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And he said to them, “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.”

(Mark 8:34–9:1)

Introduction

In our last study, we explored what it means to have the mind of Christ. That is, the Christian is called to follow Jesus, which requires denying self and taking up our cross. The true disciple of Jesus commits herself to die, as Jesus died: humiliated, mistreated, scorned, and suffering. Like Jesus, the Christian must be crucified before crowned. The Christian has a mindset for this. This is the point of the text.

The disciple of the Lord Jesus is one who follows (imitates) him. This means that the disciple embraces a willingness to suffer humiliation (v. 34) because the disciple has embraced a commitment to an ongoing calculation/evaluation (vv. 35–38).

As we return to this passage, we will revisit these themes as we move towards the final aspect of the call to discipleship: embracing an assurance of sovereign vindication (8:38–9:1).

This passage commences with the revelation of Peter’s skewed thinking. He was simply thinking like the nominal Jews of his day. Much like the nominal and perhaps misguided triumphalistic Christians of our day, Peter expected his best life now. After all, Jesus was Messiah and King, and he had brought in God’s kingdom. How ludicrous to think that Messiah should suffer! On the contrary, Messiah should come on a white horse to conquer, not on the foal of a donkey to be killed! This thinking lay behind Peter’s strong rebuke of Jesus. As Matthew makes clear, Peter told the Lord that he must avoid the cross—he must avoid all suffering (see Matthew 16:22). Jesus then publicly rebuked Peter and the rest of the disciples for their satanic thinking. This leads to his address to the crowd and his disciples, telling them the cost of discipleship. It will cost them their lives. Yes, he and they

will receive a crown, but only once they have carried a cross. Success in the kingdom of God requires suffering for the King and his kingdom.

This needed to be their mindset, and it needs to be ours. We must make up our minds to suffer if we will be saved. As we consider the words of Jesus, may we make up our minds, once for all, to daily make up our minds to follow him the way he has prescribed. Not only is Jesus the only way (John 14:6), but there is no other way to experience him as the way.

We Must Consider the Crux of Discipleship

To begin with, we must consider the crux of discipleship: “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).

In this crucial verse, Jesus was saying, “If you will benefit from me—if you will save your life—you must reject self-promotion, self-preservation, and self-determination. This is what it means to come after me.” This is precisely what Jesus did for the gospel’s sake. This is what it means to have the mind of Christ. This is what it means to set your mind on the things of God (8:33). This is extremely countercultural, but it is the only way to escape the judgement awaiting an adulterous and sinful generation (8:38).

As Grogan comments, this crucial call involves “a total revolution of outlook, a major readjustment of values and so of priorities.” And as we will see, it is the only response to makes sense. So, make up your mind daily to do so.

Embrace what Jesus did on his cross, willingly embracing the cost of embracing your cross. If you make up your mind to do so, you will be saved. But you will also suffer. So, why would you do this? In the next verses, Jesus tells us.

We Must Consider the Cost of Discipleship

We must also consider the cost of discipleship:

For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? 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 8:35–38)

After Jesus succinctly revealed what his call to discipleship involves, he told his hearers to consider and to calculate, to examine and evaluate, what is at stake. He was telling them to count the cost.

Jesus exhorted them (and us) to do the math. He urged them to do the calculations comparing the value of gaining the world, of going along with the crowd, of the easy way of simply coasting with the current of the crowd over against the value of gaining what you can never lose: the value of being right with God, of saving your soul. It really is no choice at all. It is a no-brainer. And yet multitudes refuse to make the right choice. They senselessly live without regard for either the temporal or eternal state of their souls. They devalue their lives, thereby devaluing Christ and his gospel. They cheapen their lives, thereby dismissing Jesus and his gospel as worthless. This makes no sense at all. This is truly a mindless way to live.

Jesus issued four statements, each beginning with the preposition “for,” to motivate the crowd and the disciples to follow him. He provided four powerful motivations to help his listeners make up their minds. In the words of Isaiah, Jesus was saying, “Come now, let us reason together” (Isaiah 1:18). If you properly count the cost, you will correctly make up your mind to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow him.

It is important to see that, in each of these four statements, Jesus clarified that it would be a painful decision. That is, if they made up their mind to follow Jesus, they were making up their minds to suffer. And so for you and me.

In other words, Jesus was saying, “I know it will be difficult. I know it will be costly to follow me. But consider the alternative and consider the blessed assurance that attends those who make the right choice.”

Consider the Paradox

The Lord presents a stark paradox in v. 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.” We can paraphrase this way: “For whoever refuses to abandon self-promotion, whoever refuses to abandon self-preservation, whoever refuses to abandon self-determination, neither promotes nor preserves nor determines their well-being. In fact, they will lose the very thing they are so keen to protect.”

This is both a problematic and a productive paradox. If you want to prosper, you must let go of your definition of prosperity. As Edwards so helpfully summarises,

The irony of v. 35 is that this one thing cannot be saved by preserving it, but only by forsaking it in favor of following Jesus on the way of the cross. The one for whom the way of Jesus is more important than his own existence will secure his eternal being; but the one whose existence is more important than Jesus will lose both Jesus and his existence.

Which is more important to you?

If, for Jesus' sake and his gospel's, you are willing to experience destruction, you will experience preservation. And vice versa. Those who pursue self-promotion will experience self-demotion. Those who pursue self-preservation will experience self-destruction. Those who pursue self-determination will experience soul-damnation. As Jim Elliott so famously said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose." But sadly, hell will be filled with those who are fools. Those who make up their mind to trust God's designed and prescribed paradox will find life more abundant, and free.

Consider the Profit

Jesus next asked a piercing question: "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" (v. 36). At the end of your life, if you don't come after Jesus, you will forever have to answer the haunting question, "For what profit did I gain by refusing to lose it all for Jesus?"

Jesus was not speaking primarily about financial or material wealth and possessions. Instead, he was emphatically making the point that, if you gain the approval of the whole world, if you succeed in promoting yourself, if you succeed in preserving yourself, if you succeed in determining your destiny, you will be the biggest loser. If we seek to acquire the world that is, to be acceptable to the majority, we abandon our soul.

Again, Jesus said this against the backdrop of his call to leave all for his sake and the gospel's. To follow Jesus is not the path to popularity. But it is the path to true profit, as God defines it.

It's important to see that Jesus was making the point that one can make a profit in this world. He made it clear that, in a sense, one can gain the whole world. You can succeed at self-promotion. You can succeed at self-preservation. You can succeed at self-determination. As the old saying puts it, you can have the world as your oyster. But one must consider the real cost of such a profit margin. The cost is the eternal well-being of your soul.

The cost of winning the world is losing your soul because you cannot have Jesus and self at the same time. The world demands the centrality of self. The gospel demands the crucifixion of self. If you choose the world, your temporal profit, which may be great, will in the end prove to be eternal loss, which will be greater. God keeps the books. He who does the final audit determines in the end who is the most profitable. And it is not the one who dies with the most toys.

Consider the Price

Jesus called his disciples to consider the price: “For what can a man give in return for his soul?” (v. 37). He employed the language of finance in this challenging call to his listeners, speaking of the exchange rate of a soul. He was well aware that those who follow him may in fact die to do so. So the question comes to the fore, is it worth it? The answer depends on how one values one’s life. How much value do you place on the human soul? Perhaps that question has never been more appropriate than in our day.

Clearly, Jesus’ rhetorical question informs us that the human soul has inestimable value. Edwards summarises, “It takes the word of Jesus to teach the infinite worth of the human soul, and he alone is sufficient to preserve it.”

This third question flows logically from the immediately preceding one. The whole world does not equate with the value of the human soul. The human soul is priceless. Therefore to lose one’s life for Jesus’ sake and the gospel’s, in order to win your soul, is the most profitable investment we can ever make. O that people gave such investment more thought than they do to their retirement portfolio!

Again, Jesus taught that the human life—the human soul—is of immeasurable worth. As the psalmist wrote, “Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice” (Psalm 49:7–8). But though no man can pay enough to redeem another human being back to God, the God-Man can—and he did!

I said earlier that the price paid by us to enjoy the treasure of having Jesus as our Saviour is small. And it is. But the price he paid was great—infinately so. This is not because we are worthy, but because he is.

When we truly appreciate the eternal value of our soul, we will cease to sell our souls for the price of self-promotion, for the ransom of self-preservation, for the wages of sinful self-determination. Rather, like the man who found a treasure in a field, we will joyfully give up everything we have in order to truly have it all (Matthew 13:44).

Consider the Promise

In 8:38–9:1, Jesus tells us to consider the promise:

“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.”

And he said to them, “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.”

Have you ever heard someone say, in response to strong words, “Is that a threat?” followed by the retort, “No, it’s a promise”? That is sort of what we have here. These words of Jesus were both a threat and a promise. In fact, there are three promises here. And each of them is for the purpose of moving Jesus’ hearers to correctly make up their minds to take up their cross and follow him. They serve the same purpose for you and me.

First, it contains the “negative” promise of rejection by the Lord of those who reject the Lord. Second, it contains an implied promise of acceptance by the Lord of those who accept/identify with the Lord. Third, it contains the promise of Jesus’ exaltation. We need to appreciate the third promise before we can properly appreciate the first two.

The Second Coming of Jesus?

Many years ago, I read a book by Australian theologian Broughton Knox. This brilliant man had a big impact on the founding of George Whitfield Theological College in Cape Town. He titled one chapter “The Five Comings of Jesus.” This was news to me! I knew about Jesus’ first coming, and I was very familiar with this second coming, but what were these other three?

As I read his study of various passages, I came to realise that he was correct.

When we think of the “coming” of Jesus, we usually think of his physical coming to earth. No doubt, the Scriptures do speak of Jesus’ coming to earth at the incarnation, and the Scriptures do speak of his physical coming to earth a second, future time. But Knox points out there are three other “comings” of Jesus: (1) His coming for his saints upon their death (John 14:1ff); (2) his coming with the coming of the Holy Spirit (John 14:28–15:26); and (3) his coming in judgement on Jerusalem (2 Peter 3; Rev 1:4–8; 22:17; etc.).

But I would add another “coming” of Jesus, which is connected to the last one above. I refer to Jesus’ coming to his Father as revealed in Daniel 7:13–14. This passage in Daniel is referenced in Revelation 1:7. This coming of Jesus, I believe, is referenced in Mark 8:38–9:1. And, when properly considered, it is this coming that informs us in such a way so as to empower us to rightly make up our minds to follow Jesus. His promises are true!

Briefly, Jesus, having spoken of his death and resurrection (8:31) then spoke of his ascension, when he received his kingdom at the right hand of the Father (see Psalms 2 and 110). This is what Daniel referenced in 7:13–14, and which John revealed.

Assurance from the Ascension

Jesus came to the Father when he ascended. The historical evidence of this was not only him sending forth the Holy Spirit ten days later (Acts 2), but many years later this was further evidenced when he came in judgement on Jerusalem. At that time, every eye of

those who pierced him saw him, so that all the tribes in the land of Israel wailed on account of him (cf. Matthew 26:64). The Jews wanted a conquering Messiah. They would get one. But not the way they assumed (see Malachi 3:1–4).

Jesus was promising his hearers that he would be enthroned in his kingdom. He had come, you will remember, preaching the gospel of the kingdom (1:15–16). He would establish God's kingdom and would rule over it. They needed to believe this. They must believe this.

But they must believe the way that he would establish this kingdom, which would be by his denying self and taking up his cross. He would first take the cross, then the crown. If these people would not identify with him now, they would be judged by him later, which is precisely what occurred in the destruction of Jerusalem.

Jesus called their generation an “adulterous and sinful” one. Peter would use similar words when he preached the gospel on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:36–41; cf. 3:17–23). Jesus was warning his hearers that, when he exercised conquering authority, they must not assume that they would be safe, unless they first identified with him in his cross work. That was true then, and it remains true today. If you and I do not identify with the humiliation of the cross work of Jesus now, we will not share in his crowning glory later. This is the promise Jesus was making and they needed to consider it. So must we.

How Long?

Verse 1 of chapter 9 is proof of this interpretation. It should probably be 8:39. Nevertheless, it is clear that Jesus was not referring in 8:38 to his final coming to earth in judgement, for he said, “Truly I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come in power.” Unless these individuals are at least two thousand years old, and still living today, Jesus must have been speaking of his coming into his kingdom at his ascension, demonstrated in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Many interpret this differently. They say that Jesus was referring to the next scene: his transfiguration. They say that Jesus was simply saying that he would give them a glimpse of what will happen in the future when he returns at the end of history. But though I agree that the transfiguration served as an encouraging portent of the future, it doesn't make sense of the phrase “some standing here will not taste of death.” It's doubtful that many of his hearers died in the time between this statement and his transfiguration just a short while later! However, since the destruction of Jerusalem was nearly forty years away, this statement is most appropriate.

I Am Not Ashamed

When Jesus spoke of their being “ashamed,” it is in the context of denying self, taking up one’s cross, and following him (8:34). He was asking, “Are you willing to suffer shame on my behalf?”

It is in the context of identifying with him and being willing to suffer for his sake and for his gospel (8:35). Jesus was saying that, if they would not identify with him in his humiliation, he would not identify with them in his exaltation. In fact, he would treat them as his enemies. One would think that such a promise would help them to correctly make up their minds. It is meant to do the same for us. Take your stand with Jesus and save your soul.

Though Jesus long ago came in judgement on Jerusalem, that served as a preview of his yet to be final coming to earth when he will judge the living and the dead. He will return one day, and all his enemies will finally be made his footstool. At that time, those that Yahweh has not conquered by the Sword of the Spirit—that is, the gospel (Psalm 110:2–3)—will be conquered by his wrath (Psalm 110:5–7). Therefore, please, make up your mind to repent and to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Make up your mind now!

Consider the Pain

Having looked at these verses, having considered these truths, let me bring this to a practical conclusion and application by pointing us to the final consideration that runs through this passage. That is, we must consider the pain. If we will share in Jesus’ crown, we must (as we have seen repeatedly) first share in his cross. Without pain, there can be no gain.

Job said it well: “Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7). This is true of every person, saved or lost. Suffering is the lot of every person because sin has messed up life. But for the Christian, there is additional suffering that unbelievers do not experience. The disciple of Jesus is called to suffer as a Christian, to suffer for Christ’s sake (1 Peter 2:20; 3:14, 17; 4:15, 19).

The Christian suffers what others suffer: poor health, economic hardship, relational disappointment, crime, effects of corruption in the wider society, natural disasters; etc. For as long as we are in this world, we will suffer the effects of a groaning creation, a creation that God has subjected to a curse because of our sin (Romans 8:16–25).

But in addition to this normal suffering, the Christian will suffer at the hands of those who do not have the mind of Christ. And it is precisely at these times that we are called to make up our minds: Will we embrace suffering or will we be like those who cause us to suffer?

I remember, as a young man, hearing my pastor preach on loving your enemies by praying for them. He made the very helpful point that if we don't, we will probably become like them. How true. And how scary. And how easy for this to happen.

It is precisely when faced with this kind of suffering for Jesus and the gospel's sake that we must make up our mind to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Peter learned this lesson and he wrote about it in his first epistle:

knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you.

(1 Peter 1:18–25)

Practically, what does this look like?

When you are wronged, will you deny yourself revenge for Jesus and his gospel? When you are slandered, will you deny yourself a defence? When you are hurt, will you deny yourself the luxury of hatred and rather die to self and follow Jesus by loving your enemy? When you are mistreated while sharing the gospel or standing for biblical truth, will you deny yourself, die to self, and follow Jesus by continuing to speak the truth? When you are offered the opportunity to spend your money on an extra and at the same time you know of a need in the congregation, will you deny yourself, die to self and follow Jesus who said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive"?

Will you make up your mind to embrace the pain of losing friends because of a higher loyalty? When you hear of a gospel opportunity that requires your time or your treasures, will you deny yourself spending those on yourself or will you put God's purpose first?

Will you make up your mind that, for the good of the church, you will stay put and persevere to be a solution to problems, or will you choose the easy path of leaving?

Make Up Your Mind, Daily

We have spent a lot of time in chapter 8, and especially in these latter verses, because it is essential that we understand what it means to be a follower of Jesus. In a land where there is so much nominal Christianity, we need to keep preaching the full and true gospel. We must preach Jesus Christ and him crucified. We must preach the good news that those who turn from their sin, and thereby who turn away from a self-absorbed, self-promoting, self-preserving, and self-determining world and who turn to the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved from their sins and reconciled to God.

It is imperative that we understand that embracing this good news will put us in a position where we will suffer. But this suffering is worth the pain because of the profit to our soul and because of the eternal pleasure of knowing God in Christ.

To follow Jesus requires that one consider the facts, thinks through the issues, and then make up our mind to follow him. If one does not follow him, clearly that person is not thinking.

But I want us to consider that this is not merely a once-for-all decision. Rather it is a daily one. We must daily do the math—sometimes several times a day—and make the correct value judgements: Will we save ourselves or sell ourselves?

After all we have heard, it is time to make up your mind. Make the right choice. Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus.

AMEN