

Take Up Your Cross

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- [0 : 0 0] We have an abbreviated opportunity to look at the text today, so some of you will be thankful for that, but we'll have a bit of a homily today on Mark 8, 34 to 38.
- This is the very end of our series on the Gospel of Mark for now. We'll pick back up with it in September, and we end chapter 8, which is exactly the halfway point of the Gospel of Mark.
- And last week, Derek looked at the very famous passage where Jesus asks the disciples, who do people say that I am? And Peter said the right thing.
- He said, you are the Christ, which means in Greek, Savior. It means Redeemer, Rescuer. And then the very next thing Jesus said was answering, anticipating their question, how are you going to be the Christ for us?
- How are you going to be the Redeemer? And he said it plainly, Mark tells us. So for the first time in all the Gospel stories, Jesus told them explicitly, I am going to go and die.
- [1 : 0 6] He said, I'm going to go die, and in three days I'm going to rise again. And it said that he had never spoken it so plainly before, and that means that Jesus was talking about, of course, the cross.
- So Jesus was saying, I have a cross that I'm about to go and bear. I'm going to take up my cross. And then the very next thing he says, our passage, is he turns back to them again.
- He summons not only the disciples, but also others that are around. This is one of the rare times that Jesus does this in verse 34. He summons people. He says, come in close, because I've got something that you absolutely need to hear.
- And he says, you also have a cross to bear. So in the previous passage, Jesus said, I have a cross to bear, and now in this passage he says, and you have a cross to bear.
- And he had said, my cross will be the saving cross, the redeeming cross, but you also have to take up a cross. And you see it in verse 34. He says, look, if you want to come after me, if you want to follow me, you have to follow me.
- [2 : 1 1] So if you want to truly follow me, you have to follow me by also going to the cross. That's the line that he uses. He says, take up your cross, bear your cross.
- Now this is not an easy saying at all. It's a very difficult saying, but it's pivotal. It might be the most meaningful command in the New Testament.
- Take up your cross and follow me. It's a call to follow Jesus. It's an invitation. It's weighty. It's hard. It's heavy.
- Let me just do two very brief things. One, what is he saying? What does it mean when Jesus says, take up your cross? And then secondly, how could that be good news for us?
- So first, here's the full command. Verse 34, he says, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. Now it's difficult for us to understand this phrase because we've adopted it into the English language as a normal idiom that we use.

[3 : 17] So most of the time we use bearing the cross as a joke. So you might look to the person to your left or right today, maybe your spouse, maybe your friend, and you might have said to them in the past, being your friend is the cross I have to bear.

Being wives always, you know, wives, never the other way around, but wives say to husbands, being married to you is the cross that I've been given to bear in this life. So sometimes we say it as a joke.

Other times we say it seriously, and when we say it seriously, we're talking about the things in our life that are hard that we can't get out from under. So we might say, you know, this illness, this chronic pain I have is the cross that I have to bear.

Or this terrible work environment that I'm in is the cross I have to bear. I can't get out of my job. I have to stay where I am. It's the cross that I've been given to bear. Now those are all legitimate uses in a way, but because we use this phrase in those ways, it clouds a little bit what Jesus was actually saying.

And if you heard this, if you were a first century Jew, a first century person, period, and you heard somebody say this, you would have known exactly what was being said.

[4 : 33] And James Edwards, one of the great commentators on this gospel, this is how he says it. He says, Jesus chose an image of extreme repugnance. The cross was the instrument of cruelty, pain, dehumanization, and shame.

The cross symbolized hated Roman oppression and was reserved for the lowest social classes. It was the most visible and omnipresent aspect of Rome's terror apparatus.

It was designed to punish criminals and quash slave rebellions. And then he gives us two dates. He says in 71 BC, the Roman general Crassus defeated the slave rebel Spartacus, you know the famous name Spartacus, and crucified Spartacus and 6,000 of his followers on the Appian way.

This was the famous moment that the cross became the most common torture instrument in the ancient world. 6,000 were crucified after this war with Spartacus. And one century later, 71 AD, exactly Nero, would use the cross to crucify and burn thousands of Christians who were falsely accused of setting fire to Rome, the city of Rome.

Now, Jesus is giving an invitation to follow him using the most repugnant, cruel image, perhaps in all of human history. And that means that he's saying, you have to come with me and die.

[6 : 00] That's the basic idea. And the reason he uses the language take up or pick up is because everyone knew in the first century that any time someone was going to be crucified, they had to bear their own cross.

They had to carry the cross beam, just the beam, not the foundation pole. And they would carry it to the place of death. It was humiliation and shame. Usually a parade would follow.

And so when he says, take up your cross and follow me, everybody in the first century hears exactly what he's saying. What are you saying, Jesus? He's saying, I bid thee come and die.

Come and die with me. And so the question is, what exactly is Jesus saying is our cross, the thing that has to die for us to follow him? What is the cross that you have to carry on your back if you're going to follow Jesus?

What is the cost of discipleship? Now, before I say it, he says it very plainly here, one thing is that just in reading this one verse helps us to see the historicity of the Gospel of Mark, the accuracy of the Gospel of Mark.

[7 : 08] This is something Jesus really did say. If you are a late first century disciple like Mark and you're trying to gather people around Jesus, and you're saying, look, this is a great thing to follow, the movement of the way as it was called, the Christian way, you would absolutely never put this line in.

This is a foolish thing to put if your goal is recruitment. And the only reason that you would put it in is because what we're being told actually took place. It happened, that he said to his disciples, you're going to have to die with me.

Now he was talking for sure there about martyrdom in a way, physical death. All 11 of the 12 would go and eventually lose their lives in horrific ways for the sake of the Gospel.

But that is not actually the fundamental thing that Jesus is talking about. What is he saying is the cross that we have to bear. Where is it that we have to die? And here it is. He gives it to us really plainly.

He says, it's your own self. It's you that has to die. So he says, bear your cross, take up your cross, but what's the first command?

[8 : 18] Deny yourself and take up your cross. And so he's saying, the thing that has to die is actually me. It's us. And he's not talking about the physical body there like he would have to undergo.

He's talking first about a part of who we are. He's talking about the depths of our soul. And so this is what he says, he says that there is a part of you. There's a you, follow me here, there's a you that has to deny or kill you.

There is a part of you that does the denying and a part of you that gets denied. And I know that sounds a bit too philosophical, but actually I think all of us know that there's the truth in it.

One of the best illustrations for this is our own Edinburgh-born author, Robert Louis Stevenson, who wrote the very important book, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

And in that book, he was trying to capture the problem that we have, that deep within every single one of us, there are two selves. He captured it, there's Dr. Jekyll, the reasonable scientist, and there's Mr. Hyde, the man who is out of control.

[9 : 32] And Jesus is saying that there is a part of you. There's a Dr. Jekyll that has to actually deny or kill or crucify Mr. Hyde, the Mr. Hyde that's deep down within every one of us.

Now why? Because Jesus is saying, when you come and follow me, you become a new self, a new person. By the Holy Spirit, Jesus makes you brand new.

And actually the idea underneath the idea in this command is that you become the true self when you follow him. You become actually the real you.

And so whenever you follow Jesus and you become the real you, you experience the Holy Spirit's power in your life, there is a self, a part of you, that has to be denied, that has to be crucified ultimately.

That means that ultimately Jesus is saying, deep down in us, for those of us who follow Jesus, we are not consistent. We're inconsistent. We have a war going on in the pit of our soul.

[10 : 29] And this is what he means. Paul calls it the same thing, deny yourself. Paul calls this the problem of the love of self. And this is how we might describe it. It's the part of us that wants to live entirely for our own pleasures.

It's the part of us that says, I am not in this life to be opposed. You know, I don't exist. I don't exist to be anything but comfortable. I don't exist to find opposition in this life by following Jesus Christ.

That's the part of us he's talking about. It's that every one of us has a deep desire to live as our own master, according to our base desires, as we call them, to pursue the fulfillment of our cravings and to be personally free.

And these are the types of things that we seek in our freedom. We seek this through sex, ambition, power, entertainment, wealth, status, comfort, and prestige.

And we yield these domains to our own mastery. We use them to become the comfortable self that we've always wanted to be. And Jesus is saying, that's what has to be crucified.

[11 : 37] That's what has to be denied. Augustine said it like this, the great pastor of Hippo in North Africa. He said that the love of self, self is a desire to only do one's own will.

That's what has to be crucified. Now that means that Jesus is saying, and we'll move on to the final point and be done. I know it's warm. We'll move on. But Jesus is saying this to us, if you follow Jesus by the power of the spirit, he can make you into the true self, the true you.

He actually makes us authentically and fully human. He brings us to become the people we were always meant to be from the Garden of Eden.

And that means there really is an authentic self. People talk today about authentic self, finding your authentic self. And to do that, they say you've got to reach in, you've got to search your feelings, and you've got to perform that self outward so the world can see.

And Jesus is saying that is actually the self that has to be crucified. And the self that you really need has to be gifted to you from the outside.

[12 : 44] Your true self is a gift, and it comes by the Holy Spirit through grace in following Jesus Christ. And so here's the cost of discipleship. The cost is when your deep desires, that self that you were born with, says, I want to be safe, secure, wealthy, comfortable at all costs, and these are my ultimate gods.

Your true you, the you that Jesus gives you. And the new birth has to say your days are numbered to that old self. You're not going to last forever.

I know that these are temporary desires. You have to die. That's what Jesus is saying. And secondly, finally, you might say, why in the world would I want that?

So why, you know, I've got Netflix. I've got food aplenty. I've got a good paying job, perhaps. I live in an age where I can fulfill nearly every desire that I choose, nearly.

Why would I choose to die to that person and live to Christ? Now, I don't have time to give you all the reasons, so I'm just going to let me just give you one.

[13 : 53] This command, everyone, everyone of us knows this command stands against the most basic instinct of modern humanity for 250 years. We have been taught told we've appropriated the idea that we exist for the pursuit of happiness.

Thomas Jefferson wrote it right into the Declaration of Independence, but he got it from an Englishman, John Locke. So it was here first, and then America adopted it, but it was in France too, everywhere, the entire West, the pursuit of happiness.

And happiness is a chemical reaction that happens in your brain. And sadness is a chemical reaction that happens in your brain.

And winning life means to have more of the good chemical reactions and less of the bad chemical reactions. And if you can have more of the good and less of the bad, then ultimately you've done your best.

You've lived your best life now. And how do you do that? You chase sex, entertainment, ambition, status, curating a novel identity, performances of all kind, and you hope that it will happen for you and it will not work.

[14 : 57] That's the one message here. It won't work. And here's why, and we all know this. You don't even have to turn to the Bible to know this. Here's why it won't work, because we all have had the experience that sometimes doing good, sometimes doing the most good actually brings you the most pain.

Sometimes doing what's absolutely best, what's truly good, is standing up and suffering the most. Meaning, you can do the most good and be incredibly sad and have joy in the midst of it.

You see, what people are really looking for is joy, not happiness. And sometimes joy comes, joy does come through choosing what's true, good, and beautiful instead of what makes you happy temporarily.

And John Stott and our bulletin, the line in our bulletin today, deny your old self, follow Jesus, and you can become your true self. In other words, he's saying this is the only actual path to joy.

You won't be satisfied if you do it any other way. And some of you have done it. You've lived that life and you've found out that happiness doesn't work. Let me close then with just two issues that Jesus brings up in a line or two and will be done.

[16:16] They're in verse 36 and 38. Jesus ends this halfway point of the Gospel of Mark with the two great temptations that will always keep coming at us to live the old self.

And here they are. He says in verse 36, what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? Now, what is he saying in their modern translation? What does it profit a man or a woman or a boy or a girl to gain the whole world and lose his soul?

What is he saying? He's saying beware the power of the allure of possessions. What does it profit you to gain all the stuff?

So he's saying if you're eight years old today, a kid in art here, if you're a child here, you're eight years old, you know this allure already, this allure for stuff. If you're 18, you know this allure for stuff.

If you're 80, I bet that you're still fighting the temptation of the allure of stuff. And Jesus says it doesn't gain you anything.

[17:16] You've got to say to that old self, you're dead. That my heart will always be restless until it finds rest in Jesus, not in stuff.

Now, the second one he gives us in the last one, verse 38, he says in verse 38, whoever is ashamed of me in my words and this adulterous and sinful generation of him, I, the Son of man will be ashamed.

Now, translation to modern words, he's saying beware of the temptation in the power of approval.

He says if you're ashamed of me in this life, then the Son of man will be ashamed of you in the next. And he's saying beware, whether you're eight, 18 or 80, we are always, the old self is always wanting to be driven and drawn into the power of approval.

The praise of people all around us in every venue. And Jesus is saying this, if you want security, ultimate security, Jesus Christ is the only path.

[18:18] And if you want approval, in Jesus Christ, God the Father says you are my son and my daughter no matter what you've done and what you might do.

And if you want happiness, Jesus says how about eternal joy? And so that means, here's the last word, Jesus says I have a cross to bear, you have a cross to bear, truly the last word.

Don't think today that the message is this, if you deny yourself, if you put away those temptations and that old self, then Jesus's cross will be saving to you.

And you see what came first here? Jesus said I have a cross to bear and then you have a cross to bear. And that means that you can only bear your cross, you can only deny yourself, you only have the power to do that because Jesus Christ cross has already borne you.

That means, as JC Ryle put it, when you hear the command, deny yourself, it seems so hard. What seems so hard, grace has already made easy. The cross has already done the work.

[19 : 29] And so Jesus can say to you today, my yoke is easy, my burden is light. Let's pray together. Father, give us the grace to be able to deny the self that is not true, that is not good, that is not beautiful, the self that chases after the goods of this world as if they are gods.

So help us, O Lord, to be forever changed by the power of the cross. And we ask this in Christ's name. Amen.