

Take Up Your Cross

Mark 8:31-38

I still remember one of the first TV ads I watched when I first came to the United States. What caught my attention about this commercial was its catchphrase. I am talking about the Special K Challenge of Kellogg's. The company uses a slogan that goes like this, "*What will you gain when you lose?*"

I really like the slogan because it uses two words that seem to conflict in meaning to drive a message home (or better said, for you to take their product home). At first sight, the terms gaining and losing seem to be in conflict. In our minds, these terms are like oil and vinegar, they do not mix. However, we have to recognize that gaining and losing are not always opposites. These terms can have a positive relationship with wonderful effects in life.

"*What will you gain when you lose?*" Perhaps that is a really great way to summarize the sermon Jesus preached to invite people to a life of discipleship. On that occasion, Jesus shared a very similar message with these words, "*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.*" **Mark 8:34-35 NIV**

At first glance, Jesus' words are not very appealing to a culture that is not used to the idea of winning by losing, where people expect encouraging, positive, conquering-like statements from leaders. Yet, Jesus is not saying nice words. The Master is not preaching prosperity. The message is not motivational. So, I wonder about the initial impression Jesus' words caused in such a culture.

Being honest, the language the Lord uses in this sermon is extremely difficult for people to understand. On the surface, Jesus' words are enigmatic, kind of a puzzle, a brain teaser. I imagine some of the people in the crowd looking at each other with very confused faces, asking questions like: Taking up the cross? What cross? The instrument that is used to kill rebellious slaves?

Today, we can better understand the words of the Lord because of the events that took place later. Actually, there are some scholars who believe that Jesus uttered these words after his death and resurrection. That's a good possibility because these verses hardly make sense before the crucifixion.

However, it really does not matter when Jesus said this phrase. It doesn't matter if Jesus said it before or after his crucifixion. The important thing is that the Lord is giving us a lesson on discipleship that invites us to *deny ourselves and take up the cross and follow Jesus*. Here we have an invitation that makes us ponder on the question, "*What will you gain when you lose?*"

Before we go any further, we need to ponder on the meaning of taking up the cross. First, I want to make clear that taking up the cross is not carrying the things that we don't like in our lives.

Carrying our cross is not doing the job we do not like. When we take up the cross, we are not carrying the unwanted truths of our reality. It is not like, *“my job stinks, but let me take up my cross. Or, my marriage is a mess, but let me take up my cross.”*

Your job, neither your marriage, much less your reality is your cross. You can find a new and better job and still you have to take up the cross. Your marriage can be restored, your marital problems can be resolved, and your reality can take a positive course, yet you have to take up the cross if you want to be Jesus' disciple.

You may be wondering, *“if the cross is not the things we don't like, what is the cross then?”*

The cross was an instrument of death. Slaves died on the cross. The lower class people were put to death on the cross. Cross and death were almost synonyms in Jesus' time.

In fact, when we speak of the cross we quickly think about physical death. Yet, I want to remind you that those who died on the cross not only lost their lives. The cross snatched from its victims their reputation, pride, arrogance, vanity, superiority, egotism and self-sufficiency.

When Jesus refers to taking up the cross, the Lord is not only referring to the sacrifice of giving our lives for the gospel. When Jesus said *“You have to take up the cross,”* He was asking us was to put to death the pride in our lives. Jesus was asking people to put their ego down. Jesus was telling people to crucify vanity and arrogance and all the other things that destroy the life we were created to have.

Understanding Jesus' statement more fully requires us to look at the context where Jesus uttered the words, *“deny yourself and take up the cross and follow me.”* Just moments before Jesus pronounced such words, Peter took the Lord aside and rebuked him because Jesus was talking about the death he was about to suffer. Imagine that, the disciple trying to take the place of the Master. I guess that most of us would love to say that only Peter is guilty of doing that. Yet, the truth is that Peter is not the only one who has attempted to tell God how to behave properly.

So, as Peter was trying to correct Jesus, the Lord *“turned and looked at his disciples, [and] he rebuked Peter. ‘Get behind me, Satan!’ he said. ‘You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns’”* (v. 33). Immediately after, Jesus gathered the crowd along with the disciples and said to everyone, *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”* (v. 34). It is in the context of *having in mind the concerns of God vs. having in mind merely human concerns* that Jesus said, *“deny yourself and take up the cross and follow me”*.

So, here are the questions I want us to ponder on. **What will we gain if we nail your merely human concerns to the cross?** What will we gain if we eradicate the barriers preventing us from getting fully immersed in the life and moving of God in the world?

- What will you gain if you nail to the cross the compulsion of being right, along with the subtle ways we use to manipulate people and circumstances? I believe we will gain the courage to deal with conflict in an assertive, constructive and gracious way.
- What will you gain if you nail to the cross your failures? I am certain you will receive the grace that reminds you that you are not defined by setbacks and disappointments.
- What will you gain if you nail to the cross the fear of failure, that lethal cycle that creates paralysis by analysis? I believe you will gain the confidence needed to take risks and face the future audaciously and faithfully.
- What will you gain if you nail to the cross perfectionism? I believe you can gain the joy that comes from a life that strives for excellence. Also, you will understand that the One who began the good work in you and through you is not done yet and will bring it to completion.
- What will you gain if you put to death stubbornness, indifference, any sense of entitlement, shame and blame attitudes, shallow niceness, and instant-gratification mentalities? You will gain humility, openness, appreciation, endurance, and authenticity.

The Lord is asking us today, “*What will you gain when you lose?*” He is also telling us, “*whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.*” Losing our lives means saying, like John the Baptist in reference to Jesus, “*He must become greater; I must become less*” (**John 3:30**).

As a closing, I want to share the following thought. We have heard it said that the reason we display an empty cross, as opposed to one with Christ on it, is that Christ is no longer dead but has risen. I suggest that the reason the cross is empty is because it indicates there is a place for us on that cross. We take our place on that cross in the form of dying to ourselves.

Hear the Good News. Taking up the cross does not end in suffering. It ends in life abundant. So, what will you gain when you lose?