



Pastor Kyle Mercer  
Jesus & the Cross

October 9, 2022  
Series: Unknown  
Mark 8:27-38

## **BIG IDEA – THE CHRISTIAN LIFE SHOULD BE CROSS-CENTERED AND CROSS-SHAPED**

Welcome, Sunday morning crew. It's good to be with you guys. We say a couple of things here often, and I want to say them again. We are the church for anybody, but we're not the church for everybody. We say that all the time here. Now, you have to understand a few things when I say that.

First, you have to understand what the church is. When I say the *church*, what do you think of? I don't know. If you grew up in the church, you might think it's the most boring hour or hour and a half, depending on what denomination you grew up in. Other people think the church is a building. Other people think the church is a nice nonprofit that does good deeds. Other people think the church is a social club.

Let me tell you what the church is. The church is the people of God who gather on purpose. Now, there are a lot of purposes...to come together to pray, to worship, to fellowship, to be encouraged, to be edified. Here's what I want you to understand for a minute, and then we're going to pray and jump into the sermon. We're halfway through Mark, and we're going to have a good time together this morning.

What I want you to understand if you're new... You've been coming around for a while. You're watching online. Every week, we have a lot of new guests, and we have new visitors, and we have people checking us out. Here's the deep conviction. This isn't just a Two Cities conviction; this is a Bible conviction. *The Christian life is supposed to be church-shaped.*

Let me say that one more time. The Christian life (if you're a Christian, I'm hoping you're trying to live a Christian life)... At the foundation of the Christian life is that it

should be church-shaped. So, you have to understand what the church is, and then, hopefully, you would connect yourself to a local church.

You've heard the phrase "It takes a village to raise a child." Well, it takes a church to raise a Christian. Becoming more like Christ is a community project. We need each other. You're needy and you're needed. In fact, there are a lot of "one anothers" in Scripture. You know some of them...love one another, pray for one another, forgive one another, and bear one another's burdens.

We want to be a church that "one anothers" one another. That sounds kind of strange, but, yes, that's what we want to do. The question, though, is...*If you're a Christian but you're not part of a church, who are you "one anothering"?* You might not know. God wants us to "one another" each other in a very specific way.

So, how do we do that at our church? It's the Weekender. We have nine of these a year. We have two left. We have one coming up in two weeks, and then we have one we're going to have in December as well. If you've not connected your life to God's global purposes through our church, I just want to invite you to do that.

If you're coming around and have just decided, "We're never going to come to the Weekender. We're just going to come. We're going to be a consumer, not a contributor; we're going to be a taker, not a giver," it's going to get really awkward and really uncomfortable, because we're going to continue to call you up and call you out and call you in, and you're going to want to consume instead of contribute. Let me invite you to take your next step.

Let me pray for us. For Christians, there are a lot of lines in the sand. Baptism is a line in the sand, but for a lot of people, it's "I'm not going to do this alone anymore. I'm going to move from being unknown to known. I'm going to move from being part of the crowd to connected and committed." So, I'm just going to pray for us that people would take their next step all across all of our services this weekend, and then we're going to dive into Mark and see the toughest teaching of Jesus in the book of Mark. Let's pray.

Lord, we come to you right now and pray for all of the people who need to make decisions about coming to the Weekender. I know what happens because I've been doing this a while now. A lot of times, one spouse wants to go and the other doesn't or there's fear of "What is it going to look like for me to actually be committed? What is it going to look like for me to actually be known?"

There's also so much joy, Lord. Every person in here is needy. We need other people. We can't see ourselves by ourselves. We're also needed...our personalities, our skill sets, our spiritual gifts. So, we just pray we would be a church where people come in

and understand the Christian life, fundamentally and foundationally, as connecting themselves to a local church and having their Christianity shaped by that local church. I pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

All right. Open up to Mark, chapter 8. We are halfway through a 20-week series. If you're joining us today, we are in what is called the *continental divide* in the book of Mark. We're at a place of transition. Everything is changing from this moment on. So far, Jesus has talked to crowds a lot. He has debated with the Pharisees. He has done healings. He has done exorcisms.

Everybody notices that, today, in the passage we're going to look at... In fact, we're going to look at a very short passage. We've been looking at almost a chapter each week here (a little less than a chapter sometimes), but we're going to look at 11 or 12 verses this morning. This is the moment where Jesus stops talking to the crowds, fundamentally, and starts talking to his disciples.

Here's what Jesus has been doing but is really going to start doing deeply today. He is going to prepare his disciples for his death and his departure. That's it. So, it's going to mean more investment. It's going to mean more clarity of teaching. It's going to be more talking about the cross.

He's going to do two things, and they're connected. We'll see them both. This is the whole message. Some of you say, "Kyle, you talk fast. You need to slow down and just tell me what this is about." So here it is. Jesus is going to do two things. He's going to *predict his death*, and he's going to *preach about our discipleship*. That's it. That's the whole passage: predict his own death and preach about what it means to be a disciple.

Here's what he's going to say: *your life and my life, if we're Christians, should be cross-centered and cross-shaped*. We'll look at both of those. They're a little different, but they're connected. The cross is at the center of both. He's going to say that at the center of our faith should be the cross.

The center of our faith should not be good deeds. The center of our faith should not be relationships. The center of our faith should not be rituals. The center of our faith should not be feelings. All of those things can be good. The center of our faith needs to be the cross.

Then he's going to put the cross at the center of, yes, what we believe. We sing songs about it. We pray. We celebrate it. Then he's going to say something even a little bit more profound. He's going to say the cross needs to be what shapes our lives. Well, the cross is an instrument of death. The cross is an instrument of suffering. The cross is an instrument of opposition.

What I'm preaching this morning is what we call in the pastor world a *seat-clearing sermon*. We have tried to move some of you to Saturday nights, and you won't move, so I'm going to preach this text, and hopefully there will be more seats open next week. Let's look together at Mark 8:27. ***"And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi."***

Let's talk about location for a minute here. It's interesting. Most people think about ministry in formal context. That's probably how *you* think about it. You think about your Christian life in formal context. "Well, I go to church, and then I have Community Group, and then I have DNA Group, and I'm on a serving team. I had a Bible study, and I went to youth group, and I went to camp."

We love all of those things, but those are all formal ministries. Most of Jesus' ministry did not happen within the four walls of a, we would say, *church* or he might say *synagogue* or *temple*. In fact, what's interesting is sometimes he goes to the darkest places to reveal the most light. Caesarea Philippi was the darkest sin city of the day. It was the Las Vegas of that day or, if you're in North Carolina, Asheville.

I love this, because it says something about Jesus. If Jesus was going to go somewhere in Winston-Salem, he might say, "If I'm going to announce something big, maybe I'll go down to Trade Street" or "If I'm going to announce something big, let's go to Wake Forest. I want to go to the frat houses." That's what he's saying.

In fact, the god they worshiped there was Pan. *Pan* means everything. That's why Peter Pan is named *Peter Pan*: because Peter Pan's life is about everything and, at the same time, nothing. So, it's in this environment that Jesus is going to announce something, but he's going to start it with a question. This is what Jesus does. Let's look here.

***"And on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?'"*** Now, why does Jesus ask that question? Is he an insecure middle schooler? Did you ever have that? You're in middle school, and you're asking your friends, "What does she think about me? Am I cool? What do they think?" No, he's not insecure. Is it that he's unsure of who he is and he needs other people to tell him? We're going to see in a moment, no, he's not insecure and he's not unsure.

This is an interesting thing. If you do what's called *comparative religion* and compare Buddhism and Islam and other religions and look at the major religious teachers, Jesus is the most self-centered, self-focused, self-directed of all of the teachers. In all of the other religions of the world, their main teacher points away from themselves. "Hey, read that book, and go over *there*, and worship *that*. Follow *that*. Follow *him*." Jesus says, "Follow me. Worship me. Obey me."

So, he's asking a question, and let's see what they say. Verse 28: "***And they told him, 'John the Baptist...'***" We'll talk about who he is in a second. "***...and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.***" Okay. Here's what's happening. People of that day had an idea of who Jesus was. You hear three things. They're basically the same...John the Baptist, Elijah, and the prophets. Let's put them in a category.

John the Baptist... That's a compliment, because Jesus himself said there was no greater man who ever lived than John the Baptist. If I called *you* John the Baptist or you called *me* John the Baptist, if we're thinking biblically, that would be the highest compliment you could get, but it's not necessarily a compliment when you're the sinless Son of God.

The other thing they say is "Maybe he's one of the prophets or maybe he's Elijah." They're saying, "He's good but not God. He's sweet but not a savior. He's likeable but not lord." It's interesting. I don't think this is that different than how our culture views Jesus today. I thought about this a while, and I may be wrong, but when I thought, "How does the American culture today view Jesus...?" Here's what I think: pretty positively but with just a partial understanding of who he is.

That was my experience. Some of you know I spent four years doing ministry at Duke. In my mind, every time I was driving to Duke that was eight minutes from my house, I felt like I was heading into the center of Manhattan. That's what it felt culturally. All I ever did was talk to people there about Jesus. That's why I was there. What I found was most people, if they represent society, the heart of the American culture, had a pretty positive view of Jesus.

I'm not saying they had a positive view of the church. They didn't. I'm not saying they had a positive view of Christians. They don't. I'm not sure how Jesus got extrapolated out and isolated from, but people liked Jesus. I'm not saying they liked the biblical Jesus. They had some idea of Jesus. Maybe it was the Jesus of Christmas, eight-pound baby Jesus...the Jesus of the cradle, not the Jesus of the cross.

Here's what I want us to understand. This is a burden. Part of what we have to embrace if we're going to be the church of Christ is some of these burdens. Here's the truth: if we don't tell people the biblical Jesus and who he is, they're going to replace it with whatever they've been told in their culture.

I mean, where are people learning about Jesus? Their New Testament class their first year of college? Their religion class? The History channel? A documentary? Jesus' appearances on *South Park* and *Family Guy*? (Some of you don't want to admit you watch those shows.)

Well, Jesus gets more personal. Look at what he does next. Verse 29: **"And he asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?'"** It lets us know that every person has to answer this question. We can't hide. We may try for a time. We can't hide behind what other people say about Jesus. He's like, "All right. Enough about that. What do *you* say?"

If you grew up in a Christian home, it's easy to hide behind, "Well, this is what my parents say. This is what my church believes. This is what my youth pastor says about Jesus." Fair enough, and we're glad you have all of those people in your life, but what do *you* say about Jesus?

## 01 PETER'S PUBLIC PROFESSION

Look at this response. This is really interesting. Peter responds. Verse 29, halfway through: **"Peter answered him, 'You are the Christ.'" In Matthew's gospel, he goes a little farther and says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." "And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him."**

Here's the thing about Peter. We love Peter. Peter speaks first and for all of the disciples. As you get to know people, even as you have your own kids and everything, you'll realize some of your kids are what we call *covert* and some are what we call *overt*. *Covert* is "I don't know what they're thinking. They don't tell me the truth all the time. I don't know what's going on." An *overt* person tells you exactly what they're thinking all the time. You're like, "Okay. Now I know."

Peter is an *overt* person, and he speaks first and, often, he also speaks *for* the other disciples. He says, **"You are the Christ."** Now listen. This is so important. We're going to camp out on this for a minute. This is the first confession of faith in the Bible. Peter is the first person in the history of the church to confess Jesus Christ as Lord.

Here's what I want us to understand: at the center of Christianity is a confession of faith. This is what Paul says. **"...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord..."** This is Christianity 101. Connected to that, that confession needs to come from the heart. **"...and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead..."** This is it. **"...you will be saved."** That's everything.

So, it's a confession. Christianity is, at its heart, confessional. Here's what that means: No one is a Christian by circumstance. No one is a Christian by coincidence. No one should be a Christian by convenience. You become a Christian because you go, "This is what I really believe."

Here's an interesting thing. I went to seminary, and I had to take all of these church history classes. I actually really enjoyed them. I think I took four church history classes, because there are a lot of things that happened in 2,000 years. One of the interesting things is you read church history... It's a little confusing at first. There's the rapid expansion of the gospel, and there are churches planted, and then when you get to the 300s and 400s, everybody is writing creeds.

You've said them and may not even know them. There's the Apostles' Creed. There's the Nicene Creed. There are a lot of creeds. In fact, about 15 years ago, I was in London, and I went to Westminster Abbey. This won't mean much to many of you, but in Westminster Abbey, there's a room when you go in to the right.

The guard let me in there, and in that room was written the Westminster Confession of Faith. Look that up sometime. It's one of the most famous Christian documents ever written. A bunch of men gathered together for weeks to write it. What they were writing down was, "This is what we believe."

Now, when I say that, some people go, "That's silly. It's really silly that Christians would have a confession. It's really silly that Christians would write down what they believe." Do you understand the secular world is doing the exact same thing right now? We live in the most secular time in the history of our nation, so now what we see are secular creeds.

I was walking yesterday in preparation for this message. I was just walking around West End because it's near our church offices, and what do I see in many, many yards in West End? The yard sign with a secular creed on it. You look at it. "Women's rights" or "Human rights." "Water is life." "No human is illegal." "Science is real."

What does all that mean? I don't know. They're short three- or four-word phrases. They're not even full sentences, often. Those are all over. Right? They're in Ardmore. They're in Buena Vista. They're the secular creeds. It's their way to go, "This is what we believe."

Also what happens is... This is uniquely something I want to talk about. The confession of faith, "Jesus is Lord," historically, in the church, happened at baptism. In a couple of weeks, we're going to be doing baptisms. Baptism is the place where, for the first time, or if you've been a Christian for a while and never got to do this, you publicly profess faith in Christ. Let me just talk about water baptism for a second because it's important.

In baptism, three things happen. The first thing that happens in water baptism is when somebody stands... Historically, they stood. Here we have them sit in a horse trough. When somebody stands or sits in water baptism, they say three things. First,

they say, "I no longer follow the world." It's a big moment if they know what they're doing. "My back is now toward the world, and my face is toward Christ. This is a decisive break with the world."

The second thing they say is, "The church is now my main family." That's why, historically, baptisms have been done in churches, or at least with a lot of Christians watching. Can you get baptized with a few friends in a swimming pool? We can talk about it, but in general, no. The reason is the church wants to celebrate with you.

Here's the third thing and what has been completely missing. It's the American mindset. The third thing that happens with baptism is it's the way the church tells the person in the water "Your confession is real, and you really are a Christian." So, here's something you may have never thought of before: How do you know you're a Christian if you've not been baptized? "Well, I just know. I cried at camp. I had all of the feelings inside. I said a prayer."

How many people do we know who are self-deceived? How often have you deceived yourself? You can't know yourself by yourself. So, baptism is the way the church goes, "Brother, sister, we've listened to your testimony, and we've seen your life, and we've heard your presentation of the gospel. We're not JV Holy Spirit, but as much as we can tell, we think this is legitimate." So, the confession "Christ is Lord" is meant to happen publicly and be affirmed by people watching.

Years ago, we had a guy who came to Christ in our church, and we were talking to him about baptism. For some of you, baptism is the issue. He said, "I need to get baptized." I said, "I know you need to get baptized. You just came to Christ." He said, "Here's what I want to do. I want to do it..." He mentioned a random state, and he mentioned that he wanted to do it in the month of May. This was, like, six months from then.

He mentioned he wanted to do it in a certain river, and he mentioned he wanted to do it after a certain event, and he mentioned he wanted a certain group of people there. I had to say to him on the phone, "Dude..." I tried to say it really nicely. I said, "Baptism is not about you. I'm sorry." We've even taken the main sacrament of the church and made it about ourselves. No, no, no. It's about my opportunity to tell the world I follow Jesus.

What does it feel like? Well, it feels like *this*. When my wife and I got engaged, we were in Chattanooga, Tennessee. We told our parents. Our friends knew it was going to happen. They didn't know *when* it was going to happen. So, we got engaged, and we just decided... I don't know why we did this. We decided for the first three or four days not to tell anyone.



My parents were there. We hung out. We were in Chattanooga for a few days. We were picking out the wedding venues and all this. Then, as we were heading home, we decided, "It's time to text our friends, and it's time to put it on Facebook. It's time to tell the world."

What's interesting is as soon as we did it...really, almost as soon as we did it... We weren't more engaged, but immediately, it felt more real. We felt more engaged, if that's possible. I think that's what baptism does. It doesn't save you, but if you want your faith to feel real, like, "I did it. It's public, and everyone knows..." So, what Peter does there is he confesses.

## 02 THE NECESSITY OF THE ATONEMENT

Now look at what happens. Here's what happens after that. Verse 31: ***"And he began to teach them that the Son of Man..."*** That's Jesus' favorite designation for himself. ***"...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."***

So, the confession of faith is "You are the Christ," which means "You are Lord. You are the King. You are the Anointed." Jesus says, "I'm the Son of Man." By the way, just a little theology here. That term is out of Daniel 7, and it's a very famous Old Testament passage about the greatness of the coming Messiah. Let's do a little math here. Jesus takes Daniel 7 plus Isaiah 53.

Isaiah 53 is the passage on the suffering servant. He says it's the same person. "The suffering servant and the Son of Man are the same person. It's me." I don't know how to simplify what Jesus is teaching any more than this. He's saying, "Peter, you're speaking for all of the disciples, so, all of the disciples, you're right. I'm a king, but I'm a king with a cross. I'm a king heading to a cross."

It's right after they realize who Jesus is that he begins to teach them in great depth about the cross. Look here. I want to read it one more time. ***"And he began to teach them that 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."***

So, a couple of things. He puts the cross at the center of what he's doing. We just need to be shocked again at the cross. We have the cross around our necks. We see the cross on buildings. I mean, it would be like Jesus saying, "I need to go to the electric chair." That sounds terrible. "I need to go to a place where there is lethal injection." You are talking about an instrument of death.

The cross represents opposition, and that's an interesting thought. Notice that in his promise, in his prophecy, in his prediction is that he has to be rejected. It says he has to be rejected by the best people of the day. That's something worth thinking about. Literally, the best people of the day...the political leaders, the religious establishment, the wealthy, the famous, the powerful. They all reject Jesus.

The cross represents opposition. The cross represents suffering. The Romans were amazing at killing people, and the cross is the way they perfected not just killing you (because, obviously, the cross leads to death) but prolonged suffering. I talked about the cross last week, so I don't need to go into too much depth here, but I want you to understand. How the disciples are going to hear this is Jesus Christ is voluntarily heading to the cross.

Do you see the main word in there? You can see it better in the original language, Greek. The controlling word in that sentence is the word *must*. He doesn't just say, "The Son of Man is going to be killed and be rejected and suffer and rise." He says, "This must happen." This is what theologians call the *divine necessity of the cross*. It was according to the will of God. This is something that, in the mind and heart of God, had to happen.

There are kind of two ways to think about the cross. The cross was both planned and voluntary. It was planned. We don't have all the information about this except we get things in the book of Revelation that say, "The Lamb who was slain before the foundation of the world." You're like, "What does *that* mean?" That means it was in God's mind and heart to send his Son even before he created the world because he knew we were going to sin and fall. "Okay, God. You planned this?"

Then that fact that it was voluntary. Jesus didn't have to do it. I mean, *must* because he and the Father decided, according to the Scriptures, according to the will of God, "I'm going to do it," but one of the things that just humbles you is you realize, "Wait a second. Jesus didn't have to do this." He could have left us in our sin. He could have left us to ourselves. Instead, he came after us.

Now, I want you to see what Peter does. Peter sees this for what it is. Verse 32: "**And** [Jesus] **said this plainly.**" "I don't want to mince words." "**And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.**" Awkward! We have the student rebuking the teacher. The word *rebuke* is the same word that is used by Jesus to demons. It's intense. It's heated. It's angry. Peter rebukes him.

Here's the question to ask: Why is Peter rebuking Jesus? Why does Peter not want Jesus to go to the cross? Is it because Peter just loves Jesus so much? I don't think so. I think he loves the Lord. I think he respects him. I think he wants to follow him, but I don't think the reason Peter gets so passionate and starts rebuking Jesus is because

he's worried about Jesus dying. Here's what Peter is worried about: Peter dying. That's it.

Peter understands something that *we* need to understand. This is why this is a hard text and a hard sermon. Peter understands, "Wait a second. If this is where you're headed, then what does this mean for me and the rest of the guys?" We follow and worship a guy who was crucified, betrayed, and rejected. I mean, what are the expectations you have for your life?

A lot of times, people come to faith in Christ and think, "This will be great. Maybe Jesus will heal up my marriage, heal up my family." We always pray for that and hope that, but Jesus also says, "Sometimes I came to bring a sword." People come to Christ... "Maybe with Jesus, plus Dave Ramsey, we'll get my finances cleaned up." Then sometimes you lose your job for being a Christian. It's not easy to tell.

Here's the thing: at the center of Christianity is voluntary suffering. I don't know how else to explain this text. What Peter understands... Here's what it means. We say here that the Christian life is following Jesus and helping others find and follow Jesus, but I probably haven't explained enough what following Jesus is. Following Jesus is joining Jesus in what Jesus came to do. I think that's a fair definition of following Jesus. We're joining Jesus in what Jesus came to do.

Now, sometimes we go, "That sounds fun." So, making disciples? Yeah. Helping people? Yes. Counseling? Yes. Teaching? Yes. But how? What was his main method? Voluntary suffering. We're not masochists, but I voluntarily embrace pain and suffering in my life. I understand that's the main way the gospel is going to go forward.

Peter doesn't like that, so he rebukes him, but then Jesus rebukes him back. ***"But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.'"*** Why does Jesus call Peter *Satan*? Because the last interaction Jesus had with Satan, Satan tried to do the same thing to Jesus. He tried to get him to not go to the cross.

The Satanic spirit (and I believe there's a Satanic spirit) is that which looks for the shortcut. "Is there a way...?" "Jesus, bow down to me, and you can have everything now." The Satanic spirit thinks somehow you can have Christianity without the cross, that somehow you get to go to glory without going through suffering.

### **03 CHEAP GRACE VS. COSTLY GRACE**

So, Jesus rebukes him and says, "Get behind me." Then he goes on. This is the key moment. Now Jesus moves from his death to our discipleship. He moves from how his life is cross-centered to how our lives now need to be cross-shaped. It's inextricably linked. You can't miss this.

**"And calling the crowd to him..."** We're in verse 34. Notice, by the way, often Jesus will give his hardest teaching to mass groups of people. This is his hardest teaching, and he makes sure... "Hold on. Everyone, get in here. I want everyone, not just my disciples." He calls the crowd. **"And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, 'If anyone...'"** That's a big call. **"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."**

I love that. First of all, he's making a hard call. "Does anyone want to come after me?" Does anyone think of their Christianity that way? Like, "What's your Christianity?" "I'm coming after Jesus Christ. I am aggressively and assertively running as fast and as far as I can following Jesus." So, he makes this call and says, "If anyone is going to come after me..."

Look at what he says. "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me." This is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer, that great German pastor, thinker, philosopher, and fighter of Hitler... He called this *costly grace*, not *cheap grace*. He said in America and in Germany, people had embraced cheap grace. Grace had become assumed. Grace had become presumed upon. Grace had become common.

He said grace, for most people, justifies sin, but not the sinner. He said costly grace is that tension that becoming a Christian costs me nothing, but living the Christian life will cost me everything. I've heard it said *this* way. A guy told a story explaining this point. He said growing up, his dad didn't have a lot of money, and he loved to play baseball.

He said his dad would give him the same speech every baseball season. He said, "It was embarrassing because he usually would give it to me in front of my friends." He said the speech went something like *this*: "Son, I don't make a lot of money, so if I pay, you play." He said, "Then Dad would go on. 'Two things I mean by *play*. First, there ain't no quitting. You're not quitting halfway through the season. You're not getting tired, not complaining. We're going to start this season. If I pay, you play.'"

Then he said, "The second rule, son, is if I pay, you play on the field." He goes, "I'm not paying to watch you do what I'm doing, which is watch other kids play." They don't make dads like that anymore. He made this great point. You have to understand this in a gospel-centered way. Christ has done everything for us, but Christ is saying, "I paid. It's time for you to play."

Then he says you're called to deny yourself. Notice, that's different than self-denial. Anybody can practice self-denial. Every American, usually after their birthday and on New Year's, writes down some resolutions or some habits or some goals, and it's usually some form of self-denial. "I don't need to drink that. I need to stop eating that. I need to stop watching that. I probably need to spend less on this." Fair enough. That's called *self-denial*.

Jesus is talking about something deeper. He's talking about denying yourself. What does *that* mean? That's hard. We live in a selfie culture. People have tried to think, "What is the obsession with the selfie?" It has something to do with *this*: "I'm the center of everything. The world is the background for me." It's interesting, because we are as depressed and lonely and anxious as ever, and we have put the self at the center.

How about self-care? I know, you have to care for yourself so you can care for others. Put your oxygen mask on first. I get it. But for most people, self-care is an excuse to be selfish. How about self-fulfillment? *That's* a new idea. Could you imagine talking to your great-grandpa? "Grandpa, is your job fulfilling?" "What? I work on the railroad."

How about self-expression? That happens at a lot younger age. Self-expression normally starts in elementary school or middle school. People who try to talk about it say we live in what's called an *expressive individualism culture*. Unless you're working against it, that's what you're believing in. Expressive individualism is "Let me find out who I am inside, and let me figure out the best way to tell everybody."

So, it's the clothes I wear. It's the uncool glasses I wear. It's the car I drive. It's the neighborhood I live in. It's my social media platform. It's why there's so much gender confusion today: because we've told people, "Sexuality is the center of you. Now go find it, and then go express it to everybody." Jesus comes and says the opposite. He says, "You need to deny yourself."

What is the self? The self can be broken into two parts: *authority* and *ambition*, if you're getting at the heart of what the self is, what the center of you is. *Ambition* is "This is what I'm passionate about. This is what I'm excited about. This is what I want." When you come to Christ, that has to change.

Do you see? Jesus gives you a new ambition. "Take up your cross and follow me." The new ambition and the new authority are found in two words: "Follow me." The controlling ambition in my life is now to follow Christ, and the controlling authority in my life is no longer myself but is Christ.

## 04 TO FIND YOUR LIFE YOU MUST LOSE IT

Then he says one other thing. It gets harder. Verse 34: ***"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."*** Then look at what he says. Notice the other broad call. Verse 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. 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?"***

So, he talks now about losing your life. It's interesting, because in some places Jesus says, like he says here, "If you lose your life, you will save it." You go, "What does it mean to save your life?" Well, in other places he clarifies. "If you lose your life, you will find it." What does *that* mean? First of all, he appeals to good desires. This is a common thing Jesus does.

He says in other places, "If you want to be rich..." We're like, "Okay. Yeah, that's me." He says, "...then store up treasure in heaven." Oh, okay. Not the application I was thinking of. Then another time he said, "If you want to be great..." Everyone thinks, "Okay, I'd like to be great." "...then be a servant of all." Okay, not the application I was looking for.

Here, if you want to save your life or find your life (I believe those are the same things), you need to be willing to lose it. This is the language of sacrifice. Let me explain. I don't know who first said this. The best definition of *sacrifice* I've ever heard is I give up something I love for something I love even more. In all of the stories of sacrifice that we love, that's what happens. Somebody loves something, maybe their own life, and gives it up for something they love even more.

Jesus says, "If you lose your life, you'll find it." Do we believe that? We could say something like, "Well, you know, it's the Bible, and Jesus said it, so it's true." I think we can know this a little bit by experience. Think about this. When a single guy or single gal gets married, what happens? They lose their life. I've been married 12 years. I don't even remember what it was like to be single. I'm trying to picture what that was like.

I've only talked to guys, but when a guy gets married, he realizes, "I lost my life. She wants to go to bed at the same time every night. She wants me to come home after work instead of going to the gym." What you realize is two became one. If you're thinking about this biblically, and if you're working on your marriage, you actually realize, "What I gave up... Yes, I lost something, but what I found was even better."

What happens when you have a kid? You lose your life. Anyone who doesn't have a kid... You lose your life. We all know this. We've all experienced it, and every parent

has to deal with that. There's excitement, and it's like, "I'm losing sleep. I'm losing my mind." What happens every time you enter a career path? Let's take a very professional career path, like people who are doctors.

I just talked to a guy. He just got into medical school. He's so excited. You think about that. Okay, now you're going to give four years to medical school, and you're going to be very busy. Then you're probably going to give at least three, maybe five years to residency, and if you want to do some special thing, you'll give another two to five years to fellowship. Why would you do that?

If you're looking at a short window, it seems foolish. If you don't think about the future, it seems foolish. Why would you waste your youth? Why would you take age 22 to 35 and be as busy as you are? Well, you do that... "I'm losing my life, in one sense, to gain something else. I'm losing my youth to gain this other skill set." So we get it.

Jesus is saying, "Are you willing to lose your life?" and in some way you end up finding it, but it's an act of faith. In the same way... It's hard to explain how when you are single and you get married you lose your life, and when you have a kid you lose your life. It's something that can't be explained as much as it's experienced, which leads to the final thing Jesus says. He ends with this.

## **05 LIVING IN LIGHT OF ETERNITY**

***"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."***

I'm always reading this like I would any document, any text. Gaining the world must be the same thing as saving your life. That's how people try to save their life in *this* life: they try to gain the world. What does that look like? Well, there are versions of it, but there's probably a common version.

What if you had the best house? Okay, even better, the best houses. What if you had the most awesome spouse, and what if your kids were awesome and were also good at athletics and were good at academics? What if you had one of those awesome jobs? They're hard to find, but you make a lot of money, *and* it's meaningful, *and* you work with people you love, *and* you have enough time off to actually still have a family life.

Every society tells you what it would be like to gain the world. Jesus is saying, "What will it profit you if you gain the world and lose your soul?" What I want us to see, as

we close, is that Jesus points us to an eternal perspective if we're going to live a cross-shaped life. He does it by talking about our soul and the final judgment. Do you see that? Those are the last two things Jesus motivates us with.

The truth is you don't *have* a soul; you *are* a soul. You're not really even a body with a soul. If we want to be theologically technical, you're a soul with a body. How do I know that? Because at death, your soul and your body go in separate directions. Your body is going into the ground to be resurrected. Your soul (that's you) is heading to meet God.

So, when you realize, "I have an immaterial, invisible, eternal me, and every person I meet also has a soul, and they're going to live somewhere forever," it changes you. Then Jesus points us, at the end, to the final judgment. He says, "If anyone is ashamed of me..." Now, we don't use that word *ashamed*, so how does *this* work? This is the same word: *embarrassed*.

Why are we so embarrassed about Jesus Christ and the gospel? Do you remember being embarrassed? I remember the first time I was embarrassed about Jesus. I was a brand-new Christian, and I got a free Bible from a lady. It's a long story, but she gave me this little Bible, and she put my name on it. I was a brand-new Christian, and she was excited for me, so she bought me this nice little Bible, and I loved it. It was in my backpack, and I read it all the time.

I was probably six months in the Lord. I'm in TV productions class in eleventh grade, and my Bible falls out of my backpack, and Brian picks it up. I'm in public high school in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Brian begins to make fun of me with my little Bible with my golden name in cursive, and I just remember feeling so small and so embarrassed.

Jesus tells us why we're ashamed. There's nothing shameful about Jesus Christ. There's nothing to be embarrassed about Jesus Christ. We're embarrassed because we live in a sinful and adulterous world. What would your life look like if you weren't embarrassed about Jesus, if you talked about him more, and if you really realized, "Wait a second. The cross is the only way"?

Sometimes people say, "Why is there only one way to God? Is there only one way to God?" People say, "Can there be more than one way to God? Can there be multiple paths to heaven?" Jesus had that conversation with God the Father in the garden of Gethsemane. So, if you want to know, "Where is that conversation? Is there more than one way to get to God?" that conversation happened in the garden, and God the Father's answer was "I'm sorry, there's not." This is why Jesus had to go to the cross.

So, here's what we realize when we sum it up: *Following Jesus Christ is costly. The only thing more costly is not following Jesus Christ.* Following Jesus Christ is costly. The



only thing, from an eternal perspective, more costly than following Jesus Christ is *not* following Jesus Christ. See, the Bible tells us that every Christian is both Simon of Cyrene and Barabbas. Do you know those stories?

Simon of Cyrene was the man who was called to help carry Jesus' cross, and Barabbas was the man who was let free because Jesus went to the cross. As we close, I want us to think about what this means for us, and I want to give us three categories. In a minute, I'm going to ask you to bow your heads and close your eyes. If you feel comfortable, I'm going to ask you just to go like *this*.

I do this sometimes when I pray. It's kind of like a "Lord, I give this to you." It's weird. Sometimes you'll do something with your body and you'll feel it with your soul. It's just "I want to be openhanded." We want to be an openhanded church. So, if you would close your eyes, and if you feel comfortable, palms up, I want you to think about three things with me as we close.

How do you take a passage like this? Well, theologians talk about, out of this passage, there are three deaths the Bible talks about. First, the Bible talks about a *death to sin*. That happens when you give Jesus your sin and your self. That happens when you're born again. That happens when you confess Jesus publicly. If you've never done that, I want to invite you to do that right now. It's a death to sin.

The second type of death the Bible talks about is the *death to self*, and that takes your whole life. The death to self happens as you repent, as you say no to your former and false self, and as you take up your cross and carry it. After death to sin and death to self, there's a third category that happens, and it's the *death to safety*.

I don't know how else to understand the apostle Paul's words when he says, "I die every day." The death to safety is a willingness to be unashamed of Jesus Christ. It's a willingness to no longer be embarrassed, and it's a willingness to embrace voluntary suffering to bring the good news of Jesus to other people.

Lord, we lift ourselves up to you. We know what *you're* trying to do and what *we're* trying to do, as a church, is create a type of person, a person who's the exact opposite of the American spirit, a person who is cross-centered in their faith, who the cross is the symbol of their life, and a people who are cross-shaped. Lord, would you help us?

We can't do this apart from the power of the Holy Spirit. We can't do this apart from the grace of God, Lord. We see in the life of Jesus that it was always joy that led to pain, but on the other side of that pain was more joy. For the joy set before him, he endured the cross. Lord, help us to be cross-centered and cross-shaped in our lives. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.