

What we remember from the text today and what we remember from church history is that the center of our faith is a symbol of death. It's the cross. At the very core and center of our faith is this symbol of death. The image of a cross on top of a church building is certainly a ubiquitous sign of a Christian Church.

Whether it's an architectural feature or whether it's a piece of jewelry that hangs across your neck, this symbol would've been something that the first century could never even wrap their heads around as sentimentalizing. They would've never visioned it as something to adorn ourselves with because it was a vicious and violent symbol. It was a symbol that was at its core representative again, of death, of brutality. This practice of crucifixion had happened far beyond even the Roman Empire. It happened in many empires before, but at the moment that we read this particular text, Rome had perfected it. They had made it a craft of theirs to perfect the ways in which you would execute enemies of the state.

And so from the first century on, there is this long, rich history of the church and martyrs who have given their lives or have had their lives taken for the sake of obedience to the gospel. I was reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. If you're familiar with his story, he was a great pastor and theologian and a brilliant writer.

Bonhoeffer was doing his ministry at the time of the rise of Nazi Germany. And he's writing to a church that he felt had really acquiesced to Nazism and was trying to rebuke them for the ways in which they had cheapened grace. And he says this grace must demand a great sacrifice of us.

His most famous work was called *The Cost of Discipleship*. And in there, he's writing against this compromise and the complicity of the German church as they failed to step up and stand against the rise of Hitler and the Nazis. He writes,

As we embark upon discipleship, we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. Dietrich Bonhoeffer

What Bonhoeffer is getting at is this long tradition that we see throughout church history dating all the way back to this particular text. This chapter from which I pulled this quote is his reflections on this very text we're going to preach today. It's drawing upon this long history of discipleship, following Jesus, or the ways of apprenticeship to Jesus. Taking on the very way in nature of life will ultimately lead to the

cross. And we view the cross often as something that Jesus has done for us, which is 100 percent correct and the center point of the cross. But the cross is also the very path in which we are walking. If we are called to follow Jesus, which quite literally in the first century meant to get behind him and take steps with him, is it any surprise that all, except for one, of the original disciples were also then crucified? That the way of life in Jesus led those early disciples to have to lay down their life for the sake of the gospel.

Now, you and I are blessed with the fact that probably none of us in here will have to face that kind of death. We live in a country that we're grateful for, that has given us that freedom of religion, which we won't have to face that kind of death. But this isn't true for many believers across the world. There are many of our brothers and sisters who call on the name of Jesus, who will face the same martyrdom that the early Christians did, that Jesus himself did. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.

This is a call that we have to understand both in a literal and a metaphorical sense. As we go through this text, I want us to hold in mind that this is first literal and then metaphorical. There are both of those things happening in this text, but we tend to take them strictly metaphorical, and we forget the very call to follow Jesus to the cross as all disciples before us have had to do. They've had to walk that road or, at minimum, be ready to walk that road.

It was just eight years after the publication of that book that Bonhoeffer was arrested, thrown into a concentration camp, and then eventually executed because he was part of a plot to take out Hitler. So Bonhoeffer understood the call. He understood that when he answered the call of Jesus to follow him, it was a bid to come and die.

We come to that same call, and what do we do with the call that says death to self is the center point of following Jesus? What does that mean for an age in which we live with this ethos of being true to ourselves, being true to our heart, live your truth? We live in an age that worships the sovereign self. And yet, at the center of our faith, Jesus bids us to come and die. How do we live in that tension? How do we answer that particular call of Jesus?

Peter declared that Jesus was the Messiah, and then Jesus said that he was going to go to Jerusalem. He was going to march down to the capital, and there he was going to suffer and die at the hands of the Romans and the religious officials. And Peter says, "Jesus, that's not the way this story goes. You don't understand. That's not the king and Messiah that we're longing for." And he rebukes Jesus. And Jesus responds with an even stronger rebuke and says, "You are getting in the way of the king and the kingdom. Get behind me, Satan."

Then we arrive at our text, Mark 8:34. *"Then he called the crowd to him..."* Jesus sees what's happening with Peter and the disciples, and he says that this is the same impulse that's in the crowds. Now, remember, the crowds in Mark are where we find ourselves. Mark is inviting us into the text, and the crowds are usually indicative of everyone across time.

So when he calls the 12 and the crowds, this is radically different than what Jesus has done. Remember, we've made note of this throughout the book of Mark, that usually, when the crowds gather, Jesus splits the other way. But this time, he calls the crowds to him. He gathers the crowds and his disciples, and he begins to teach. *"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'"* (Mark 8:34). If anyone wants to follow me, which was a radical call in itself that one would say that anyone could, in fact, be my disciple.

And so he says, "Anyone who wants to follow me, both the 12 and the crowds," which is interesting that he calls the disciples together and says, "Whoever wants to be my disciple." This begs the question, is Peter sitting there wondering if he just got cast out of the 12?

Did he miss the plot? Which is an unsettling question that we should ask ourselves. As someone who grew up in church, that's an unsettling question to realize that I could declare Jesus Messiah and yet still be way off. It's a word for us.

In Greek, there's something really unique happening beneath the surface. A couple of verses earlier, we read, *"But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. 'Get behind me, Satan!'"* (Mark 8:33). The Greek word for disciple is *mathétés* which means student or apprentice. That's the word that's typically used when it talks about disciple. Now the word behind me is the Greek word *opisó*, which means behind or disciple. In the next verse, the translators will use the word *opisó* for disciple. Because what they're trying to get us to see is that being behind Jesus is the place of the disciple.

Look at verse 34 again, *"Then he called the crowds to him and along with his disciples (mathétés) and said: 'whoever wants to be my disciple (opisó)..."* Literally, this phrase isn't whoever wants to be my disciple. Literally, it's whoever wants to come behind me. And so he's saying there are those here who would rebuke me; those disciples need to get behind me. But then he says, "Whoever wants to be my disciple, well, they can get behind me as well."

Do you see the parallel Mark is highlighting? What we miss subtly is that the posture of the disciple is to get behind Jesus, not out in front of Jesus. This is what Peter did. He got out ahead of Jesus and said, "No, that's not the way the King operates. That's not the way the Messiah is to be." Instead, Jesus says, get behind me. The place of the disciple is to follow me. And this isn't some egotistical thing. He's just saying that if you want to live in the reality of the kingdom, you have to unlearn all the things you've learned in this world and come behind Jesus and learn what it means to live this life with God in the kingdom. So he says, "Whoever wants to be my disciple, my mathétés, come behind me, come after me, follow me."

And then he says these three things, which we're going to come back to at the end of the sermon, but he's essentially laying out the three things that if you want to be his disciple that you do. The first is you deny yourself. The second is you take up your cross. The third is you follow Jesus.

I don't think when Jesus says deny yourself; he means the core of who you are. Notice also he doesn't say deny yourself things, but rather he says to deny yourself. And when we map this across biblical theology, which is just a fancy way of saying, when we take one concept and trace it through other areas of scripture, this comes to light a little more.

Paul, in the New Testament, who's really reflecting so much on what Jesus had taught and his encounter with Jesus, talks about the distinction between the true self and the false self. And in those places throughout the New Testament, when Paul talks about the false self, another word he uses for it is the flesh. It's that culmination of your human desires that are bent away from the things of Jesus and the kingdom of God. And Jesus is saying that's the part of you that you need to deny.

He's not saying deny the things that make you a particular person, like personality, history, and place of origin. He's not saying that. He's been clear on that. Jesus going to Gentile and Jew is welcoming the distinctions and particularities of who we are as humans. But he's saying there's a part of you that's bent away from the things of Jesus.

It's exactly what we just saw with Peter. Peter had all these desires and inclinations as to what it meant to follow him. And Jesus, coming out of that very scene, says that the first step of a disciple is to deny that self that's bent away from the things of Jesus. All of us have this.

Think of Paul in Galatians 2:20. I referenced this last week as well. *"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."* Notice Paul's language. I have been crucified with Christ. To be crucified means you die. You stop breathing. So clearly, here he's not saying you are literally not breathing anymore, but there's something, a part of who we are, that needs to die off in order for Christ to inhabit that space. And he says, "I have been crucified, that I, that self, that's bent away from the things of God, I've crucified that, but now Christ lives in its place."

Then Jesus says to take up your cross. Now, growing up, I always read this as just an elaboration of the first thing. It was just another way to deny yourself, but I don't think that's what Jesus is doing here. I actually think this is a second thing. And when he says to take up your cross, which he just told Peter and the disciples that he was going to Jerusalem and would be killed, the disciples and the first-century listeners would've been familiar with what the cross meant. They would've known what it meant to be crucified. They would've seen, at times, thousands of people hanging on crosses lining the street. This is why there's that revolutionary fervor in the disciples who wanted their revenge. They would've understood this.

So when he said, "Deny yourselves, and secondly, take up your cross." They're getting at this idea that you have to sever your allegiances, which is what we'll play off later in the sermon. See, we can domesticate this line, and we think of it like, "Well, I just have to endure hardship and

take up my cross." That is not what's going on here. It's much deeper. Jesus is saying that we can become entangled with the ethos of the world around us. We can be entangled with the different waves of empire and what it means to wield power and be in control. Instead, we are to take up our cross because for Jesus, in the economy of the kingdom of God, from death brings life which is completely counter and radical. That's why Peter was so shocked.

What it means to follow Jesus is to deny yourself. Then you also embrace what the world would look on as defeat to bring about resurrection life. And this is Jesus doing his saving work that only he alone does. But Jesus here seems to be laying a clarion call that our following of Jesus is to walk in these particular paths. And right beneath the surface between here and the end of the book of Mark, Jesus and the disciples are making their way to Jerusalem when Jesus says, "Get behind me." Jesus quite literally means, "I'm walking the road to crucifixion; join me. Will you join me? Can you deny yourself and take up your cross?"

And then, thirdly, Jesus says, "Follow me." Jesus is inviting his followers not to follow the different areas of the empire. Don't follow the way of Rome. Don't follow the way of the religious authorities. Instead, he says, "Follow me." See, what we miss is that the cross that Jesus just said we're going to endure that we need to take up was held for those who had committed high treason against the state. They disrupted Roman rule and the social order of the time.

Jesus says that if we're taking up that cross, we're stepping out of one kingdom and into the kingdom of God. And so, to deny ourselves is denying the kingdom of self. We deny that, but then we broaden it, and now we want to deny all these other things that want to pull us in ways that make it hard to keep fidelity to the kingdom of God. So we deny those things as well because we're stepping into the kingdom of God, this completely counter-contrasting kingdom.

Remember, in the very beginning of the gospel, Jesus announces the kingdom that he's bringing about. That's the gospel—the kingdom of God has come, repent, and believe the good news. The kingdom can be stepped into here and now; it's present. It's both a future reality that we hold out there when it fully establishes itself, but yet Jesus speaks of it as a present reality as well. He says that if you want to step into that, apprentice under me. Learn how to unlearn the ways of this world, learn how to unlearn those things in which you've been formed by the kingdoms of this world, and step into the kingdom of God.

Now Jesus transitions here in verse 35, and he begins to speak of the rationality, if you will, for why you would do this.

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? Mark 8:35-37

Notice the way Jesus teaches. He's so brilliant. Notice that throughout this, there are no commands. Jesus is naming reality here. He's simply saying that this is the way the world works. If you want to save your life,

you're going to lose it. If you lose your life for Jesus in the gospel, you'll save it.

He names reality and then allows us, as his listeners, the disciples, and the crowds there, to just decide if we want to trust Jesus and align our lives with the way Jesus understands reality. He doesn't coerce. He doesn't end with a big call like, "Come do this." He is just saying that this is the way the world operates. If you want to be his disciple, deny yourself. Take up your cross and follow him because if you want to save your life, you'll lose it. If you want to lose your life, you'll save it. It's very point-blank. It's very pragmatic.

Now, let's parse this out a little bit. First, the word for life. Some of your Bibles may use the word soul, and that's actually a valid translation because the Greek word is the word *psuché*, which is the root word where we get our word psychology. And so it references this idea of the soul, breath, or life. And when Jesus says this, we have to understand the biblical imagination of the soul.

We get this wrong sometimes. We tend to think of the soul as the immaterial part of who we are. Like when a cartoon character would die, and a little bird would float off somewhere. We laugh, but that's how most of us think of the soul. And that's really because we've adopted a platonic understanding of the person where there's material, and there's soul. And those two things are over and against each. And when we've adopted that from Plato, not the scriptures, we've slowly understood that the soul must be better and the body's just a thing we're trapped in.

But the biblical understanding of *psuché*, of the soul, is actually the integration of all of who you are. Both your body, your mind, your will, your volition, and your emotion. All of that integrated together is the soul. This is really important to understand because if we adopt that platonic understanding where material and spiritual are separate, then a problem can happen with things like sin, and we get caught up on how to do that. We don't understand how those operate because if the spirit, that immaterial part of you, is the only thing that matters, and the body is just something to be discarded as we float away someday into a glad bliss of utopia, then bodies don't matter.

What's downstream from that are things like racism, things like systemic injustice, and inequality. Because if bodies don't matter, if the only thing that matters is saving the immaterial soul, which is a separate thing from the body, then what? Why would we confront those things? But the biblical imagination says the soul is the integration of everything of who you are. And what Jesus is doing, what Jesus has resurrected into, is the first fruit of what we will be.

So what we see in Jesus' resurrection is our future, a bodily resurrection. This is why it's essential that Jesus had a bodily resurrection. It's why Paul would say that if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, we're most to be pitied because Jesus is working not just to save the immaterial part of us. He's saving the whole of who we are. Body, soul, mind, strength, thoughts, emotions, everything has been wrecked through sin, and Jesus is redeeming and restoring the whole thing. This is why the future

of our eternal destiny is a physical reality in which we are present and communing with Jesus. Just like Adam and Eve were in Genesis 1.

Jesus says, if you want to save your *psuché*, if you go there, you're going to lose it if you focus just there. But rather, if you focus on the kingdom, you'll save the whole of who you are. See, if the sovereign self is king over everything, what happens is you slowly become enslaved to your wants and desires in such a way that they distort your very soul. They begin to erode you. You focus on finite things, but you are created for infinite things. You're created with eternity in your hearts. And so when you then place finite things in the posture of God, that's the same platonic dualism that the church has succumbed to as well. It's just emphasized the material over the immaterial.

If you focus on just the material, you're still only knowing half the story of who you are as a human. You are body, and you are spirit. You are both of those things fused together. God took the dirt from the ground, and he fashioned it and shaped Adam, but Adam didn't become a human until God breathed his spirit into him. Because that is the distinction in which a human is among all of creation. We are both body and spirit fused together into a hybrid creature. We are distinct.

What happened in the world we live in is we've elevated the material to a place in which when you focus on that and become enslaved to your desires and wants, it eats you alive in such a way that you do, in fact, lose your soul because you're not meant for just material.

But Jesus says, if you focus on me and the gospel, then you'll save your soul. Because what the gospel's doing is heralding the announcement that there is healing for the whole of who you are, which is why God is in the work of redeeming and restoring this material world because he recognizes the fracture of sin as both material and immaterial. And he's fusing these things back together into a renewed, restored creation where we'll spend eternity under the reign and rule of Jesus Christ. And we'll rule with him because we've been made new; we've been made fresh.

Jesus says, "Listen, if you want to save your life, if you want to focus on that, you'll lose it. But if you want to lose your life, for me, if you're willing to give up the whole of who you are for the sake of me and the gospel, then you will save it."

Then these penetrating questions in verses 36 and 37, "*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 if you got everything? What if that platonic understanding, that material part, says, "Man, I could have everything I ever wanted." What if you achieved that, but yet you lost your soul? What if you arrived there? This is the story we hear over and over of the rich and famous, who arrive, and they seem like they have everything, but yet they still feel hollow, like something's missing.

Jesus says what if you gained the whole world, yet you forfeit your soul? What gain is that? He says that you're missing it. Notice also that Jesus is so practical. It's almost scary because notice the syntax. He says, "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, not, might, not could and not maybe. He says that you will lose it. But the inverse is true. Whoever

loses their life for Jesus and the gospel, will save it. It's practical. It's pragmatic. It's just a statement of reality in which Jesus is inviting us to apprentice under him to learn how to align our life with that understanding of reality.

Jesus does this over and over. He names reality and then allows us to decide if we want to live in line with that. I love that. He's not coercive. He's not going to twist our arm. He'll honor our choice to reject him and to reject his understanding of the world. But he simply says you might lose your life in the process of that. He invites us to align ourselves with that.

There are two options in Jesus. Deny yourself and follow Jesus, gaining life. Or deny Jesus, follow yourself, and lose your life. And he invites us to make that choice, to wrestle with that tension. I'm convinced that we will not progress very far in our maturity and walking in the kingdom of God, our life with Jesus, until we integrate denial of the self into the regular practice of following Jesus.

Because the reality is none of us are for Jesus or against Jesus—wholly. If you're like me, it probably depends day to day, maybe even hour to hour. Am I for Jesus or against him? And not in the, like I sit down and think, "I'm not against Jesus here." In the very practical ways in which I organize my life, there are times in which I'm all in, and I get it. And other times, I'm like, "Jesus, I don't want to hand that over to you. I don't quite want to give that." This is a hard teaching of Jesus, but the invitation is for us to do soul searching to find out where we are with Jesus today. Do you understand that idea of getting behind him? In the age of the sovereign self, it's very difficult to learn how to deny ourselves and take up our cross.

It's counter to everything we feel and understand in the world, but Jesus says that the way to life is through death. And that will assault our modern ears, and it needs to. Because we have bought the myth in areas and corners of our soul in which we don't even realize, in which we are constantly just serving the self without the realization that this is, in turn, coming back and eroding us from the inside out. Jesus says there's a different way.

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." 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." Mark 8:38-9:1

Jesus now broadens out and looks over the horizon. He says that if you are ashamed of the understanding that from death comes life, and from loss comes gain, then there's that day out on the horizon in which Jesus will be ashamed of you. He's saying that if you can't understand that this is the way the kingdom of God operates like Peter couldn't, well then, he's not going to claim you as one who's in the kingdom of God because you're not in the kingdom of God, you're doing something different and counter. You're still in the kingdom of self or the kingdom of Rome or

the kingdom of America or capitalism, or whatever it is. You're serving a different kingdom.

And Jesus very pragmatically says if you're not in, if you can't catch this, you miss the kingdom of God. He says that on that day, out on the horizon, you won't be claimed. Jesus says that's what's at stake. And then notice 9:1 says, *"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."*

Now, what does he mean by that? There are two possibilities, neither of which is the second coming of Jesus. That tends to be the one we read here, but that's clearly not the case because that hasn't happened, and Jesus wouldn't be lying here. First, it could mean the transfiguration that happens, which that could be the scene he's pointing to. What I personally think Mark has been developing through chapter 8 is, what is power in Jesus' kingdom? It's death which gives way to resurrection.

What he's talking about is the kingdom of God. It's here, but it hasn't come in power yet because the power of God is through the crucifixion, through the cross. And he is saying that some of them standing there will see this. There will be a day in which he hangs on this cross; he will give his life. But then, three days later, they will witness the resurrection. And there, the kingdom of God comes into power in an alternative, radical way that nobody saw coming. And he said they would see that.

Here's why this verse is so important. It is because you can only make sense of denying yourself, taking up your cross apprenticeship to Jesus like that with the resurrection. The resurrection brings coherence to the Christian story that says the way that you find your life is to lose it because you make sense of that command with the future in mind.

Now we have the benefit of looking back on the resurrection, realizing the truth and validity of that, and saying, "I can stake my life on that." But if you leave from here with only the cross and not the resurrection, you don't have very much hope. But we're a people of hope, and we understand that we make sense of this, denying ourselves with an eye for the future. And Jesus says, this is the way in which you find life. It's the only way you find life. Until we get this reality in our bones, we're going to be on the outside looking in. It's what Peter was caught up in.

Now Peter figures it out. There's grace; there's welcome; there's always welcome back into that, but some of us are missing it. We're not contextualizing this idea of denying yourself with an eye for the future. Because if we don't have that context, again, denying ourselves makes no sense.

If our world is only a material world, then we should feel every desire and exercise because that's all there is. You die, and there's nothing. But if there's some future in which that makes sense, then it makes sense to lay our life down for the sake of resurrection. It makes sense to follow this kingdom of God. The story all of a sudden has coherence because we understand what Jesus is doing. He's saying that thing that we desire, that material part; if we only focus there, our life will be lost. But instead, if we give that up, we'll be saved. What good is it if we gain the whole world, yet forfeit our souls? Jesus is welcoming us into that perspective.

Deny Ourselves = Sever Allegiance to "Self"

To close, I want to focus back again on those three things that are instructive for us. Jesus has this call of what it means to follow Jesus. Jesus will respect your choice. He will not force himself on you. He'll lay out reality and then invite you to figure out how that works with him. But he says the first thing is we need to deny ourselves, and for us, this means we have to sever our allegiance to self.

We live in an age that exalts the self, that views the self as "I'm the author of my own story. Anything I feel, I should do because that's inherent to who I am. And so that must be the right thing to do." And this sovereign self is the place that we think brings life. Jesus says that we need to deny ourselves; we have to crucify that because that thing will conflict. It will lead to infidelity to the kingdom of God. We cannot worship ourselves and worship God. It does not work.

But our world is constructed in such a way that the individual is at the center. What we feel is what we should do. Jesus says that's going to lead to the loss of life. Because the inverse would be to deny Jesus and gain ourselves, but in that, we allow ourselves to become enslaved to our desires and wants. What happens when those things are found empty and wanting?

This idea of nihilism, that nothing is important anymore, seems to be rising with the younger generation because they're pursuing their desires and their feelings; they're trying everything. They are throwing off all sorts of restraints that could be put on the individual, and they get those things. They achieve them, and when they find themselves still wanting, they just say, "Well, nothing must have meaning." It descends into this hopeless nihilism. Like, what's the purpose of anything? It's a depressive state to be in, but when you play out the life of this logic, that's where it leads. It leads to that emptiness.

It's the writer of Ecclesiastes who does everything to the fullest experience. He has everything—all the wealth, anything he could ask for. And he says it's all vanity. It's all meaningless. And he comes to the end of himself. He says, "I tried everything, every experience I could possibly experience, and it left me empty."

Jesus' invitation to deny yourself isn't one of a restrictive like he wants to hold us back. It's one that says, "I want to liberate you from the enslavement to self." When you can then say no to self, say no to those disordered loves, those disordered desires, that is where you get freedom because you're not running enslaved to them. Rather, they take their proper place, and you find freedom from that depressive nihilism. If we're going to deny ourselves, we have to sever our allegiance to the self.

Take Up Our Cross = Sever Allegiance to All Other Allegiances

Then secondly, take up your cross. This means that we have to sever our allegiance to all other allegiances. This is literal before it's metaphoric. For Jesus, he's standing before a crowd. He was standing before disciples who had all sorts of fervor. The whole thing through chapter 8 has been that they want this power. They want to be Rome with a Jesus veneer. That's what they wanted. But to take up your cross is to deny

those allegiances. To say that the only allegiance I can have is to the kingdom of God.

That scene where Jesus preaches this hard teaching, and a bunch of people leave. He turns to the disciples and says, "Are you guys going to leave too?" Peter, in a moment of faith, looks at him and says, "To who would we go? You hold the keys to the kingdom. You hold everything we could ever want. To who would we turn." See, if we are to take up our cross, we have to sever our allegiances to all other allegiances.

I'll be honest; I'm concerned about this one. As I've looked both historically and watched the way, in particular, the Evangelical Church has wed itself to political parties; I worry that we're tied up in other allegiances.

If you go back historically with the rise of the moral majority and the way in which the Evangelical church is aligned with the Republican Party, I'm concerned. We have an allegiance there. Now it doesn't mean we go and join ourselves to the left. That's equally as wrong. The problem is proximity to power. Proximity to power throughout history, starting in the third century with Constantine, anytime the church and Christians get close to power, it generates compromise, and we begin to have to compromise the way of Jesus to uphold it.

As I look at the landscape and the way in which both Christians on the left and the right prop Jesus up as a mascot for their political party, it's generating compromise. It will not fit neatly and nicely in any category because Jesus is beyond those. He's not as worried about those as we tend to be. If we're to take up our cross, just like the call was for them to crucify their allegiance to Rome, so too, being in connection with Jesus and the kingdom of God will cause us, at times to not line up with the American way. Those two things will be in conflict. It's hard, and it's nuanced.

It doesn't mean we hate our country. I love this country. As I said before, I'm so grateful that I can do what I do right now without the threat of death. That's a huge gift from God. It is nuanced. It is a gray area. It is hard. It's a tension. But if we are to take up the call of Jesus, to deny ourselves and take up our cross, we have to be willing to sever any allegiance to something that is other than Jesus. Again, it's hard, but it's what we must do.

What good is it? If you gain the whole world, yet forfeit our soul. What good is it if we get to experience everything in our heart desires, yet we lose our soul? What good is it if we gain all cultural influence but yet lose our soul?

Jesus is saying the temptation to these things is so strong. It's always been from the very beginning days of Jesus, such as what Peter's wrestling through. He says if you give yourself to those things, they'll eat you alive. The kingdom of God is something different, an alternative. And here's the hard part about that, when we find ourselves at odds with culture, we need to double down on the ethic of the cross because

it will stand in contrast. You will then absorb shame and things that will come on us from the culture that says we're bigoted, that's wrong. You shouldn't stand for that. All those sorts of things. But fidelity to the way of Jesus is to walk in line with the cross. And so, what if the call for Christians in the church today was to absorb that and then allow the cycle to stop?

That's what Jesus does on the cross. He takes the violence. He takes the evil. He absorbs it, and rather than retaliate in kind; he allows the cycle of violence to stop. What if our role in culture today was to absorb that and not tweet back, not snap back, not cut down, not get defensive, but just say, "Man, that hurts; that's not the way of Jesus." But we just absorb it, and we allow the cycle of hate to stop.

Paul would talk about how he feels like he's joining and sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Bonhoeffer would say that when Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die. That is the same exact posture. There's something beautiful to that. There's something hard, maybe even, to be honest, a bit frightening, but we absorb that, and we allow it to stop.

Follow me = Establish Allegiance to King and Kingdom

Jesus ends with this positive. He says, "Follow me." It doesn't make sense to deny self, sever the allegiance to self, sever the allegiance to all other allegiances. But he then says to follow him because the call then is to establish our allegiance to the King and kingdom, namely Jesus in the kingdom of God.

He says that this is the invitation. This is why Jesus in John 10:10b said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." It's not just ho-hum, but rather when we find our life in the way of Jesus, in this cruciform way of the kingdom of God, that is where we experience life and life abundantly.

Jesus says that this is the call, "Follow me." He says to step in that way. This is the invitation that you can have your communion with the very Jesus, the creator of the universe. Jesus is saying this is the invitation. "Come follow me, deny yourself, take up your cross. That's where life begins." Jesus is saying to follow him, and he will demonstrate this liberation into a new ethos, this resurrected life in which you commune with Jesus and God, and you live in this interactive relationship with him here and now.

This is the invitation. This is the call. It will require a lot. The road is narrow. Not many find it, but it leads to life. If you're willing to give up those things, if you're willing to do all of that, Jesus says that is where we find the abundant life. Whoever wants to be his disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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