

Mark 8:27 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"

²⁸ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

²⁹ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Peter answered, "You are the Christ."

³⁰ Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

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 things of God, but the things of men."

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Dear Friends in Christ,

There are lots of opinions about who Jesus is. You know how cable TV history channels like putting on shows about Jesus. We especially can count on that around Christmas and Easter time. One year they portray him as a community organizer, another as a rebel, other years as a philosopher. And in a way that is appropriate, because Jesus is the most controversial person in the history of the world.

The Christian can easily say, "I believe what I believe. What the outside world believes really doesn't matter." In a lot of ways I agree. It is a waste of time to always be on the defensive, to try to disprove the naysayers. But what did Jesus do? He specifically asked his disciples, "**Who do people say I am?**" (27). We should consider what others think, because the only way to connect them to the Messiah is, is to connect the real Jesus to them.

COME, FOLLOW ME, THE SAVIOR SPOKE

I. Follow Jesus for Who He Is

So "**Jesus asked [his disciples], 'Who do people say I am?'**" The disciples answered, "**Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets**" (28). Good job, disciples! You have your ear to the ground, your finger is on the pulse of the people.

But that wasn't enough for Jesus. He asked, "**'Who do you say I am?'** Peter answered, '**You are the Christ**'" (29).

What does that mean? What does "the Christ" mean? Well, first of all—you might know this already—"Christ" and "Messiah" are the same thing. Christ is from the Greek, and Messiah is from the Hebrew.

"Christ" and "Messiah" both literally mean "the Anointed One." We don't anoint any more, we elect and swear into office. Anointing was something done long, long ago. Anointing wasn't a popular election, it was God's choice regardless of what people thought. When someone was anointed, some oil was sprinkled on a prophet's, a priest's or a king's head as a sign that God had chosen him for a

special work. God's choice was for life. When those disciples said, "You are *the* Christ," they said a lot.

They were saying that Jesus was the one promised by God for thousands of years. It had long been promised in Hebrew prophecy that the Christ, the Messiah would come and give God's people rest and protection. This Christ would usher in a new age of blessings for God's people.

The disciples' view of Jesus was fundamentally different from how everyone else was looking at Jesus. It is the difference between going out on the deck in late February, seeing the Canada geese flying north and saying "Spring is coming" and actually going out and putting the sweet corn seeds in the warm, moist, brown earth of the garden.

Israel was thinking, "Spring is coming. God's kingdom, his Christ should be arriving any day now. This Jesus guy is a sign of it." But Jesus was pointing out, "No, spring isn't coming. Spring has arrived. God's kingdom is here. I am the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah." And the disciples understood.

But then Jesus does something we don't expect. "***Jesus warned them not to tell anyone***" (30). If the disciples had the right answer, and all the people had the wrong answer, then what is Jesus saying? Doesn't he want people to know him?

Great question. Ever hear it said, "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing"? Someone with a little knowledge of a computer can really mess one up, can't they? Someone with just a little knowledge of plumbing can make a disaster. Someone with a little knowledge of nursing or doctoring would be positively dangerous!

That was Jesus' disciples at this point. God bless them, they knew Jesus as the Christ. But that was only half the truth, and of the other half, they were completely ignorant! That's why Jesus told them to hold their tongues.

"[Jesus] then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him" (31)

They disciples liked to think of Jesus as the one who could bring peace, health and prosperity, the one who could oppose the hypocrisy of the religious establishment, who could right the wrongs. They liked that. They couldn't stand the idea of rejection and death. That was not why they were on this train ride. But Jesus said, "I must suffer, be rejected, die, rise."

How are you with that? How are you with a Savior who is rejected by everyone whose opinion matters? Attend a university where your prof will openly ridicule you before the class for faith in Jesus. Listen to people curse and swear using Jesus' name. How are you with a Savior who says that "I must be rejected?"

It had to be that way with Jesus because this is how he saved us. He didn't save with military victories, glory and parades. He didn't get a Nobel Peace Prize. He saved us by going to a cross, by suffering, by dying for the sins of the world. "*He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed*" (Isaiah 53:5).

Jesus told them, "Come, follow me. Follow me for who I am: the powerful Savior who had to die to save you from your sins."

II. Follow Jesus No Matter What the Cost

America has been a land of innovation like no other on earth. Americans find ways to get things done. That penchant for getting things done, creates people who think along the lines of win-win solutions. You know what I mean –having the best of both worlds. That is a virtue.

Jesus hints that this maybe doesn't actually work in spiritual matters. He says, ***"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and [he must] take up his cross and [he must] follow me"*** (34).

I, too, like win-win situations, but what Jesus tells his disciples is that they will have to go through lose-win situations. In three different ways, Jesus says there will be choices, difficult choices.

Jesus says that every follower of his must ***"deny himself."*** That is clearly not a win-win situation. Denying yourself says that you don't get what you want much or most of the time.

Jesus says that we must ***"follow him."*** That means that we are not free to do what we want, when we want. To the independent spirit, this sounds more lose-lose than win-win.

Jesus goes a step further. Not only do I not always get what I want, but sometimes God is going to call me to do something downright unpleasant. Jesus says that every Christian must ***"take up his cross."*** To the people Jesus talked to, that was shocking. They had seen mangled, bloodied corpses on crosses and smelled the death. We wear gold-plated crosses on necklaces and bracelets. We have nice, neat crosses on bumper stickers and T-shirts. I criticize none of those. Jesus is honored when we use his cross as a statement of who we are. But it does diminish the effect of Jesus telling us to ***"take up a cross."*** Crosses were roughhewn, splintery timbers. They were heavy. Anyone who carried one was carrying the instrument of his own torture and death – like a death row inmate carrying the syringe with the drugs for his execution. Imagine the syringe being handed to you. Imagine walking down the hallway for the last time with that instrument of death, your own death, in your hand. When Jesus told the starry-eyed disciples to take up their cross, that is what he meant.

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and [he must] take up his cross and [he must] follow me." It is three ways of saying the same thing. What we by nature want is not what God wants in Jesus' followers. When it comes to us and God's will, there is no place for mavericks. God desires those who can and will follow orders.

If you ever felt a guilty conscience for doing what you wanted rather than what God wanted, if you have ever felt a tension between what you want to give God and what you want to do for yourself, if you ever thought that being a Christian is sometimes a real pain in the neck – Good! Because if you have never felt that, then I would wonder if you are a Christian. Jesus said it would be like carrying a cross.

Now define cross. Sometimes we think about bearing crosses like this: if I have a terrible illness, that is my cross. If you have to live next to an especially grouchy neighbor, that is your cross. I do not diminish those difficulties, but they are not what Jesus is talking about. Jesus defines the cross this way: ***"Whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it."***

This is to say, the cross is any suffering or inconvenience suffered specifically because of Jesus. The sufferings common to all mankind are not the cross. Carrying Jesus' cross can be getting a ribbing at work for following Jesus' desires in our life—that is the cross Jesus talks about. It can be the decision to give more than our month-end financial left-overs to Jesus, and instead dedicating your household to giving 5%, 10%, 12% to God. This is a cross because not only are you giving to God, but you are giving up some of the pleasures of life. Taking up the cross to follow Jesus is taking an afternoon a month—and we know how precious every hour is—taking one afternoon a month and instead of going fishing or doing what I want to do, that time is for cleaning the church, or volunteering.

Now who would do that? Who would actually put himself out for his church? Surely God's kingdom is about something more enjoyable. Well, thank God, it often is. I hope you enjoy this morning's worship. I hope you benefit from the music and the message. Don't forget to enjoy the fellowship time with your fellow Christians after this service. And remember that faith in Christ gives

eternal blessings that are out of this world. But in the short term there will be times to take up the cross.

Right after our reading, Jesus went on to say, “*What good it is for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul*” (36).

I don't know if you have ever heard of a man named Charlemagne. He was a king in Europe, by most accounts the most important king in the last fifteen hundred years of European history. He was a Christian, a godly man. When he died, immense wealth was put into his tomb. A hundred fifty years after his death, someone opened his tomb to get the great wealth. It was a ghastly sight. There, so the record goes, sat the greatest monarch of Europe in a millennium, sitting upon a throne with his royal robes and crown. Robes aged and dusty, the great ruler only a skeleton. Upon his lap was an open book, with his fingers upon the page. Charlemagne's finger pointed to a Bible passage, for the book was a Bible. His fingers pointed all treasure seekers to this very passage, “*What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?*” This glorious king had followed Jesus because he knew it was not just about this world. It is much bigger than that.

“Come, follow me,” the Savior spoke. Follow him for who he is; follow him whatever it may cost. Amen.