**THE WAY OF THE CROSS**

***Mark 8:31-38***

***“Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’” (34)***

Let’s go back to last week’s passage. In that bit of scripture Jesus again reveals his deity by healing a blind man. Then Jesus takes his disciples to Caesarea Philippi and asks them two important questions. One, “Who do people say I am?” and most importantly, “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Messiah”. His answer also reflected that of the other disciples. There answer to Jesus’ question was a matter of life and death. But it was also a call of confession of who the Lord of their life was. Therefore, our confession of faith in Christ is more than just a matter of entering Heaven or Hell, but it is also a call to discipleship. In today’s passage, we will see Jesus teach the core of the gospel message and what it means to be his disciple. May the Spirit remind us of the gospel truth and learn the way of the cross.

1. **The core of the gospel truth (31-33)**

Let’s begin this passage by looking at verse 31, ***“He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.”*** After Peter’s confession, Jesus began to teach his disciples the gospel truth. This will be the first of three clear teachings of the gospel message—Mark 9:31 and Mark 10:33-34 are the other teachings. What was Jesus teaching about the gospel truth? There are three certain facts that Jesus made clear about his mission as the Messiah. One is that he is going to suffer and be rejected by the religious leaders. Second is that he is going to die. Third is that he will rise from the dead. Not at some uncertain time in the future, but precisely in three days, his suffering, death and resurrection is appointed.

What is not mentioned in each of those texts is why. Mark gives us the clearest statement of that after the three predictions. In Mark 10:45 Jesus says, *“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* This is the great central fact of history and of our lives. Jesus, the Son of Man, the exalted human, divine God-man, came—was sent by God the Father—to give his life as a ransom for many.

Another reason why Jesus went the way of the cross is stated in Galatians 3:13, *“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.”* The cross saved us from the curse of the Law of sin and death. Jesus became the curse for us. In which, he paid for our ransom. Without Christ’s suffering and death on the cross, we would still be trapped in our sin.

Our sin has kidnapped us and put us in a prison of our own making. Separating us far from God, and putting us in chains of iniquity, under God’s holy wrath, and powerless to free ourselves. And worse yet, we are held hostage to Satan and his evil forces of sin and self.

One of the images the Bible uses for our liberation is ransom. In the Old Testament term, ransom was the price paid for the freedom of a slave (Lev 19:20) or a heavy charge laid on a person as a substitute for his own life (Ex 21:20). A ransom had to be paid for one’s freedom and life. But Psalm 49:7-8 says, “*No one can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for them—the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough—”* In other words, no mere man can ransom another man’s soul. And we can’t even ransom our own because in this world, there is no enough money to pay back our immeasurable amount of the ransom. Then look at verse 15 of Psalm 49: “*But God will redeem me from the realm of the dead; he will surely take me to himself.*” Man can’t save himself. Only God can, and He will.

God chose to pay each of our ransom by himself. But it would be so costly. He sent his one and only Son as a ransom for us. Jesus came to this world in his obedience to the Father’s will. Now he would suffer and die on the cross. There is no other way except the way of the cross to pay the ransom for sinners, ultimately saving us from sin and death. Therefore Jesus used the strong word, **“must”** twice in verse 31: ***“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected; he must be killed.”*** The way of the cross is the inevitable way of the Messiah for ultimate victory and glory. Now that he taught the way of the Messiah, he wants to teach the way of his disciples. Jesus teaches that the way of the cross is also the unavoidable way of his followers. Jesus went the way of the cross as an example for his people to follow. For those that follow Jesus, the way of the cross is the way of freedom, meaning in life and glory. Let’s learn the principles of being a disciple of Jesus.

1. **The way of the cross (34-38)**

After teaching the gospel truth about his life and mission, Jesus then calls to the crowd and his disciples and says, ***“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (34)*** Jesus is now talking about the principles of discipleship. But before I get into the principles of discipleship, I want you to briefly think about the word of discipleship. What comes to mind when you hear that word—discipleship? While a disciple is a follower of Jesus, discipleship is the process by which the disciple grows in the Lord Jesus Christ. To follow and grow in Jesus, he teaches his disciples that there are essential principles to keep on. In teaching the discipleship, Jesus also uses the strong word, **“must.”**

**The first principle of discipleship is, we must deny ourselves.** What does it mean to deny ourselves? The word "deny" means to “to refuse oneself or to give up oneself.” Denying one-self means that we repudiate our right to ourselves, our right to run our own lives. It is to disavow any connection with our old-self. We are to deny that we own ourselves. We do not have the final right to decide what we are going to do, or where we are going to go. It strikes right at the heart of our very existence, because the one thing that we, as human beings, value and covet and protect above anything else is the right to make ultimate decisions for ourselves, to live for ourselves and to protect our very nature by ourselves. You can say it is the idol of self whether it is self-gratification, self-preservation or self-centeredness. We refuse to be under anything or anybody, but reserve the right to make the final decisions and act out our lives. This is what Jesus is talking about. He is not talking about giving up this or that, but that may be part of our choice to deny our old-self, but it’s really about giving up and submitting ourselves to God. Apostle Paul wrote the same thing that Jesus spoke in First Corinthians: *“You are not your own;**you were bought at a price.”* (1Co 6:19b-20a). If you are going to follow Jesus, you no longer own yourself. He has ultimate rights; he has Lordship of your life. So you no longer belong to yourself; he must make those final decisions when the great issues of your life hang in the balance. This is what Jesus means by, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself"—deny our self-trust, deny our self-sufficiency, deny our feeling that we are able to handle life by ourselves and run everything to suit ourselves. It is to give ourselves over to our King and Lord.

I would like to quote from a prominent Christian business man who once wrote, *“It is my pride that makes me independent of God. It's appealing to me to feel that I am the master of my fate, that I run my own life, call my own shots, go it alone. But, that feeling is my basic dishonesty. I can't go it alone…and I can't ultimately rely on myself. I'm dependent on God for my very next breath. It is dishonest of me to pretend that I'm anything but a man—small, weak, and limited. So, living independent of God is self-delusion. It is not just a matter of pride being an unfortunate little trait, and humility being an attractive little virtue; it's my inner psychological integrity that's at stake. When I am conceited, I am lying to myself about what I am. I am pretending to be God, and not man. My pride is the idolatrous worship of myself. And that is the national religion of Hell!”* I think this is a very eloquent explanation of what Jesus means when he says, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves. Let him give up his rights to run his life, let him submit himself to Jesus’ leadership, to his Lordship.” And this is fundamental to all discipleship. There can be no discipleship apart from it. That is why if we are Jesus’ disciples we must first give up ourselves and submit to our Lord, Jesus. May the Spirit guide us to accept this premise and live for Jesus as King and Lord over our lives.

**The second principle of discipleship is, we must take up our cross.** Let’s remember that in verse 31 Jesus taught his disciples the gospel truth. And at the heart of the gospel is the cross. Jesus’ cross was to save sinners from sin and death. The cross included rejection, shame, suffering and death. Likewise, Jesus’ disciples are learners and followers of Jesus. So, we too have a cross to bear and take up. This too is a part of discipleship. So, what is the cross we must take up? One type of cross is the cross of mission. After Jesus’ crucifixion and death on the cross and before his ascension, he gave his disciples two clear instructions, preaching the gospel and raising disciples: *“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.” And, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you…*” *(Mk 16:15, Mt 28:19-20a).* The cross of mission restored man’s mission on earth. The cross gives meaning to a man or woman’s life. To carry out this Great Commission, each Christian may have specific mission from God but in a broader sense, we all have the same cross to carry. May the Lord guide you to receive the meaning in your life through the cross! Another type of cross is the cross of shame, rejection, self-denial, and possibly death. This type of cross is the outcome of one’s life as a follower of Jesus and to serve God-given mission. Not everything comes easy. And certainly, not everything in our Christian walk is sunshine and roses. When we take up our cross and are not ashamed of it, we bear its shame, people’s contempt and rejection, and we most certainly should bear its imagery of death. I think Galatians 2:20 sums up what I mean most, *“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”* Therefore, taking the cross of death leads to life and freedom. May the Spirit guide us not to be afraid of taking up our cross as a disciple of Jesus.

**Third principle of discipleship is, we must follow Jesus.** A disciple is a learner and a follower. And who better to follow and learn from than Jesus, God Himself? So, when Jesus said, you must follow me, it means to follow in his character and obedience to God’s will. It means choosing to do or say what Jesus commands us to do or say, and what he himself did, and looking to him for the power to carry it through. They key quality of being a follower of Jesus is obeying Jesus. And that is why self-denial is key. And this is what being a disciple is all about. The Christian life is following Jesus, doing what he says—like *“Love your enemy,”* (Mt 5:44). *“Pray for those who persecute you,”* (Mt 5:44). *“Forgive other people when they sin against you,”* (Mt 6:14-15). *“Carry each other’s burdens”* (Gal 6:2). *“Freely you have received; freely give.”* (Mt 10:8). Those are not merely wise and helpful words; they represent a way of life our Lord is setting out before us, to which we are expected to conform in the moment when we least feel like it. ***“Follow me”*** means obeying these and all the many, many other exhortations that come from the word of God.

In the original Greek, these steps are stated in the present, continuous tense. That means, "Keep on denying yourself, keep on taking up your cross, keep on following me." This is not the decision of a moment, but a program for a lifetime, to be repeated again and again, whenever we fall into circumstances which make these choices necessary. This is what it means to be a disciple. Discipleship is a life-long process of denying your right to yourself, and taking up the cross, and then following him, doing what he says to do and looking to him for that power.

Jesus showed us how to deny ourselves by take up his cross, and obey God’s will. Jesus prayed at Gethsemane until he denied his human desire and submitted himself to the Father’s will. We have a perfect example. Whenever we fail, we can rise again by fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of the way of the cross. Apostle Paul followed Jesus by submitting himself to God. So he could say, *“I die every day...”* (1Co 15:31a). Even Apostle Peter at the beginning did not understand nor accept the way of the cross; however, when he submitted himself to God, could overcome his own earthly desire and hope and live for Christ. When he submitted to God’s will, he could say, *“Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God* (1Pe 4:1, 2)*.”* May we make a decision to give up ourselves and follow Jesus.

Look at verses 35-37. ***“For whoever wants to save their life will lose it but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?  Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”*** In these three verses, Jesus explains why we should be disciples of Jesus. Everyone wants to save their life. No one wants to lose their life. The question is how to save one’s life. Basically, anyone who tries to save their life for their own glory and benefit will lose it. But if we lose our lives for Jesus and the gospel we will be saved. Jesus promises that when we deny our old-self, we find true self in God and have freedom and joy from God. True happiness comes when man loses his selfishness and lives for Jesus and the gospel.

Jesus ends his teaching with a promise of his glorious Second Coming. Jesus, himself looked toward the glory the Father would give him. Indeed, Jesus became King of kings and Lord of lords through his humble obedience to the point of death. Now Jesus encourages all his followers to follow him boldly, for there is eternal reward. He will give the crown of life to all who faithfully denied themselves, took up their crosses, and followed him. This generation, like all others, is adulterous and sinful. Many Hollywood and sports stars and politicians; even though they have beauty and power, are bound by their adulterous and sinful hearts. We should be thankful for the grace of God who called us out of darkness into His wonderful light. We must be grateful for the grace that God has bestowed upon us to serve His will. May we say Yes, Lord and be grateful to deny old selves and take up our crosses and follow Jesus. May we look to the heavenly glory so that we may grow in the image of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now we are not all good disciples at all times; there is much of failure. And our Lord has made provision for failure in our lives. But he is talking about the heart: What is your aim? What do you really want of your life? Do you want to live it for yourself, or do you want to live it for him? That is really the question. C. S. Lewis gathers all this up very well in these words from *Mere Christianity:* *“God is going to invade this earth in force. But what is the good of saying you are on His side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream, and something else -- something it never entered your head to conceive -- comes crashing in; something so beautiful to some of us, and so terrible to others, that none of us will have any choice left? For this time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use saying you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing; it will be the time when we discover which side we have really chosen, whether we realized it before or not. Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back, to give us that chance. It will not last forever. We must take it or leave it.”*

Through this passage, I’m very much reminded that my call to discipleship is not a call to a burdensome life or a life that is devoid of my personality or individuality. Actually, discipleship is a call to make me who I am originally created to be and supposed to be. However, that life requires me to give up myself to God. I am to deny my pride and self-reliance. I am to deny my self-preservation and selfish love of myself. That’s why before I can follow Jesus, I must give up myself, so I can give myself to Jesus. I am reminded that following Jesus is actually freedom for my soul. When I follow Jesus, the outcome is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. On the other hand, following my pride and the world results in bondage and slavery to sin and Satan. I have often struggled with the cross. I have often feared the suffering that goes along with it. But through this passage, I’m reminded that my struggle is with myself and giving that up first. I am truly my own worst enemy. In order to truly follow Jesus, I must submit myself to the Lord, who is the Lord of the Way and the Life.

Through this passage, we learned that Jesus went the way of the cross to pay the price for sinners to have life. Christ’s life laid the foundation and blueprint for his followers. And when his followers live by the principles of the cross, they can have freedom from sin, meaning in life and glory. May the Spirit guide us to follow the way of the cross by faith.