

Lent 2 / February 28, 2021

Mark 8:35

*“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”*

**Faith. Confession. Following.**

Who do you say that I am? Jesus asked His disciples that question after He first asked them what people were saying about Him and who they thought Him to be. The people were wrong, in thinking He was one of the prophets of old. They were wrong in thinking, He was simply a new prophet, come on the scene in these latter days. The disciples were right in saying He was the Christ. However, they were wrong in their thinking about what it meant to say Jesus is the Christ and in the what they expected the Christ to do.

Poor disciples, as was often the case during their tuition under the Son of God, even though they hit the target they missed the mark. They were correct in confessing that Jesus is the Christ. Jesus affirmed their understanding and then immediately told them not to tell anyone. His reason became apparent after He told them, it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and die and then rise on the third day.

When He finished speaking, I expect there was a stunned silence. Perhaps some jaws drooping in wonder. Then Peter voiced their thoughts and rebuked Him for saying such a crazy thing. Why would the Messiah suffer and die? They must have wondered where Jesus got such a crazy idea, not realizing that Jesus got all His ideas from the bible, which said this was necessary.

Isaiah sang of the Messiah saying, *“Surely He has born our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we considered Him stricken by God and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace and with His stripes we are healed.”* Many parts of the Old Testament spoke to the suffering and death of the Messiah, none so clearly as the 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah.

What do we say about Jesus? Where do we get our ideas about Jesus, who He is, what He does and what we can expect Him to do? We say Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, our Lord and Saviour. In this gospel Jesus challenges us to consider what those things mean and the effect they will have on our lives. Peter had the right answer, but the wrong understanding. Jesus affirmed His answer and rebuked His understanding. Jesus turned to the crowd following Him, challenged their faith and called them to a fuller understanding. They expected a crown, not a cross! His way led not first to a crown, but to a cross.

We too would prefer a crown rather than a cross. He promises a crown, the crown of life. But He reminds us that whoever would receive from Him the crown of life, must first come to Him through His cross and then follow Him under their own cross. He said, *“If anyone would come after me, let Him deny Himself and take up His cross and follow me.”* No one likes to bear a cross, but blessings come in and through the cross. Jesus brings us to God in forgiveness through the cross. God draws us closer to Himself through the crosses we bear in our lives. We follow Jesus under the cross, even at the cost of life in this world, for Jesus said, *“whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s, will save it.”*

What is most important is to know that Jesus is the Holy One of God and to believe He is our Saviour and Lord. The unclean spirits immediately recognize Jesus when they hear His words. But Jesus forbids them to speak and immediately throws them out. They have knowledge of God, but no love for God. Their witness is discounted, because any association of Jesus with unclean spirits is a bad witness. The scribes, Pharisees and Teachers of the Law, who will condemn Jesus, already defame Him and discount His ministry saying, ‘He is in league with the devil and deceiving the people.’ The disciples’ knowledge of Jesus’ identity is limited and their awareness of His mission is even more stunted, but even though they do not fully understand and have a lot to learn, they know Jesus is the Holy One of God and believe He is the Christ.

Through their witness and the words of scripture, we know that Jesus is the Son of God from eternity; through whom all things came to be and in whom all things hold together. Although His divinity was covered by the veil of His humanity, He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His being. We know more fully than they did at that time that He came as the Christ, not to establish an earthly kingdom of power and glory, but to establish God’s righteous reign on earth in forgiveness, beginning in the hearts of those who receive Him as Saviour.

Peter is rebuked by Jesus for vowing to prevent Him from doing the very thing necessary for Him to establish the kingdom of God on earth, which is to go to the cross. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus said it was for this purpose that He had come! Jesus establishes God's kingdom first and foremost, by bearing our sin on the cross. This is the most important work of the Christ and the most important thing for us to believe. We see Jesus as the Christ through His cross. We receive the benefits of His cross, by receiving Him in our hearts through faith and following Him in faithfulness under the cross.

The mistake the disciples and the crowds who followed Jesus made, was thinking that Jesus was going to establish an earthly kingdom and restore the glory of David's kingdom. Where did they get that idea? They certainly didn't get it from the bible. Jesus' ideas came from the bible. The ideas of the crowds and the disciples, came from their own imaginations and from the speculations of their ancestors, in the four centuries since the Jews returned from captivity. They were thinking the thoughts of human beings and forgot to check their thoughts against the thoughts of God, written by Moses and the prophets. They were so mistaken that they failed to understand that the long-awaited Messiah would take away their sin and that He would do it through the blood of His cross.

This reminds us that we should never assume something is true, just because it sounds pious and holy. We shouldn't believe something, just because someone we admire and respect as a teacher in the church says its so. We shouldn't accept something, simply because people have believed it for a long time! We need to test everything against the clear words of scripture. We should be especially suspicious of any teaching in the church that promises us a life of easy discipleship, without bearing the cross. Jesus says, *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."* We see Jesus through the cross. We follow Jesus under the cross.

What is the cross we must bear? Its not a cross by which we atone for our sin. Jesus atoned for our sin and paid the debt of every human soul, through the blood of His cross. In Colossians Paul wrote, *"And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside, nailing it to the cross."* Jesus did that for us on His cross. We receive all the blessings and benefits of His cross; forgiveness, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the promise of resurrection to eternal life, through faith in Him and baptism into His death and resurrection.

The cross we bear is the suffering of reproach and hardship that comes from being called by His name. Jesus said, *"If anyone is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."* Our crosses are the hardships and sufferings that are common to this life, but which God calls us to endure trusting in His grace, knowing that through these things He draws us closer to His heart in Christ Jesus. Paul prayed for the removal of the thorn in his flesh. He said, *"Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me."* Jesus said, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* Through the crosses that we bear, we experience more fully His power to help and are made to believe more firmly.

We follow Jesus by bearing our crosses, but we don't bear our crosses alone, or even by our own power and strength. We come to Jesus through His cross, by which He draws us to Himself in faith and brings us to the Father in peace. We follow Jesus by the power of His Holy Spirit, who comes to us in the word and through the washing of baptism that we may walk in newness of life. We bear the crosses of our lives by His power, knowing that in Him nothing in life is without purpose. We find meaning in Him.

He brings meaning and purpose to our lives through His cross. He is the meaning and purpose of life. He works all things in our lives, especially the crosses we bear, to our eternal benefit and blessing. When He returns as King, He will take our crosses and exchange them for crowns. He will give us the full blessing of His cross in resurrection and bestow upon us and all who believe, the crown of eternal life. Jesus keep us in His grace to that day. In His Name. Amen