

November 15, 2015

Counterculture: Will You Follow Jesus?

Mark 8:27 – 38

To give you some context for this, you have to understand that this passage comes at the height of Jesus' career. This is the most popular Jesus has been. At the beginning of Mark 8, we read of the miracle of the bread and fishes where thousands were gathered to hear Him speak. Everybody wanted to hear Him and see Him. But from here on out the crowds melt away, the disciples run and hide, and Jesus is crucified on a Roman cross. And it all begins with Jesus ministering in the villages around Caesarea Philippi and asking that crucial question: *'Who do people say that I am?'* And Peter, bless his heart, pipes up and says, *'You are the Christ'*. And it is just as His disciples are processing this revelation, Jesus begins to teach them – plainly the text tells us – that the days of thronging crowds and heady jubilation are over. He begins to explain exactly what it means to follow Him. He tells them that He has to suffer, that He will be rejected, He'll be killed, and then He'll rise again.

And again it's Peter who speaks up and begins to rebuke Jesus. In the same account in Matthew he takes Jesus to task and says, *'God forbid it Lord! This shall never happen to You!'* And Jesus turns around and essentially tells Peter that he's aligning himself with Satan, not with God. And it's at this point, at the height of His ministry, with the crowds around even now, He knows that there's a problem with His disciples thinking. Something has invaded their hearts and minds and perverted their understanding of what it means to follow Him. Up until this point there has been a huge groundswell of popularity and acclaim, and these guys have been riding the wave. They were going to move through the countryside, gathering support and followers, and then He would proclaim His messiahship and the glorious revolution would begin. He was headed to Jerusalem and victory. This talk of suffering and rejection and dying was defeatist talk.

But what they didn't understand was that following Jesus is counter cultural at its core. It doesn't fit the model of what the world sees as rational or successful. Following Jesus means that you are committed to different values than the culture around you. In this passage, Jesus confronts two of the things most people in most cultures are committed to – security and comfort. We want to be secure, and we want to be comfortable. What Jesus is telling them is that following Him will be neither secure nor comfortable, in the sense that they understood security and comfort. There is nothing about suffering, rejection and dying that fits those definitions in any normal sense. Which is why Peter speaks up. And which is why Jesus responds: *Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.*" Jesus understood that their thinking was not yet lined up with the revelation of who He was. And so, turning to His disciples and the crowd, He begins to tell them just exactly what it means to follow Him.

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. 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. 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? 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." When Jesus called people to follow Him, He never sugar coated the message. He didn't soft-pedal the gospel. His message seems almost guaranteed to turn people away. To a rich young man who runs up to Jesus in chapter 10 and says, 'What do I have to do to get eternal life?' Jesus says, 'Sell everything you own and give it away to the poor, and then follow Me'.

In Luke 9, an eager wannabe tells Jesus, *"I will follow You wherever you go."* And Jesus turns to him and says, *"Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."* In other words, 'Then consider yourself homeless.' In the next verse Luke records that *'To another He said, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father."* **60** *And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."* Don't let your family be your priority. **61** *Yet another said, "I will follow You, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home."* **62** *Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."*

Following Jesus is both counter-intuitive and counter cultural. Logic and our culture 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, running after stuff, even gaining the whole world, leads to loss. But doing the opposite leads to gain. Grabbing for all the gusto of this life means that in the end you lose your life. *For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?* In other words, your very soul is at stake. If you approach life according to the wisdom of the world, making sure you are secure, seeking to save your life, looking out for your comfort, running after the stuff of this life, in the end you lose your life. But if you lose your life for His sake and the sake of the gospel, in the end you'll gain your life.

In other words, for you profit and loss accountants here, **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. In the middle of the civil war that is raging in Syria, there are thousands of Christians who follow this Jesus. One of those is a man named Farid. 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.

In a letter to the West, Farid wrote: *'So many brothers and sisters have been killed already that it seems our little group has the only empty graveyard in Syria. As of this writing, none of us have died yet. We rejoice by greeting one another with these words, "The graveyard is still empty!" We all know it will not stay empty, but meanwhile we're grateful.'*¹ For these disciples, the question is not academic or theoretical. They have decided that following Jesus means that they count their lives forfeit. In their profit and loss columns, saving their lives does not compare with following Jesus even if it means death. Logically, even culturally it makes sense, it's prudent, it's even wise to skeddadle out of Damascus and live to fight another day. And don't get me wrong. I'm not saying everyone who follows Jesus should stay and be killed. But that isn't the point. **The point is, that following Jesus means that we do not count our lives as so dear to ourselves that preserving them, securing them, holding on to them, becomes our priority.** What Jesus is telling us here is that all the promises of gain in the world end up as loss. And all that looks like loss in following Him is actually gain. In other words, if you follow the thinking of this world, if you run after security and comfort, if you make safety and stuff your priority, you'll lose everything you thought you'd saved.

It's a counter cultural truth. And it's a crucial truth. He follows that with this: *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 his letter, Farid goes on to say, *"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."*²

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

2 Ibid. 42

On the surface this appears to be a message of Stoic self-sacrifice as though that were some kind of high virtue in itself. But Jesus wasn't calling people to a life of self-sacrifice for its own sake. He wasn't saying, 'You've got to be like some Benedictine monk and live the ascetic life'. What He was saying is that everything the world offers are seductive promises that will never be delivered on and they will blind you to the real joy and peace I can bring you. 'If you follow the world, it all ends in death and destruction. But if you follow Me, you'll have joy unspeakable and full of glory'. He is pulling back the curtains, so to speak, and giving us a view of reality. Follow the world – die. Follow Me – live. And here in this passage He tells all who would follow Him just what it looks like: **Deny yourself** – adopt a new identity; **take up your cross** – be willing to pay any price; and **follow Me** – do what I do.

He tells us first of all, '*If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself*'. The word deny here is very interesting. It means to disavow any acquaintance or connection with someone, to disown them. It's the word the gospel writer uses to describe Peter's denial of Christ – he disowned Him. And it also means 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 the 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'.

Jesus is saying, 'If you lose yourself for Me, if you set aside gaining what the world thinks is important, you'll discover you've actually found your true self. Instead of trying to find your identity by gaining things, build everything in your life on Me, on who I am, what I have done. Build your life on the gospel. Find your identity in the gospel. Don't build your life on your career, or making money or your family. Don't work for security and comfort. If you build your identity on what this world calls gain, when it goes, you'll be lost. You won't have an identity. All that the world calls gain is so much firewood waiting for the match. It will burn, and when it does, so will you. Pour your life out for Me and the gospel and you'll have an identity you can't lose. You'll have a soul you can't lose. Finally, you'll have an identity that can't be rocked by anything. Finally, you'll have a true identity because it's been built on the one reality in the universe – Me'.

Rafia Abbar was a Professor of Islamic Studies for Women at the prestigious Imam Islamic University of Riyadh in Saudi Arabia until she began having dreams of Jesus. As a committed Muslim, these dreams of a man claiming to be Jesus telling her that He loved her, threatened her Muslim identity conjured up all kinds of questions in her mind. But it wasn't until she met a woman on a plane headed to Sydney, Australia who began explaining who Jesus was that she began to understand. As it happened, that same woman was flying to Sydney to begin studies at the same university Rafia was heading to; and for a year this woman disciplined Rafia in the faith. Not long after she returned to Saudi Arabia to take up her post at the university in Riyadh, she made the announcement to her family one night at dinner that she was no longer Muslim, she was a Christian, and she followed Jesus now. The announcement was followed by dead silence. No one spoke. No one looked at her, and for two days, it was as if she didn't exist.

Two nights later, she awoke to see two menacing figures standing over her with knives in their hands. It was her two uncles and she knew they had come to kill her for leaving Islam. "I love you Jesus" Rafia whispered. "Into Your hands I commit my spirit". But nothing happened. The figures stood there, knives raised and ready to strike, but nothing. After ten long minutes, they left the room and Rafia saw her daughter standing in the doorway. She was horrified that her daughter had witnessed her uncles doing such a thing but her daughter just smiled and said, "Mommy, I knew grandpa's brothers wouldn't kill you". "How would you know that?" Rafia asked. Her daughter just grinned. "Didn't you see Jesus standing in front of you? He was holding their arms back...He wouldn't let them touch you. He was looking at me and smiling".³

3 Tom Doyle, Killing Christians: Living the Faith Where It's Not Safe to Believe, (W Publishing Group, Nashville, Tennessee, 2015) 125-146.

Rafia writes: "When you live in Saudi Arabia and give yourself to Jesus, you forfeit your right to live. The cost is known from the beginning. But Jesus assured all of us that whoever loses his life for His sake will save it. (Matt. 16:25) Paul also told the Thessalonians not to be 'unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. (1 Thess. 3:3) The trials we endure reinforce our identity in Christ. They offer evidence that we are no longer children of the devil but are children in the family of God."⁴ Following Christ means now that your identity is all tied up in Him. He's the one that gives definition and meaning to your life.

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 Jannaeus 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.⁵

To our ears this sounds unaccountably 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 cantankerous 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 is simply to be willing to pay any price for the sake of Christ and the gospel.**

Are you willing to pay any price? 'What's the price?' you say. Are you willing to follow Jesus if it means losing some of your closest friends? Are you willing to follow Jesus if it means alienation from your family? Are you willing to follow Jesus if it means the loss of your reputation? Are you willing to follow Jesus if it means losing your job? Are you willing to follow Jesus if it means you will be persecuted? Are you willing to follow Jesus if it means real death? Are you willing to pay the cost? Azzam Mubarak is a Somali Christian who had to flee his own home when his father found out he was a Christian. Not long after he left, his mother's body was delivered to the house where he was hiding by men sent by his father who made it clear that he was next. He has since brought to faith and discipled the men who killed his mother, and his ministry to the Somali church is to sneak into Kenya, buy Bibles, and smuggle them back into his country by hiding himself and the Bibles underneath Somali corpses carried back into Somalia from Kenya in coffins.

Of his life Azzam wrote: "My life in Christ has never long been free from severe testing and difficult trials. But in the midst of them I have seen His power...I have been a believer now for fifteen years. When I married, my wife knew we would not have a normal life. She told me, 'Azzam, we will live in danger until the day we die as martyrs for Christ, but I will walk this journey with you joyfully!'...What a fearless woman of God! I am blessed beyond blessed to have her as my partner in life."⁶ Are you willing to follow this Jesus? Will you follow Him?

The third thing Jesus says is: "*If anyone would come after Me, let him...follow Me.*" Follow Me, Jesus says. When you follow someone, the first thing it means is that you do what they say. Obedience is the key to following someone. You can't say you follow someone and then refuse to do what they say. That's not following.

4 Tom Doyle, Killing Christians: Living the Faith Where It's Not Safe to Believe, (W Publishing Group, Nashville, Tennessee, 2015) 147.

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

6 Tom Doyle, Killing Christians: Living the Faith Where It's Not Safe to Believe, (W Publishing Group, Nashville, Tennessee, 2015) 15.

In 1978 Michael H. Hart, an astrophysicist and historian, published a somewhat controversial book called *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*.⁷ Unsurprisingly, Jesus Christ made his list. But Hart caused some commotion among Christian readers, by ranking Jesus third, behind Muhammad and Sir Isaac Newton. Hart acknowledged that Jesus' teachings were "*surely among the most remarkable and original ethical ideas ever presented.*"⁸ But he continued, "*If they were widely followed, I would have no hesitation in placing Jesus first in this book.*"⁹ In Hart's opinion, Jesus' influence on the world has been considerably diminished by those who claim to follow Him but they don't obey Him. It is only when a person comes to the place of self-denial and takes up his cross in obedience to Jesus is he prepared to follow Him. Authentic following is submission to the lordship of Christ.

Tim Keller has given this illustration so many times it must be in the public domain by now. But anyway it's his and I'll give him credit for it. But it is a great illustration of this. He was attending a conference many years ago and there was a speaker by the name of Barbara Boyd. And she said, "If somebody says to me, 'Come on in, Barbara, but stay out Boyd,' it's a bit of a problem, because I can't separate them. I'm all Barbara, and I'm all Boyd. It's not like the top half of me is Barbara, and the bottom half of me is Boyd. I'm all Barbara and I'm all Boyd. So if you won't have Boyd, you can't get Barbara. Because if you're going to keep the Boyd out, I can't come in at all!" Then she said, "To say, 'Jesus, come into my life, forgive my sins, answer my prayers. I want to say I believe in you. I want the assurance of knowing I believe in you. Do this for me, do that for me, but don't be the absolute master of my life, don't be the absolute focal point of every area of my life. Come in, Jesus, come in Savior; stay out Lord,' how can he come in at all?"¹⁰ We cannot legitimately call ourselves followers of Jesus if we ignore what He says. If we treat His commands as suggestions. We cannot be called followers if all we do is go to Him when things get rough or we get in a tight spot. We cannot really be called His followers if we only occasionally read and meditate on His words. If we truly follow Him, we obey Him because He is not only Savior, but Lord.

You see, He left us with two great commands and one great commission. 'Love God supremely and love your neighbor as yourself' and 'Go and make disciples'. All of Jesus' teachings were wrapped around these commands and this commission. What He taught His disciples was to love God supremely and love their neighbors as themselves, and in doing that He was making disciples. And His goal was that His disciples would in turn make disciples, who would then would make disciples, who would make disciples themselves, ad infinitum. If you would be a follower of Jesus, you have to wrap your mind around this. Jesus did not intend that His teaching would produce good little churchmen who looked spiffy on Sundays and mouth syrupy Christian platitudes. His teaching was intended to make disciples who made disciples who made disciples.

Jesus says two remarkable things about genuine followers. First they are willing to lay down their lives for His sake and the gospel's. You can only answer 'Yes' to the question of are you willing to follow Jesus *if* you are committed to Him and the gospel. Are you a gospel person? Are you committed to spread that gospel whatever it takes? Do you love the gospel? Is it the most important thing in your life to see that gospel proclaimed in the earth? And then 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. However they realized at the same time that they had irrevocably thrown in their lot with Jesus and had nowhere else to go. But today you have a lot of Christians who want to make Jesus a pleasant sort of fellow who only wants you to be happy and live a good life.

7 Michael H. Hart, *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History* (Secausus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group, 1992)

8 *Ibid.*, 17

9 *Ibid.*

10 Keller, T. J. (2013). *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive*. New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church.

'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.' One of the most painful things I've ever watched on YouTube was an interview by Larry King of a prominent evangelical pastor with a church somewhere in Texas. Time after time Larry tried to get the guy to commit to affirming Jesus' own words that whoever does not acknowledge Jesus as Lord will not be saved. And time after time this guy wiggled off the hook, not wanting to say what the Bible actually says. It was tragically ironic, the unbeliever apparently believing what the believer refused to proclaim.

But the gospel is not meant to appeal to our cultural understanding or conform to our cultural sensitivities. At its heart the gospel is counter to the whole direction of culture. 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 19th 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."*¹¹

The gospel awakens you to the infinite value of Jesus over anything and everything the world or this life can offer. The apostle Paul said it best: *But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*¹² The gospel of Jesus Christ says 'If you want to follow Me, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Me.' If you really want to live, be willing to lose your life for My sake and the gospel. Deny yourself – get a new, eternal, lasting, identity in Me. Live under the shadow of the cross and pour your life out for Me and you'll have a life you can never lose, and a joy that is eternal. Will you follow Jesus?

Our gracious God and loving Father,

Let this gospel of grace soak deep into our souls, penetrating hearts that are predisposed to set their affections on cheap imitations of eternal joys and to lust after suicidal pleasures that only end in ruin. Grant that we would build our lives on this gospel and find our 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.

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

12 Philippians 3:7-8 ESV