

# The King's People's Pain

## *The Servant King & the King's Servants: A Study in Mark 1-10 Sermon 10*

Mark 8:31-38

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One of the most striking things about Jesus' resurrection appearance was that his resurrected body bore the scars of his crucifixion. Appealing to the doubting Thomas, Jesus says, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side" (John 20:27). And in scenes of the end of time, when God's people are worshiping God's Son in heaven, it is not only the Lion of the Tribe of Judah pictured. The saints will worship "the Lamb that was slain" (see Revelation 5:5-6).

Jesus' scars endure forever because Jesus' suffering is essential to his love. As we saw last week, Jesus taught in Mark 8:31 that the Son of Man *must* suffer many things and be killed. Jesus' willingness to endure suffering was a way he displayed his love for his Father, and Jesus' suffering was how he purchased life and redemption for us.

Today we continue in Mark 8 and move from Jesus' sufferings to the sufferings of Jesus' people:

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" (8:34).

Pain and suffering are part of life. Whether you follow Jesus or follow some other way, you can't avoid them. But Jesus is saying something more. He's saying that if you want to live God's way in a world often opposed to God, then you'll face additional trials. Sometimes obeying God will put you at odds with the lifestyles of friends. Sometimes obeying God will put you at odds with a political affiliation. Sometimes obeying God will put you at odds with the desires of your own family. And always, obeying God will require self-denial. *Jesus is king, not me.*

Jesus uses a vivid picture to describe the cost of following him: Crosses and crucifixions are not everyday sights for modern people. But they were for people living around cities in the Roman Empire. Typically, the vertical part of the cross would remain in the ground; and the person on their way to die would be forced to carry the crossbar. "*Take up your call to a painful death filled with public shame,*" Jesus says, "*if you want to follow me.*"

This passage is strong medicine. Strong, because it doesn't taste good going down: *deny myself; take up a cross?! How can this be good news?* Medicine, however, because as we'll soon see, it's really an invitation to become our true selves, to taste true life, and to know the eternal joy of treasuring Jesus enough to let go of the world.

The passage is structured simply: One command in vs. 34—*take up your cross and follow me*—is followed by four reasons for keeping it in verses 35-38.

The little word “for” begins verses 35, 36, 37, and 38. It means these four sentences offer four reasons for obeying the command in verse 34; instead of the word for, you could begin each verse with “because of this reason....” Changing the rhetorical questions to statements, we could present the logic of the passage as follows:

34: Take up your cross and follow me...

35: Because whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.

36: Because it doesn't profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul.

37: Because a man cannot compensate for the loss of his life.

38: Because 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.

We will briefly consider each reason Jesus gives for following him. Because I think these reasons actually build, one atop the other, to a climax in verse 38, I am going to start at the bottom, and we'll work our way up.<sup>1</sup>

Picture the way a deck is supported: you can see the beam, but there is a footing—often of poured concrete—that sits beneath the ground, often out of sight. We'll begin with the footing that supports Jesus' command.

## Reason 1:

***If you're ashamed of Jesus today, he'll be ashamed of you tomorrow.***

Jesus' final reason for following him comes in verse 38. There he says,

**"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." Mark 8:38**

Every week when we say the Creed, we say that we believe Jesus "will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead." These words come from passages like this in Mark 8:38. Jesus is drawing from the vision in Daniel 7 we referred to last week:

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a Son of Man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away... (Daniel 7:13-14).

*Why is Jesus bringing up the final judgment here?*

Because a person's relationship with Jesus in the present points toward their relationship with Jesus in the future. God has sent His Son, Jesus, into the world to save the lost. Those who are ashamed to be associated with Jesus amidst a sinful world will find themselves separated from Jesus in the world to come.

This is a hard teaching, and not popular today—the final judgment. We want to assume that God loves everyone the same, no matter how they relate to His Son. We want to believe that if there is an afterlife, everything works out for everyone in the end. Except for people like Hitler and whatever modern politician you currently hate everyone “gets in.”

But notice how the logic of our passage changes if we change this foundational doctrine of verse 38:

38: When the Son of man returns, he accepts everyone, no matter what, even those who are ashamed of him and reject him.

37: Therefore, a man can pay any price to get his life back in the end, because Jesus is cheap.

36: Therefore, it profits a man much to gain the whole world, because he already possesses eternal life.

35: Therefore, whoever holds tightly to his own life, is smart; but whoever loses his life in order to follow Jesus, really loses it, so is a fool.

34: Therefore, if anyone asks you to deny yourself, take up a cross and follow Jesus, you should instead embrace yourself, lay down that burden, and walk away.

Universalism, the idea that everything works out in the end, makes the death of Jesus, and the suffering of his disciples, meaningless. Whatever else marks the mission of a local church, bringing people into a saving relationship with Jesus and helping them love him must be at that mission’s center.

## Reason 2:

***Only Jesus is valuable enough to handle the value of your life.***

**“For what can a man give in return for his soul?” Mark 8:37**

The second reason to follow Jesus at any cost comes in verse 37, a verse we looked at last week: “For what can a man give in return for his soul?” (8:37). This is a rhetorical question. The assumed answer: “nothing.” If at the end of time, you’ve lost your soul, there is nothing that would compensate for such a loss. And you won’t be able to present any payment to God for it. But you will offer your good deeds: *look at all the nice things I did*. You will offer excuses: *but I had it rough, circumstances were not great*. But God will ask, “*What about my Son? Why did you find your own plans and desires more valuable than the offer of my son? My Son was sent as the payment for your life, but you scorned Him.*”

Do you know how valuable you are? Have you considered the miracle of your existence? Do you know from where this gift has come? I watched a nature documentary recently about the coastline of British Columbia. During a small period, tens of thousands of Pacific Herring come to the shores and spawn. There is something like twenty-thousand eggs per square foot. Twenty thousand—think of that! The vast majority won’t make it. This isn’t a biology class, but the likelihood that a human egg ends up becoming a human being is just as small. Do you know what an unbelievable miracle it is that you exist? The odds are so unlikely. Yet here you are. Do you know you were God’s creation—that He wove you together in your mother’s womb (Psalm 139)?

And do you know that you’ll exist forever? God has given you *eternal* existence. And God has sent His Son to purchase eternal life for you. The alternative is eternal estrangement from Him. So, what could you possibly give God in exchange for this gift, if you just use your existence for your own ends?

So, give yourself to Jesus—the author of your life. Give yourself to him in sacrificial servanthood. No matter the cost. Why? Because you have nothing else besides him, to secure the value of your life.

### **Reason 3:**

***If you gain all earthly glory, only to lose yourself, you’ve gained nothing.***

**“For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” Mark 8:36**

In a vivid scene in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus tells a parable:

“The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”’ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:16-21).

Jesus uses this same word, “soul” in Luke as he does here. It stands for more than our physical life; it stands for one’s whole life; its depth and eternal breadth.

I’m often struck when I read of a powerful or famous person dying—whether they were known for good reasons or ill. Like Hugh Hefner, or John Lennon, Babe Ruth, or Michael Gerson (a well-known writer here in town who sadly passed away last week. Our prayers go out to the Gerson family). When people who tasted glory here—whether in pleasure, fame, or power—meet God, I wonder how their earthly treasure looks in comparison to Him.

The Apostle Paul says “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (Romans 8:18). Jesus says the treasures of this present age aren’t worth comparing to the treasures of true life: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Matthew 13:44).

The philosopher Peter Kreeft ponders something along these lines. Freud asks this question in *Civilization and Its Discontents*: Modern man has become like a god, master of the forces of nature by his science and technology. Yet he is not happier than premodern man. Why? Freud thought the answer had something to do with sexual repression and guilt; but the Pill and the Sexual Revolution have pretty much removed the first, and Freudianism has removed the second (guilt), among major segments of the population—and yet they are not happy. Is there a simple, obvious psychological explanation for this?”

There is, Kreeft writes: “For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? (8:36).<sup>2</sup>

Why should you risk losing things in this life for the sake of following Jesus? Because to gain the whole world, only to lose your true self, is the tragedy of all tragedies.

## Reason 4:

### *In giving yourself, you become yourself.*

**“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.” Mark 8:35**

John Stott says of this passage: “If you insist on holding on to yourself, and on living for yourself, and refuse to let yourself go, you will lose yourself. But if you are willing to give yourself away in love, then, at the moment of complete abandonment, when you imagine that everything is lost, the miracle takes place, and you find yourself and your freedom.”<sup>3</sup>

Now, this can seem like a general principle. That any type of self-sacrifice, paradoxically, proves self-liberating. This is true, to a degree. But notice Jesus is not general in this verse, but specific. The person who saves their life is the person sacrificing their life “for my sake and the Gospel’s.”

When you give yourself to others for the sake of Christ because you are his disciple, you are serving not only them but also him. At the end of time, the king will say to his people:

“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer

them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me’” (Matthew 25:31-40).

Jesus’ call to self-denial is hard but turns out to be liberating. Our culture has imbibed the toxin of expressive individualism. This is the idea that the path to happiness and freedom is being yourself, with no restraints or constraints. But true freedom is not being whatever you want; it’s becoming who you truly are.

A fish is made for water. Freedom for a fish is not the ability to go on land, but the ability to enjoy the water. Human beings are made to swim in the ocean of loving God and others (Mark 12:29-31)—that’s the water we’re made to swim in. And true love is *self-giving*. We are, therefore, by nature, created to give ourselves away. To return to John Stott again:

God made me for loving. But loving is giving, self-giving. Therefore, in order to be myself, I have to deny myself and give myself. In order to be free, I have to serve. In order to live, I have to die to my own self-centeredness. In order to find myself, I have to lose myself in loving....It is only sacrificial service, the giving of the self in love to God and others, which is perfect freedom.<sup>4</sup>

Let’s see if we can summarize these four reasons and see how they motivate us to answer Jesus’ command in verse 34. Jesus says, “Friend, let go of your life, and instead give it in radical service to me and my kingdom. And here are four reasons why:

1. Because at the end of time, I embrace the man or woman who has embraced me.
2. Because I have the resources to pay for your life—to forgive all your sins before God’s perfect judgment.
3. Because any treasure you gain by not following me, are like ashes compared to the True Life you gain by being with me.
4. Because self-denial and self-sacrifice for my sake and the Gospel is the doorway to becoming your true self: a man or woman set free to love God and love others.



The alternative? A damned life; a debt you can't pay; a treasure that fades; a self in bondage to itself. Such is the path the world offers you, dear friend.

*Which way will you choose?*

**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."**

**Mark 8:34**

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## Endnotes

1. As Robert Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross*, pg. 434, writes, "Each saying in vv. 35-38 starts with γάρ, "for." The repeated γάρ makes each of these sayings a reason to obey the command in v 34, but the reasons build one on another till they reach a climax in a saying on the last judgement [v.38]."
2. Peter Kreeft, *The Man Who Left His Mark: How Mark's Gospel Answers Modern Questions* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2022), 49.
3. John Stott, *The Gospel: A Life-Changing Message*, 32-33. For a wonderful little article about Stott's thought of denying yourself for the sake of Christ, check out Tim Chester, "[Give Yourself to Find Yourself: John Stott on the Gospel and Freedom.](#)" *Desiring God*, September 12, 2020.
4. John Stott, *The Gospel: A Life-Changing Message*, 32-33.