

The Gospel of Mark

(Mid-Week Bible Study)

Week 12: The Cost of Following Christ -- Mark 8:31–9:29

Picture the moment after Peter's great confession. The sun is bright. The disciples are walking the road from Caesarea Philippi feeling proud of their team captain. Peter has just declared Jesus to be the Christ. They have answered correctly. And then Jesus begins to teach them something they have not expected. "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" (8:31). Mark notes that Jesus said this "plainly" (8:32). No parable. No metaphor. The road ahead leads to a cross.

Peter cannot bear it. He takes Jesus aside and rebukes Him. Mark uses the same verb here that he uses for Jesus rebuking demons. Peter is trying to silence the Christ he has just confessed. Jesus turns, sees the disciples, and gives one of the sharpest rebukes in the Gospel. "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man" (8:33). Peter wanted a Christ without a cross. He was wrong, and he was speaking with a voice Jesus had heard before, in the wilderness.

Then Jesus calls the crowd along with His disciples and gives one of the most demanding sentences in the New Testament. "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (8:34–35). The Christian life is not a slightly improved version of our own self-managed life. It is a deliberate dying to self for the sake of Christ and the gospel. There are no other terms.

Six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. He is transfigured before them. Moses and Elijah appear. The Father's voice declares again, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him" (9:7). Down the mountain they go, into a noisy scene of failed deliverance from a demon. "I believe; help my unbelief!" (9:24). Mark 8:31–9:29 takes us up and down the mountain of discipleship. The cross is the way. Self-denial is the cost. The glory is real. And the work of God in our lives is sustained by His power, not by our cleverness or strength. This week we sit with the price Jesus actually asks of those who would follow Him.

Group Discussion: Right after Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ, Jesus began to teach openly that the Christ must suffer, be rejected, and be killed. Peter could not accept it. We can be tempted to want a Christ shaped to our preferences instead of the Christ Scripture actually gives us. Where do you see this temptation at work today (in our culture, in modern preaching, even in our own hearts), and what does it cost a person, a church, or a generation to want the wrong kind of Christ?

Personal Reflection: Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (8:34). Self-denial is rarely abstract. There is almost always a specific “self” the Lord is calling each of us to deny right now. What is the specific self-denial Christ is asking of you in this season, and what is making it hard to say yes to it?

Read Mark 8:31–9:29

Study Questions

1. In verse 31 Jesus says plainly, “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.” What is Jesus teaching about the necessity of His cross and resurrection, why does Mark emphasize the word “must,” and how does this passion prediction shape what the Gospel of Mark is actually about (compare Isaiah 53; Acts 2:23; 1 Corinthians 15:3–4)?
2. Peter wanted a Christ without a cross. He represents every disciple who wants the benefits of Jesus without the suffering of following Him. Where in your own life are you tempted to follow a “Christ without a cross” (a Christ who blesses your plans without ever crossing them), and what would honest discipleship look like instead?
3. To both the crowd and His disciples Jesus says, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (8:34). What does Jesus actually mean by “deny himself” and “take up his cross,” how is this different from common popular uses of the phrase, and how does Luke 14:25–33 fill out what it means to count the cost of being a disciple?
4. Self-denial is not vague. It is the daily, specific work of saying no to the lordship of self in concrete areas of life. What self is Christ asking you to deny this season (a particular ambition, an attachment, a habit, an entitlement, a fear), and what would actually taking up that cross look like in practice this week?
5. Jesus says, “Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (8:35), and then asks, “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” (8:36). What is Christ teaching about the great exchange of the Christian life, the eternal stakes He is naming, and the way these verses should reorder the goals and aspirations of every believer?
6. Most of us measure our lives by what we have gained: career, comfort, security, recognition, relationships. Where in your life have you been quietly trying to save your life on your own terms, and what would it mean to lose that area for the sake of Christ and the gospel and actually trust Him with the outcome?
7. Six days after the passion prediction, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain and is transfigured before them. Moses and Elijah appear, and the Father declares, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him” (9:7). Connecting this scene with 2 Peter 1:16–18, Hebrews 1:1–3, and John 1:14, what is Mark teaching about the deity and glory of Christ, His relationship to the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah), and the unique authority of His word?

8. At the Transfiguration the Father commanded the disciples, "Listen to him." Where in your own life has Jesus been speaking, in His Word, through faithful teaching, through brothers and sisters, and you have been slow to actually listen, and what does the Father's command mean for the way you orient your attention this week?
9. Coming down the mountain, the disciples cannot cast a demon out of a boy whose father pleads, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (9:24). Jesus delivers the boy and later tells the disciples, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer" (9:29). What is Christ teaching about the genuine but imperfect faith of His people, the indispensable role of prayer in the spiritual battle, the dangers of self-reliance in ministry, and the union of believing and praying in the Christian life (compare Ephesians 6:10–20; James 5:13–18; Hebrews 4:14–16)?
10. Mark has placed the call to take up the cross, the glory of the Transfiguration, and the desperate prayer of the father side by side. Each part of the chapter is in every faithful disciple's life: the cross, the glimpses of glory, and the prayer "I believe; help my unbelief." As you close this lesson, where do you most need to ask Christ for help in your unbelief this week, and what concrete act of obedience would give shape to that prayer?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Isaiah 53, the suffering Servant whose work Christ fulfilled at the cross; Luke 14:25–33, counting the cost of being a disciple; 2 Peter 1:16–21, Peter's eyewitness testimony of the Transfiguration and the more sure word of prophecy; Ephesians 6:10–20, the spiritual armor and the centrality of prayer in the real battle; Hebrews 12:1–4, looking to Jesus who endured the cross as we run our own race.