

What Can You Give in Exchange for Your Soul?

Series: *Jesus Has Questions for You*

March 7, 2021

Mark 8:34-9:1

Today, we continue our Lenten sermon series called *Jesus Has Questions for You*. It follows Jesus and his disciples through chapters 8-10 of Mark's gospel as they make their way, scene by scene, toward Jerusalem, where Jesus will face his cross.

At each stage of their journey, Jesus reveals more about who he is and what it means to truly follow him. In the process, he asks his disciples a number of soul-searching questions. These questions challenge their assumptions and address their blind spots, all so that they might come to see who Jesus really is, and choose wholeheartedly to follow him, at all costs, all their days.

Jesus poses the very same questions to you and me for the very same reasons.

The question Jesus has for us today is this: *What can you give in exchange for your soul?* This question is found in the middle of a very challenging passage near the end of Mark chapter 8 where Jesus cuts right to the chase of what it means to follow him.

We'll get to Jesus' question later in the message. First, we'll need to dive into the opening verses of today's passage. But before we do that, let me ask you a few *other* questions:

Have you ever purchased something, say, on Amazon, only to find when your shipment arrived that the product didn't match the description?

Have you ever travelled to a vacation destination, only to find that it didn't even come close to living up to the online photos and reviews?

Have you ever ordered a meal at a restaurant, only to find it was nothing like what the menu had led you to expect?

If you're watching live and have had an experience along these lines before, type Y for yes into the chat area.

Accurate information matters, doesn't it? Because we like to know up front exactly what to expect before we make a purchase. We like to be aware of what we're about to get into before we make a decision. Which is why we appreciate it when things come to us as described, as advertised.

But here's the thing about that: *I wonder if we're always up front and honest with ourselves and others about what it means to follow Jesus.*

Because we live in a time when there's a lot of inaccurate information circulating about the Christian life—about what it demands, what it costs—about what Jesus actually asks and expects of us as his followers.

We live in an era of consumer Christianity where all too often, churches and preachers misrepresent what it means to follow Jesus by talking about the Christian life from a "What's in it for me?" perspective—as if following Jesus is some sure-fire way to fulfill all your personal wishes.

Don't misunderstand. I believe with all my heart that there's no better life you can possibly live—no greater source of blessing, joy, hope or purpose you could possibly find— than in a life of following Jesus.

But those gifts come to us not in the world's way, and not on our terms, but in Jesus' Way and on his terms.

So what exactly *does* Jesus say we should expect when it comes to following him?

Last Sunday, we explored how Jesus acknowledged to his disciples, "Yes, I'm a King—I am the Messiah— but I'm not like any Messiah you ever expected. Because I'm a King who's going to a cross." ¹

Their conversation didn't end there, because as we'll see in today's passage, Jesus goes on to say, "And if you want to follow me, there's a cross in it for you as well."

And so, Jesus explains right up front, in a very forthright and honest manner, what to expect when it comes to following him. He pulls no punches, nor does he gloss anything over. Please follow along as I read Mark 8:34 - 9:1:

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of

¹ Mark 8:27-33

Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."

In this passage we learn both the cost of following Jesus, as well as why we should wholeheartedly accept that cost. First, let's talk about:

1. The cost of following Jesus.

I'd like to draw your attention to the audience that Jesus is speaking to in this passage. He had just been speaking only with his twelve disciples, but:

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples... ²

This is significant, because it means that the words Jesus is about to speak apply to anyone and everyone who would choose to follow him—including you and me. Then he says:

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." ³

So the first of three costs that we're called to as followers of Jesus is **self-denial**.

To be clear, self-denial is not the same thing self-rejection or self-hatred. To reject and hate yourself is to be in fundamental disagreement with God about your value as a person, because God thought you were worth his Son dying for.

The call to self-denial is different. To borrow Tim Keller's words, self-denial is not to think less of yourself, but rather to think of yourself less. It's a call to follow the way of *Jesus*, rather than following your own way.

The second cost of following Jesus is closely related to self-denial. It is the call to **take up your cross**.

This is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer had in mind when he famously said in his classic book *The Cost of Discipleship*:

² Mark 8:34a (NIV)

³ Mark 8:34b (NIV)

When Christ calls you, he bids you come and die. ⁴

Because the cross is an instrument of death.

Contrary to its uses in popular culture, Jesus never intended the cross to be worn as a fashion accessory, or even as a medallion awarded for military valour. Neither does the cross have anything to do with patiently bearing with life's inconveniences, which is often what is meant when someone says, "This is just my cross to bear."

Instead, in our passage, Jesus uses the cross as a radical illustration of self-denial. **Taking up your cross is about dying to self.**

To take up your cross is to die to your own ways in order to follow the Way of Jesus:

- Maybe staying in your marriage is a cross for you to bear as you learn to love your spouse like Jesus loves you, and honour your marriage covenant in spite of a lack of passion, personal fulfillment or reciprocation.
- Maybe the way you approach your sex life is a cross you'll have to bear as you learn to be led by the commands of Jesus rather than the norms of prevailing culture or the whims of personal desire.
- Maybe your cross is to find constructive ways of dealing with your stress and anxiety as opposed to resorting to escapist and addictive behaviours that hurt you and those who love you.
- Maybe your cross involves giving away your time, energy, comfort and control as you learn to sacrificially serve and be present to others, for the sake of their needs and the sake of Jesus and his gospel, rather than what you stand to gain from it.
- Maybe your cross involves forgiving someone who hurt you, or praying for your enemy, in spite of your urge to shun or attack them.
- Maybe your cross involves having to bear the ridicule of family members, co-workers or fellow students who think you're a fool for your faith in Christ, a fool for not joining them in following the world's ways of thinking and living.

All of these are examples of dying to your own way, so you can follow the Way of Jesus. How is Jesus calling you to take up your cross?

The third cost Jesus speaks of is found in his words **follow me.**

⁴ Paraphrased to make the language inclusive. The original quote is: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

What does it mean to *follow* Jesus? It means no less than to obey Jesus. It means to do what he commands us to do rather than doing things our own way. In Matthew 28 Jesus says:

“... go and make disciples... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”⁵

At an even more basic level, to follow Jesus is to stay close to him. You can't follow someone very well from a distance. Following requires proximity, nearness. To follow Jesus, you have to stay close to Jesus. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes:

All that self-denial can say is: “He knows the way, keep close to him.”

If denying yourself and taking up your cross feel all but impossible for you, they become quite possible when you stay close to Jesus, and let him become your life and strength and guide. What analogy of closeness does Jesus give us in John's gospel? He says:

Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.⁶

What are you doing to stay close to Jesus these days? In the chat, I invite you to **share one thing that helps you stay close to Jesus**. Maybe what you share will encourage someone else, so don't be shy. What's one thing you do that helps you stay close to Jesus?

Let's be clear, though. Staying close to Jesus will cost you. It will cost you time that you might have spent otherwise. It will cost you the effort of thinking through an intentional plan to make space for Jesus through prayer, scripture, worship and other spiritual disciplines that will help cultivate your relationship with him. It might cost you being misunderstood or resented or mocked by others who don't appreciate your commitment to stay close to Jesus.

But we shouldn't be surprised at the cost of following Jesus, because he's told us very directly what we can expect. He's been very up front with us. But *why* would we want to accept that cost? Let's talk about that:

2. Why we should wholeheartedly accept the cost of following Jesus.

⁵ Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV)

⁶ John 15:5 (NLT)

We come now to the question Jesus has for us today: *What can you give in exchange for your soul?* In our passage, Jesus tells us:

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or **what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?**

What is your soul, anyway? The original Greek word for soul in our text is *psyche*, which means *life*. When the Bible speaks of your soul, it's referring to the sum total of who you are as a person—every aspect of your life and being— your body, spirit, heart, mind, will.

So another way of phrasing what Jesus is asking would be, "What can you give in exchange for your *life*?" or "What can you give in exchange for yourself?"

In these verses, Jesus uses the language of the marketplace—the language of commodity exchange, of profit and loss, of cost-benefit analysis.

In doing so, he shows us the first of three reasons why we should wholeheartedly accept the cost of following Jesus. We can't afford not to, because **the stakes are infinite**.

If you don't accept the cost of discipleship because you think you have too much to lose, sooner or later you will, ironically, end up losing absolutely everything— your soul, your life, your very self— forever and ever.

But if you accept the cost of discipleship, and lay down your life for the sake of Jesus and his gospel, you will, ironically, gain that which is truly life— the only kind of life that really counts—both now and forever.

The classic biblical illustration of this is the parable of the rich fool in Luke's gospel.⁷ A rich landowner has a bumper crop, builds bigger barns for himself so he can store up his all his wealth and enjoy a lifetime on easy street. But that very night, his life is demanded of him. He had gained the world for a fleeting moment, but in the blink of an eye, lost both his wealth and his soul.

In contrast to the rich fool, Christian missionary and martyr Jim Elliot echoes Jesus' words when he reminds us that:

He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

⁷ Luke 12:13-21

What can you give in exchange for your soul? Nothing. It's a rhetorical question. Because your soul—your life, your very self—is of infinite value. There is no worldly or selfish pursuit that could ever, and I mean ever, be worth the cost of your soul.

The second reason why we should wholeheartedly accept the cost of discipleship is because one day, **we will stand before Jesus face to face.**

Listen to what he says in our passage:

“If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”⁸

In the Old Testament, the prophet Daniel speaks of “one like a son of man”, a divine kingly figure who will one day come with the angels to reign over the nations and set the whole world right once and for all. In our passage in Mark, Jesus is saying, “That’s me!”⁹

He first came into this world a baby. He grew, lived, died, rose again, and ascended back to heaven. In this passage, Jesus points us to his second coming—to his future and ultimate return to earth to overcome all evil and injustice, and rule this world forever as King.

At that time we will each stand before him, to give an account of our lives.

On this side of Jesus’ second coming, it’s all too easy to be overly concerned with what other people think about us because we follow him. One of the costs of following Jesus is being willing to reject the temptation to feel embarrassed or ashamed about your relationship with Christ.

But listen. One day, when you’re standing face to face with Jesus, the farthest thing from your mind is going to be whether or not your peers think you’re cool. And you’re not going to care one lick about what your judgmental relatives have to say anymore, because you’ll be standing before the world’s true and righteous Judge. The one and only thing that will matter then, and therefore the one and only thing that should matter now, is what Jesus thinks.

⁸ Mark 8:38 (NIV)

⁹ Daniel 7:13-14

Any compromise you might make now could never be worth Jesus being ashamed of you when he comes again. And any cost you might have to bear now as you follow Jesus will be as nothing compared to standing face to face with the one who died for you and hearing him say, "Well done good and faithful servant."¹⁰

The third reason why we should wholeheartedly accept the cost of following Jesus is because **we get to be part of God's kingdom mission.**

In chapter 9 verse 1, we read:

And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."¹¹

What is Jesus talking about here? Well, when did the first disciples see the kingdom of God come with power? They certainly saw it in the life and ministry of Jesus, which they got to be a part of.

And they absolutely saw it when Jesus was raised to life in great power after suffering and dying in great weakness.

And then they definitely saw it at Pentecost when the Spirit of the risen Jesus filled the hearts of his disciples, and they got to be part of the ministry of the early church as it and grew in love, service and influence all over the world.

Sometimes following and serving Jesus is hard. It demands self-denial. It demands that we take up our cross. But I wouldn't trade a life of serving him and being part of his kingdom mission in this world for anything.

In the early years of Cornerstone, some of us would go to a ministry conference where we would hear the phrase, "We get to do this!"

What the phrase meant was that all of us—whatever our role may be— get to be a part of Jesus' kingdom mission by building up his church, and we get to do it together. "We get to do this!"

Over the years, those of you who have been of this church family have been able to see Cornerstone grow from a small mono-ethnic church plant to a large multicultural

¹⁰ Matthew 25:23

¹¹ Mark 9:1 (NIV)

congregation that is a major presence for God's kingdom both in our community and around the world.

Over the years, by God's grace, so many people have come to know Jesus and be baptized. So many people have been shaped as followers of Jesus. So many people have been welcomed with the hospitality of Jesus. So many have grown in their prayer life. So many have found emotional healing, and freedom from the baggage of their past. So many people served others with God's love in practical ways, in accordance with their God-given gifts and talents.

Have there been hardships, and sacrifices, and sufferings along the way? Plenty. Have we been the targets of enemy attack? All too often. Have we gone through some heart-wrenching times together? No question about it. Have our faces often been tear-stained? Probably more times than we can count.

Would I give it all up to be spared the self-denial and cross-bearing? Never in a million years. We get to be a part of God's kingdom mission together. Everyone type into the chat, "We get to do this!"

Today we've explored both the cost of following Jesus, and why we should wholeheartedly accept that cost. In the process, we've considered Jesus' question: *What can you give in exchange for your soul?*

As we now prepare our hearts for the Lord's Supper, we're reminded that Jesus gave his own life in exchange for our souls. That's how much he values us. That's how much he loves you and me.

May this meal remind you that Jesus' body was broken for you; his blood shed for you.

Therefore:

You are not your own; you were bought with a price.¹²

But Jesus' call to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow him is not a call to a dour life of trudging through hardships. Rather, it's a call to stay close to and be nourished by the one who loves you so much that he denied himself for you, and carried his cross for you.

¹² 1 Corinthians 6:19b-20 (NIV)

It's a call to let his limitless love meet the deepest needs of your heart, and impart to you the strength to follow him by laying down your life in sacrificial service to others in his name.

May this meal also remind you that one day, Jesus will return, and we will rule and reign with him forever and ever in resurrected glory.

At that time, we will feast with him at his table in the new heavens and the new earth, and we will know, as Paul has written, that our prior temporary sufferings for Christ "have produced in us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever!" ¹³

Communion

¹³ 2 Corinthians 4:17