mark, Jesus is just going around and around, but with our passage today, Jesus starts heading straight for the Cross. And so we're going to take that journey with Him this Lenten season; we will walk with Him 'on the road to the Cross,' not to get less chocolate but to get more of Him.

This morning we're going to start right around the watershed moment at Mark 8:27 and explore what I think are two very important questions: 1. What kind of Saviour is Jesus? And 2. How do you follow a Saviour like Him? So turn with me to Mark 8:27 and we'll explore those questions - 1. What kind of a Saviour is Jesus? And 2. How do you follow a Saviour like Him?

So, Mark 8:27:

27 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"

When Jesus was teaching, He was often surrounded by hundreds, even thousands of people, and yet, given the fact that He was the one teaching, He would not always be able to hear what they were

saying. The disciples though would be free to wander the crowd and to see to what the people were saying about the Teacher.

28 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

In other words, the general consensus seemed to have been that Jesus was just another in a long line of Old Testament prophets.

29 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Having spent so much time with them, having invested so much effort into them, Jesus wondered if that investment had paid off. And it did.

Peter answered, "You are the Christ."

This is a huge moment in the life of Jesus. For three years now, the disciples had followed Jesus, seen His miracles, heard His teaching and yet when it came to who He was, time and time again they got it wrong. (Just to give you a sense of that, just a few pages back in Mark 6, Jesus calms the storm and the disciples are left asking – 'Who is this that even the wind and waves obey Him?').ⁱⁱ

But here though, in Mark chapter 8, they finally get it right. Peter says – 'You are the Christ, the Messiah; You are the Saviour that God has promised.' Peter rightly says that Jesus is not just another OT prophet saying that God is *going to* send a Saviour; Jesus is the Saviour that God has sent.

Now you'd think that that would call for an enthusiastic reply from Jesus – just think about how you reacted when your child took their first step or when they finally succeeded at something that they hadn't been able to do. Gold star!

And yet Jesus says:

30 Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

That's a weird response, isn't it? Jesus is the Saviour, sent by God to deliver His people, and yet Jesus says 'tell no one about this.' Why?

This is an example of the 'Messianic secret' motif that we talked about in a Q from the pew last summer. A bunch of times in Mark's Gospel Jesus tells people NOT to tell people who He is and this is one of those times.

The reason for this is that He wants to control the message. He wants to manage expectations. He wants to demonstrate what kind of Saviour He is before He lets people know that He is the Saviour.

When someone says 'I'm the Messiah,' people are going to project ALL sorts of hopes and dreams onto them. 'He's the Messiah? He's going to deliver us from Rome; we won't have to pay taxes! Finally, we won't be under military occupation! He's the Messiah? He's going to lead us into battle to triumph over all our foes!' Culturally speaking, this is what the Jewish people in Jesus' time were expecting. They thought that God was going to send a warlord to trample over their foes. And yet this is not the kind of Messiah that Jesus came to be.

Jesus came to be a humble Messiah, who would nonetheless deliver them from an enemy greater than Rome. He explains in verse 31:

31 He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things – the Son of Man is an OT title with Messianic overtones – essentially synonymous with ‘Messiah’ⁱⁱⁱ -

- 31 He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.

Jesus is not the kind of Saviour that people expected, the kind of Saviour who takes the lives of others to give his people victory. Jesus is the kind of Saviour who gives HIS OWN life to rescue His people from sin and death. You can see that in the words He says here – ‘he must be KILLED’ – not ‘he must die’ – He will be killed as a sacrifice for sin and then rise again to break the power of death that looms over all people.

And in saying it like this, Jesus was pointing to the fact that He was the Suffering Servant Saviour that God had promised in Isaiah 53. God said in Isaiah 53 that this man would come who would be pierced for our transgressions, by whose wounds we would be healed.

With this announcement in Mark 8, Jesus says ‘That’s Me. I am the Saviour who will give His own life to give you the kind of life that you desperately need.’

See, Jesus knew that Rome was not the worst enemy that people faced. Sin was, separation from God was, because both those things lead to death. And we have that problem too.

And so, it was necessary for the Son of Man to suffer many things and be rejected by the leaders of the people, that He must be killed and on the third day, rise again. He had to die as a sacrifice for sin to set us free from the chains of death, which He Himself did that first Easter.

According to 32 He spoke plainly about this...

He wasn’t going to hide His mission. He wasn’t keeping it secret from His disciples. I mean, He did want to hide His identity as the Saviour, at least until it was clear that He was a suffering Saviour. But as far as the details go of how it would go, Jesus told it exactly as it was.

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

And this introduces into this story an idea that’s very important to this passage. This introduces the idea that there are two ways of looking at things. You can see things from God’s perspective and you can see things from man’s perspective.

To be fair to Peter, it may just be that he was having a hard time wrapping his mind around all this. He’s finally figured out that Jesus is the Messiah, but now Jesus is telling him, not that kind of Messiah. But I suspect that there’s a little self-preservation going on here too, because whatever happens to the Messiah is going to happen to him.

And that's why Jesus says, verse 33: But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

Peter and the others are thinking about this from a purely worldly point of view. To be honest, they probably just wanted someone to deliver them from their enemies and make their lives easier but Jesus knows there's bigger issues at play here. And so, looking at it from God's point of view, He is committed to laying down His life as the sacrifice for our sin to give us eternal life.

So that answers the first question – what kind of Saviour is Jesus? He's a suffering Saviour, who by His suffering saves His people's souls. What about the other question? How do you follow a Saviour like that? You follow a worldly Messiah by riding into battle with him; how do you follow a heavenly one?

Verse 34 - Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

That's how you follow a Saviour like Jesus – you deny yourself, you take up your Cross and you go after Him. If you're going to take hold of Jesus' sacrifice that gives YOU life, then you need to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Him. Let me unpack those one at a time.

If you're going to follow Jesus, then you need to **deny yourself**. You need to stop living for your own desires and purposes and make Jesus' desire and purpose the central goal of your life. An older commentator named Ernest Best puts it like this:

"It is not the denial of something to the self but the denial of the self itself..."^{iv}

Not simply giving up chocolate for Lent, but giving up the idea that we're in control, in favour of letting Jesus take the wheel. Denying self means letting Jesus be in charge.

So if you're going to follow Jesus, you need to deny yourself and **'take up your Cross.'** Now in our culture, 'take up your cross' as a saying has taken on a life of its own. When people say 'take up your cross' today, they usually mean something like - 'embrace some irritation or inconvenience in your life and bear it with stoic perseverance.'^v But that's not what Jesus meant. When He said 'take up your cross,' He was thinking of literal capital punishment. And so when He said 'take up your cross,' He was saying 'consider yourself dead to self, the way a criminal carrying his cross considers himself a dead man walking.' Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously said "The Cross is laid on every Christian... When Christ calls a man He bids him come and die."^{vi} 'Deny your SELF to the point that you DIE to self.'

And then, **'follow Me,'** Jesus says. 'Go where I go, do what I do, act how I act.' Jesus says. 'Stop living for yourself and start living for Me.'

I think we can sum that up very simply: **if you want to follow Jesus, you gotta die to self and live for Him.**

Now I admit that that's a very counter-cultural idea. And I remember wrestling with this passage saying 'that's crazy! Why should I not live to self when all the world around me says that 'self' is the most important thing there is?!' 'Follow your heart!' 'To thine own self be true!' These are the maxims of our culture/this is the wisdom of our culture.

And yet Jesus lays it out plainly in the very next verses.

35 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.

As Peter has already shown us, there are two ways to look at the world – God’s way and our own. And what the world sees as victory, God considers loss. The person spending his life living for self, making a name for himself, chasing the bottom line, fame and fortune and followers – no matter how great a life he accumulates for himself, if it’s not with God, it’s all for nothing. Try to save your life, you’re gonna lose it.

But if you give up your life for the sake of a Saviour who is much more wise and powerful and compassionate than you can possibly imagine – that’s when you save it.

The paradox of that hit me like a ton of bricks. I remember thinking this through in the middle of a message I heard on campus at Laurier: all my best efforts at preserving my life were for not. Unless I was living for Jesus, I would lose it all.

36 What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? (Power and prestige are everything from the world’s point of view and yet if they mean giving up your soul, they’re worthless!).

37 Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? (Is there anything more valuable than that?? Are you really going to give up your eternal soul to pursue temporary things?!)

38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

Jesus tells us here that when we live for ourselves, we may very well do really well for ourselves, gain the whole world but lose it all in the next. When we insist of living for ourselves, our rebellion against God is not covered by Jesus’ death – by His wounds we are not healed – and lose it all in the end. On the flip side though, when we lose our lives for the sake of Jesus, we gain everything in the end.

And so Jesus says to us - ‘stop trying to ‘live your best life’ without the One who gives you life and allow Me to take the wheel and show you what REAL life is like.’

If you’re going to follow a suffering Saviour, you do it by dying to self and living for Him. That’s where the rubber hits the road.

To follow a suffering Saviour, you gotta die to self and live for Him.

And notice, Jesus isn’t asking us to do anything that He hasn’t already done. If you think about it, on the road to the Cross, Jesus denied Himself, literally took up His Cross and died for us. How do we respond to that, knowing that HIS death gives US life? We deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Him. We die to self and live for Him.

Now let’s stop for a minute and think about how we apply this. And let’s use those questions that I started with off the top: what kind of a Saviour is Jesus? And how do you follow a Saviour like Him?

1. What kind of a Saviour is Jesus? A suffering Saviour, a merciful Saviour, a compassionate Saviour. Jesus is the kind of Saviour who laid down His life for us WHILE WE WERE STILL SINNERS! He didn't wait for us to get right with Him; He laid down His life to restore us to God, if only we would trust in Him and live for Him.

The question is 'what kind of Saviour is Jesus for you?' 'Who do YOU say He is?' Maybe a better way to getting at it is 'What are you looking for Jesus to do?' Are you looking to Jesus the way the crowds did – as someone who would make their lives easier and deal with all their problems? Or do you think of Jesus on His own terms, as a Servant Servant and a humble Messiah?

Jesus came to be a suffering saviour, a saviour who would die to save undeserving people, to give us 'strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.' Think of Jesus in that way.

And knowing that, die to self. That's question 2 – How do you follow a Saviour like Him? A. **By dying to self.** This is hard for us because from birth we are trained up to look out for our own well-being. And there's something to that. God doesn't want us to live like dependent mooches, forever lost in a cycle of self-pity and low self-worth. He DOES however want to free us from the self-destructive tendencies that come from our sinful selves and so He says – 'deny your SELF.' 'Die to SELF.'

David Garland gives us a really good sense of what that looks like. In his application commentary, he writes:

Every day we must open ourselves up to God's initiatives and control. Self-denial takes shape in many ways. For some, it may mean leaving job and family as the disciples have done. For the proud, it means renouncing the desire for status and honor. For the greedy, it means renouncing an appetite for wealth. The complacent will have to renounce the love of ease. The faint-hearted will have to abandon the craving for security. The violent will have to repudiate the desire for revenge. On it goes. Individuals know best what hinders them from giving their lives over to God...^{vii}

So here's the question – are there areas in your life where you have put the idol of self above the sovereign mercy of God? If so, nail it to the Cross. Die to self and...

B. **Live for Him.** Go where He goes. Do what He does. Be His presence wherever you go. Consider God's purposes when you are making plans so that you are not just thinking about what you want, but also about how what you're doing will bring glory to Him. Live a life that is worthy of the high calling to which He has called you. If we are literally following Jesus, it means that we would be following Him into the heavenly realms, so that our minds would not be set on earthly things but on things above (Colossians 3:2). Consider the world from God's perspective, not from the world's.

If you're going to follow Jesus, you need to die to self and live for Him.

Benediction:

Caesarius of Arles (500's AD in France): What he commands is not difficult, since he helps us to do what he commands.... Just as we are lost through loving ourselves, so we are found by denying ourselves.

(ACCS on Mark 8:34)

'The good work that He has begun in you He will bring to completion at the day of Christ Jesus.'

(Philippians 1:6).

APPENDIX – On grace and cross-bearing

Given that we just unpacked our statement of faith here, you might be wondering how exactly this lines up with statement 5 of our Statement of faith. Statement 5 says that we are saved by grace alone and yet Jesus says 'if anyone would follow me and so take hold of the benefits of my substitutionary death, He must die to self and life for me.' How do those fit together?

Well, I'd put it like this. I could tell you that I have a signed Wayne Gretzky rookie card at home in my closet; one just like it sold for 3.75 million dollars a couple of years back.

Are you going to believe that? What's your response? Show me.

That's this.

We ARE saved by grace through faith. This is the gift of God, not by works so that anyone can boast.

Titus 3:5 – God saved us not because of the righteous things that we had done but because of His mercy.

Jesus Himself in John 3 – anyone who looks with faith on Him will not perish but have eternal life.

We are not saved by denying ourselves and taking up our Cross; it is only what Jesus did on the Cross that restores us to God. We are saved by believing in Jesus and what He did.

We show that we believe by working out the implications in our lives. We show that we are living for Him by denying our old self-centred way of living. We demonstrate our commitment to living for Him by dying to self and letting Him lead. We stop trying to do the things that we in our limited view think are good and allow Him with His all-knowing and all compassionate wisdom to govern our lives. We believe with our hearts and then show it with our lives.

ⁱBell, James Stuart. *Awakening Faith: Daily Devotions from the Early Church*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ The disciples' words are not recorded in Mark – he simply says that 'they were amazed' – but Matthew 8:27 tells us what they said.

ⁱⁱⁱ13 "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a **son of man**, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.

14 He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. (Dan 7:13-14 NIV).

^{iv} Quoted in David Garland, *Mark* (NIVAC), 333.

^v Mark Strauss and Walter Wessel. From the *Matthew-Mark Revised Expositor's Bible Commentary*, commentary on verse 34. (digital).

^{vi} From Bonhoeffer's *The cost of discipleship*, (p.99), quoted in Garland, 335.

^{vii} Garland, 333.