

Take Up Your Cross and Follow Him
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Wasilla Bible Church
February 03, 2008

Everything we look at today is gonna revolve around, and be rooted in, one particular verse of scripture. So there's one main text for our day. As we look at it, my hope is that some of you will be encouraged. As we look at this particular text you'll see in it the rhythm of your life; you'll see in it something you've made a commitment to and you have been devoted to living out, maybe now for decades and years. And as you look at it it'll be confirming to you today, saying 'Yes, that's my life plan, and it's a right one.'

For some of you, I would hope this would be very informative for you. You're kinda tryin' to figure this whole Jesus-thing out, and you're wondering 'Just exactly how do I go about doin' this; and what's involved in bein' a Christian?' And today, as we look at this, you should be instructed. You should find some really pertinent and important information that you should be aware of before you ever make a decision about following Christ. You need to see what we're lookin' at today.

The third is there's going to be some of you today that are going to feel a twinge of conviction. It may be powerful; it may be something that just feels like a stab to the very core of your being. And others, it may just be kind of an unsettled feeling, that there's some kind of dissonance between the life you're living and the text we're looking at. Whatever level of discomfort that may be, whatever sense of dissonance there may be, I'm going to encourage you to take it serious. The challenge, if you're here today and you acknowledge Christ as Lord, this is the way you ought to be living,—the verse we look at today. And if it's not, there will be a bit of unsettled dissonance; and you need to take that seriously.

I don't know what all will happen with each one of you, but let's commit it to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father in heaven,

As we go into Your word today we know that Your word never returns empty; it never fails to accomplish its purpose. And as we look at it today, as we preach it today, You have a purpose for each person in this room. For some, it may be encouragement. For some, it may be a lifting of the spirit. For some, it may be information, just understanding, so they can make clear-headed decisions. For others, Father, it may be a stirring of conviction, and a changing of heart. Whatever it is, Father, we commit it to You, and we look forward to Your word, through Your Spirit speaking to ours.

In Jesus' name, amen.

The verse we're gonna look at is found in Mark 8: 34. We have been working our way through the gospel of Mark, and we're at a very critical point, a hinge point in that book. And as we come to this particular verse, the subject, the focus that Jesus has is indicated in the very first words. He says,

"If anyone wishes to come after Me..."

...if that's your desire, He says, 'If you wanna be a follower of Me, a disciple of Me, if that's what you wanna be, I have something to tell you.'

Now, they had just acknowledged Him—His disciples, for the first time, had just come to acknowledge Him as the Christ. A few verses before that Jesus asks them

"Who do people say that I am?"

His disciples come back and say,

"Some say You're Elijah, some say You're John the Baptist back from the dead, some say You're a prophet."

And he looks at His disciples and says

“But who do you say that I am?”

And they finally get it right. They say,

“You’re the Messiah.”

‘You’re God’s anointed ruler. You’re the one that’s gonna set all things right. You’re the Christ.’

As they say that, Jesus tells them what the messiah is going to do. He is going to suffer many things, He’s going to be rejected by the religious authorities, and He is gonna be crucified; and *then* rise again. And they’re disturbed by that. In fact, Peter pulls the Messiah...he says, ‘Don’t talk like that. You got the wrong game plan here. You’re the Messiah, but You don’t have the right plan.’

Jesus rebukes him, and then the very next thing He does is He calls the people together. He gathers disciples and the others, and verse 34, the opening part of the verse says He summons them to Him. And then He says to them,

“If anyone wishes to come after Me...”

‘I’m the Messiah...you know that. Now if you wish to follow me,’ He says, and here’s His first instruction—he must deny himself, and the emphasis is on the word *must*—there are no options here. You cannot follow Jesus without doing this.

You say, ‘Well, what exactly does it mean to deny yourself?’

Let me tell you what it doesn’t mean—pushin’ that box of chocolates away, or passing by the donut shop (that’s a tough one). It’s a pretty...pretty definite term used here. It’s speaking of something that’s done very deliberately and very specifically. It is to renounce—it is to renounce any claim on allegiance to- or control over-. And so what He’s saying here is ‘If you’re going to follow Me, you must renounce...any claim on yourself, any allegiance to yourself, and any control over yourself; because all claim on yourself is gonna be relinquished to Me. All your allegiance must be devoted to Me. And all control over you must be given to Me. You must renounce yourself—any claim, any allegiance, and control, and hand it all over.’

Let me give you a kind of an analogy to give you a sense of this idea. A lot of people think that as you become a Christian it’s a little bit like asking Jesus into your life to be kind of a Driver’s Ed. instructor. You know, He’s gonna start ridin’ along beside you, and what He will do is He will teach you techniques of driving; He will instruct you in the rules of the road; and if you start getting lost He will tell you how to get where you want to go. You know, kinda ‘Jesus is my co-pilot’ idea. That is woefully inadequate. If you’re gonna follow Jesus you give Him the keys, you sign the title over, and you let Him have the steering wheel. He’s not a ride-along instructor. Follow me on that?

If you want Him in your life...the Messiah in your life, doing all He can and will do...you give Him the keys, you sign the title over, and you let Him have the steering wheel. You *must* do that.

Follow up on that—not only must you deny yourself; He goes on and says I must take up His cross. Powerful visual imagery here. And it’s a little hard for us to grasp it, but crucifixion was the common torture of choice in the Roman Empire that they would use to spread fear and terror and submission among the peoples the Romans conquered. It was not uncommon to come up next to a city or a village where the Romans had been, and see crucified bodies and corpses hanging on crucifixes outside the town. And it was the Roman way of saying, ‘We rule.’

And so, when the phrase was said in that time—‘Take up your cross’—these people knew exactly what it meant. It meant that you had been condemned. And now that you had been condemned, the Romans had given you a cross to carry out and be put on a hill and die. Powerful, powerful imagery! Pick up the instrument of your death and go to your death.

That’s a powerful imagery; but how do we get a practical grip on it? Answer? Very simply, we have to understand that when we start talking about our cross, thousands of years away from that Roman situation, the analogy is that our cross is whatever God has given you to do at this time in your life, and the costs that come with it. Whatever God has given you to do right now, and whatever costs that come with that, that’s your cross.

It'll vary from person to person. There'll be common patterns. There'll be common characteristics. But it'll vary from person to person. For some, it may be something very dramatic—right now, a career choice that needs to be made that's gonna affect the next thirty years of your life. For somebody else, it may be something very small, almost routine, that you've been committed to for years. I don't know what it'll be. It may have to do with your family, your spouse; it may have to do with your job; it may have to do with your thought life. It may have to do with your entertainment. It may have to do with a habit. I don't know what it may be for you. But whatever God has given you to do at this time is your cross, and all the costs that come with it.

And there will be costs. I am absolutely convinced that there is no command given by our God, on any level of our life and experience, that will not cost you to obey. Every call upon you our God gives is gonna cost you. There'll be something else you could be doing. There could be something else you could be thinking. There could be something else you could be pursuing. I know...I'm not talking something overly dramatic here. I'm just talking specific reality. If God tells you to do somethin' and you do it, then there's something else you could have been doing that you're not. And that's a cost.

If you've been a Christian a long time, and you've walked this road a long time, you may be thinking right now, "Larry, tell them about the benefits that come. Tell them about when you obey, how things work out better. Tell them how when you obey, things come together. Tell them how when you obey, God works and there's great miracles that may happen in your life, or there may just be steady works of grace. Tell them, Larry, the benefits of obedience!"

No.

What I want you to understand, right now, is any and every act of obedience with respect to our God is gonna carry a cost. And if you're gonna follow Jesus you must pick up that call and pay the price, whatever it is.

Adds another statement, almost a little bit redundant here, but I think it was repeated purposely by Jesus. He says,

"...and follow Me."

The idea is, if you're gonna follow Jesus you must actually follow Him. There's no such thing here as virtual following. I mean, you either do this or you don't. You either actually deny yourself and follow Him on a path of obedience, or you don't. That's the call. Very simple template to this verse. I don't have to expand on it, really, any more. There's a deliberate, self-denying commitment that you make if you follow Jesus. Point in time, you give Him the keys, you sign over the title, and you let Him have the steering wheel. You do that. And then there is consistent, cross-carrying obedience from that day forward. I'm not sayin' perfection. But you go forward doin' what He tells you to do.

You say, 'Well, wait a minute, Larry. I thought salvation was a free gift.' It is. But it will cost you everything.

We've hired a couple of new staff members in this last year-and-a-half, and for some reason, they've all been military. And I'm startin' to get all these terms—'Let's have a QTB.' 'How 'bout an AIR?' I mean, they throw these letters around like crazy. But one of 'em had a comment on this verse one time. Not this verse, but this concept. And he says, 'You know, Larry, it doesn't cost anything to join the army. In fact, you may even get paid a bonus. It doesn't cost you a thing to join the army. But it'll cost you everything.'

It does not cost you anything to become a Christian. It is absolutely free. But it will cost you everything.

So why would anybody ever do it? I'm gonna give you four quick reasons; actually five, but the fifth is kinda long, so we might not get to it today. So let's go to the four quick ones. They're in our text. If you look at 'em as you move forward in the verses that follow, and you ask that question 'why', the first response is you're gonna get what I call 'The Discipleship Paradox.' It's one of those truths in Christianity that's kind of counter-intuitive. You think it should be one way, but it's another way. It's like the New Testament principle that the way up is actually down, that the person that wants to be great needs to be the servant of all. I mean, it's those kinds of principles that you find in scripture, that we're at our strongest when we're at our weakest. Well, The Discipleship Paradox is this—that whoever wishes to save his life will ultimately lose it. Whoever loses his life for the cause of Christ and for His word will save it.

You may say, "I am not going to give over the keys, the title, and the steering wheel. I am gonna *keep it!*" And you will lose it. You will lose it. And years from now you will never be the person you are now. You will lose yourself. See, if you're not willing to let go of who you are and who you're trying to be right now, you will never become the wondrous and glorious person God has created you to be. If you try to save yourself, you're gonna lose yourself. You gotta let go to really find who God's made you to be.

Second, follow up on that is I call it 'The Bottom Line.' And the statement goes like this...

What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but forfeits his own soul?

The background here—there's a very definite world view perspective, a view of reality that Jesus has as He says this. And the view is this, that there is a day of reckoning out there ahead; there's a day when you'll be held accountable before God for all you've said and all you've done. And on that day of accountability your eternity will be fixed, between the eternal kingdom of God and what Jesus called the outer darkness, what He called 'Gehenna', the garbage dump, hell forever. And the idea behind this particular statement, when He would talk about the bottom line and profiting from gaining everything in the world, the idea is 'what gain is there, what advantage there is, if you gain everything the world has to offer...you have everything people can lay their hands on and want to lay their hands on...but at the same time you end up in hell forever, and ever and ever and ever.' What have you gained?

Gotta keep movin'. This is what I call the 'Exchange Question.' This one's a little odd; follow me with it. The idea is this—what will a man give in exchange for his soul? And you have to adjust your thinking just a little bit here. But let me lead into it like this. You need to understand that God...God desires your soul. He desires you. He desires you as a person. He loves you profoundly and deeply, beyond anything you could ever think or imagine. He desires you. He deserves you. He's created you. And not only does He desire you, not only does He deserve you, He *demand*s you. He demands your heart, your soul, your being. Now what do you have that you can offer to Him that is worth that? 'Oh, I'll give Him ten percent of my income.' *He doesn't want ten percent of your income! He wants you as a person.* 'Oh, I'll sacrifice my life on the mission field.' He doesn't want your life sacrificed on the mission field—unless He tells you. What He wants is your soul, your heart, your commitment, your love. There is nothing you can offer God that will replace for Him your soul in his heart. And when you give Him something else, it's like throwing trinkets in His face. And Jesus didn't die for trinkets.

Let's go to the fourth, a personal issue. As we go on in this text Jesus makes this statement. He says

"Whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful or evil generation, I'll be ashamed of him when I return in the glory of my Father with the angels."

When Jesus looks at His disciples and says, 'Listen. In this world, with everything that people do and everything that's said, with everything that's going around in this world, if you look at Me and you're ashamed of Me...given what everybody else is doin', if you look at Me and you're ashamed of Me...and what everybody else says, you hear what I say and you're ashamed of what I say...' He says, 'Listen, if that's the way you are, I will be ashamed of you.' And that is deeply personal. He doesn't say you're gonna go to hell. He doesn't say that 'I am going to punish you.' He says, 'I will look at you and I will be embarrassed to call you Mine. You are gonna cause Me to be ashamed in front of the Father and all the angels.' That is deeply, deeply personal.

There's a fifth reason, and it goes beyond all these. Can't get it right now—come back to it next week. You say, 'Oh Larry, I gotta have that reason.' You haven't listened yet.

Let's stand. Before I'm gonna pray, I gotta add a tone here. I feel strongly about this, so I've spoken strongly, but in the process there's the sense that 'Wow! This sounds really grim, Larry.' Let me put the right tone on it. When you give Him the keys, you sign the title, and you let Him grab the steering wheel, He will look at you and smile. And He'll say, 'Let's see what this thing can do.'

Father,

We're committed to You. We wanna enjoy Your Son to the utmost. Father, guard us and protect us from stopping short of that...out of our fear, out of our disbelief; Father, out of our clinging to self.

In Jesus' name, amen.