

## Sermon Notes – February 28, 2021

(Mark 8:31-38)

Have you ever had your parents or a spouse or a co-worker or somebody to tell you, “What you think, that’s not the way it is.” You think it one way, but sometimes it’s a different way -- it’s not the way you expected it to be.

That’s what happened with Jesus and his disciples. Jesus was coming to tell them that he was going to be a suffering Messiah, but the disciples -- like us, oftentimes -- didn’t quite get that. They thought, like most of the Jews, that Jesus was going to be this powerful and mighty king who was going to reign with righteousness on the throne of David. He was going to overthrow the Romans and put the Israelites in power, and each of Jesus’ disciples would be officers in his kingdom. They would be Secretary of Defense, Vice President, etc. – they would be officers. They would have power and prestige and wealth. Jesus had to correct them. He says, “Guys, you’ve got it wrong. You’re not thinking right. I’m going to be a suffering Messiah. You see, I’m going to suffer and be betrayed by the Jewish elders, the scribes, and the Pharisees. I’m going to be killed and rise in three days.” The disciples were still having a hard time getting it just like us. How was Jesus going to usher in a new kingdom by humility, love and sacrifice rather than by violence?

Jesus pulled the disciples and the crowd together and said, “Listen. If you want to be my disciples, deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.” What did Jesus mean by that? ***When he said, “Deny yourself,” he’s talking about letting go of our selfishness and becoming more God-centered;*** let go of some of your selfish desires and earthly security and let God reign in your lives. Become more God-centered and more other-centered, rather than self-centered.

Jesus said, “Take up your cross.” What did he mean by that? You know a lot of people think that “taking up your cross” is carrying some unnecessary burden – like if I live in an abusive relationship, then that must be my cross to bear. But that’s not what Jesus is talking about here. He says, “Take up your cross” – YOUR cross. What he’s talking about there is -- in Roman society, criminals and slaves were executed by crucifixion. The Romans also made the criminal or slave being executed to carry their cross or “take up their cross” to the place of execution; that was a symbol of shame to carry that cross -- it was a symbol of Rome’s authority over you. So, when you carried your own cross, you submitted yourself to Roman rule, and you were letting the public know that they better be watching out because Rome is in control and not you. ***When Jesus says, “Take up your cross,” he’s talking to us about humbling ourselves and letting God reign in our lives – letting him be the one in charge.*** He’s in the front seat and we’re in the back seat, letting Christ reign in our hearts and our lives. Take up your cross and let Christ be the center of your life. Life is not all about you – but others in Christ.

Then he said, ***“Follow me” -- follow him in his pattern of sacrifice and service.*** Jesus sacrificed his life for us; he served others, and he calls us to that kind of life. That may not be easy because most of us tend to be more selfish. We tend to want things our way. We want to be in control of people, circumstances, and that kind of thing. Jesus calls us to let him be in control.

I like something that the late Dr. Keith Miller (who was a book author, a pastor, and a counselor) said in one of his books about this passage. He said, “Jesus doesn’t call us to take up our cross and follow him to church every Sunday and then live as we want the rest of the week. Cross-bearing is a choice that we make day-by-day to follow Jesus.” It’s a decision that we have to make -- moment-by-moment, day-by-day to follow him.

I heard an interesting story about a guy named Brian – who was in college. He went to college about a hundred miles away from his home. He was often homesick and he decided to go back home every four-to-six weeks to see his family. He had an old car; he didn’t have a lot of money; he barely had enough gas to get home, but he headed home anyway. On his way, he saw two people stranded and he pulled over and helped them. One of them filled up his tank up with gas and the other gave him money for dinner. When he got back to college that weekend, he was telling some of his friends about something that happened to him. He said, “You know, I was going home and I barely had enough gas to get home. I saw two people that needed help and I felt sorry for them, so I stopped to help them. They did something that I never expected – one paid for my gas and the other bought my supper.” One of his friends got the bright idea that he was going to go home next weekend, stop and help some people, and maybe, “I’ll get some more money in my pocket.” He went on his way home, stopped along the way, and helped two people. One of them almost got him in trouble because he offered him drugs and the other one stole his wallet. He said, “Man that didn’t work for me.” Brian said, *“Friend, the difference is that I wasn’t expecting to get help. I helped because I was concerned about somebody. I didn’t do it to get paid. I did it because I cared. Maybe the difference is your intention. You went out and helped somebody, but you only wanted to get paid for it.”* Jesus calls us to really care about others – not always asking what’s in it for me.

God calls us to help people and be concerned about people because it’s the right thing to do – it’s what Jesus would do – not because of what’s in it for us. Jesus said to deny self -- don’t be so self-centered – think about others. I heard another way of putting this and it says, “If you want to be my disciple, let yourselves be so wrapped up in doing God’s will and lifted up in concern for others that you forget yourselves.” And then he goes on to say, “If we only live for ourselves, we will miss life altogether. But if we lose our lives in our concern for others, doing God’s will, we’ll find satisfaction, purpose, and fulfillment.” That is the abundant living that Christ calls us to do.

Jesus said, “Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.” He goes on to say – “What gain is it if you gain the whole world and lose your own soul?” In that, Jesus is saying, “Take care of your soul because that’s what lives after you die. Your body is going to die, but your soul will live on.” One day we will give an account to him. Take care of your soul now.

Some of you know the name River Phoenix – he was an actor and a movie star, but he died at a young age. He was the young Indiana Jones in the movie, “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade”; he starred in the movies, “Stand By Me” and “Running on Empty.” He came from a family of young boys who got in movies and acting at a young age. He made it big time and was famous. He earned wealth and fame; he earned enough money to buy his parents a farm. But at age 23, he was found dead on the streets outside of a west Hollywood night club from a drug overdose. He had it all – wealth, nice home, family, the respect of his peers – he had everything going for him. He was even nominated for an Oscar! But he wasn’t happy with his life. He had ALL that the world had to offer, but he died at age 23 in a drug overdose. “What does it profit a man to have the whole world, but forfeit his soul?”

Jesus said, “If you want to be my disciples, deny yourself,” (become less self-centered and more God-centered), “take up your cross,” (let him reign in your lives – let him be first place, in the front seat and you in the back seat), “and follow me,” (in the service of sacrifice and service). Jesus sacrificed his life for us and he calls us to serve others. Jesus was trying to tell his disciples, “Guys, if you want to live for me, be my disciples, and have faith, you need to be willing to take some risks. You need to let go of some of your selfishness and let me be the center of your life.”

Jesus wants to work in our lives and achieve greatness in our lives for him. He wants us to be concerned about others and not just ourselves. Those who live only for themselves - with their wealth, possessions, and keep everything for themselves - he said, "you'll miss life altogether" -- but those who share it in concern for others, “you will know authentic life.”

I think of something that the late Dr. Fred Craddock (who was a Methodist Minister, book author, and professor at Emory University) said. In one of his books, he talks about this passage of scripture and he tells a story about a Catholic priest. He said a wealthy man came up to the Catholic priest after mass one Sunday and he brought him a check for \$50,000.00, made out to the Catholic Church. The priest looked at it and thought, “Man that’s a lot of money.” He handed the check back to the wealthy man. He said, “I want you to take this check back to the bank and cash it out in dollar bills and I want you to spend it in one dollar bills doing the Lord’s work everywhere you go.” He said,

“Well, that will take a lifetime.” The priest said, “You’re right. That’s the point - serving God every day!”

God doesn’t want you just doing one thing, he wants you serving him every day. ***It’s a day-by-day, moment-by-moment choice to follow him; to deny yourself; to do something for somebody else; to follow him in sacrifice and service.***

Jesus already knew that some of his disciples were going to lose their lives in martyrdom. Sometimes we won’t lose our lives like the disciples, by death, but we will lose in giving up opportunities to do things. We will have to make some sacrifices of time, energy, and money serving people. Sometimes following Jesus won’t be easy and it will be a sacrifice.

I heard a story about a war-correspondent in Afghanistan. He was interviewing a group of Catholic nurses who were attending the wounded soldiers. He said he walked up to one nurse who was attending to a man’s injured leg and as she unwrapped the bandages on his leg, the stench, the blood, and the pus was so bad that he turned his head and put his arm over his nose. He said, “I wouldn’t do that for a million bucks.” He overheard the nurse say, “Neither would I, except for the love of God.” *Sometimes when we follow Jesus, he may call us to go to people who make us uncomfortable. He may call us to places we don’t want to go. He may call us to do something that we wouldn’t normally choose to do.* I bet if I asked you, how many of you like to serve the homeless, some of you would say, “yes” and some of you would say, “no.” If I asked you if you wanted to go to the mission field overseas, to Africa or somewhere else, some of you would say, “no” and others would say, “yes.” You see, service to God and following him, may call us to places we don’t want to go sometimes or to people that make us uncomfortable, or to do things we wouldn’t normally do, but for the love of God.

Jesus told his disciples, “If you are going to be my disciples, it’s not going to be easy, and sometimes you will be asked to make some sacrifices. But know if you lose your life in serving others and me, for the gospel’s sake, you will save it. Take care of your soul because it lives on.” Take care of your souls. May we grow in denying ourselves and following him, taking up our cross and letting him reign. Amen.