

January 1, 2017

## Suffering Servant, Sovereign Lord *If You Follow Me*

Mark 8:31 – 9:1

Two weeks ago we read the passage just above this one where Jesus and His disciples come to Caesarea Philippi and He asks them the defining question: '*Who do you say that I am?*' And Peter, answering not only for Himself but no doubt all the rest of the disciples, says, '*You are the Christ*'. And you get the sense that this is the moment everything begins to change for these guys. Jesus begins now to teach His disciples precisely what it means to acknowledge that He is the Messiah. And we know they had a lot of trouble with the explanation. They had a view of what it meant to follow Jesus that had nothing to do with what Jesus had in mind. They had a view of victory, power and success, but Jesus begins to show them rejection, suffering and death.

Not only does Jesus reject the Messianic stereotype they had in mind, but He defines His mission in very unattractive terms: *31 And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 And He said this plainly.* Jesus was not using figurative language here. He wasn't teaching them in parable. He was speaking plainly. And what He was teaching them came right out of their own reading of the Bible. But He was bringing together two ideas from Scripture that had never been put together before – the Messiah and suffering. No one had ever connected those two things together. He uses His favorite description for Himself here in Mark, Son of Man, to get the point across.

The term 'Son of Man' is a clear reference to the prophecies of Daniel where there is this description of "*...one like a Son of Man...*", a divine person who comes with heavenly hosts to restore all things, to right all wrongs, a messianic figure. Jesus makes this identification clear down in verse 38 where He talks about Himself coming in the glory of His father with the holy angels. So He makes this clear connection between Son of Man and the coming Messiah. And then He says, this Son of Man must suffer and die. This is something the disciples definitely would not have learned in synagogue.

From the Old Testament prophets, mainly Isaiah, they would have learned about some mysterious figure called the Servant of the Lord who would undergo suffering and death. But the Jews never put those texts together with the other Messianic texts to make that connection. The very idea that the Messiah, the Son of Man, would have to endure suffering and brutality made no sense at all to these guys. The Messiah was coming to make all things right in the world. He was coming to wipe out evil and suffering and injustice and death. When Messiah came and set up His throne, the golden age would begin and peace and harmony and joy would rule. The idea that injustice and evil would be defeated by the very suffering and death they caused, was way outside the disciple's theological box.

Which is why Peter's reaction is so strong: *And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him.* Peter uses the same word that Jesus used to rebuke the demons. Peter is condemning Jesus in the strongest possible language. 'This is not what Messiahs do. This is not how to build the kingdom of God. This is crazy. We've given up stuff to follow You Jesus, but we're not going there. That's no way to run a Messiah campaign. We're looking for a Messiah sitting on a throne, not sitting in an executioner's cell. We're looking for a Messiah to kill the enemy, not be killed.' And Jesus' response is immediate: *33 But turning and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."*

A wrong view of who Jesus is and what He came to do will result in a wrong view of what it means to follow Him. I believe we have a lot of people, especially in this country, who do not really know who Jesus is and why He came. And the level of their commitment to follow Jesus is somewhere around Peter's confession level. He had a moment of divine revelation that Jesus was the Christ, but he was unwilling to follow that to its conclusion. And the conclusion, Jesus said, was that He **must** suffer, and He **must** die. Very strong words – **must**. Jesus is not just saying, 'I have come to suffer and die'. He is saying 'I **must** suffer and die'. And Peter is arguing with the **must**. How is it that Jesus must suffer and die?

Well we could do a whole series just on that question, or you could read John Piper's book, *50 Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die*. But let me sort of boil it down for you this morning with just two of those reasons which I think are at the heart of it all. The first reason is a personal one. That is, Jesus had to come and die for me. Our fundamental problem as human beings is not that we are simply good people who have done bad things. It isn't that we have simply messed up our lives or made bad decisions here and there and we need someone to show us how to live better lives and make better decisions and be kinder people. Our fundamental problem is that we have rebelled against the God who made us and put ourselves in control. And even in our sin-sick world, the universal punishment for that rebellion, treason really, is death.

But on the whole, we don't think we are really that bad. I've been bad sure, but not bad enough for the death penalty. Certainly not bad enough that someone would have to die in my place. We look at the severe penalty for this rebellion, this sin in the Old Testament and say, 'Isn't this a bit severe? I mean there's a guy who gets put to death because he's discovered gathering firewood on the Sabbath for heaven's sake!' But this is looking at the thing through our self-centered glasses. We cannot imagine responding this way if the offense were against us. When we ask people to do something our way and they don't do it, we usually do not conclude that we should kill them. But the penalty for sin is not determined by our standards. The penalty for sin is determined by the magnitude of the one sinned against. We see that in our own laws. If you kill a deer out of season, it doesn't carry a death penalty. But if you kill another human, you may well be put to death for it.

A story David Platt tells really puts it in perspective. 'Azeem, an Arab follower of Jesus...was talking...with a taxi driver in his country. The driver believed that he would pay for his sin for a little while in hell, but then he would surely go to heaven after that. After all, he hadn't done too many bad things. So Azeem said to him, "If I slapped you in the face, what would you do to me?" The driver replied, "I'd throw you out of my taxi". "If I went up to a random guy on the street and slapped him in the face, what would he do to me?" "He would probably call his friend and beat you up." "What if I went up to a policeman and slapped him in the face?" "You would be beat up for sure, and then thrown into jail." "And what if I went to the king of this country and slapped him in the face? What would happen to me then?" The driver looked at Azeem and awkwardly laughed. He told Azeem, "You would die."<sup>1</sup> The driver immediately understood Azeem's point and realized he had been seriously underestimating the enormity of his sin.

This is the personal part of why Jesus had to die. You see our offense against a Holy God is so great that only death could clean the slate. But that would mean we'd all just die. And that is not what God has in mind for His creation. He loves us with an everlasting love and does not want us to simply be killed for our transgressions. That is why Jesus said **He must** suffer and **He must** die. Someone **must**, but the only one that stood a chance of coming out of that was the very Son of God. Only a life lived perfectly without sin could be the offering for all our sins. Understanding this is the beginning to understanding of how to follow Jesus.

The second important reason is a cosmic reason. Paul, in the letter to the Colossians, pull back the veil so to speak on the cosmic meaning of Jesus' death on the cross: *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, 14 by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.* There's the personal part. And then he says. *15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.*<sup>2</sup> There's the cosmic part. First of all He cancelled the debt we owed by nailing the record against us to the cross. "Tetelestai!" He cried on the cross. "It is finished. It is paid in full". And by trusting in the work He has done on the cross, we are no longer enemies of God in rebellion, but sons of God in His kingdom. By His death He personally reconciled us to God.

But His death also worked a cosmic goodness. On the cross He disarmed the rulers and authorities. That's a very militant statement. He disarmed them. They had weapons, now they are weaponless. And what was their main weapon? The Bible tells us the power of the evil rulers and authorities in this universe was broken on the cross. Their weapons were taken away. It was a decisive victory over the whole evil world system that holds people in bondage. You see, behind the world power structures that exploit people and oppress people and kill people are demonic forces led by the devil. This is what Jesus was speaking to when He talked to Peter like he was the devil. 'Get behind me Satan'. Peter was aligning himself with the rulers and authorities at that point.

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1 David Platt, *What Did Jesus Really Mean When He Said Follow Me?*, (Tyndale House, Ill., 2013),4-5.

2 Colossians 2:13-15 ESV

It is these forces that tell us it is better to save your life than lose it; that the way to significance and meaning is through power or money or exploiting others for personal gain; that satisfaction comes through doing what you want to do and how you want to do it; that materialism and greed is good. And what is the weapon they use to enforce this?

The writer of Hebrews exposes the thing: *He Himself* [speaking of Jesus] *likewise partook of the same things, that through death He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.*<sup>3</sup> The weapon Jesus destroyed on the cross was death. And that makes sense. What is the thing evil powers use to control people, ultimately? It's the fear of death. If you think that is the worst that can happen and you'll do anything to avoid it, it makes you a slave. But if you are a follower of Jesus and you know that the worst thing they can do to you is kill you, there is real freedom. If death loses its sting, it loses its power over you. If following Jesus becomes the fountainhead of your existence; if knowing Jesus becomes the root of your significance and identity, then all the stuff of the world becomes just that – stuff. You are no longer motivated by what the world is motivated by. And it's confusing for them, just as it was for Peter.

When Joseph Tson was a pastor in Romania he was arrested by the secret police for publishing a sermon calling for the churches to refuse to submit to the Communist government's demand for control over their ministries. When an official told him he must renounce his sermon, he replied, "No, sir! I won't do that!" The official, surprised that anyone would respond so forcefully to the secret police, said, "Aren't you aware that I can use force against you?" "Sir, let me explain that to you," Tson said. "**You see, your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying.** . . . You know that my sermons are spread all over the country on tapes. When you kill me, I only sprinkle them with my blood. They will speak 10 times louder after that, because everybody will say, 'That preacher meant it because he sealed it with his blood.'"

And then Jesus spells out just what it means to follow Him. He gives us two clear directives and three important reasons. *34 And calling the crowd to Him with His disciples, He said to them, "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.* "If you want to follow Me", Jesus says, "Only two things are necessary – deny yourself and take up your cross". Now if you've been a Christian for any length of time, you'll be overfamiliar with those words. They may even roll off your back like water off a duck.

But look at the scene here. Jesus is talking to His disciples, telling them plainly who He is and why He came; one of His closest disciples tries to correct Him and gets blasted by His response; He turns to the crowd, with His disciples around Him, clearly intending that everybody get this, and tells them plainly what it means to follow Him. And the first thing about being a follower of Jesus is that we are self-deniers. In Luke, the gospel writer modifies this by saying 'daily'. In other words there is some sort of continual practice of self-denial that goes on in the life of a disciple. What does that mean? In what sense are we to deny ourselves? Does He mean that every impulse we have should ultimately be stifled?

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3 Hebrews 2:14-15 ESV

Many have taken this statement to mean that any desire we have toward enjoyment or happiness or fulfillment should be squashed. It can lead to slavery to the worst forms of legalism if that is what self-denial means for you. No, what Jesus was saying was that if you want to follow Him, first you must be willing to shift the focus of your life from a concern for yourself to a wholehearted embrace of the will of God. **To deny yourself is to say no to you and yes to God.** He's not talking about giving up chocolate for Lent. It literally means to disown yourself, to forget yourself, to lose sight of yourself and your own interests. So what Jesus is saying is that those who follow Him must disown themselves, forget themselves, lose sight of themselves, drop their old identity and get a new one.

He emphasizes this when He talks about gaining the world and losing your soul, or losing your soul and gaining it. You see our identity in the world is so often tied up in the stuff of this world. Your family gives you identity; your work gives you identity; accumulating wealth gives you identity. Stuff of the here and now give you a sense of who you are, a sense of worth and value and meaning. But Jesus says the way to life is to disown that way of identifying who you are. Following Christ means now that your identity is all tied up in Him. Jesus says, *'If you use the stuff of this world to find yourself, you'll actually end up losing yourself in that stuff. But if you find who you are in Me, you'll still be here when all this is gone'*.

And then Jesus adds another condition to following Him: *"If anyone would come after Me, let him...take up his cross..."* This was language guaranteed to shrink the membership of His followers. Take up your cross. The language was blindingly clear to everyone listening. To the people of Jesus' day the cross was a very concrete and vivid reality. It was the instrument of execution reserved for Rome's worst enemies. It was a symbol of the torture and death that awaited those who dared raise a hand against Roman authority. Not many years before Jesus and the disciples came to Caesarea Philippi, 100 men had been crucified in the area. A century earlier, Alexander Janneus had crucified 800 Jewish rebels at Jerusalem, and after the revolt that followed the death of Herod the Great, 2,000 Jews were crucified by the Roman proconsul Varus. Crucifixions on a smaller scale were a common sight, and it has been estimated that perhaps some 30,000 occurred under Roman authority during the lifetime of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

To our ears this sounds incredibly harsh, and we are tempted to simply give this a spiritual spin: We should die to the desire for self-glory, die to the desire for worldly respect and the fear of man, die to the desire for security and comfort, die to the desire to accumulate stuff, and a host of other things. And we *should* understand it this way – we *must*. But when the disciples and the crowd heard Jesus talk about taking up the cross, there was nothing spiritual to them about the idea. They immediately pictured a poor, condemned man walking along the road carrying the instrument of his own execution on his back. A man who took up his cross had only one destination, death. Unfortunately, in western Christianity we've sanitized and trivialized the message. Jesus was not talking about the common trials and hardships that everybody faces in life. A cross is not your domineering husband, or your cantakerous boss, or that relative you can't stand. Your cross is not having a physical handicap or suffering from some incurable disease. ***To take up your cross means that you are willing to pay any price for the sake of Christ and the gospel.***

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.gty.org/resources/bible-qna/BQ072913/how-to-take-up-your-cross>

In Tom Doyle's book, *Killing Christians*, he tells the story of a man called Farid living in war-torn Syria. Farid's story is like so many others in that bloody conflict. Daily threatened with death for following Jesus, he and his small community of believers live in Damascus, uncertain if they will see another sunrise. At one point early on in the conflict, Farid and the other Christian leaders held a meeting to decide whether or not they should flee for the sake of their families, or remain for the sake of the gospel. After a night of intense prayer, they all agreed to stay on whatever the cost. But they also agreed on one other practical point – they pooled their money and bought a plot of land in which to bury each other.<sup>5</sup> In an open letter to the West, Farid said, *"Once we bought the graveyard, we gave up our rights to live as we pleased...Our lives rest in God's hands. There is remarkable freedom in having no expectations, no plans for tomorrow. The question I and many others start every day with is this: 'Jesus, what do you have planned for me and my family?' Only today matters. Only how I live for Jesus counts. Everything else is superficial. When I hand over my life to my Lord, knowing each day may be my last one on this earth, I am more at peace than ever before."*<sup>6</sup>

And then Jesus gives those who would follow Him three reasons why living a self-denying, cross bearing life is the best possible way to live. First of all He says, *35 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.* If your focus and all of your energy is spent on you, there will be a big price to pay. Following Jesus is incredibly counter-intuitive. Logic and common sense would tell us that denial is not the way to get stuff and carrying a cross is neither secure nor comfortable. It doesn't seem reasonable that we lose to win, and if we win we lose. Contrary to the wisdom of the world, Jesus says that trying to secure your life in this world, not denying yourself, not being willing to pay any price for the sake of Christ and the gospel, will lead in the end to losing what you are trying to save. You see, if you build your life, your identity, your soul, on the stuff of this world, when it goes, you go. But if your identity is built on Christ, you can never lose that.

*36 For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? 37 For what can a man give in return for his soul?* What He's telling us is that our souls are priceless. All the wealth of all the world cannot compare to the worth of your soul. All the things the world considers gain in this life are powerless to save your soul. Therefore there is nothing in the world that demands your careful consideration more than the state of your soul. So working hard to preserve yourself, to save yourself, to run after your own desires and pleasures, security and comfort, actually means you lose everything in the end. But to set yourself to follow Jesus, to lose your ambitions and dreams for His, to abandon your priorities for His, works in the end to save everything. In other words **the way to sure fire loss is to pursue the world. The way to sure fire gain is to pursue Christ.** Disciples of Jesus are those who understand this. They understand that loss is really gain, and that dying is really living. They understand that there is more joy, more reward, more life in denying themselves, taking up their cross and following Jesus.

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5 Tom Doyle, *Killing Christians: Living the Faith Where It's Not Safe to Believe*, (W Publishing Group, Nashville, Tennessee, 2015) 40-41.

6 Ibid. 42

Finally He says, *38 For whoever is ashamed of Me and of My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.*" The implication is that genuine followers are not ashamed of the gospel. Of course nearly every Christian you might ask would say they're absolutely not ashamed of Jesus. But how about His word? Especially those hard things He seems to always be saying. I know a lot of Christians who wouldn't be ashamed of Jesus, but they do seem to be ashamed of His words. They seem to want to water down the hard bits and sugar coat the message. The indigestible stuff. Much like His disciples when He started telling people that they needed to eat His flesh and drink His blood. They said literally, 'Who can stomach this?' They were ashamed at that point to be associated with Him.

There are an awful lot of people who want to make Jesus a pleasant sort of fellow who only wants you to be happy and live a good life. 'Let's not talk about hell and eternal damnation and the wrath of God and how loving money will keep you out of the kingdom. Let's soften the bits about sexual immorality and divorce. Let's go easy on the deny yourself and take up your cross message. After all, we don't want to turn people off.' But the gospel is not meant to appeal to our idea of what is good, or conform to our cultural sensitivities.

The gospel is meant to cut through our culture and our sensitivities and expose sin and wrong thinking and wake us up to the reality of Jesus Christ. The gospel is meant to awaken us to the empty deceit of sin and direct us away from all the promises of the world that will rob us of real joy and peace and wholeness, and will, in the end, kill us. That great 19<sup>th</sup> century preacher, C.H. Spurgeon might have been speaking to a contemporary world when he warned: *"Avoid a sugared Gospel...Seek that Gospel which rips up, tears, cuts, wounds, hacks and even kills for that is the Gospel that makes alive again! And when you have found it, give good heed to it. Let it enter into your inmost being. As the rain soaks into the ground, so pray the Lord to let His Gospel soak into your soul."*<sup>7</sup>

Jesus said, "If you follow Me, it means a life-style of self-denial, saying no to yourself and yes to Me. It means that you take up your cross, living in such way that you are willing to pay any price for My sake and the gospel's. It means building your identity on Me and not on the stuff of this world. It means that your highest ambition is to please Me and not yourself.

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7 <http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/spurgeonquotes.html>

*Our gracious God and loving Father,*

*Grant that we would build our lives on these truths and find our real identity in Your Son. Give us to see the infinite value and beauty of Jesus that would ignite our hearts to be willing to pay any price for the sake of Christ and the gospel. May the command to take up our cross be a sweet invitation to our ears, the ground of all our comfort, and the comfort of all our afflictions. Let the gospel cut through our culture and our sensitivities and expose sin and wrong thinking and wake us up to the reality of Jesus Christ. And may we be those who live to delight in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the saving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*