

*Where we start . . .*

So many of the things that Jesus said and taught came with a “memorable ring” to them. For example, what idea is conveyed by the following simple expressions?

Prodigal Son    Good Samaritan    Turn the other cheek

*What we read . . .*

Although such memorable expressions may well convey what Jesus intended, sometimes we “fill in” in the meaning in a way that misses what Jesus is really after. And that is sometimes the case with Jesus’ words we find in this week’s passage. Read Mark 8:31-38.

What prompts Peter’s rebuke of Jesus? What is Peter’s concern?

How does Jesus characterize Peter’s comments? What is Jesus saying?

Jesus unpacks His thinking as He goes on to explain things to the crowd. He first presents an image (with a memorable phrase) and proceeds to explain it a bit. Look first at Jesus’ explanatory comments:

What is it that someone must “lose” in order to follow Jesus (8:35)?

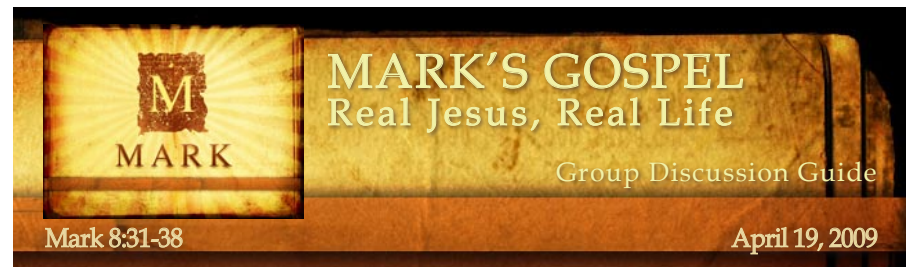
What is it that someone will “save” in exchange for such a losing?

What is the “trade” that is pictured in 8:37?

With these thoughts in mind, what is the idea Jesus intends to convey by talking about “taking up your cross” in 8:34?

*Why this matters . . .*

Jesus is inviting you to follow Him. What is the one thing that can get in the way of your experiencing the kind of life He wants for you?



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*Diving in . . .*

Although Jesus' words are often memorable and gripping, we sometimes end up filling in what we think He means in ways that do not do Him, or His thoughts, justice. Perhaps one of the more notable (and unfortunate) examples of our misreading of Jesus is the way we think of "your cross to bear." So many people imagine "taking up your cross" as if Jesus is talking about bearing up under some hardship (like a physical difficulty, or bad work situation, or an unruly spouse). But, taken in its context and listening to what Jesus is really saying, the expression "taking up your cross" is far more radical an idea than "getting under the load."

*Discussing . . .*

A prodigal: A wasteful spender (who, hopefully, returns). A good samaritan: Someone who is generous in helping another in distress. Turn the other cheek: To forgo retaliation. Those memorable expressions of Jesus convey some idea for most people. But, do the definitions we carry around in our head really capture what Jesus is saying? In Luke, the prodigal is not simply the wasteful spender *but is the object of love*. The good samaritan, as Jesus speaks of him, is not simply someone who is generous with aid *but a foreigner who aids someone who despises his kind*. And to turn the other cheek is not simply forgoing retaliation *but extending kindness in the face of insult and injury*. So, although we get a sense of the word, we might not be unpacking the idea fully.

And that kind of misreading happens for many with Jesus' words about "taking up your cross." How is this expression commonly understood? Many people think of "taking up your cross" in terms of bearing up under trouble. Whether it is difficulty at work, a wayward child, financial hardships, physical limitations, or an unresponsive spouse, such burdens are often identified as "the cross I have to bear." But that really isn't what Jesus had in mind at all as is clear when we read these words in the context of His remarks.

In response to Jesus' question, Peter made his confession; he affirmed who he thought Jesus was (8:29). On the heels of that remark, Jesus began to explain plainly to the disciples what He was facing; He told them what was going to happen to Him (8:31). He stated this plainly so that there could

be no misunderstanding. Peter heard Him right; Peter just didn't take well to what Jesus said (8:32). With what we would hope would be Jesus' best interests at heart, Peter rebuked Jesus and His explanation of what *must* (notice that, it is important) happen.

When Jesus turned and responded to Peter, He wasn't saying that Peter was demonized. (Had that been the case, we would anticipate that Jesus would have delivered His friend from the demon.) Nor is Jesus insisting that Peter is Satan incarnate. But Peter's perspective (setting his mind on human things) fell right in line with Satan's plans.

As Jesus goes on to explain, the problem that Peter (and all of us!) was wrestling with had to do with *how we keep on following Jesus*. And it is right here where Jesus offers the call to "take up your cross" and follow.

What would that expression mean to those who first heard it? They had seen many people crucified; it was a rather wide-spread and very public form of execution in Jesus' day. Undoubtedly, those listening to these words had seen people carrying their crosses. And, reflecting on that image, they *would not have thought*: "What a great weight that person has to bear!" or "How sad that they have such a burden to carry." Their thoughts would have been more along the lines of: "That person's life is over!" or "Life as he knows it is done!" Those "walking dead men" carrying crosses would not be those who are "under the load" as much as those who "don't have a life!"

As we listen to what else Jesus says, it becomes clear that this is the way to understand what He meant by "taking up your cross." To lose one's life (that is, give up life on one's own terms), is to find life! Highlighting this, Jesus drives home the point: If you really want to live, if you really want to have life, the only way to do so is to give up all claims to life on your terms. That is what it means to "take up your cross."

Might such a life include "burdens"? Of course; but that is not what is in view. A "no cross for me!" kind of life would also include burdens. It is not the *burdens we bear* that Jesus has in mind but *the way we follow Him*. And the only way to really follow Him is to follow Him as if our lives are not our own—to follow Him as those who are the "walking dead" with regard to our plans and purposes for life.

Jesus explains all of this in response to Peter's confession and rebuke. Peter saw; he realized that Jesus really is the Messiah, the anointed Deliverer God had promised. But when Jesus began to explain what the journey would be like from that point on, Peter's view of how things should go got in the way of listening to Jesus. So Jesus tells Peter (and the other disciples and us) that His way *is* the right way and that for Peter to keep on experiencing life with Him, Peter will have to die to *his* way of viewing life. Peter will have to "take up his cross" and become a "dead man walking"—dead to his way of life so that he can experience fully the kind of life Jesus has for him.