



HICKORY GROVE

BAPTIST CHURCH

Every Christian That Is A Christian

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Mark 8:34-38

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³⁴ And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶ For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? ³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his soul? ³⁸ For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

(Pastor prays)

When the phone rings at 2:00 in the morning and the person that is on the other end of the line identifies himself as someone with authority, you know that the news you are about to receive is going to change your life. And when you are given that news, the truth of the information sits you down and enters into your soul. Your heart and your life are altered from that point forward. The passage that I just read you is that 2:00 AM phone call. If this information is rightly understood it will reach into your soul and change the course of your life forever.

Let me give you some context. We are in the eighth chapter of the Gospel of Mark. Mark has been writing this story telling us about Jesus. We got to the very height of who Jesus is in Mark chapter 8 when His disciple Peter said, "you are the Christ, the son of the living God." Mark has shown us Jesus teaching, he has shown us Jesus casting out demons, he has shown us Jesus performing miracles, and he has shown us Jesus giving sight to the blind.

Now, we have the truth of who He is: the Son of God. He has authority. And now, with that authority in place, Jesus gives us a very short sermon in verses 34-38. This short sermon is in all the synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Mark 8:34 says that Jesus calls not just His disciples, but He calls the crowd. Everybody that's been following along and watching His miracles is enamored and thinks positively of Jesus. He calls those people over. All of the admirers and the hangers-on, He calls them over and—in no uncertain terms—Jesus gives the requirements of what it means to belong to Him; what it means for you to call yourself a Christian. It is unlike anything else that Jesus has said up to this point. This is the separation which will tell us who a disciple is and who is not a disciple. This is a separation. It will tell us who is a sheep and who is a goat. This is the separation that will tell us who will hear at the end of their life, “Well done good and faithful servant” and who will hear, “Depart from me I never knew you.”

This is not for the faint of heart but these words are life. These words are life for all who believe. These words are strength for all who are in Christ. Because the truth of the matter is...

Everyone Who Claims to be a Christian is Not One

So here is what I want you to do: I want you to ask God right now, just right now where you are, ask God to give you ears to hear. Ask God to help you examine yourself to see if you are in the faith. And with that in mind, let's go to the words of Jesus. Let's find the words of Jesus as he gives us four ways Christians will live. Let's start with number one.

Every Christian Lives an Abandoned Life

That's how you know who is a Christian. Every Christian lives a life that is abandoned to God. I found that in verse 34. You've read it; you've probably already divided it out. There are three segments in verse 34. Let's read it and go through them. Jesus says, calling the crowd to Him with the disciples, He said to them...Look at the three segments. If anyone would come after me

there are three things you would do to be my disciple. "Let him deny himself. Take up his cross. Follow me." Do you see the three?

Let's start with self-denial. What does it mean to deny self? This is a defining act. Something has happened. "This is what I was, I'm not that anymore. And this is who I am now." The word "deny" means "to abandon, to reject." If you deny something, you are saying, "I have nothing to do with that." It is a repudiation. This is the word that Jesus uses when He talks about what Peter will do by the servant girl when Jesus is being tried. Peter denies Him three times. Peter says, I do not know Him. To deny means to create a distance. To deny is to dig a chasm and create an uncrossable sea. To deny yourself means to give up your reliance on whatever you are by nature. Even if you say, this is how you were born, you now are saying that you are not that anymore. To deny means to completely disown. It is to shift the center of gravity in your life from a concern so much about yourself to a reckless abandonment to God. This means to see that old self, to find it, and to kill it.

Oftentimes after supper, Connie and I watch TV together. She's on the couch and I'm in my chair. Sitting in the chair the other night I looked over across the floor and, seven feet away, I see a giant spider that looked like a tarantula, but I don't live in a jungle so maybe it's a wolf spider or something. I jumped out of that chair and ran over and stomped that spider with such velocity it was like I smashed an aluminum can. Or it's when you have a fly in your house and you get a fly swatter and you go after it like you're batting down blackbirds, going after the kill. That's the idea of denying yourself.

What is it that you need to deny? Is it some sort of sin? Maybe it's your own self, maybe you think you're good enough and that you don't need all that. Maybe the denial needs to be all of the things that are pulling you away. But more than likely that self-denial includes denying your own pride or greed or lust or complacency or laziness or some kind of addiction. God has brought you here so that you hear the words of Jesus who says, "if you're going to follow me what it means is to deny yourself." Maybe you have an anger problem; get rid of that. Maybe you are complacent or maybe just

comfortable. You know, most of the sins that we commit against other people find their root in selfishness. You need to deny selfishness, decide to kill it. When marriages fall apart, you can dress it up and say that we just fell out of love with one another, or we just don't get along. Most marriages fall apart because one or both of the parties at some point just got selfish.

This is a reminder that how we are saved is the absolute grace of God. It is this denial of everything. I bring my own righteousness, my own religion, everything I've tried to do, all my good works, all my effort and I deny any good and say, nothing in my hands I bring, only to the cross I cling. This is to see that it is the absolute grace of God, the goodness of God, the love of God. It is the outpouring of God's mercy in your life. It's not self, but Christ.

"He must deny himself." That is the first part of the first point. This is the second part. "Take up his cross." The word cross is here for the first time in the Gospel of Mark. You won't see it mentioned again until chapter 15 when Jesus is crucified on the cross in the place of sinners for our own redemption and forgiveness. But when Jesus said this to His disciples and the crowd around Him, every person that heard it knew what He was talking about. Mark wrote these words for a church that was living in Rome about 65 AD. They've seen Nero crucify Christians. They knew just what Mark was talking about. When Jesus says, "anyone who would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross," they knew what He was talking about.

The Persians had invented the crucifixion but the Romans perfected it. When the Romans would find someone guilty of a crime, it was a capital punishment, execution. They wouldn't just kill the criminal, they would make sure he was an example. The condemned man would be an example and part of the sentence would be a humiliating walk with a cross beam on your back to the place where you are going to be nailed to that cross beam. We see that even in the story of Jesus when Simon the Sirene is made to carry the cross. But this is not just a colloquialism. We sometimes use it that way. We say things like, "this is my cross to bear." "I've got this arthritis, it's just my cross to bear." "I've got a bad heart, it's just my cross to bear." "I married a mean

woman, it's just my cross to bear." But if you married a mean woman you better not say that.

We use it as a colloquialism but that is not what Jesus means. To take up your cross is the simple submission to the sovereign lordship of Jesus Christ, rather than relying on your own self-determination. It is relinquishing autonomy. If the cross of Jesus is the heart of Christianity, then cross-bearing is essential for Christian discipleship. This cross-bearing is the willingness of self-sacrifice even to the point of giving up your life. This right here divides those that are disciples from those that are admirers. To take up your cross is a willingness to renounce all for Christ. Whatever path you are on, as a Christian, your path is the path of Golgotha. To take up your cross is a willingness to pay the price for the glorious gift that God gives you in Jesus. Look at it now in verse 34. It is a staggering statement. If you're a Christian, you pick up your cross and you understand that it is a one-way journey. Would you pick up your cross today? Do you say that's what you want? Jesus says, if you're going to follow me you deny yourself can you take up your cross.

But what is the third condition? It is that you follow Jesus. What does it mean to follow Jesus? We sometimes call ourselves Jesus followers but what do we mean by that? Being a Jesus follower is different from having followers on Instagram. But what does it mean to have Christ?

I'll give you a couple of ways you can define it. One is to trust Him. If you follow Jesus, you trust Him. So what Jesus says in John 3:16 is that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever will believe in Him will not perish but have everlasting life." You trust. What do you trust Jesus for? I'll give you a couple of things. You trust Him for your own salvation. You trust that Jesus Christ died in your place, God raised Him from the dead and you are saved. It's not because you're a good person but it is because of what Jesus has done. You trust Him for your redemption. You trust Him in providence. That is God working all things together for good. Romans 8:28 tells us that "God is working all things together for good for those that love God and are called according to his purpose." That means providence, the

good things and the bad things. There is a smiling providence and a frowning providence. There is a sunny providence and there is a cloudy providence but it is all providence. And that is that God is in control of all of it and you are trusting that He is taking you somewhere. You trust Him for your redemption, His providence. You trust Him in your pain. For some of you, it's been a hard week or a hard month, but you trust Him. God is using that to define you and to build you and to strengthen you and to take away that which is not good and to bring that which is good. You trust Him. For those of you that are aging, maybe you have an ailment, or a terminal disease. We trust Him with our eternity and we don't lose hope, because of Christ.

You see, to follow Him is to trust Him; to follow Him is to imitate Him. So Peter said in 1 Peter 2:21, "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps." We trust Him in His humility as He stood under it. We trust Him and His love for people that don't love us. He told us to love our enemies. We trust Him in His patience, in His suffering. To follow Him means to trust Him and to imitate Him. To follow Him is to obey Him. This is what Jesus will say in John 15:14 when he talked to His friends: "You are my friends if you do what I command you." Here is how you know you are His friend, if you do what He tells you, you know you are a Christian. Every Christian lives an abandoned life. That's the first point. Let me give you a second one, #2.

Every Christian Lives a Bewildering Life

It doesn't make sense. Verse 35 is a paradox. Let's read it together and see the paradox: "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's will save it." Some people have said this is the most important verse of this passage. Because what it does in verse 35 is define two selves. One self is saving my own life. I'm maximizing all my opportunities. I'm doing all I can in this world right now for myself. I'm saving what I have here and keeping it to myself. I see all that is around me which is valuable and I want that. I want all the world has to give me. I want all the love and happiness. I want a good marriage and kids, respectability and more

money; I want that. That is most important to me. Jesus says that person will lose his life. There is another self that says, I like all that stuff but I don't want that more than I want Jesus. You see, I want Jesus. He's the most precious to me. I'll let go of anything, any promotion, any amount of money, any relationship, any prestige, any pride, any addiction, any habit. Jesus says that person right there who will lose his life for the sake of the Gospel, that's the one who will be saved.

It's interesting to me how at the end of verse 35, Jesus defines it. Jesus says, "whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel will save it." Do you see my sake and the Gospel? He has put the two together, they are the same. That is the Gospel of grace. How you get Jesus is the Gospel.

How do we define the Gospel here at Hickory Grove? Let me explain it in a brief way. The Bible teaches that God created us in His image. You have dignity because God created you in His image. But that image of God in you has been disfigured because of sin. There is not a person here that would say that you are perfect. You would admit that you are a sinner. That sin is not just that your life has gone off the rails, that you have made bad decisions. That sin is an actual offense to God. It is a crime against the holy God. We understand justice. We like when a crime is punished. We get that from the Bible. God told us that He is the Holy Judge and He will judge all crimes. All those crimes that we have done are actual offenses against a holy God; they are sin. That's what we've done, and because of that we stand under a condemnation. That is bad news. The good news is that God is also loving and kind, and He has given us Jesus Christ who is the God man. He is fully God and fully man. And as fully man, He comes into this world like all of us did, but He lived a perfect life. He lived the life we were supposed to because we had the image of God in us, but sin has kept us all from it. Jesus lived the way men and women were supposed to in perfect fellowship with God. He kept all the commandments and earned righteousness. So what happens at the cross is God then takes His wrath that only Jesus can handle, because He is also God. God takes His wrath and pours it out on His Son as it says in John 3:16. Jesus takes the wrath in our place and we get the righteousness that He has earned.

So, if you hear this and think, I want the Gospel, that means you are trusting that Jesus died in your place. You might even write, “Jesus died for me.” You can ask God to save you based on what Jesus has done for you. You understand that Jesus cannot be added to your life, Jesus must become your life. This is the great paradox of Christianity. Whoever would save his life will lose it. You gather all that stuff, it’s gonna be gone. But whoever would let go of it from my sake and the Gospel, his life will be saved.

The first point is Every Christian Lives an Abandoned Life. The second point is Every Christian Lives a Bewildering Life. Here is the third point, number three:

Every Christian Lives a Content Life

I don’t mean that you don’t have ambition. I don’t mean that you’re not trying to do better for your family. But there is this subtle contentment that Jesus is giving you. It is that you’re okay with Christ as your all. R.C. Sproul said, “When you look at verses 36 and 37, this is Jesus giving us a lesson in spiritual economics.” You’ve got to take them as a whole, and I want you to pay attention to the word “gain” and the word “profit.” “³⁶ For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? ³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his soul?”

Look at the words “profit” and “gain.” What kind of gain do you get when you work 40 to 50 hours? You get paid for the work you’ve done and then you pay all the bills and everyone is taken care of. All the payments are made and there’s a little bit left over; that’s gain. What is the gain for? Hopefully, you have a nice house or a better car. For a husband or a wife it might be more intangible to say my gain would be I have children, or maybe an early retirement. Maybe a gain is to get a boat. Whatever you think gain is, if it costs you your soul, then there’s no profit. If gaining cost you your soul, then you have sacrificed that which is supremely valuable for that which is worthless in comparison. There’s just an emptiness here.

I just finished a book called *Power Failure*. It is a fascinating story of the rise and fall of GE General Electric Company. It became the biggest company in

the United States, the biggest company in the world under the leadership of a man named Jack Welch. Jack Welch led it for 20 years. He was a cutthroat man who was pictured as one of the greatest leaders. People patterned their careers after him. He met with presidents, he had millions of dollars and homes all over the world, but he could not keep his family together. He kept getting married and divorced and his kids didn't care much for him. He was interviewed for the book as an old man looking back on his career and his language is foul. He is filled with bitterness because GE went down and it felt like what he had built had been wasted. He died with this hatred of the company and the people. I stopped reading that book and thought that his life did not do anything.

And that is the point that Jesus is making. Is that your soul? Sometimes I see people outside of church, at a restaurant or maybe a funeral or a wedding or some other social event and I know they have not been to church in a long time. Maybe they have a talented kid who's really showing some progress and they travel all over cultivating that talent and it keeps them away from church. Or maybe things have gone well financially so they can travel a lot and their weekends are gone. Or maybe they just got lazy. I had one guy tell me that during COVID, he started watching and it just got easier to keep his pajamas on and watch at home. And I walk away thinking, does he not understand the value of his soul? Why would you let anything, no matter how good or beautiful or wonderful it is, threaten your soul? You see a Christian life, as we live it, is contented. That's what Paul teaches us in Philippians 4:11-13: "Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

In verse 37, Jesus asked a rhetorical question. There is an obvious answer to the question in verse 37: What can a man give in return for his soul? The obvious answer is nothing. You can spend all of your life getting all of these things and relationships and money and wealth and prestige and pride or

family and your kids are happy and you wake up and realize you didn't spend time in your soul. There is only one way for a soul to be purchased and that is through the blood of Jesus who died on the cross in your place. It is the promise and the hope of the Gospel.

Every Christian Lives an Abandoned Life. Every Christian Lives a Bewildering Life. Every Christian Lives a Content Life. Let me give you one last one. Here is the fourth point, number four:

Every Christian Lives a Courageous Life

Look, if you love Jesus and you're trying to live your life as a faithful believer at any age in this world, you are living a courageous life. You didn't know you were being courageous, but you actually are. There's a word in verse 38 and that word is "shame." Shame is a hard and powerful emotion. It's caused by a perceived shortcoming of some sort of impropriety or guilt. Shame always has an audience. It's this deep embarrassment of knowing that other people have cast disapproval. That's what shame is. And with that word in mind come with me to verse 38 and let's finish it out. Notice what Jesus says: "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels." If that was an adulterous and sinful generation 2000 years ago, what is it today? Here you are living your life simply as a Christian. You're not standing on the street preaching, you're not putting a Bible in everyone's office. You are just living your life with joy. You live in a world that is intimidating. You're going to be ridiculed if you believe what the Bible teaches. But Jesus said don't be ashamed of me and His words.

To live in 2023 is to live in a world that will seek to shame you. The Bible says that we are not the ones to be ashamed, they are. You have nothing to be ashamed of if you love Christ and you love the Bible. But you live in a world that will tell you that LGBTQ should be accepted. That gender is fluid and if a man decides he wants to be a woman he could do that. We would say, "No." We're not going to fight people about it. That's not what the Bible has shown

us. But there is something beautiful about His Creation. God has created man and woman in His own image. That is beautiful. You take your life and you live it humbly and you do so believing what the Bible has told you about what marriage means. It's told you what the truth is and what life is. And verse 38 tells us that there comes a day when the Son of Man will make the final judgment. He comes in the glory of His father with millions of angels. And on that day, all of those who thought, "I don't want any part of that" and who were ashamed of Him will face the consequences. The consequences of being ashamed of Christ are cataclysmic. The picture here is the magnificent, inspiring arrival of Jesus Christ the Son of God. And when judgment comes, Jesus comes in the glory of his Father and the angels are with Him. This judgment is for all those who rejected Him, it's vindication for all who lived in the world and mocked and misunderstood the Gospel. Verse 38 is the picture of you living your Christian convictions in a world that mocks you and is doing all it can to destroy you. Be faithful to the end. Look, brothers and sisters, everyone who claims to be a Christian is not one, but my prayer today is that God has opened your eyes and heart and gives you ears to hear and eyes to see and believe and trust in Jesus.

(Pastor prays)