

Sermon for September 3, 2023 – 14th Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 8:31-38 (EHV)

Theme: What do you have in mind?

- 1) The Things of Men.
- 2) The Things of God.

³¹Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things; be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the experts in the law; be killed; and after three days rise again. ³²He was speaking plainly to them. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But after turning around and looking at his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! You do not have your mind set on the things of God, but the things of men."

³⁴He called the crowd and his disciples together and said to them, "If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. ³⁵For whoever wants to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶After all, what good is it for a man to gain the whole world and yet forfeit his soul? ³⁷Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? ³⁸In fact, whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

If God promises to bless everyone who believes in Jesus, shouldn't we (as his followers) expect a life of health, wealth, and ease? And if we don't get those things, or if we receive their opposite, don't we have the right to complain: "No, Lord, this isn't how it should be. I am your servant who trusts in you. Why are you allowing trials in my life instead of blessing me?"

If we think this way, then we, like Peter in today's sermon text, don't understand what discipleship is about. The LORD does not want us to follow him to receive earthly comfort, wealth, and glory. No, Jesus calls us to follow him so that, dying with him to the world, we might rise with him into everlasting glory.

Therefore, let us listen to Jesus explain what it means to follow him, under the theme: **What do you have in mind:** 1) The things of men or 2) The things of God?

Part One: The Things of Men

Our sermon text occurs shortly after Peter confessed about Jesus: " *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*"ⁱ Jesus called Peter blessed for being able to make such a confession. Now Jesus began to explain to the disciples what their confession meant: how He would accomplish His primary work as the Christ to save us. We read:

³¹Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things; be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the experts in the law; be killed; and after three days rise again.

Jesus wanted his disciples prepared for what they would experience in Jerusalem. He knew that his suffering and death would test their faith to such a degree that they would abandon him. He wanted them to understand that what he would endure was God's plan for their salvation. No matter how hopeless things looked, He would rise from the dead in victory.

³²*He was speaking plainly to them. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.*

It seems as if Peter imagined the Christ's glory to be like that of a "comic book superhero" - so much so that he could not accept Jesus' words about his suffering and death. For that reason, Peter took it upon himself to straighten Jesus out: "No, LORD, you've got it all wrong. You are the Christ, the Son of God. You came to usher in a new era of peace and glory for Israel. God will show you mercy and never let those bad things happen to you!"

Before we hastily condemn Peter's foolish rebuke, let's take a moment to reflect on our thoughts regarding Christ's work. Aren't we all tempted to think that, since Jesus rose glorious from the grave after beating Satan, a Christian's life should be a lot easier than it is? Don't we wonder why the LORD allows his disciples to suffer severe persecution in many places around the world? Aren't we also tempted to pray with Peter: "No, Lord, that is not how things should be. You should prove yourself with mighty, glorious miracles – making life easier for us, your people." Yes, we also find ourselves, like Peter, tempted to rebuke God because His actions don't match our opinion of how things should be.

It is no wonder, then, that Jesus so publicly and sharply rebuked Peter, saying: "*Get behind me, Satan! You do not have your mind set on the things of God, but the things of men.*" In other words, even though the disciples confessed Jesus as the Christ, they still didn't understand what that confession meant. They didn't understand that His glory was *not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*ⁱⁱⁱ Satan had blinded their understanding just as he blinds ours.

Yes, brothers and sisters in Christ, we all are tempted to think about glory and greatness in human terms. Like Peter, we want a Christ who crushes our enemies effortlessly - allowing us to pursue earthly ease as his followers. Shouldn't God bless Christians with all the wealth and happiness they desire? Wouldn't that attract more people to Christ's kingdom?

The problem is that our enemies are not physical but spiritual.ⁱⁱⁱ Even worse, one of our most dangerous enemies lives inside us, namely our selfish, sinful flesh. Spurred on by Satan, it doesn't want a superhero Christ for the sake of God's glory but for its own sake. It craves worldly pleasures – desiring things God knows are not good for us and will lead us away from Jesus. Giving in to our flesh's desires won't protect us from it. No, our sinful flesh needs to be crucified – just like Jesus was crucified in payment for all our sins to reconcile us to God. Yes, our sinful flesh needs to die through daily repentance so that, just as Christ rose from the dead, a new person might rise in us who desires to live for God's glory in the peace of His forgiveness.^{iv}

Part Two: The Things of God

Thankfully, Jesus was not minded like Peter and us. He knew exactly who all our enemies were and what He needed to do to save us. Even though his path would be filled with immense suffering and shame, Jesus was willing to bear it all. The cross would become his greatest glory – a glory which he calls all his disciples to share.

Jesus called the crowd and his disciples together and said to them, “If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. ³⁵For whoever wants to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

I don't think we fully appreciate how shocking Jesus' statement was to the crowd around him. We use the cross as a decoration. They, however, saw the cross as a most gruesome and horrific instrument of torture – reserved by Roman law for the worst of the worst! Yes, the image of a cross was so shocking to the crowd that I couldn't come up with a modern-day equivalent to illustrate how appalling Jesus' statement sounded to them. “If you want to be my disciple,” Jesus says, “then you need to be willing to go through the same earthly humiliation, suffering and death that I will endure for you. You need to deny all your cravings for earthly wealth, pleasure, relationships, experiences, and comfort – willing to give them up in a heartbeat for the sake of my gospel. Why? Because only my Gospel saves. What you suffer on this earth, in this life, will be temporary; I, Jesus, am your life. I will use your proclamation of my gospel and unselfish reflection of my love to draw others to me. It will testify to the world who I am and what I came to do.”

Now, denying our fleshly desires is something we cannot do on our own. Thankfully, God does not leave us alone. When God the Father declared us to be his children in baptism, He gave us a gift: the Holy Spirit who, working through the Gospel, awakens in us a joyful desire to give up every earthly thing for Christ's sake. Why? Because we understand that this world and everything in it is passing away. Jesus' kingdom, however, will endure forever in unimaginable glory and bliss.^v

Brothers and sisters in Christ, do you now understand what it means to be a disciple of Christ? As I mentioned, one of our greatest enemies is our sinful flesh, which desires ease, comfort, and pleasure. If we live to satisfy our sinful self, we will ultimately lose the true life Christ won for us on the cross. How so? Because, as Jesus said elsewhere, *the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth and desires for other things ... choke the word from our hearts.*^{vi} *When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, those who love themselves more than Christ will immediately fall away.*^{vii}

But if, with the Spirit's aid, we deny our sinful selves by prayerfully focusing our attention on the everlasting salvation Jesus won for us through His cross, then we will be able to drown our sinful flesh through daily repentance so that our new man (given to us at baptism) might rise to live to God's glory. As we focus on what Christ accomplished for us through His cross, taking up our crosses for Christ becomes much easier – even to the point of becoming joyful. We begin to understand what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote: *We also rejoice confidently in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces patient endurance, ⁴and patient endurance produces tested character, and tested character produces hope. ⁵And hope will not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who was given to us.*

Jesus asks: *What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and yet forfeit his soul? ³⁷Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?*

What good are all the things you have and experience in life when you're dead? How will you answer God when He asks you what you did with the time, talents, and treasures He entrusted to your care? Will a person's pursuit of a rich, comfortable, carefree life impress the LORD on the last day? Will we be able to trade in our house, investments, and leisure pursuits for everlasting life with God in heaven? The obvious answer is no. Only one thing can redeem our souls from hell: the salvation Jesus won for us through His cross, which we receive through repentance and faith. That is why our faith in Jesus is our most precious gift from God, a gift for which Christians are willing to give up everything – even life itself.

Jesus continues: *³⁸In fact, whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.*"

The world, spurred on by Satan, hates both Christ and Christians. Even in our country, the devil is working hard to silence the Gospel, doing all he can to make us feel too scared or ashamed to share Jesus with others. But don't be embarrassed or afraid to confess the Gospel. Why not? *Because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.*^{ix}

And that is why Christians are willing to give up everything (even life itself) for the Gospel's sake. Even though the devil tempts us to worry about what people might think or fear their response when sharing God's Word with them, we find our confidence to confess Christ by focusing on Jesus' promises and remembering that his Spirit is with us. Thus, our courage and joyful desire grow to confess Christ in a hostile world that desperately needs him.

So, dear Christian, what do you have in mind: the things of God or the things of men? Are fleshly comforts more critical to you than Jesus? Are people's praise and acceptance more vital to you than God's soul-saving Gospel being proclaimed to everyone? Is this world that is passing away all you live for, or is your treasure with Christ in heaven?

We all are guilty of dropping the cross to follow the world. For that, we deserve God's everlasting shame on the last day. But Jesus doesn't want to condemn us to hell. That is why he paid for our sin of being ashamed of him on his cross and sent the Holy Spirit to awaken repentance and faith in our hearts to receive his forgiveness. Live in the peace of that forgiveness – focused on the future he won for you. As you set your heart on Christ's cross's victory, let His love move you to pick up your cross to follow him. Yes, even your troubles and sufferings will become a joy in him. With Jesus in your heart, you become willing to sacrifice all for Christ – knowing that, possessing Jesus, you lose nothing at all. Amen

ⁱ Mat 16:16 (EHV)

ⁱⁱ Mark 10:45 (EHV)

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Ephesians 6:12

iv Cf. Romans 6:1-11

v Cf. 1 John 2:17, 1 Corinthians 2:9

vi Mark 4:19 (EHV)

vii Mark 4:17 (EHV)

viii Romans 5:3-5 (EHV)

ix Romans 1:16 (EHV)