

Take up Your Cross

Mark 8:27-38

One morning, as a mother was making pancakes for her two sons, the boys began to argue over who would get the first pancake. Mom saw an excellent opportunity for a lesson on self-sacrifice, so she said: *“If Jesus were sitting here, He would say, ‘Let my brother have the first pancake. I can wait.’”* The older boy looked at his younger brother and said, *“Ryan, you be Jesus!”*

In a cute way, that story reminds us that self-sacrifice is not a normal part of our human nature. Ever since Adam and Eve fell into sin, our human nature has been tainted by selfishness and self-centeredness. Our natural tendency is not to give in, but to hold onto what we’ve got and grab for more. Above all, we want to hold onto our life. And we’ll do almost anything to protect it. Yet, in sharp contrast to that desire, Jesus made a very radical statement in our text, when He said: **“WHOEVER WOULD SAVE HIS LIFE WILL LOSE IT, BUT WHOEVER LOSES HIS LIFE FOR MY SAKE AND THE GOSPEL’S WILL SAVE IT!”**

What in the world is Jesus talking about? Actually, He’s zeroing in on two key words – ‘almost’ and ‘life.’ What do we mean, when we say we’ll do almost anything to protect our life? What does ‘almost’ include? Will we sacrifice our children to make a little more at work? Will we forsake our marriage to find a little more fulfillment? Most importantly, will we give up our faith to save our life? For you see, the word ‘life’ in our text is really the word for ‘soul.’ And that’s what Jesus is talking about – protecting and preserving our real life, which is our spiritual life, our soul’s salvation.

To underscore that thought, Jesus had just told His disciples that He was about to lose His life in order to save our lives. This is the first time in the Gospel that He explains to them about His imminent suffering, death and resurrection. Not too surprisingly, Simon Peter, in his typical zealous fashion, takes Jesus aside and actually has the nerve to rebuke Him. Elsewhere we are told that Peter said to Jesus: **“NEVER LORD! THIS SHALL NEVER HAPPEN TO YOU!”** Peter’s comment reflects the common Jewish misunderstanding of the Messiah. Peter had just declared Jesus to be the Christ, the Messiah, and yet, his

understanding of Jesus' Messiah-ship did not involve suffering or death. That's because the Jews thought the Messiah would be the Conquering King, who would rescue them from the Romans – not the Suffering Servant, who would save them for their sins. As a matter of fact, when they read Isaiah 53, which prophesied the sufferings of the Messiah, they attributed the positive parts to the Messiah, but they interpreted the sufferings to apply to the people.

That's why Peter told Jesus: "NEVER LORD! THIS SHALL NEVER HAPPEN TO YOU!" Actually, what he literally said was: "*May God be merciful to you.*" In other words, may God in His mercy spare you from this suffering. It would be similar to our phrase: "*God forbid it!*" But Jesus' whole point, is that God could not spare Him the cross. As He told the disciples: "THE SON OF MAN MUST SUFFER MANY THINGS." And the word 'must' is the Greek word for a necessary compulsion. He had to suffer torture, shame and death. And the reason He had to, was so that you and I might be spared the shame and torture of eternal death in Hell. Jesus had to walk the road to the cross, in order to say: "*God forbid it!*" to our death and destruction.

For that reason 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!" You see, Jesus knew that Satan was behind this temptation. Last Sunday we heard about Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. But that was only the beginning of Satan's temptations. Throughout Jesus' entire earthly life, Satan kept throwing roadblocks in His way to keep Jesus from reaching the cross and saving you and me. And in that regard, it's not unlike the temptations that Satan throws at us. He urges us to focus all our time, effort and energy on this physical life, instead of our spiritual life – to neglect our daily devotions and prayer time, to avoid Midweek Lenten services, to watch TV or read a book, rather than praising and worshipping Jesus, to skip the Word and Sacraments. For Satan knows that if we fix our eyes on the earthly instead of the eternal, if we set our minds on the things of man instead of the things of God, we will surely lose our life.

For example, George MacDonald tells of a cloth-maker, who always used his thumb to make the measure just a little bit short. As MacDonald put it, "*He took from his soul and put it in his money-bag.*"

Is that how you and I conduct our life? Do we let the care and the concerns of the world so control us, that we give up our Christian beliefs and convictions? As Jesus reminds us: “FOR WHAT DOES IT PROFIT A MAN TO GAIN THE WHOLE WORLD AND FORFEIT HIS SOUL?”

Interestingly enough, the word ‘forfeit’ is an accounting term. It refers to someone being fined for mishandling the accounts and having their property and possessions confiscated. It’s a powerful reminder that God is the Eternal Auditor whom all men must face some day. And because of our sin, our life’s balance sheet doesn’t look too good. You might say, we’ve cooked the books and have gone spiritually bankrupt. Worst of all, there’s nothing we can do to pay off our insurmountable debt. As our text indicates, there’s nothing a man can give in exchange for his soul.

Thankfully though, Jesus paid the ultimate price, when He died on the cross, just as He foretold to His disciples. He forfeited His life by hanging on the cursed tree, to remove the curse from us. He poured out His saving, cleansing, life-giving blood as the ultimate down-payment, to buy us back from sin, death and hell, and cancel out our debt of iniquity forever. In other words, He gave His life in exchange for our life, so that we might gain the ultimate life – eternal life with Him. He gave His soul in exchange for our soul, so that might be rescued and redeemed for His heavenly kingdom.

Now, the Greek word ‘exchange,’ is the word used in the LXX to refer to the purchase-price for something, what we might call the sale-price. Satan, of course, tries to sell us a bill of goods. He promises us that if we only succumb to his temptations, we will find peace and contentment, happiness and joy. But it never happens. Once we pay the price, we immediately have ‘buyer’s remorse.’ Fortunately, though, Jesus gave His own life in exchange for ours, as the sale-price to purchase us as God’s treasured possession. And for us that was the greatest sale of all, because He gives us true peace and contentment, happiness and joy. We have received forgiveness, life and salvation absolutely free.

We might think of it this way: a salesman was demonstrating unbreakable combs in a department store. He was impressing the people who stopped by to look by putting the comb through all sorts of torture and stress. Finally, to impress even the skeptics in the crowd, he

bent the comb almost in half and suddenly it snapped in two. Without missing a beat, he held up both halves and said, *“And this, ladies and gentlemen, is what an unbreakable comb looks like on the inside.”*

No matter how much he tried to cover it up, his unbreakable comb, really wasn't unbreakable. Likewise, no matter how much we try to hide the truth or cover up our guilt, we cannot escape the fact that our lives are terribly broken by sin. Thankfully for us, though, Jesus Christ came to mend all our broken flaws and cover up our hideous guilt with his cleansing blood. He lost His life for us, to save us for eternal life. And out of thanks for all of that, He invites us to now lose our lives in service to Him.

That's why He exhorts us today, just as He exhorted His disciples in our text: **“IF ANYONE WOULD COME AFTER ME, LET HIM DENY HIMSELF AND TAKE UP HIS CROSS AND FOLLOW ME.”** You'll notice that this is a twofold exhortation. First of all, we are called to deny ourselves. The Greek word literally means: 'to refuse something, to send it away.' In other words, to say 'no' to our sinful desires and passions. When Satan comes tempting us, we need to follow the example of our Lord, and say: **“GET BEHIND ME, SATAN, IN JESUS' NAME!”** That may mean giving up our desires to please our spouse, sacrificing our goals, for the good of a brother or sister in Christ, setting aside our wants, to help a friend. For that is how we lose our lives in service to Jesus – by giving up our will to do His will.

Secondly, Jesus exhorts us to take up our cross and follow Him. The picture here is that of a condemned man, who is required to carry the beam of his own cross to the place of execution. And the idea is that we need to daily crucify our old Adam, by confessing our sins to Jesus, not only repenting of them, but also rejecting and renouncing them, so that empowered by His forgiveness, we can follow in His footsteps. If we daily put to death our old man, through confession and absolution, we will be strengthened in our faith to go wherever Jesus leads us, whether it's to minister to a colleague at work, to pray for someone who's hurt us, to apologize to someone we've offended, or to give a helping hand to a needy person. That's how we take up our cross, and follow Jesus.

There is a legend that says St. Peter tried to escape death in the persecution under Roman Emperor Nero. At the time, Christians were dying hideous deaths, set on fire and serving as light torches in Nero's

gardens. Supposedly, Peter snuck away and was two miles down the Appian Way when he met Jesus, traveling towards Rome. Struck with amazement, Peter cried, “*Domine, quo vadis? – Lord, where are you going?*” And the Savior, looking at Peter as he might have in the courtyard, said, “*I go to Rome to be crucified a second time.*” Peter turned and went back to Rome, where he died by crucifixion, which at his own request was with his head facing down.

Whether or not Peter died in just that way, we don’t know. But it is true that most of the apostles died as martyrs for their Lord Jesus Christ. They did that to thank Jesus, who had accomplished their salvation by his own death, and who, by his resurrection, made death the door to eternal life. Jesus went all the way to the cross and lost His life for us, so that we might gain everlasting life. May that motivate and encourage us to give up our lives in service to Him, by denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following Him, for His name’s sake. Amen.