

“SHOCKING WORDS”

by Steve Hammond, Sunday, February 24, 2019
Mark 8:34-38 at NFBC

//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. 35 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. 36 What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? 37 Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? 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.”//

—Mark 8:34-38 NIV

Do you think this was a shock for the crowd to hear? What about the Twelve? Do you think it was a shock for their ears? What about for us? Of course we’ve read this before. We know the whole story. But still, is there something of a shock that goes through us when we hear it again?

I hope so.

Let me see if Jesus can help.

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

First of all, remember the context in which this comes. This isn’t simply a call to give your all, such as what would be expected of any serious endeavor. Joining the Marines, for example, anyone who signs up for that should be willing to put their life on the line if and when that time should come. Test pilots or astronauts, too. Can you imagine one of them looking up at the Saturn V rocket, all 36 stories tall, and asking: “Is it safe?”

To loosely quote C.S. Lewis: “Of course it’s not safe. But it’s a good rocket.”

But Jesus isn’t giving quite that kind of a call to those who would follow him and seek to be like him as his disciples. The crowd might think it is, but the Twelve Apostles would know differently. For they just got done hearing Jesus talk about his *own* death, his own cross, the losing of his own life.

Now what kind of teacher, leader and anointed Savior is that? And who would want to follow a teacher, leader and anointed Savior like that? This would not be an easy lesson for them to hear. It would be like being

called to join a Marine Corps led by a loser, for a losing cause. (Seemingly at least.) It would be like being called to be an astronaut where the Saturn V rocket seems to be made of wood.

Jesus is emphasizing this, too, when he makes clear that he isn't simply calling people willing to die for a great cause. He is calling people willing to lose their lives, "... **for me and for the gospel...**," he says. You're going to have to give up your life for the sake of a loser – in the eyes of the world – and for a 'good news' story that will make most people think you are crazy.

Any shock yet?

Let's see if there's more shocking words here to help us.

"Whoever wants to be my disciple..."

Why would anyone want to follow Jesus in the first place?

At first, we might think: Of course lots of people would want to follow Jesus. Weren't there big crowds following him wherever he went? Even here in Mark 8 it doesn't seem very hard for Jesus to get a crowd around him and start teaching them.

But why were the crowds following Jesus? Well, for various reasons. Some because he had healed them. Some because of his powerful teachings. Some because of his miracles, especially the kind that gave them bread. Some no doubt followed him simply because he was popular. And some, like the Twelve, followed him because of love. Surely Jesus was seeking to sort out the various motives and reasons people would be following him.

But here he is sorting them in a whole new way. He is sorting them out through death, even death on a cross. A death in contrast to a life of gaining the whole world.

So you have to ask: Who would want to follow that?

Remember the TV show: "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" The clear implication and basis of the show is that millions of people would want to be a millionaire, especially if all you had to do was answer a dozen questions.

But even if the implication of Jesus' question is that there are lots of people who would want to be his disciple, he is challenging every one of them to reconsider the cost to themselves in doing so. Instead of "Who

Wants to Be a Millionaire?” Jesus was asking, “Who Wants to Be Penniless?” And as if that weren’t enough, he asks: “Who Wants to Be a Condemned Criminal in the Eyes of the World Around You?”

Why would Jesus make the following of him so, so shockingly difficult? Well, he continues.

36 What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? 37 Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

Just how important is your soul to you? Do you even know what it is? The world around us doesn’t talk much about the soul anymore, at least not in human beings. While dogs, cats, sheep and chickens (and even rivers! See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/16/new-zealand-river-granted-same-legal-rights-as-human-being>) are being given legislative recognitions for “sentience” and rights to life, human beings are looked at more and more to be best understood as animals. Even less than that while we are in our mother’s wombs.

But in reality our souls are of utmost value. They are the part of us that can’t be separated from “us,” from who we really are. You can lose a million dollars and still be you. Billionaires do it all the time. You can lose billions of dollars and still be you. You could lose your arm and leg and still be you. You could lose everything in the world and still be you. You could even lose your life and still be you. And still be of utmost value in the eyes of God.

But what could you be given as compensation should you lose your soul? You can lose your money, your limbs, even your life. But your soul is you. Who can afford to lose that?

And *that* is exactly what Jesus came to save. And *that* is exactly what he wants those who would follow him to understand and value. The real shock of this passage isn’t from what Jesus is calling his disciples to give up. The real shock value here is that Jesus has come to save our souls from a fate worse than death.

If this is not appreciated for what it is, then there will be one final shock to be found far beyond this passage.

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."

The great Day of the Lord is coming. Who can stand the shock of that? This will not be a glorious day for everyone. Yes, there will be salvation for some, but there will also be damnation for others. And Jesus gives us a glimpse, just a minor, trembling glimpse, of what will be at the heart of the condemnation. Shame. If any of us are ashamed of Jesus, he will be ashamed of us. If we find Jesus' words foolish, Jesus silence will prove us foolish. If we side with this adulterous and sinful generation, Jesus will exclude us from the Father's glory with the holy angels. We will see this with all the clarity and shock of shame before God. And our souls will be lost forever.

This is why Jesus has called us to follow him through this way of the cross. It reveals the gracious, crucified side of Jesus. He is lifted up before the whole world in a way that neither puffs us up in vainglory nor condemn us in shame. It strips us of everything but that which is essential. And at the same time it fills us with the love and forgiveness of God.

This is why if anyone wants to follow Jesus, be his disciple and be like him one day, we must be shocked by this calling. There is no greater calling in life. Yet it is a calling of complete contrast with what the world considers great, of what we ourselves consider great even.

That's why we must be willing to die every day of the shocking truth of God's own dying love for our souls.