

# THE WAY OF THE CROSS

by Ray C. Stedman

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I had anticipated studying the Transfiguration with you at this time, but, as I worked through the passage, I found that the closing paragraph of Chapter 8 is so important, so central to the message of this entire Gospel, that we dare not hurry over it. With it we begin the second half of our study in the Gospel of Mark. We have been watching One who came as the servant of man -- healing, helping, comforting, restoring -- yet with such power and authority that, along with the disciples, our eyes have been opened finally to see that he is nothing less than the Lord of glory himself, that he is "The Servant Who Rules" in all the far-flung creation of God. This has been the theme of the first half of our study in Mark.

But no sooner have we discovered who Jesus was and is, than, incredibly, he begins to speak about his death. This was startling to the disciples, and it represents the turning point in the Gospel of Mark. From this point, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, to the darkness of Gethsemane's garden, to the judgment hall of Pilate, to the whipping post, and to the bloody cross. Yet, on the way, as we shall see, he is still ministering to men, still healing, still comforting, still cleansing, restoring, and blessing men. But now he is "The Ruler Who Serves," and this is the theme of the last half of our study in Mark.

If you will permit me just a word of outline, so that you can see where we are going, this last half falls into two major divisions: Beginning with Chapter 8, Verse 34, and continuing through Chapter 13, we have what I am going to call *The Way Of The Cross*. It is our Lord's preparation of his disciples for the dire event that awaits him as he comes into Jerusalem. Chapters 14 through 16, which conclude the Gospel, relate the events of the cross and the resurrection.

In the division we begin now, *The Way Of The Cross*, there are also two subdivisions:

- First, our Lord's preparation of the disciples at Caesarea, at Capernaum, and proceeding down the Jordan River valley.
- Second, the events at Jericho, on the Mount of Olives, and in Jerusalem.

Today we will take only that part of his preparation of the disciples which took place at Caesarea Philippi in the north of Galilee at the foot of Mount Hermon.

After Jesus had announced the cross to his disciples, had been rebuked by Peter, and had rebuked him in turn, Mark tells us:

**And he called to him the multitude with his disciples, and said to them, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." {Mark 8:34 RSV}**

This is our Lord's outline of the process of discipleship. Here, in his own words, we look at what it means to be a disciple. The very fact that our Lord called the multitudes together with the disciples has raised questions in people's minds. Many have wondered if this indicates that he was seeking to make disciples, i.e., evangelizing; or was he simply telling his own disciples what it will mean to live as disciples? In other words it raises the question that many ask: Can you be a Christian and not be a disciple? -- Is discipleship a second stage of Christianity? -- Are there many Christians, but only a relatively few disciples? -- Can you be a Christian and not be a disciple? This is a very important question, and one our Lord himself will answer for us as we go on in our study.

Let us focus our attention now on these simple but very crucial words of Jesus, whereby he gives us the process of discipleship. There are three steps, he says:

First, "If any man [anyone] would come after me, let him deny himself..." Notice that he does not say, "Let him hate himself." He is not asking us to deny our basic humanity, our personhood. If you take it that way, you have missed the point. And he is not telling us that we are to abandon ourselves. We cannot get outside of ourselves in any way. So we must understand what he does mean by this phrase, "deny himself," which is the first step of discipleship.

The word "deny" means to "disavow any connection with something, to state that you are not connected in any way with whatever is in view." Interestingly enough, it is the very word used to refer to Peter's denial of Jesus a little later on. As he was standing in the courtyard of the high priest, warming himself at a fire, a little maiden asked him, "Do you know this man?" {cf, Mark 14:66-72}. Peter denied that he had any connection with Jesus, said he did not know him, and affirmed his disavowal with oaths and curses. Thus he denied his Lord. This is exactly the word Jesus chooses when he tells us that, if we are going to come after him, we must first deny ourselves.

It is important also to understand that he does not mean what we usually mean by "self-denial." By this we usually mean that we are giving up something. Many people feel it is only right to deny themselves something during Lent, to give up various bad habits, like wearing overshoes in bed. But Jesus is not talking about this kind of "self-denial." He is never concerned about what we do so much as with what we are. Therefore he is not talking about giving up luxuries, or even necessities, but about denying self, which is entirely different.

Denying self means that we repudiate our natural feelings about ourselves, i.e., our right to ourselves, our right to run our own lives. We are to deny that we own ourselves. We do not have the final right to decide what we are going to do, or where we are going to go. When it is stated in those terms, people sense immediately that Jesus is saying something very fundamental. It strikes right at the heart of our very existence, because the one thing that we, as human beings, value and covet and protect above anything else is the right to make ultimate decisions for ourselves. We refuse to be under anything or anybody, but reserve the right to make the final decisions of our lives. This is what Jesus is talking about. He is not talking about giving up this or that, but about giving up our selves. Carved on the wall of the PBC auditorium is a verse taken from Paul's writings in First Corinthians, which says the same thing Jesus is saying: "You are not your own; you are bought with a price," {cf, 1 Cor 6:19b-20a}. If you are going to follow Jesus, you no longer own yourself. He has ultimate rights; he has Lordship of your life. So you no longer belong to yourself; he must make those final decisions when the great issues of your life hang in the balance. This is what Jesus means by, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself" -- deny our self-trust, deny our self-sufficiency, deny our feeling that we are able to handle life by ourselves and run everything to suit ourselves.

Some years ago I read an article entitled, *The Art of Being A Big Shot*, written by a friend of mine, a very prominent Christian businessman, named Howard Butt. Among many other good things he said, were these words which I quote because they are so illustrative of what our Lord means here:

It is my pride that makes me independent of God. It's appealing to me to feel that I am the master of my fate, that I run my own life, call my own shots, go it alone. But, that feeling is my basic dishonesty. I can't go it alone. I have to get help from other people, and I can't ultimately rely on myself. I'm dependent on God for my very next breath. It is dishonest of me to pretend that I'm anything but a man -- small, weak, and limited. So, living independent of God is self-delusion. It is not just a matter of pride being an unfortunate little trait, and humility being an attractive little virtue; it's my inner psychological integrity that's at stake. When I am conceited, I am lying to myself about what I am. I am pretending to be God, and not man. My pride is the idolatrous worship of myself. And that is the national religion of Hell!

That is a very eloquent explanation of what Jesus means when he says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself. Let him give up his rights to run his life, let him submit himself to my leadership, to my Lordship." And this is fundamental to all discipleship. There can be no discipleship apart from it.

The second step immediately follows: "Let him deny himself, and take up his cross..." What does "take up his cross" mean? Well, I am sure these words, falling on the disciples' ears, were almost totally incomprehensible to them. They did not know what he meant. To them, the cross was but a very vague, hazy blur on the horizon of their minds. They did not understand where Jesus was heading. But he knew. And he knew that after the

awful events which were to come in Jerusalem, after the terrible, searing pain of those days was answered by the joy and the glory of resurrection, they would think these words through again and begin to understand what he meant. We who live on this side of the cross find it easier to know what he meant.

But many people think that a cross is any kind of trial or hardship you are going through, or any kind of handicap you must endure -- like a mother-in-law, or a ding-a-ling neighbor or a physical handicap. "That's my cross," we say. But that is not what Jesus means. He himself had many handicaps, many difficulties and trials he endured before he came to his cross. So it is not merely handicap or difficulty or trial. The cross was something different. The cross stood for something in the life of Jesus connected with shame and humiliation. It was a criminal's cross on which he was hung. It was a place of degradation, where he was demeaned and debased.

And so the cross stands forever as a symbol of those circumstances and events in our experience which humble us, expose us, offend our pride, shame us, and reveal our basic evil -- that evil which Jesus described earlier: "Out of the heart of man come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness," {Mark 7:22 RSV}. It is the cross which brings this out. Any circumstance, any incident which does this to us, Jesus says, if we are a disciple, we are to welcome. That is his meaning. "Take up your cross, accept it, glory in it, cling to it, because it is something good for you. It will reduce you to the place where you will be ready to receive the gift of the grace of God." That is why the cross is so valuable to us.

This does not mean only the big things in our life; it is the little things as well. Do you feel hurt when someone forgets your name? Do you get upset when a cashier will not cash your check? Does criticism hurt, even when you know it is justified? Are you rankled when you lose at tennis or golf? All these are minor forms of the cross at work in our lives. The Lord's word is that if we are going to be a disciple, we are not to be offended by these things, we are not to get upset about them; we are to welcome them.

You can see how radical this approach to life is, how different it is from the way the world around would tell us to act. The world says, "Escape. Avoid the situation. Or, if you can't avoid it, then strike back. Get angry, get even, offend in turn. Get upset about it." But the word of Jesus is, "If you're going to be my disciple, deny yourself, and take up your cross."

Then the third step is, "Follow me." This really means, "Obey me." Is it not remarkable that it takes us so long to understand that if disobedience is the name of the game before we are Christians, then certainly obedience is the name of the game after we become Christians. It must be. I am amazed at people who say that they are Christians, but then blatantly, and even pridefully, acknowledge that they do not follow the Lord, do not do what he says. Now, we all struggle with this. I myself fail at this many times. Our Lord is not talking about perfection as a disciple; he is simply telling us what discipleship means, what it involves. It involves following him. It means choosing to do or say what Jesus commands us to do or say, and what he himself did, and looking to him for the power to carry it through. This is what following him means. It is what it meant to the disciples. They obeyed him, and they were taught to look to him for whatever it took to make it possible. In the feeding of the multitude, he told them to feed the crowd, and they did. But he had to supply what it took.

This is what Christianity is all about. The Christian life is following Jesus, doing what he says -- like, "Love your enemy," {Matt 5:44}. "Pray for those who hurt you," {cf, Matt 5:44}. "Forgive those who offend you," {cf, Matt 6:14-15}. Those are not merely wise and helpful words; they represent a way of life our Lord is setting out before us, to which we are expected to conform in the moment when we least feel like it.

When we do not feel like obeying or forgiving or praying, he tells us to do it anyway. "Be kind to the ungrateful and the selfish," {cf, Luke 6:35}. I struggle with that one. I do not want to be kind to people who are ungrateful or selfish, but that is what the Lord says to do. "Bear one another's burdens," {Gal 6:2}. "Freely you have received, freely give," {Matt 10:8}. "Follow me" means obeying these and all the many, many other exhortations of Scripture.

In the original Greek, these steps are stated in the present, continuous tense. That means, "Keep on denying yourself, keep on taking up your cross, keep on following me." This is not the decision of a moment, but a

program for a lifetime, to be repeated again and again, whenever we fall into circumstances which make these choices necessary. This is what it means to be a disciple. Discipleship is denying your right to yourself, and taking up the cross, accepting these incidents and circumstances which expose our pride and conceit, welcoming them, and then following him, doing what he says to do, looking to him for the power.

This is not always a very appealing course, is it? I am sure that it must have struck these disciples and the multitude with very solemn and serious impact. In fact, John tells us that at this point many turned and went back, and followed him no more, because these words seemed to them harsh and demanding. We can always be grateful that our Lord never has invited any to come after him without letting them know what would be involved. He told them straight from the shoulder what they would be getting into. And he does this with us. He is not interested in anybody's becoming a Christian, or attempting to live as a Christian, on false terms. He wants us to understand that this is going to shatter us, change us, make us into a different kind of people. It is bound to. If it has any meaning in our lives at all, it is going to revolutionize us utterly, right to the very basic core of our being. He makes this very clear, right from the start.

And then he goes on to give us the motive which will move us in this direction:

**"For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." {Mark 8:35 RSV}**

That is motive enough, certainly. Who is not interested in saving his life? That is, making it worthwhile, making it complete and full and rich, worth the living. We all want that. Deep down within us, every one of us has a hunger for life and a desire to find it, to the full extent of what it was designed to be. This is what Jesus is talking about. "If this is what you want," he says, "I'll tell you how to acquire it." There are two attitudes toward life which are possible, and you can have only one or the other:

- One is: save your life now, i.e., hoard it, clutch it, cling to it, grasp it, try to get hold of it for yourself, take care of yourself, trust yourself, see that in every situation your first and major concern is, "What's in it for me?" That is one way to live, and millions are living that way today. All of us, at one time or another, do this.
- The other attitude is: lose it, i.e., fling it away, disregard what advantage there may be for you in a situation, and move out in dependence upon God, careless of what may happen to you.

Paul says, "I count not my life dear unto myself," {cf, Acts 20:24 KJV}. Abraham obeyed God, went out into a land he knew not where, on a march without a map, apparently careless of what would happen to him. And his neighbors reproached him, rebuked him for not caring about himself. This is to be a way of life, Jesus says. Trust God, obey him, and put the responsibility for what happens on his shoulders. This is the way of life Jesus offers -- to lose your life like that.

And he says there are only two results which can follow. If you save your life, if you cling to it, hoard it, get all you can for yourself, then, without a doubt, Jesus says, you will lose it. This is not a mere platitude, a truism; he is stating a fundamental law of life. It is absolutely unbreakable. Nobody can break this law. If you save your life, says Jesus, you will lose it. You will find that you have everything you want, but you will not want anything you have. You will find that all of the life you tried to grasp has slipped through your fingers, and you have ended up with a handful of cobwebs and ashes, dissatisfied, hollow and empty, mocked by what you hoped to get.

There are many who are proving this today. Ask the man who has everything, "Are you happy?" He may answer, "Yes, I am. I've got everything I want, I can do anything I like, I can go anywhere, at any time. I've got all the money I need. Yes I'm happy." But if you press him, "Does that mean you're satisfied with yourself, content with your life, fulfilled, convinced that your life has been worthwhile, and that you can go to your grave with a deep sense of having invested your life well?" If you press, you will ultimately get the answer, "No, something's missing. I thought these things would fulfill me, I thought they'd satisfy that deep craving down inside, but they haven't. It is still there. I still feel there must be something beyond, something more that I haven't got." This is what Jesus is talking about. "Save your life, and you will lose it."

"But lose your life for my sake and the gospel's," says Jesus, "lose your life by means of giving yourself away in the cause of Christ, giving up your right to yourself, taking up your cross and following me, and you will save it." You will not waste it, but you will save it. You will find contentment and satisfaction, an inner peace, and a sense of worth about your living. You will discover, not just in heaven some day but right now, that even though you may not have all the things others have, your life will be rich and rewarding and satisfying.

There is an illustration I often use to point up this truth. I can imagine the scene when the Apostle Paul appeared before Nero, the Roman emperor, to give answer to the charges against him. I wish I had been present. I can imagine the emperor, in his royal robes, seated upon a throne. His name was known throughout the empire. But nobody knew of Paul. Here was this obscure little Jew, bald-headed, big-nosed, bandy-legged, totally unimpressive in his physical appearance -- he says so himself in his letters. And he was a leader of an obscure, heretical little sect that was known only as troublemakers. Nobody had heard of Paul, while everybody had heard of Nero. But the interesting thing is that now, two thousand years later, we name our sons Paul, and our dogs Nero.

This is God's part in the work of discipleship. Jesus did not come to call us to ultimate barrenness, weakness, darkness, and death. He called us to life, to richness, to enjoyment, to fulfillment. But he has told us that the way there means death. Discipleship ends in life, not in death. It ends in fulfillment and satisfaction. But the only way that we can find it is by means of a cross.

The final issue is set forth in our Lord's words in the closing part of this paragraph:

**"For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life ["soul" is the Greek word]? For what can a man give in return for his life [soul]?" {Mark 8:36-37 RSV}**

Oh, these questions of Jesus -- how they search us! What does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and lose his own life?

This question hangs over our whole generation, as it has hung over every generation since that day. What good is it to get all the things you want, and have nothing with which to enjoy them, having lost your life in the process? Is it not the very essence of wisdom, if you are going to invest time, and money, and everything you have, to make sure you are able to enjoy the result when you are through? Would anybody knowingly build a house contrary to all the zoning ordinances and building codes, with the certain result that when he has spent all his money and built the house, he will not be permitted even to move in? What foolishness that would be! And yet how many lives are being built without any consideration of this question, or any dealing with the God who stands at the end of the road? This is why Jesus asks, "What would it profit a man, to gain the whole world and lose his life? What can a man give in return for his life?"

Many years ago, archaeologists discovered the tomb of Charlemagne, {the} great 8th- and 9th-century king and emperor of France. When the tomb was opened, after being closed for centuries, the men who entered it found something amazing. They found certain treasures of the kingdom, of course. But in the center of the large vault was a throne, and seated on the throne was the skeleton of Charlemagne, with an open Bible on his lap, and a bony finger pointing at the words, "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" What a tremendous lesson from history to those of us who follow!

Jesus not only asks this question, but he also points out that there is no way we can cheat. He says that not only is it worth it to gamble, but also that it is impossible to deceive:

**"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 RSV}**

That is, deeds, not words, will tell the story. It is not what we have said we believe; it is how we have acted

that will make the difference. Somebody said to me after the earlier service this morning, "What does it mean, to be ashamed of Jesus? My son, who is in high school, said to me the other day, 'You know, Dad, I've learned a way of saying grace before I eat in the cafeteria so that nobody knows about it. I just bend over and tie my shoe.' Is that being ashamed of Christ?" Yes, it is, in a way, but I do not think little incidents like this are what our Lord is talking about. We are all tempted, at times, to be nervous about professing to be a Christian, or to manifest it in certain circles. And the temptation is not wrong. What our Lord is talking about here is a settled way of life which outwardly expresses conformity to Christian truth, but inwardly adopts and follows and conforms to the values of the world. This, he says, is what will be revealed in that day. Remember that at the close of the Sermon on the Mount he said, "Many shall come to me in that day, and say, 'Have we not done many mighty works in your name? Have we not cast out devils, and preached in your name?' And I shall say, 'Depart from me, I never knew you, you workers of iniquity,'" {cf, Matt 7:22-23}.

So there is the answer to the question we asked at the beginning: Can a person be a Christian, and not a disciple? Well, you can come to Christ, and all who come to Christ are given life, if they mean it when they come. But it is clear that unless you take up the work of discipleship, this life is given in vain. Paul calls this "accepting the grace of God in vain," {2 Cor 6:1b}. Only those who are disciples enter into an abundant life.

Now we are not all good disciples at all times; there is much of failure. And our Lord has made provision for failure in our lives. But he is talking about the heart: What is your aim? What do you really want of your life? Do you want to live it for yourself, or do you want to live it for him? That is really the question.

C. S. Lewis gathers all this up very well in these words from *Mere Christianity*:

God is going to invade this earth in force. But what is the good of saying you are on His side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream, and something else -- something it never entered your head to conceive -- comes crashing in; something so beautiful to some of us, and so terrible to others, that none of us will have any choice left? For this time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use saying you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing; it will be the time when we discover which side we have really chosen, whether we realized it before or not. Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back, to give us that chance. It will not last forever. We must take it or leave it.

This is what Jesus said to the men of his day. Becoming a Christian is not easy. It is radical. But it is the only way to life.

### **Prayer:**

Our Father, thank you that you are the kind of God who does not lie to us, but who tells us the truth right straight out, without hesitation. And you expect us to react honestly. We cannot deceive you; we cannot lie to you -- we can to others but we cannot to you. Perhaps there are many today who are facing this choice. Father, we ask that you will help them to make the choice for life, and not for death, that by your power you will help them find the grace to say "Yes" to you, Lord Jesus, and to enter into life by means of the cross, which will humiliate them at times, offend them, expose their shame, cast out their pride. Yet it will also bring release, liberty, freedom, gladness, and joy. Lord, we pray in this crucial moment that many will decide. For we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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