The Servant’s Cost Of Discipleship
Mark 8:34-38

Introduction

In Mark 8 we have seen the provision of the Servant in feeding the multitudes (vv.1-10). We have seen the provocation of the Servant by the religious leaders for a miraculous sign (vv. 11-13). We saw the power of the Servant as Jesus heals the blind man at Bethsaida (vv.22-26). We witnessed the prompting of the Servant as Jesus asks His disciples the question of His identity (vv.27-30). Now comes the prediction of the Servant; Jesus predicts His rejection, death, and resurrection (vv.31-38). The Lord Jesus calls the crowd and challenges them with both a requirement (v.34) and a reward (vv.35-38). Our passage is about profit and loss. In one sense it is possible to make a huge success from life and in another sense to be living a life not worth living!

What is your most important asset? What is your greatest treasure? When you answered that question did you think about your soul? Did you think about your eternal future?

The Principle Of The Cross (v.34)

Mark 8:34 (NKJV) 34When He had called the people to Himself, with His disciples also, He said to them, “Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.

In one short and powerful sentence Mark incorporates the call of discipleship and the cost of discipleship.

How are we to read the words of Jesus?

Note: Jesus calls the people and the disciples. Discipleship is for everyone. It is not the exclusive domain of an elite class of Christians. Discipleship is not the Special Forces of Christianity. Is it possible to be a Christian and not be disciple? Here Jesus spells out the crucial motive for following Him; the dare of risking everything on the claims of Christ. Jesus invites them to come after Himself. The parallel is staggering. Jesus spells out what He expects from His disciples. Jesus expects from us what the Father expects from the Son.

And what is the problem? Not all disciples stay followers as Peter has just shown! Jesus says whoever desires to come after Me. Matthew includes; “If anybody wants to be my follower, that person must turn away from oneself.” Here Mark uses the term deny oneself. Jesus lays down three conditions for true discipleship: (1) We must surrender ourselves completely to Him—that’s right—denying oneself is most ineffective unless one is willing to embrace a powerful substitute. (2) We must identify with Jesus in His suffering and death; and (3) We must follow Him with both an attitude of obedience and actual obedience. The obedience we encounter may take us on a journey we would not necessarily chose for ourselves.
The Servant’s Cost Of Discipleship
Mark 8:34-38

“To deny oneself is not to do without something or even many things. It is not asceticism, not self-rejection or self-hatred, nor is it even the disowning of particular sins. It is to renounce the self as the dominant element in life. It is to replace the self with God-in-Christ as the object of affections. It is to place the divine will before self-will”(New American Commentary: Mark).

Self-denial is not giving up something or someone. . .though Jesus may ask us to do just that. Some religious traditions practice a sort of giving up something in order to make God happy. But Jesus means something far different. Jesus is asking His followers to give up their best hopes and desires for themselves.

Jesus is asking them to disown all rights and claims to self. This is a decisive act of disowning of rights and claims. It is in effect a transfer of Lordship that Jesus is looking for. People generally value their rights. . .the right to determine their own choices. . .Jesus is in effect asking them to disavow all claims. . .The word deny is the same word used to describe Peter’s denial of the Lord. . .Peter was disavowing any knowledge of Jesus and Peter would later curse and swear an oath in order to emphasize that denial. When we deny ourselves we come under New Management. To deny oneself is to say “no” to self and “yes” to Jesus.


What did Jesus mean when He said; “and take up his cross”?

Submission and Surrender

In the world of Jesus the man who took up his cross was on the way to a painful, personal, death. No one survived the cross. At the end of the day or in just a few days for the remarkably strong, death was inevitable. No one can place themselves on a cross. It requires the cooperation of a man or men who tie the ropes and drive the nails through flesh. The cross kills.

In the ancient world to take up one’s cross was an expression to expect extraordinary suffering. I think it is interesting the text reads “take” not “make” your own cross. God will provide the cross.

Charles Spurgeon preached; “Believer, Christ Jesus presents you with your crosses, and they are no trivial gifts.”

The idea of taking up one’s cross adds to the idea of self-renunciation. By taking up the cross; it incorporates at least two ideas: (1) You go public and (2) You go to death with self-renunciation. There is the temptation that this is a private thing, a personal thing--an inward thing. But cross-bearing is a public thing. . .the person who took up their cross began a march that could only lead to death. When Jesus invites you to come he bids you come and die. But behind this bidding
The Servant’s Cost Of Discipleship
Mark 8:34-38

and underneath this bidding is something more. . .It is the call to believe that Jesus is more real than death.

How can we miss the obvious connection? In the previous verses only the most dull person can escape the fact that Jesus must suffer rejection, he must suffer ridicule, humiliation and a cross. A criminal’s cross. A thing of scorn and shame--a curse in the biggest sense of the word. But can we read these words and simply deny the fact that the Scriptures declare that is not only Jesus who must suffer. . .but it includes Christ’s followers.

Jesus says “Follow me”. . .“Follow me”. . .Jesus says live a life of following after Me. The two prior commands. . .self-renunciation and cross bearing. . .are only remotely possible in light of this command. . .“follow me”. This means believe in Him but it is also the decision that empowers the believer to do the first two commands. We quite simply cannot deny ourselves and we won’t pick up the instrument of our own death unless we are willing to follow Him. Jesus can empower a person to turn their backs on themselves and be willing to die. We follow Jesus by seeking to take His teachings seriously. We might try to explain the text in some other way--but cannot if we include the context. But of course we must be careful. Jesus is the Lord. When He calls people He calls them practically, personally, it is an individual call. But always the elements of true discipleship must include these three elements.

The person who would turn from self must learn to unlearn our propensity to follow man made teachings. The answer Jesus gives is to pry oneself from oneself, away from oneself. Only then will you obey Jesus. When Jesus says “follow Me” it is certain He means follow Me in obedience to the Father. Paul calls salvation the obedience of faith (Rom.1:5; 16:26). Peter later describes God’s sovereign saving work in a life as the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood” (1 Peter 1:2).

Perhaps one of the great difficulties facing the disciple of Jesus today are the voices calling the disciple to a life of self-indulgence and self-satisfaction and self fulfillment. In the first century the threat was Gnosticism; the belief that secret knowledge was necessary to understand God and have a right relationship with God. In the second century the challenge was paganism; how much of the beliefs and rituals, the cultural and religious practices of the pagan past should the Christian embrace? In the third century the Christians had to face the challenge of a variety of competing claims to the hearts and minds of men and women. Fast forward to the 19th century and rationalism assaulted the educational and seminary establishments. People questioned the authority and accuracy of the Scripture. In the 20th century the rise of eastern mysticism coupled with a Church that largely rejected the supernatural, saw millions embracing various aspects of the Charismatic Movement. A genuine outpouring of the Holy Spirit saw millions of individuals come to the Lord Jesus Christ. Many who had viewed Christianity as stale or perhaps hollow or perhaps powerless; experienced a fresh outpouring of God’s Holy Spirit. In the middle of this movement, some groups began to experience and then teach a very strange and in many cases a perverted and distorted gospel.
The Servant’s Cost Of Discipleship
Mark 8:34-38

Many today abandon the Biblical Gospel for a gospel of self; a gospel of power politics, power evangelism, power church growth, a god of signs and wonders, a god who sees self-renunciation and self-sacrifice and self-satisfaction as a relic of primitive christianity.

Gone for the most part is the preaching that you must deny yourself. Gone for the most part is the preaching of the Cross. Gone for the most part is following Jesus for the Gospel’s sake. Bob Dylan sang; “Do you ever wonder, just what God desires? Do you think He’s just an errand boy to satisfy your wandering desires? When you gonna wake up? When you gonna wake up? When you gonna wake up. . .and strengthen the things that remain?

There is a reason the call to prosperity, ease and comfort is so strong. It appeals to self. But what if God’s goal is to make us holy, righteous, and cultivate the character of Christ. I am not talking about outward, legalistic piety, but a transformation inside of the heart that makes life in Christ like Christ. What if God’s goal is to make us holy and productive for His kingdom and taking up our cross and following Jesus are the true marks of true discipleship?

The Paradox Of Self Sacrifice (vv.35-37)

Mark 8:35 (NKJV) 35For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it.

The disciple faces the temptation to save one’s life. What does that mean? It might mean to live in comfort rather than discomfort. Since Jesus calls us to live lives of self-denial, surrender, possible suffering, and sacrifice; it might mean to forsake certain personal comforts, enjoyments, earthly ties, personal ambitions, material riches, even life itself.

The Lord Jesus declares the greatest gain is the greatest loss!
The Lord Jesus declares the greatest loss is the greatest gain!

Winners are losers and losers are winners! What in the world does Jesus mean? The paradox of winning and losing is really quite simple. Jesus is saying that whoever lives. . .only for self, to save self, to save his own life, whoever lives and puts luxury, ease, comfort, whoever seeks what’s best for self, acceptance by the world; avoiding pain and avoiding suffering; will in effect lose his opportunity for eternal life. But whoever is willing to give up his earthly, worldly life, to suffer and if necessary die for Jesus, will find eternal life. Every person has a choice. You can go for it now. . .and lose it forever. . .or you can forsake it now. . .and gain it forever.

In the popular culture people speak of spiritual disciplines or being spiritual. Popular spiritual disciplines include self-improvement, self-realization--the fulfillment of one’s abilities and potentials; self-sufficiency--and spiritual disciplines based on one’s work and personal dedication. Contrast that with biblical spiritual disciplines; spiritual maturity, the realization of the fruit of the Spirit and the character of Christ in the life of the believer. Dependence on God
The Servant’s Cost Of Discipleship
Mark 8:34-38

rather than dependence of self. For the Christian--spiritual discipline is based on the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. John Ortberg in his book The Life You’ve Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People writes; “A disciplined person is someone who can do the right thing at the right time in the right way with the right spirit”.

The Lord Jesus contrasts the person who seeks to save their life with the one who loses their life for Christ’s sake and the gospels’s sake. We think of people with fabulous talent to sing. Think of all the vocalists and artists and musicians who started off life in the their small church or church choir.

36For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?

What a thought provoking question!

A few men in history have come close to gaining the whole world. Alexander the Great accumulated vast wealth in a short time. The Pharaoh’s of Egypt and the rulers of Rome embraced vast treasures. But what about the opportunity to live your life for Jesus? What is your life truly worth? Will you spend your life for Jesus or will you spend your life for self? Does the Bible despise profit? There is a legitimate profit and a legitimate gain! Believers are encouraged to make a living and provide for their family! If you don’t work--don’t expect to eat (2 Thess. 3:10). Paul told Timothy-- “If any provide not for his own, and especially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel” (1 Tim.5:8). But there is a profit--a gain--that has little value. In Proverbs we read “Treasures of wickedness profit nothing” (Proverbs 10:2). “Riches profit not in the day of wrath” (Proverbs 11:4).

One hundred and eighty years after the death of Charlemagne, in about 1000; officials of the Emperor Otho opened the great king’s tomb. They found an amazing sight among the treasures. Charlemagne’s skeleton was propped on his throne; his boney skull still wore his gold crown. On his lap was a copy of the gospels and his boney finger placed on the verse we are reading now; “what good is it for a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?”

37Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?

What a heart searching question!

How many Grammy Awards would you have to receive in exchange for your soul? In order to answer the question Jesus raises--we must consider the content of the question! What will a man give. . .the implication is that we have certain things. What is it exactly that you possess? Your will? Your life? Your goods? What is it that you have? Can your wealth or position or power secure your soul’s eternal position?

“Riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven” (Proverbs 23:5). “Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be,
The Servant’s Cost Of Discipleship
Mark 8:34-38

which thou hast provided?” (Luke 12:20). What value does Jesus place on the human soul? Isn’t it odd that poverty cannot condemn the soul! “The redemption of their soul is precious” (Psalm 49:8). “Redeemed. . .with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:18-19).

Jesus identified the false disciple as the one who is unwilling to let go of his grip on this world. The true disciple is willing to pay whatever price faithfulness requires. Whatever the personal cross bearing may entail it requires the willingness to abandon safety, security, personal resources, health, friends, job, even life.

The Promise Of His Coming (v.38)

38 For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.”

Parousia is the noun form of the Greek word “to come” and here “He comes”. The angels are the instruments of his judgment and service when the Son of Man returns to the earth. In Matthew’s Gospel we read that Jesus will recompense each man according to his deeds (Matt. 16:27). The Lord Jesus will review the life of each person who has ever lived. For the Christian the review will be one of reward. For the unbeliever it will be a review of judgment and punishment. The Lord Jesus knew that even as he spoke to the people and His disciples some would be taken aback--some would stumble and balk at fear!

Look closely at the expression “ashamed of Me” and “My words”. The world in which Jesus lived was described as sinful and adulterous. What kind of fear? The fear of being poor. The fear of being hurt. The fear of pain. The fear of shame. Disciples of Jesus might face reproach. What is the incentive Jesus offers? Jesus reminds them of a day when He will come in great power and great glory. The Lord Jesus will return to the earth! Jesus will not come in humility but in glory. Jesus comes in the glory of His Father and the holy angels. What does that mean? It means with all the pomp and majesty of God. The glory of God the Father is a single phrase that incorporates the sum and substance of the attributes of God.

Are you willing to confess Jesus to a godless and wicked generation?
What are you willing to gain and what are you willing to lose?
The world says you are a fool to give up your life for a dead Jew! You are a fool to preach a message of forgiveness of sin and hope in Christ!

Conclusion

The Lord Jesus has asked you a thought provoking question; and a heart-searching question.
The Servant’s Cost Of Discipleship
Mark 8:34-38

How will you answer His questions? You might think; “I don’t have to reply”. You may not reply today. You may not reply tomorrow. But one day you must give reply.

“For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?”

You know the answer. How much did you make? How much did you take? How much did it cost? How much did it break? What will you give in exchange for your soul?

Will you cast your lot with the “adulterous and sinful generation”? The Bible says, “All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof” (1 John 2:16-7).

I heard the story of a plantation slave in the old south who was always happy and singing. No matter what happened to him, his joy was always abounding. One day his master asked him, “what have you got that makes you so happy?” The slave replied, “I love the Lord Jesus Christ. He has forgiven my sin and put a song in my heart.” “Well how did you get what you have?” His master asked. “You go and put on your Sunday best suit and you come down here and work with me in the mud; and you can have it.” “I would never do that!” the owner responded with a great deal of indignation! And the man rode off disgusted. Some weeks later he came back and asked the same question--and got the same reply. A few weeks later the master came a third time and said, “Be straight with me. What do I have to do to have what you have.” “Just what I told you the other times” came the answer. In desperation the slave owner said, “I’ll do it.” “Now you don’t have to do it.” The slave said, “You only had to be willing to do it.”

You may never experience a physical cross. Your flesh may never be stripped, you may never have everything taken from you. But you must be willing.

The servant’s cost of discipleship is for many a price to high to pay. The cost of discipleship is the cost of a cross. Jesus never asked anyone to wear a cross--but rather to bear a cross. The cross is an invitation. An invitation to die. With each cross comes the certainty of death. And with each death comes the certainty of a resurrection.

Discipleship is a matter of profit and loss. Discipleship is a question of whether or not you will waste your life or invest your life. Losers are keepers. Keepers are weepers.