

95-08-06bMark

He is also preparing for that great sacrifice that He will shortly make on the cross. And in verse 22 of chapter 8, we saw the healing of the blind man, and it was unusual because of it being in two stages. I thought it was pictured, even in Jesus working with the disciples, how it was a process of coming to see clearly.

At first the man who is healed says, I see men like trees walking. He makes a right identification, but a wrong perception. And that's exactly what Peter does in the next paragraph.

He says, you are the Christ, but when Jesus explains what kind of Messiah He is, Peter comes up and rebukes Him. And Jesus says, get thee behind Me, Satan, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men. Now this is one of the great challenges in our life, isn't it? To distinguish between the things of God and the things of men.

Because in our lives, the things of God are inextricably bound up in the things of men. We can't just sit and, as they say, be so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good. The truth of God, the plan of God, the character of God expressed in our lives, obviously has to have some outworking in this life.

And the question becomes, what is the nature of the interaction between God and man? Between the things of God and the things of man. That's what Jesus came to make clear. That's what He's focusing on with His disciples at this part of His ministry.

And He's going to go on in this chapter to try to make that very relationship clear. And it's important to us, isn't it, to understand how is it that the things of God that we learn about from God's Word and that are reinforced in our souls through God's Spirit, how do they work themselves out in practical life? That's what Jesus is going to address for us this evening. In verse 34, right after this episode with Peter, Jesus called the people to Himself.

There is a crowd of people in the general vicinity. They are out in this area of Caesarea Philippi, these towns and villages. And evidently there's a section of people who have come to hear Jesus teach to see if He's going to heal and so forth.

And then you have the inner group of disciples. And this discussion, who do men say that I am, who do you say that I am, that we saw this morning, is a discussion primarily between Jesus and the twelve. But now, in this response to Peter, Jesus doesn't just speak to Peter, He speaks to all twelve disciples, doesn't He? He turns and looks at the disciples in verse 33 when He rebukes Peter.

He includes the disciples in what He says to Peter. Now in what He's going to say to the disciples, He includes the entire crowd of people that are in the area. So in verse 34, Jesus called the people to Himself, with His disciples also, and said to them, "...whoever desires to come after

Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.

For whoever desires to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for My sake and the Gospels will save it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels." Now, I don't know about you, but this does not appear to me to be an easy thing to grasp and to digest and to work into daily life.

On the surface, we understand what the cross entails, but Jesus is speaking about taking up a cross when He Himself has not yet gone to the cross. Now this was no doubt very striking to the people who heard. Jesus said, if you want to follow Me, take up a cross.

When we think of cross, we think of Jesus Christ and the sacrifice that He made on our behalf, but this is before that event. What can this mean? What would it have meant to the people who heard it? One of the great things about the system of justice that the Romans employed was that it was swift and it was public. It had a great deterring effect on the populations in all of the lands that the Romans conquered.

Their justice was fair, but it was swift and it was public. Sentences that were handed out in Roman justice were executed publicly. And this served as a great training aid for young people growing up and contemplating a life of crime.

As they saw a convicted criminal beheaded or crucified or otherwise flayed and punished in public, this became a very significant factor in one's calculations on whether or not they were going to pursue a life of crime. It was not an uncommon thing in Rome with as many people as they subjugated to see these punishments executed. Probably on a nearly daily basis, someone was receiving this justice.

And so when Jesus says the words, take up His cross, this would bring to mind for people in Israel the public shame and humiliation that preceded execution under Roman law. This was not an Israelite custom, was it? Crucifixion on a cross was a Roman custom. The Israelites didn't like the Romans.

They didn't like Roman rule. They didn't like Roman justice. They didn't like Roman taxes.

But Jesus uses this figure and it brings vividly to mind an extreme in life. This was the worst death one could die. The Romans designed it that way.

It was designed not only to punish those who had committed a crime, but to deter future criminals. That was its purpose. So they made it as awful as they could.

They scourged people ahead of time. It was a slow, painful, torturous death. So when you talked about taking up a cross, you were talking about going to an extreme.

You were talking about an extreme of sacrifice, an extreme of rejection, an extreme of shame and humiliation, an extreme at the end of which you didn't continue to live on the earth. Why does Jesus bring this into His discussion? Why does He present this as a picture of following Him? This is not the prosperity gospel, is it? This isn't, come to Christ and have your problems solved. This isn't, come to Christ and bring your tithes into the storehouse and the windows of heaven will be opened and blessings will shower down, is it? This is not a good advertisement for following Jesus Christ.

But this is what Jesus presents. He says, if you desire to come after Me, to follow after Me, a man that desires that, let him do three things. Let him first deny himself.

What does it mean to deny oneself? What constitutes our self? That's our life, isn't it? What do we expect out of life? What are our expectations? What are our hopes? What are our dreams? What are our goals? Why do we get up in the morning and keep on moving? What is it that drives us in life? When we get to the end of the day and we think it's been a good day, why do we think that? What did we accomplish that makes us feel as though our life is worth living? That's our reason for being. The French have a phrase they can never pronounce, song, or whatever. The reason for being.

That's our goals and hopes and aspirations. Jesus says, throw that over. Whatever you thought constituted success, whatever you thought constituted a happy life, a meaningful life, a fulfilled life, a life that people would remember after you were gone, throw that over.

Not a popular concept. Not a catchy advertisement to bring people into discipleship of Jesus Christ, is it? Whatever you think is valuable, throw it out. But that's the first step that Jesus presents in following Him.

Now, this is much easier to apply to other people than it is to ourselves. But if we shine the laser beam searchlight of our scrutiny on ourselves as we want to do on others, we find that we have certain areas in which we have aspirations. We have hopes and dreams.

We have things in which we have invested ourselves, don't we? We've labored hard and long. We have poured ourselves into certain things, hoping for a certain result. But Jesus says, throw that over.

That's the first step. The second step is to take up one's cross. This means not only do you give up your personal desires, but you give up any hope of good opinion on the part of people that are watching you.

This taking up the cross was the march through the streets, the Via Dolorosa that Jesus trod with His cross. The line of people on each side jeering and spitting and mocking and saying, you deserve what you are about to get. You are a failure.

You are a criminal. It's your own fault that you aren't where you are. And this complete rejection by people, Jesus presents all of these in extreme terms, doesn't He? Obviously, in the life that we lead with Jesus Christ, these things don't happen.

We are not forced to literally trot a street with a cross. We don't, in America, typically face being despised and rejected because of our faith. Nor do we typically have to give up any thought of personal happiness or personal fulfillment.

But Jesus presents these things by way of an extreme. Remember when we talked about the sermon that He gave in John chapter 6 and many turned back from following Him? Jesus presented it in a radical way, didn't He? He said, you've got to eat my flesh and drink my blood or you have no life in you. This is not the way to encourage a huge following, is it? It's just the opposite.

But what does it force people to do? They've either got to reject Jesus entirely and say, He's crazy, I don't know what's the matter with Him, but He talks nonsense. Or they've got to think past the realities of this life. It forces them to say, He can't be talking about His actual blood and His actual flesh.

What could He be talking about? What is His message? And that steers them into that invisible reality that He's trying to communicate. There is something greater than this life. There's something greater than human accomplishment.

There's something greater than all of the things that we take for granted in human life. And Jesus is trying to get the people of Israel to see that. God is up to something.

God has a purpose and a plan that transcends what you can think of, what you can imagine. Are you willing to seek it? Are you willing to look at it and consider it? Jesus says to His generation. And that's what the Word of God and God the Holy Spirit present each succeeding generation with.

How interested are we in throwing aside this life and seeing what the life is that God asks us to lead? Because we are saved, because we are recipients of His grace, we now have a calling. Paul says it's a high calling. It's a high mark.

It's a challenge. It's not easy. It doesn't come from any of our human talents.

It doesn't come from our human perception. It's something beyond. It's something supernatural.

And it requires supernatural working to understand it and to live by it. So Jesus puts this in radical terms. He says, you've got to deny yourself.

And this root word in Greek, arneomai, means to absolutely throw over. This is what a traitor would do to his country. This is what someone would do that absolutely said, get thee hence.

I have nothing more to do with you. I wash my hands of you. It's a complete, radical separation.

Jesus says, if you want to follow Me, throw yourself out. Then He says, take up your cross. Throw out any consideration of what other people are going to think.

Any consideration of what your fate and your future might be. What is the future of a person taking up his cross? Where is he headed? Death. Destruction.

Annihilation. It is the end of all things in human terms, isn't it? And Jesus says, you just plan on heading into what appears to be destruction, annihilation, death. We call upon people to do this today, don't we? In warfare, military men, we believe that there is something worth dying for, don't we? We believe that the values of this country, the freedom that we enjoy in this country, the freedom to worship God first and foremost, and the other ways in which our country reflects its godly heritage and its godly origins, we believe that that is so valuable that individuals in this country are willing to go and have their life come to an end.

Watching their children grow up, celebrating anniversaries, growing old with their spouse, all of the pleasures and the hopes and the dreams of this life are snuffed out in a moment because of an idea, because of a principle that we consider to be worth dying for. That's why we celebrate Veterans Day. That's why we celebrate Memorial Day.

We recognize the nobility of that sacrifice and the greatness of character of the men who have made that sacrifice on our behalf. We live and enjoy the things that we enjoy because blood has been spilt for us. Jesus says you've got to be willing to do that if you want to see the glory of the kingdom.

If you want to experience in this life what God has for us in the next, you've got to have that commitment. We get scared sometimes because we see that a course of action has something to recommend it as being right. It's a course that seems to hew to the line of principle and yet it leads in a direction that appears to be certain failure, certain destruction, certain death.

Our church has faced that in attempting to stick with a biblical emphasis and to be a Bible church. There are a lot of folks in this day and age who don't understand the emphasis of a Bible church. What it means to be a Bible church.

To seek to let God make an impact on us before we run out and attempt to have an impact on others. The Pharisees missed that point, didn't they? And Jesus said you canvass the earth and the sea to make a proselyte and then you make Him two-fold the child of hell that you are. We try to avoid that.

That's why we're a Bible church. That's why we seek to let God change us and transform us first. It's a matter of priority.

It isn't that we dismiss the importance of having an impact on others, but we try to see from whence it comes. Jesus is trying to do that for the disciples. He's saying before you can arrive where I am.

Who's had the greatest impact on human history? Who's affected more lives than any other human being in history? Jesus Christ. We would love to be followers of Him and do what He has done. What does it require? Throwing out any self-consideration.

Throwing out the consideration of other people are the first two steps. And what is the third? Follow me. How do we follow Jesus Christ? What is the example that He set? How did He meet challenges? How did He face the challenges of the Pharisees? How did He face the challenges of the scribes and the Sadducees and all of the other opponents? How did He face the challenges of Satan himself? Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.

That is God's provision. That is God's strength. That's what is the object of our faith.

And in the presence of faith, the power of God is active. So we've got to put ourselves in the position that Jesus put Himself in, in His humanity. He walked by faith, not by sight.

That's our calling. Jesus says whoever desires to save his life will lose it. Remember back in Genesis, I think it's in chapter 22 or thereabouts, when God comes down to Abraham to test him.

What is the nature of that test? Abraham believed God and God credited it to him for righteousness. What was the test that God gave Abraham? It was this very test. Sacrifice your future.

Sacrifice the thing that you long for more than anything else. A son. A progeny.

An offspring. That which God had said will be to the whole world. God said through you all the nations of the world will be blessed.

In Isaac shall thy seed be called. And then God comes down and says offer Isaac as a sacrifice. How horrible.

This can't be right. Surely this isn't God's will. Abraham could have rationalized getting around that sacrifice a hundred different ways.

Thou shalt not murder. This would obviously be murder. God has made a promise.

God has to mean something else. There are many, many different ways that Abraham could have explained this away and gotten around it. But when you read that chapter, there is not a hint of hesitation.

Although we can imagine that there must have been. There's not a hint of Abraham's anguish. Although there must have been.

There's not a hint of the inner struggle that we imagine must have gone on in Abraham's soul to fulfill that command. What faith it must have required to take one's flesh and blood. He had waited a hundred years to see and march up the mountain with a stack of wood and a sharp knife and have every intention of sacrificing that future and that hope and the basis of God's promise on the altar.

But Abraham did it. Why? Scripture tells us Abraham believed God. That's the one thing that he could cling to with all of the rationalizations and all the explanations.

If any of Abraham's friends, you can bet if Sarah knew what he was going up the mountain to do, he would have had his wife around his knees dragging her all the way up the mountain. I didn't go through a pregnancy at the age of 90 something years to have you sacrifice our child on top of a mountain. You're nuts! I don't know what you've been eating, but it wasn't anything I cooked.

I don't know what vision you saw. I didn't see that vision. You've got to be nuts! Abraham believed God.

And in the face of every opposition, every rationalization, everything else in life, Abraham said, this is what God has asked me to do. This is what I will do. And he told the men that were with him when he told them to stay behind as they went up the mountain, he told them, we will return.

Abraham clung to the promise of God. What had God said? What was the Word of God that was the object of Abraham's faith? He said, in Isaac shall thy seed be called. Abraham didn't understand how, or where, or why, but he had the promise of God.

And if in Isaac my seed will be called, that's God's problem. God says, sacrifice him. Well, something must be going to happen because God has promised that in Isaac my seed, my progeny, my future will be called.

And Abraham was willing to lay down his life. He was willing to lose it in obedience to God. And was God actually interested in Abraham sacrificing his life and his future? Not at all.

God was interested in Abraham expressing that commitment. Very few of us will have to persevere to the point of blood or persevere to the point of death like missionaries in South America, like martyrs of days gone by have had to do. Very few of us will be called upon to express our faith in that way.

And yet, there are other ways in which all of us are called upon to express our faith in exactly that way. All of us have aspirations. All of us have hopes and dreams that we cherish and hold close.

And God says, are you willing to set that aside? Are you willing to trust to the point of death? To

the point of annihilation where you can't see how it's going to work out except in destruction? God says, that's right where I want you to be. When you can't see and you don't know and you trust anyway. That's the point that God wants to bring each one of us to.

That's the point that God is bringing Tahlequah Bible Church to and each one of us in it. We can't see how things are going to work out. The future looks dark.

The future looks uncertain. The future is unknown to us. That's exactly where God wants us to be.

Will you trust that God's hands are on and around this church? That God's hands are on and around each one of us? We don't have to know. It is sufficient that He knows. That's what Jesus means when He says, are you willing to lay down your life? Are you willing to take up the cross and walk the road that appears to end in destruction? Abraham did.

Jesus did. The Apostles did. And in areas of our life we can as well if we simply trust our God.

It doesn't have to make sense. There doesn't have to be a rational explanation and a solution on the horizon that we can see and understand. The whole point is faith is the evidence of things not seen.

So those are the steps. Whoever desires to come after me, if you want to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, if that is your ambition, then throw aside any other ambition. Throw aside any other hope, any other expectation.

Any other expectation from people. Any other expectation from yourself. And follow Christ.

If you desire to deliver your life, if you've got an ace in the hole, if you've got a backup plan by which you can bail out and rescue yourself, you're going to lose your life, Jesus says. Abraham didn't take a backup lamb just in case God changed His mind when He went up the mountain, did He? He said, God will provide when Isaac asked the question. Father, we've got the wood.

We've got all the other fixings here, but we have no sacrifice. And Abraham says, God will provide Himself a lamb. We have to commit with no reserves, as we would say in the military.

You commit 100% and there is no cavalry coming over the hill. There is no safety net. That's the kind of commitment it takes to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

And it's not an easy thing. That's why Jesus said, the gate to destruction, meaning an empty life, is wide and the road to it is broad and there's lots of people on that road. Narrow is the way and straight is the gate that leads to life and few there be that find it.

You can expect that there's not going to be a lot of company on that road because few of us have the commitment. Scripture tells us that. Few of us are willing to commit.

We trust too much to our human experience. We trust too much to our human resources. When push comes to shove, we are not willing to climb the mountain with the wood and trust that God will provide Himself a lamp.

Whoever desires to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospels, will deliver it. It is at the point that we turn loose of things that God can give them to us in abundance.

What are the desires that we have as a church? We would love to have an outreach. We would love to have ministries. We would love to be larger.

We would love to be prosperous in many ways. And we rationalize that. We justify that.

Not until we are willing to turn loose of that ambition and simply commit to what God asks of us in the Scriptures and say, it doesn't matter to me if we ever grow. It doesn't matter to me if we ever have ministries and a youth program and outreach. What counts is that we please God.

And if you look in Scripture, you will find that it is at that point when we turn loose of our definition of success and commit to God's definition that God can give us those things. Because now, they are not an essential part of our thinking. God can give them to us and they don't destroy us.

They don't distract us. They don't swerve us off the path of God's will. God can give and God can take away.

We can learn to be abounding or abased and it never shakes us off our course. But we have to come to the point of committing to God's way and let the chips fall where they may. A military man can do that.

A military man can march up the hill into withering machine gun fire knowing that it is probably certain death. But he does it anyway because there are some things worth perishing for. I would rather be a church that committed itself to the truth of God's Word in an uncompromising way and perished than to be a thriving, prosperous church that compromised, that accepted the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.

That's Jesus' message here. And the wonderful thing is if we simply trust that, very seldom do we actually perish. Very seldom are we actually called upon for that greatest sacrifice.

But we have to mentally and spiritually reach that point of commitment before God can bless us with the things that He desires so much to give us. What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul? What will a man give in exchange for his soul? What can we offer God at the judgment seat of Christ other than obedience? What can we offer God? Can we offer Him the attendance rolls of our church? Can we offer Him the number of ministries, the activities in the bulletin? Can we offer Him the evidence of our senses that great things have happened?

He knows where we stand. He sees into our hearts.

And the fruit of the Spirit, I could give you a pseudo list of the fruit of the Spirit. I won't do it. What is the fruit of the Spirit? Every single one of those is invisible.

It's internal. It's what God does to us that God is looking for. Not what we do to others.

That is simply icing on the cake. Those are results. Those are benefits.

Those are outworkings of what God does in us. We have to single-mindedly dedicate ourselves to being changed and being what we need to be so that God can produce those other things that are legitimate and are important and are a wonderful manifestation of God's grace. Whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.

One of the things that's going to come up in our study Tuesday night is the fact that this is not talking about unbelievers. This is talking about believers. You say, well, I was with you up to this point, but can Jesus be ashamed of a believer? It's a very simple deduction.

How many unbelievers are going to be there when Jesus returns? None. They don't get resurrected until the great white throne judgment. The only people that are going to be there when Jesus comes with the glory of His Father and the holy angels are believers.

Resurrected church-age believers and raptured, twinkling of an eye, changed church-age believers and the resurrected faithful of the Old Testament age. That's the only people that are going to be there. The dead are not raised until the end of the thousand years.

These are believers that will be ashamed, that Jesus will not bring up in an honor roll of recognition before His Father. That's us. That could happen to us.

We could miss out being listed among those whom Jesus says, well done, thou good and faithful servant. It's something to think about, isn't it? This life is so short. The goals and the things by which we measure are so temporal.

We will look back on this life the way we look back at our dreams and aspirations in the first and second grade of elementary school. Things were so important at that time and now in perspective they seem so insignificant. The things that we consider so important in this life are going to seem so tiny.

Let us not get to eternity and look back and say, oh, if I had only set better priorities, if I had only pursued in an aggressive, dedicated way, God's working in my own soul to furnish me thoroughly for every good work. Let's close here in a word of prayer. Father, we are chastened by Your Word.

We are exhorted and we are encouraged. We know that any good thing in our lives comes from You. We know that any meaning, any purpose in our lives is a result of Your working within us.

We pray that the truth that we've seen from Your Word will be something that the Holy Spirit can take and use as His sharp sword to pierce to the center of our being, to show us the ways that we can follow Jesus Christ truly, to commit to Your plan and to Your purpose, to lay aside the human expectations, the human energy, the human solutions, and to lean wholly on the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We pray in His name. Amen.