

MARK 8:34-38

CROSS PURPOSE

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? ³⁷ Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

This is a truly shocking statement by Jesus. Those of us who were alive in the middle decades of the 20th century have a little bit of an idea of the radical nature of Jesus' description of discipleship. In the time of government-imposed "blue laws" that protected the Sabbath and school days commencing with the Lord's Prayer, being a Christian was a matter of being born in the United States and not being Jewish. Like the Jews of Jesus' time, belonging to the chosen people was a passive affair, even if the ritual expression was not. Into our peaceful Sunday afternoon drive of a Christian life Jesus delivers a tsunami. Being his disciple is an individually active and personally consequential decision. One must *deny* himself, *take up* his cross and *follow* Jesus.

The real shocker is the matter of taking up one's cross. Jesus leaves no doubt that he is talking about nothing less than dying by execution. There is no room here for psycho-babble about bearing the burdens of life, whether they be addictions, unearned suffering, disease or broken relationships. The cross is not the image of noble suffering, but rather the instrument of the world for imposing death on an unwilling subject. If Jesus has been victorious over the powers and principalities of the world, then anyone who publically declares themselves to be on Jesus' side is an enemy of the world and the target for the world's anger. Jesus wants us to know the true cost of choosing him. It is not just a matter of conforming our will to his will (denying self), it is acknowledging that you are not choosing the world, and therefore, now have chosen to be subject to its wrath.

The good news is that Jesus has already been victorious over the world through his death and resurrection. The present (and for most of us, potential) sufferings of this world are temporary, while the peace of God's kingdom is eternal. Elsewhere Jesus said, "*Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both body and soul in hell...[but,] don't be afraid; you are worth more [to God] than many sparrows*" (Matthew 10:28,31).

Father, deliver me from the delusion that your grace has little personal cost. Open my eyes to the reality that your grace toward me has cost you more than I can ever imagine. Help me to know and count my cost of following you so that I might truly invest myself in being your disciple. Amen.