

Sermon Title: Want To Save Your Soul?  
Scripture Text: Mark 8:34-38

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 2-10-19

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A couple of times lately, I've been just especially joyful at God's providence in small things. We were reading through the book of Acts, and the Sunday that we got to the annual meeting of Heritage Bible Church, where we confirm those who are going to lead us for the next year, we got to the passage in Acts Chapter 6 where they confirm the first ones to assist the Apostles. I thought that was really cool. And then today is Mission Sunday, and last Sunday we left off at a verse that is the beginning of one of the most appropriate passages *anywhere* for missions! And so, I want to finish today what we started last week, as far as the particular pericope in God's Word; I want to look at, today, Mark Chapter 8, Verses 34 through 38.

Now, if we were doing a newspaper article on this, we would ask the five famous questions: "Who? What? Where? When? Why?"—not in that order. Here's what's going on: *Where* are we? Well, this takes place at a place called Caesarea Philippi; it's at the farthest northern point of Israel. It's away from the crowds, and there's just a small group there: Jesus, the Twelve, and a group of committed disciples. *When* is this? Well, it's about a year before the crucifixion. It's after the Great Galilean Ministry has concluded. Jesus has taken the men on a tour into some Gentile territory, and then back around the Sea of Galilee—a couple of stops there, and then all the way up north to Caesarea Philippi. *Who* is it? It's Jesus and the Twelve, and then, as I say, a small group of other committed disciples; you'll see a reference to a "crowd," but think of a small group of people, not "the crowds" like Jesus has been ministering to. *What* is it? Well, the training of the Twelve, and these others, for their ministry after Jesus's death and resurrection and ascension; *that's* foremost on the mind of Jesus in this last year of His earthly life before the Cross.

And *why*? Well, there are many things that the disciples did not yet understand. They'd just come to the point of this glorious declaration of who Jesus is: "You are the Christ, the Son of living God" (Matt. 16:16, NASB, and throughout, unless otherwise noted)—"and we're committed to that!" It wasn't the "who He is," it's "what His plan was"—*that's* where they were struggling, and He has to explain that to them. He has just asked them the crucial question—after, along the way, asking them, "Who do *people* say that I am?"—He said, in their one-question final exam, in the oral portion: "Who do *you* say that I am?" That's when Peter spoke up and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And from that point on, Jesus began explaining what was to happen. We saw this last time: Verses 31 and 32 of Mark 8—"He began to teach them that the Son of Man"—that's His Messianic name (Dan. 7:13-14)—"the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." And notice—"And He was stating the matter plainly." From this point on, He's going to be very clearly explaining that.

Now, they understood that there was a plot against Him on behalf of "the elders and the chief priests and the scribes," but, "*suffer many things*?" "*Be killed*?" They didn't like part! That provoked Peter to take Jesus aside and "rebuke Him." Bad idea, but...this is Peter, and he sometimes executed bad ideas. He said to Jesus that he was *never going to let that happen* to Him! Alright, give Peter kudos for the sentiment, but his commitment to not letting Jesus die led him to some foolhardiness, and it took him to the point of frustration and even despair *so intense* that he eventually denied that he even knew Jesus.

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Now, it's against *that* backdrop of Peter's overzealous, misguided declaration of loyalty, that Jesus explains what He expects from *anyone* who wants to follow Him, anyone who wants to be His disciple, anyone who wants to be born again, anyone who wants to be "saved from the wrath of God" (Rom. 5:9). So: You want to save your soul? Here's where we're going today: Verses 34 through 38 in Mark 8. Number 1: Do you wish to follow Jesus?—Verse 34. Here's what to do—Verse 35. And then, here's why—Verses 36 through 38.

So, do you wish to follow Jesus? We left off kind of midstream in this verse last Lord's Day. Mark Chapter 8, Verse 34—"And He summoned the crowd"—so you know that there's more than just the disciples, but it's not a big group; we can tell that—"He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me"—so, who is this invitation to? *Anyone*. He didn't say *just* them—"If anyone wishes to come after Me"—this is an invitation to anyone; it's recorded God's Word for *anyone*, and that means us. "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." Now, this verse—and the explanations to follow—set forth for you the very essence of the core of the *essentials* of Christian discipleship. This is what it means to follow Christ. This is what it means to be a Christian. This is what it means to be born again. This is what it means to be a believer (Lk. 14:27; cf. Jn. 10:26-28).

The gospel is not all about "coming and getting blessings." The gospel—or, a very common *false* gospel—can be presented in a very man-centered sort of way; like saying, "Hey! Would you like to be blessed? Would you like to be happy? Would you like to have less conflict in your life? Would you like health? Would you like wealth? Would you like the glory of heaven?" Now, what idiot's going to say, "Uh...No. I think I'll just die in a gutter somewhere, in the inner city somewhere."? No idiot's going to turn that down, because *that's not the gospel!* The gospel is: You were created in the image of God. You were created to have fellowship with Him. That relationship is broken; it's *severed* because of your fallenness—because of your sin (Is. 59:2)—and you have *no hope* to be reconciled to God (Eph. 2:12; cf. Rom. 5:6)! Ah, but there's *good news* to go along with that bad news. The good news is: *God* did what it takes for you to be reconciled (2 Cor. 5:19; cf. Is. 53:6, 10; Jn. 10:17-18). Christ died for your sins according to the Scriptures. He was buried and He rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures (see 1 Cor. 15:1-4). Those who preach the gospel of, "Come and get the goodies" preach a false gospel.

Now, as I said last time: Don't get me wrong; *there's no better way to live* than as a follower of Jesus Christ! But it's not all about earthly blessings, it's about incomparable eternal treasures. And *in this life*, I can't guarantee that, from the standards of the world, things will be better for you if you're a Christian than if you're not (see 1 Cor. 15:19). I can't promise you that, and anybody who does is lying to you, because the Bible says, "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). Jesus said in this world, you *will* have trouble (Jn. 16:33), but that's the good news—this isn't the end; this world is not what it's all about.

Now, when Jesus spoke these words—"If you want to come after Me, you have to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Me"—when He said, "Take up your cross," I explained this last time, but remember: They all knew what that meant. "Taking up your cross" brought

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up the picture of one condemned to crucifixion by the Romans; you had to carry the crossbeam of the cross through the city *as a spectacle* to be mocked, and then crucified in public, outside the city. *They knew* that He was saying, "If you want to follow Me, you have to be willing to *die*! You have to be willing to make Me and the gospel more important than anything else, and that means you have to deny yourself."

Now, what does *that* mean? Somebody walks up and says your name, you say, "No, I deny that name!" No, that's not what it means. What it means is: You have to vehemently turn your back on your own earthbound, sinful, natural, rebellious, unredeemed self, and your desires in that way (see Gal. 5:24). You choose to follow and obey the Lord, even though it might be hard. The word translated "deny" here is the very same word that was used to describe Peter denying Jesus, and when we get to it—in Mark 14, Verse 71—we're going to see exactly what Peter said. When he got to the end of it, what was his denial? "I do not know this man you are talking about!" He denied any allegiance to Jesus in public. So, what does it mean to deny yourself? "I am giving up allegiance to those things that *I want*, because there's a higher calling; there's a more glorious reward to be had at the end." That's how you need to deal with your own life in the flesh, and all the desires that you have that we all come by so naturally, that are contrary to the will of God (see Gal. 5:16-17). He's saying, "If you want to come after Me, it could cost you your life. Deny yourself, take up your cross—be willing to go to death, if need be—and follow Me. That's *obeying*—doing what *I say*." So the question here is: "If you want to save your soul, do you wish to follow Jesus?"

Secondly, Verse 35; new territory for today. Here's what to do: Mark 8:35—"For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it." Now, He explains what He means by this apparent contradiction: If you live only to save—to preserve and multiply your earthly, physical life, and to gain more stuff and get more glory for yourself; if it's your ease and your comfort and your acceptance by the world—if that's what you want, you lose the opportunity for eternal life! But if you're willing to *lose* that earthly stuff—if you're willing to give that up, suffer, die if necessary, for Christ's sake—you will find eternal life. It sounds axiomatic, but if you want to get to the top for eternity, strive for the bottom here. That's the point. You have a choice: You can go for the gusto in this life, get all you can, and you'll lose it in the end. What's the old cliché? You never see a hearse pulling a U-Haul? Or, you can forsake things now, and you can gain treasures for all eternity. You can do *exactly* what Jesus said: Laying up for yourself "treasures in heaven" (Matt. 6:20).

Now, there's an interesting insight here, based on the difference between Greek and English. Words don't have identical meanings in different languages. Every word has a range of meaning, depending upon its context. And here's a case where you have a word that has a pretty wide range of meaning in Greek, but not so much in English; so in English, we tend to have different English words translating the same Greek word. Here's the insight: The word that's translated "life" twice here—"Whoever wishes to save his *life* will lose it, but whoever loses his *life*...will save it"—that word is the Greek word *psuche*, with a silent "p" on the front of it. It's a word from which comes our word "psyche" and the prefixes on words like "psychology" and "psychiatry." The most common translation of this word is "soul," so He's talking about how to save your *soul*. It means the *real you*.

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"Life" is a legitimate translation of this word, but it means that nonphysical part of you, and it goes all the way back to Creation that this concept was first exposed to us. Genesis Chapter 2, Verse 7—Genesis Chapter 2 elaborating, filling in details of Day 6 of creation from Genesis Chapter 1—it says this: "Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground"—He took some dirt, He shaped it into the physical form of Adam. How good does that make you feel in your self-image? You're dirt! Ah, but—something happened to the dirt! "The Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being."

Now, let me take that apart for you a little bit. The word "breath" and "breathed" are forms of the word for "wind." The verb form of that word is even used for "playing the flute," so breathing, blowing, moving air—that's the idea. The noun form of that word is often translated "spirit"; "spirit" and "breath" are synonyms. Again, bigger breadth of the meaning of the word in one language, so you translate it into English, and you have to break it down into some different words.

Now, back in Mark Chapter 8, Verses 35 through 38, you'll find that the word "life"—translated "life," as in "lose your life, gain your life"—and the word "soul," *are the same word!* It's that word *psuche*—the real you, the inner person, the part of you that lives *even when your body is dead* (see Lk. 16:22-23). Adam had a body; God made it alive by breathing into it the breath of life, and the Hebrew literally says, "and then he became a living *soul*." So when God added breath to the physical stuff, you get a living soul. Throughout the Bible, this word "soul" is often used interchangeably for "the whole person." For example, First Peter 3 comes to mind: There were "eight souls" on the ark (1 Pet. 3:20, NKJV); lots of animals, but "eight souls" on the ark, meaning "eight people" on the ark.

But it's *also* used for the nonphysical part of you; when the soul leaves the body, that's called "death" (Jas. 2:26a; cf. Lk. 8:53-55). And it's used, as well, for "the life you live," like "living your life, giving up your life, gaining your life, losing your life—your stuff of life"—it's used that way in the New Testament. So, what does He say here? "Whoever wishes to *save his soul* will lose it, and whoever *loses his soul* for My sake and the gospel's will save it"—you can read it that way. What's your attachment to this world, and how does it relate to all of eternity?

Now, there are people who say that Genesis 2:7 is like a theological-chemical recipe for man: Take dirt—a body; and then, add spirit—or, "breath"; and then you get a soul. So it's Man = body plus soul plus spirit—and that does *not* fit the use of the words! It's *far* more complex than that. Man is not a three-part being; man is a two-part being: There's the physical you—you *are* dirt; and there's the *nonphysical* part of you that has made the *whole package* into a "living soul." What happens is, when you separate the physical part from the nonphysical part, we call that "dead." That's what separation is. Physical death—separate the nonphysical from the physical. Spiritual death—be separated from God. Eternal death—be separated from God for eternity.

Now, the point here is that, if you want all that God has for your eternal soul, then in *this life* you need to make Him your highest priority in comparison to everything to do with this life.

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Now, that doesn't mean, give up everything and go live in a hole somewhere; you still need to go to work, you still need to make some money, you still need to buy food, you still need to teach your kids, you need to take care of things—there's a lot of "earthly" stuff to do. But a true believer is one for whom following Christ, modeling what Jesus wants a person to be and proclaiming the gospel, is the most important priority. He says, "For My sake and the gospel's sake."

Dirk was talking about being on a Missions trip, and, "I'm not quite sure what I'm here for," and he says, "Maybe Jim knows exactly what he's doing on a Missions trip"—Oh, contraire, my friend! I remember waking up the first morning that I was on a Missions trip; I was I was in the bed of a 10-year-old boy who had been kicked out of bed so that his parents could make room for the soft Americans that came, and I was the closest to the length of a 10-year-old boy, so I got his bed, and others got the other beds in the guest room. And I remember waking up in the morning, and I had to teach at a pastor's conference; I was all of 29 years old, I had been a pastor for one year, and I'm going to go tell these Brazilians—through a translator that I'd never used before—I'm going to go teach them stuff? I remember my prayer that morning: "Lord, I'm Yours"—and I left, in my mind, an ellipsis—"...You fill in the blank. I'm Yours. I'm here to serve You." That's the *essence* of what it means to be a Christian. You don't have to be on foreign soil for that to be the case.

So, you want to save your soul? Well, do you wish to follow Jesus?—Verse 34. Here's what to do—Verse 35. And now: Here's why; our final three verses for today. Jesus used that apparent contradiction—what looks like the paradox of "losing your life to save it"—and then He asks two rhetorical questions, and He concludes with a very serious admonition.

Now, I want you to notice something, whether you saw it or not: Verse 35 began with the word "for"; that's a connecting word. Verse 36 begins with the word "for." Verse 37 begins with the word "for." Now, for the advanced class here, guess what Verse 38 begins with? "For"—it's all connected; it's all tied together. The invitation: "If anyone wishes to come to Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me; for you're going to have to lose your life in order to save it." Now, look at these next three verses, but let me explain this word "for" first. You probably want to say, "Get a life, if you can get excited about a three-letter word." Well, it's also three letters in Greek, so, take that! I looked it up this week, because it's one we can roll past so much, but it's a connecting word. If you are ever looking at a verse, and it begins with a "for," don't just select that verse from the context—find out what it's connected to, because it's explaining something connecting to what came before it. So I looked it up in my favor lexicon, this little three-letter word; here's what they suggested it means: "Verily then; in truth; indeed; yea"—they're a little King-Jamesey—"then; why; and, when giving an explanation, for." It's explaining something. So, Jesus wants to explain further *what He means*.

So here He says this: "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels." So a couple of rhetorical questions, and then a pretty strong urging there. Do you want Jesus to be ashamed of *you*?

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Now, there's another verbal technique here: hyperbole. Verse 36—"What does it profit a man to gain the *whole world*"—you can't do that, okay; but, suppose you could? Suppose you could have *absolutely everything* of this world, and its stuff, that you would ever want to have? Ah, but the price is: forfeit your eternal soul. That's what He's saying. "Your best life now"? I keep thinking of the absurd title of that allegedly-Christian book. The price for having your best life in *this* world is: your *soul* (see Lk. 12:16-21; 16:19-25). You cannot have your best life now, on earth, unless you're going to hell (see Ps. 73:3, 16-17; Prov. 14:32). It can't be done! Because, if you belong to Christ, *oh... whatever* you have in this life, the next one is, "Wow!" Like "imperishable...undefiled...will-not-fade-away" kind of "inheritance" that is "reserved in heaven for you" (1 Pet. 1:4) while you are "kept by the power of God" (1 Pet. 1:5, NKJV). *That's your best life.* Wednesday night, we just finished Revelation Chapter 22—*that's* going to be our "best life"!

So He uses His second coming as a motivation for how to live now. He is the Judge; He's the One who's going to determine your eternal destiny (Acts 17:31), and He says very straightforwardly: How you live in this world—which is adulterous, and a sinful world—that's going to show everyone where you stand with Jesus Christ (see Jn. 15:8). The word "adulterous" isn't referring *only* to inappropriate sexual behavior; it's often used for *spiritual* adultery—fooling around with other gods, rather than the true God.

So, are you *ashamed* of Jesus Christ? Are you ashamed of the Word of God? If you are, today is the day to repent and turn to Him, deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Him. What *does* the Lord ask of you? To be His disciple (Matt. 28:19-20). These are not optional, add-on, aftermarket accessories—this is the essence of being a Christian (see Matt. 7:21-23).

Once you have come to Him by faith, once you have heard and believed the good news and put your faith in Jesus Christ, once you've received His grace, once you've come to know His forgiveness—then what? First requirement: self-denial. Second requirement: take up your cross; be willing to pay any price for Christ's sake. And then, third requirement: loyal obedience; "Follow Me"—submit to His lordship as your pattern of life (1 Pet. 2:21-22).

Now, don't get me wrong: It's not that you have to be a martyr in order to prove you are a disciple, okay? By and large, most Christians don't die for their faith. But, you have to be *willing* to be; you have to be willing to be that spectacle, that one who is so identified with the Crucified One, that people have no problem understanding that that is who you stand with, that is who you live for. You have to be *willing* to be a martyr *if* faithfulness to Jesus Christ demands it.

And I think that's a pretty cool passage for Mission Sunday! And it *is* Mission Sunday at Heritage Bible Church. So today, in a few minutes, we are going to invite you to consider joining a team to go either to Russia, where Christians are persecuted; or to Vanuatu, to a tribe on an island where I don't think Christians are persecuted, because they're *unknown*—there *is* no such thing. The gospel hasn't gone there yet; it's just now getting started. And, I will tell you, I've been there 20 times: life is more difficult in Russia than it is here. And in Vanuatu, it's *far more* difficult than it is in Russia.

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So, here's your chance to get *real spiritual*—are you willing to set aside two weeks this summer, help raise some support and a prayer team, and go to help the people who are spreading the gospel in those places? It's *not* for everyone; I understand that. But it's very good for *some*. And it's a very good thing for *us* to do, to send the "some."

So before we make that invitation for a hard two weeks in the service of Christ—and I realize, that isn't for everyone—I want to ask you to consider something that *is* for everyone; and it's a lot more challenging than two difficult weeks. Whether you go for two weeks or not, what are you doing tomorrow morning? What about your everyday life? What are you doing that systematically, intentionally, makes it very clear that you are denying yourself; everybody else in the room is more important to you than yourself? That you're willing to take up your cross—whatever is meant for Jesus, bring in on! (see Ps. 69:9; Heb. 11:26) Because I represent Him, and I want to tell you about Him, and I want to follow Him. How about your *everyday* habits and priorities? It's *easier* to suck it up for two weeks, than it is to live the other 50 consistently for Christ.

And do you know that, without crossing even a state border—maybe not even a county border—you can commit yourself to sacrificing some time and some energy, as part of your weekly routine, to do some things? There are opportunities for you to serve every week and every day. And, frankly, it's more of a grind than traveling for missions. You can do a lot of different things, and we want to invite you to consider them.

So, let's pray:

*Heavenly Father, we are Yours. Please fill in the blank of the rest of that sentence, whenever You would have it to be. You've called us together as Heritage Bible Church to represent You in this world, and to be a place from which the gospel spreads. So make it so, we pray, through each one of us, in Jesus' name. Amen.*