Mark Lesson 27 (2023)

**THE WAY OF THE CROSS**

Mark 8:31-9:1

Key Verse: 8:34

“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.’”

 In the previous passage, Peter confessed Jesus as the Messiah in answering one of the questions Jesus asked, “Who do you say I am?” (8:29) Peter’s confession of the Messiah was indeed monumental. However, in today’s passage, Peter took him aside and rebuked him when Jesus revealed what kind of Messiah he would be (32). Then Jesus rebuked him back right away, calling him Satan. (33) Wow! What had happened to them? They didn’t seem to get along any longer. A serious conflict arose between Jesus and his disciples. We see in the following passages that Jesus’ disciples were afraid or refused to listen to what he had to say about his suffering and death (8:34-38, 9:30- 37, 10:32-34). Why did the disciples hate hearing what Jesus told them about his way even though they loved and respected him? It was a crash between God’s way and the human way. This is a serious question we should think about. *“Am I following God’s way? Or we only think we are following God’s way while pursuing our way.”* This morning, let us think about why the way of the cross is the way of God that leads us to everlasting life.

 Look at verse 31. “He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.’” Having heard his disciples’ confession of the Messiah, Jesus felt imperative to teach them what it means that he is the Messiah. Why? It’s because, at that time, the disciples viewed Jesus as a political Messiah who would defeat all of God’s enemies and establish an earthly messianic kingdom with his authority and power. They assumed that through Jesus the Messiah, all evil in the world would be exterminated. The disciples’ expectation of Jesus was very high. But what Jesus taught them was not what they expected to hear.

Jesus announced that he must suffer many things, be rejected, and be killed instead. He didn’t say that he might suffer many things. Instead, he said that he must suffer many things. He used the word “must.” Why the **“MUST”**? Did he mean that he would be a victim of circumstances, had no choice, and had to be crucified? No. He was talking about God’s plan, God’s way, and God’s eternal will. Why must he die? He had to die to be a ransom sacrifice for our sins. John 3:16 states, “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Yet, when we think about the necessity of the death of the Messiah, love is not the only reason. There is another critical reason for his death.

We know that the Jewish religious leaders, collaborating with the Roman governor, crucified Jesus. The crucifixion was a cruel and bloody execution to kill a criminal violently and painfully in public. Why would Jesus let these evil people do such evil things to him? If he wanted, he could defend himself and kill those who tried to harm him by calling angels from heaven. It would be considered a demonstration of God’s justice. But Jesus didn’t think so. He didn’t even want to use any means of violence. Instead, he allowed his enemies to arrest him, mock him, spit on him, and crucify him. He was hung on the cross, shedding blood, and died in excruciating pain. On the cross, he didn’t retaliate but forgave all those who sinned against him, praying, *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do!”* (Lk. 23:34)

Why? Jesus said that the Son of Man must suffer and die. Why must? God’s will was to defeat evil with non-violence and goodness. Through his violent and painful death on the cross, Jesus defeated evil with his integrity and ended humankind’s vicious cycle of violence so that he could become the source of forgiveness and everlasting life. God’s will was also to raise him from the dead on the third day.

The Messiah’s death and resurrection were God’s salvation plan for all humankind, which had been repeatedly prophesized in the Scriptures (Pic#1). The Prophet Isaiah predicted the suffering Messiah by saying, “He was despised and rejected by humanity, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces, he was despised, and we held him in low esteem…. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." (Isaiah 53:3 & 7)

 However, the idea of the Messiah’s suffering and death was more than Simon Peter could stand. It was too humiliating and disappointing. How did Peter respond? Look at verse 32. “He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him,” Peter was unprepared to take what Jesus had said about his immediate future, with many sufferings, rejection, humiliation, and cruel death at the hand of hypocritical religious leaders and unjust politicians. It was not just against his human expectations but also entirely unfair, unjust, senseless, and foolish. So, Peter reacted with a strong sense of conviction against Jesus’ nonsense idea. He took him aside, probably to avoid other disciples’ eyes, and rebuked him. *“Jesus, never say that again! Never! Okay?”* I believe that other disciples agreed with him.

 Look at verse 33. “But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. ‘Get behind me, Satan!’ he said. ‘You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.’” Of course, Jesus knew that Peter was not Satan. But he rebuked Peter because he acted like Satan, who tempted him to follow the popular way of the world, not God’s way. We see that Jesus’ disciples were unprepared to do God’s will unless they changed their minds and hearts even though they had confessed Jesus as the Messiah. In the following verses, Jesus explains to his disciples that suffering and death would be not only his destiny but theirs as well. (34-38)

Read verse 34. “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.’” Jesus said this to his twelve chosen disciples and the crowd. Some in the crowd liked Jesus and thought about becoming his disciples but had not yet decided. They were Jesus’ fan club members, not Jesus’ disciples yet. They did not commit. If they didn’t like it, they quit and left him. So, Jesus was telling them, “*Would you like to follow me? Then you should make up your mind.”* Following Jesus requires serious decision-making.

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Jesus used the word “must” again. Why **the Must?** It’s because there is no other way. So, what is involved in the decision to follow Jesus? “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

***First, we should decide to deny ourselves.*** Jesus didn’t say, *“If you follow me, I’ll make you popular and prosperous.”* But he said that we should deny ourselves. It does not mean that God will not bless us. For example, God promised the people of Israel through Jeremiah when they were exiled in Babylon by saying, “For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (Jer. 29:11) I believe God is the God of blessings. He also said to Abraham, “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.” God’s promise of blessing is true to us even today. Yet, we still must have the right attitude to be truly blessed by God: we should deny ourselves.

**What does it mean to deny ourselves?** Some people think denying oneself means giving up something we like, like watching TV or playing video games. Well, that too. But it’s more than that. It also means more than denying our sinful nature, such as pride, greed, lust, or other selfish and worldly ambitions. Denying one’s sinful nature is an integral part of self-denial. Yet, it means even more than that. It means to say **“NO”** to ourselves. To decide to say **“NO”** to us is a serious decision. We may feel uncomfortable and offended. Especially in the “me” generation, we are bombarded with questions *like “Who is the most important person in the world?”* We say, *“Me!”* So, is Jesus’ discipleship of self-denial irrelevant to us? Of course not.

We are God’s unique creatures with different gifts, talents, and circumstances. To deny oneself does not mean to ignore and despise God-given talents and characters and have low self-esteem. Never. But it has a spiritual meaning in that we are no longer to live a self-centered life but to start to live a Christ-centered life. Apostle Paul explains it very well when he says in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

**What does it mean to take up the cross**? To most of us, it means enduring difficult things or circumstances or carrying out our duties as Christian disciples. According to Christian magazine, the level of commitment among average American Christians is low due to the influence of consumerism. There are two kinds of Christians in most churches, ***consumer Christians and contributing Christians***. The difference is that consumers come to be served while contributing Christians come to serve. To many of us in UBF, carrying the cross means carrying out the mission of world campus evangelism. But carrying the cross means more than doing the ministry.

The cross is an instrument of death. So, when Jesus said that we must take up our cross, it meant that we should be ready to die. It’s a serious commitment. However, denying oneself and taking up the cross is the focal point of the Christian life. It sounds simple but is extremely difficult to practice. But if we don’t practice it, we are not Christians.

One of the most difficult spiritual struggles is to die to oneself. According to spiritual psychology, “*egocentricity is like original sin in that it is the inevitable human condition.”* (John Sanford) Egocentricity is the fallen nature of all humans. Egocentricity is found even among successful pastors and missionaries. All of us are egocentric. The egocentric Ego must die. Why? It’s because, through the death of our egocentricity, a new Ego can rise. The way of the cross is to remove our old self and put a New Self in Christ Jesus. Apostle Paul highlighted this point in his letters. He said in Ephesians 4:22-24, “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” When Jesus said that we must take our cross, he meant to take up the task of becoming a whole person. So, this gospel is the timeless and timely truth we all need to practice.

In verses 35-37, Jesus talks about two alternatives in life with two different outcomes. Look at verses 35-37. “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses his 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?” What Jesus talks about here is a paradoxical truth. It’s our choice whether to follow Jesus or not. We don’t have to deny ourselves and take up the cross. We can choose to save our lives. But Jesus said we’d lose our life in the long run if we made that choice. The other alternative is that if we follow Jesus and **say “no” to ourselves** and **“yes” to God’s will, we will discover** meaning and purpose in life. When we make the right choice, we are not miserable. We can taste everlasting life now and forever. The way of the cross appears to be foolish to human eyes, but it is the way of God that leads us to everlasting life.

Look at verse 38. “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.” Here, Jesus is saying **NOT** to be ashamed of him. Why would we be ashamed of him? There may be several reasons. But when we are unsure that the way of the cross is the way of eternal life. We live in a post-Christian era in which the gospel of the cross is considered offensive, outdated, and irrelevant. Instead of following the way of the cross, people tend to follow the broad ways that seem to promote prosperity, well-being, and other immediate benefits. But when we think a little deeper about the gospel of the cross, without the cross of Jesus, there cannot be actual well-being, prosperity, freedom, liberation, unity, equality, etc. The gospel of the cross is the foundation of the kingdom of heaven. Without the cross of Jesus, there is no life and no salvation. The way of the cross is the only way to defeat evil with good and bring eternal salvation to us. The gospel of the cross is indeed the power of God that brings salvation to all who believe. (Ro. 1:16)

We are living in an extremely divided world, even among Christians. Some claim they belong to the right group, while others claim they belong to the left group. But what we need is not belonging to the right or left groups. We should grow deep and more profoundly in the gospel of the cross so that when Jesus comes again, he will not be ashamed of us Christians. Praise Jesus the Messiah, our Lord, and Savior, who defeated evil with good on the cross and brought us everlasting life in his kingdom now and forever. The way of the cross is the way that leads us to eternal life. So, let us follow Jesus, not as consumers or fan club members but as seriously committed disciples.