

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 11th July 2021 **Andy Banks**
Mark 8:31 – 9:1 **Jesus' Call: Take Up Your Cross**

We're continuing our series in Mark's Gospel, reading today from Mark 8:31 – 9:1. Having focused a lot over the last couple of talks on our first key question for this series, "Who do you say Jesus is?", we now turn to the question that flows from that: "What difference does who he is make to your life, today?"

[Read Mark 8:31 – 9:1]

8:31 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. 32 He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

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 concerns of God, but merely human concerns.'

34 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. 35 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. 36 What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? 37 Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? 38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.'

9:1 And he said to them, 'Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.'

[Debs to share with the children]

[Song]

Children, I'm going to talk a bit more to the adults for a few minutes now, so feel free to continue decorating your crosses, or, if you finish that to do some of the other activities we sent out to you. But you can also listen in if you wish.

[Pray]

One phrase I have heard from Christians a number of times in recent years is "I can't ask someone to deny who they are." Invariably, the motive is pastoral sympathy for someone's struggles, and is generally given as the justification for re-thinking how we interpret the Bible, because the Church's traditional teachings are perceived as crushing to a particular person's identity. Of course, where there is a solid biblical basis for challenging the Church's traditional teachings, such as permitting women to preach, for instance, then I believe we should challenge it. Feel free to ask me for more detail if you wish, but very broadly the biblical basis for this is rooted in the creation of male and female both *equally* in the image of God, and in the direction of travel in the Bible towards the elevation of women back to that equal status that was lost in Genesis 3. So, I believe, women should be free to preach and to bring the richness of their femininity to that task.

But, increasingly this argument is also used as a kind of "trump card" to support the promotion of that which the Bible clearly declares to be sinful, perhaps *most* frequently at present in regards to the redefinition of

marriage. And this we cannot support, because it is the exact opposite of Jesus' teaching in this passage: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must *deny* themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

1) *Whoever wants to be my disciple*

This is not an optional extra for the super-spiritual. It is the basic requirement of *everyone* who claims a faith in Jesus Christ. It applies to "Whoever wants to be [Jesus'] disciple." And Jesus clearly wants this teaching to be understood far and wide, for he deliberately calls the crowd to him alongside his disciples, so that they will all hear this important message. "Whoever wants to be my disciple ..." This is the universal basis on which we enter into that covenant relationship.

2) *Must deny themselves*

And that is reinforced by the next word: *must*. It's the same word Jesus had used about his own destiny of the cross. "The Son of Man *must* suffer ... and ... *must* be killed." Likewise, whoever wants to be a disciple of the Son of Man "*must* deny themselves." That doesn't mean we pretend to be who we are not. But it does mean that we must develop self-*control*, such that the sinful and negative aspects of our personality are submitted to the control of the Holy Spirit, and the God-honouring aspects of our personality are given space to flourish. Every one of us has natural tendencies which are good and honouring to God, and every one of us has strong natural tendencies that we might even say are part of us, but which are nevertheless sinful in God's sight. And Jesus' clear call is that we must deny ourselves and take up our cross if we wish to be his disciples.

For example, I am a very passionate person, and I believe God made me that way so that I might, among other things, stand up for truth and justice and for those who can't stand up for themselves. That requires a degree of anger at wrongdoing. But my passion has a flip side, which Satan can use: I naturally have too short a temper. That has been the case for as long as I can remember. For all I know, I was born that way. It would save me a lot of soul-searching and stress if I were to be able to argue that it's just who I am. But I *can't* argue that, because consistently throughout the Bible, God commands us *not* to be *easily* angered, just as he is *slow* to anger. For me to follow Christ, I must *deny* my natural passions and learn to be more patient, and to *channel* my anger in a *controlled* way for good, not for destruction. That's a work in progress, for sure, but there are huge improvements from when I first became a Christian to now, as God's Spirit works with mine to change me into the person he *actually* made me to be. For each of us, what we must deny is different, but each of us has aspects of our personalities which we must deny if we wish to be Jesus' disciple.

3) *And take up their cross and follow me*

For, to be Jesus' disciple is to follow *his* way of life, which is the way of the *cross*. Jesus' destiny was to die, literally, on that cross, not because *he* deserved it, but to stand in our place because *we* deserved it. As we've already heard, he loved each of us so much that he was willing to sacrifice his own self for us. But he did not sacrifice himself so that we could just continue to live however we want and go on hurting God and other people and his world with our behaviour. Paul says in Romans 6:4-7: "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into *death* in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a *new* life ... For we know that our *old self* was *crucified* with him so that the body ruled by sin might be *done away with*, that we should *no longer* be *slaves* to sin – because anyone who has died has been set free from sin."

This is what it means to take up our cross and follow Jesus: it is to consciously unite ourselves and our worldly passions to his death, so that our old way of life lived solely for ourselves might be done away with. The life we now live we live for God, however popular or unpopular that might make us, however rich or poor we might be as a result, even if it should cost us our freedom of our life itself, we live not for ourselves, but for God. This is not an optional extra. This command is for “whoever” wants to be Jesus’ disciple. It’s a sobering call. Christianity is not for the faint hearted.

4) Paradox: by losing our life we actually find it!

But the paradox is that, in this self-denial, we actually find life in all its fullness. Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full (or in abundance)” (John 10:10). There was an old joke that many Christians had misinterpreted that verse as “they may have life and have it in a barn dance!” But Jesus is clear. We have to let go of the old way of life, if we are to really find *full* life. “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever *loses their life* for me and for the gospel will save it.”

That is never easy to do. The old life clings to us and we to it, like a comfort blanket. It’s what we know; it’s safe; it’s comfortable; and it’s not *all* bad. But it’s not all *good* either. It’s certainly not God’s best for us. As Jesus says, “What good is it for someone to gain the whole *world*, yet forfeit their *life*?” (The Greek word is the same as in the previous verse, and life is the better translation). In every respect in which we cling on to the old sinful ways of life, we forfeit the *real* life that God wants for us, be that in clinging on to gossip, or unforgiveness, or fear, or self-hatred, or sexual immorality, or lying, or cheating, or gluttony, or greed, or chasing popularity, or whatever it might be. To cling on to the old life is to lose the chance of the real *new* life that Jesus died to give us. Real life is found in boldly owning faith in Jesus Christ, and in living as he commands us day by day. And in accepting his forgiveness when we fail, and determining to start again. “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” In so doing, we too will be among those who see the Kingdom of God come with power. Do you want to see that? Let’s pray.