

The Heart of Discipleship

Mark 8:34-38

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As I like to say, social media is a dumpster fire, but occasionally it gives you a gift. Occasionally. And one of those gifts happened this morning. In the weird all-knowing algorithms of Facebook, it decided to deliver me a photograph this morning asking me would I want to repost it. "Do you remember this memory?" Now, of all memories to put before me is a picture taken exactly ten years ago this weekend. And that photograph was taken right back here, and it was just a month prior to our landing here to serve full time. It was an introduction to the whole congregation. Kate and I are standing there, and somebody took our photograph. And I said, "Well, look there." And so I went to the window and took another side profile of myself. And I'm going to share this later on Facebook. So look for it. How it started, and how it's going. I didn't have any of this grey hair ten years ago. So a nap is a Grecian formula. Definitely called for. So thank you, Wayne. Thank you, PD. And Kate is very much looking forward to this sabbatical. I've seen the to-do list. And yeah. It'll be good.

So we are now ending this series of "The Qualities of a Disciple." And thinking about the qualities as we have moved through them, I wanted to end with something that we also began with, but we return to with more focus. And that is the heart of discipleship itself. And so this morning, you've already heard the text from which I'll be preaching, but I would like to read it again. It's Mark 8:34-38 as we consider what actually is a disciple. And in answering that question, I believe it comes by way of implication for what Jesus is teaching and what He is doing in the presence of the disciples.

And then, therefore, I want to stress a couple of things. First, that there is a demonstrable difference between the first audience and us. And by that I don't mean time and space and culture. There obviously is that difference. But there's a sense in which when Jesus is talking about "Follow me" and talking about discipleship, He's looking specifically at the disciples. That doesn't mean, however, that we are in exactly the same role as the disciples. But by implication of their ministry and of what Jesus intends for His people, all those who call on the name of Jesus and trust in Him for salvation are to be disciples. So there are differences, and there are distinctions, of course. But there are also a lot of similarities.

And so this morning, I'm not paying attention to the differences or the distinctions between us and the first audience. I want to look for what the similarities are for us as we consider this passage. What is a disciple?

Mark 8:34-38.

And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Pray with me this morning.

Father, we thank you for this portion of your word as given, as revealed, as taken down and then

written for the church evermore. We take great comfort in your providential revelation that there are words and things here for us as there were for the first audience to hear. Throughout the centuries of your church, you have wanted us to understand in greater and greater measure what it means to be a disciple of Christ. In fact, your church exists to make disciples of all nations, of all people. Not converts, not clones, but disciples. And it happens one life at a time. And we're called into union with you, Lord Jesus. And in being called into union with you, Lord Jesus, you promise that all who call upon your name receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. And it is by you, Holy Spirit, that we live, breathe, move, rejoice, grieve, wait, and endure. And by your power, we are being made increasingly more and more into the image of Jesus. But we need to be reminded, Holy Spirit, of what it means to be a disciple. Teach us, we pray. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

So as we consider this text this morning, the heart of discipleship, I want us to consider these three questions. What is a disciple? What decision is to be made? And then thirdly, what kind of person is Jesus seeking? What is a disciple? What decision is to be made? And what kind of person is Jesus seeking? And I hope that by looking at these three questions and answering them, we'll be able to see the heart for Jesus, but then what does it mean for the heart of discipleship?

Let's look first then at this idea of what is a disciple. Jesus tells us. At least, He is giving us at least the actions at the heart of what a disciple is. But more importantly, He first reminds us that—there's going to be this phrase I want you to remember that I think is at the heart of discipleship. So hear it again. Verse 34, "And calling the crowd to him." So He's calling them. And in coming to Him, He said to them, "If anyone would come after me." Now, that phrase "come after me" is similar to when He says, "Take up your cross and follow me." So this idea of "follow me and come after me" has within it the very starting place for what a disciple is. A disciple is following someone else. We might think of it as an apprentice, perhaps. Someone to whom you go for instruction or advice or guidance.

Dallas Willard in his magnum opus on discipleship *The Divine Conspiracy* defines it this way. He says, "A disciple is a simple someone who has decided to be with another person in order to become capable of doing what that person does or to become what that person is." To follow another person in apprenticeship, to either learn what that person does, or to become who that person is.

Now, I remember when we were restoring our 1929 Dutch Colonial in North Jersey, when we were redoing the entire kitchen, to save money as one does, you ask the electrician, "Instead of hiring somebody, can I work alongside you?" We had gotten to know our electrician. And so he let me go in and work alongside him for the complete gutting of all the electrical work in our kitchen and then to work beside him in restoring it all. Now, I had absolutely no intention of becoming an electrician. However, in that moment, I began to see very practically what it was like to actually be an apprentice, a disciple of someone else to learn what they do, and yet I realize I can't be what he is. But I can learn what he does so I don't have to hire an electrician every time I need work done around the house.

And I remember at the end of that first day, Kate took a picture of me napping with our dog on the couch. I had dirt all over me, and I was completely exhausted. Because even just learning what he does without a desire of becoming what he is, I was completely and utterly exhausted because everything was new to me. My fingers were sore. My arms and shoulders and everything, and my neck, my whole body was just wracked with pain because everything was new. But I learned very quickly what a disciple is in the middle of just regular life of just doing a kitchen.

He continues when he writes these words, "Jesus lives in the kingdom of God and applies that kingdom for the good of others, and even makes it possible for them to enter into it for themselves." I think Dallas Willard is right. A disciple is someone who is willing to follow Jesus.

We recognize that implied is if we understand our imagination that we can't become who Jesus is. He's the redeemer. He's the savior. But there is something about His way of life, there's something about His character, there's something about what priorities mattered to Him which then become those things for me and for you. When He says, "Follow me," as a disciple of Jesus, I am with Him. We who are called—and all of us are called. Whether you sit here as one who doesn't believe in Jesus or not, all of us are called to follow Him. And as such, we do so by grace. Not our own ingenuity, not our own strength, but by His invitation, He calls us. And we learn from Him how to live in the kingdom and living the kingdom.

We are invited into His world that He inhabits as the king of heaven and earth. And coming in His incarnation and in His public ministry, Jesus has established the kingdom of God, the ethics of the kingdom of God, the heart of the kingdom of God, the love of the kingdom of God. And when He calls us to Himself, we first experience the kingdom. And that's where we understand our vision statement. "To experience and extend the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ." To be called by Jesus into His kingdom that He has established, first and foremost, we experience that grace. Then we live the kingdom by extending the grace which has been extended to us.

However, this living as a disciple, as an apprentice of Jesus is not finding a new job or a new set of works or a new set of things that we need to go out and do out there that is functionally different than the life we've been living. The life I now live, the life that you live—I remember what it was like not to follow Jesus. I don't have a different life. I have the same parents. I have the same family. I have many of my same friends. I have the same face. Yes, more grey hair. I have all my same life. And I have the same strengths today that I had back before I knew Him. I have the same weaknesses. I have the same tendencies toward temptation and sin as I did back then. All those things are the same. And I have the same name. The difference is that by being involved and called into the kingdom of Christ as His disciple, discipleship then and being a disciple of Jesus doesn't mean I need to go find a life out there that is functionally different, either by career or station or anything else. It's living the life you now have in the kingdom following the king in the king's ways.

In the kingdom of God, in the kingdom of Jesus—Ryan, I'm going to pick on you because I see your face. You always like to smile at me. If you don't know Ryan, you'll now see. He's the smiley guy over there. Ryan, you've heard me say this. There is no functional difference in the kingdom of Jesus between what I do as a fulltime vocational minister and what you do as an attorney, in the kingdom of God. Gary, I hear you always saying, "Amen." Thank you. Gary, you're a real estate agent. What you do in your life is no functionally different before the glory of God than what I do as a minister of the gospel. Because here is the reality. What Gary and Ryan do, what Patty does as a stay-at-home mom and grandmother and blessing to so many, what you do and what I do now becomes reshaped and reimagined in who Jesus is and His grace, and then living it out.

You don't have to become a missionary. You don't have to become a whiz kid evangelist. You don't have to wear different clothes. You don't have to do any of that stuff. You don't have to do religious stuff. Just go to the grocery store, love your neighbors, do your work as an engineer or a stay-at-home parent. Be a single person. Be a married person. Be a family that has children. Be a family that doesn't have children. Be a person who likes to watch TV. Be a person who doesn't like to watch TV. But all these things that you are, if you come into the presence of Jesus or are called by Him as a disciple, now all those things which you have done now are done as unto Christ. It's not about being religious or doing religious stuff. It's just about asking Jesus, "All right. You've asked me to follow you. Now by your grace, reshape the life that I have."

So if that is what a disciple is, someone who follows after another person, in this case Jesus, more

and more becoming like Him and the life that He has given us, then a decision needs to be made. And here is the decision. Do you want to follow Jesus as a disciple? Do we? And that is not a question of theology or doctrine or orthodox furniture all in our skulls, and we have a list of our beliefs, and they're all there. Please understand our orthodox beliefs or doctrine of what we learn from scripture is absolutely important, but it is completely possible to have all of our orthodox religious doctrine in place, but actually have our street-level life untouched. And that's true for all of us, even those who don't believe. There are things that we believe, but our lives contradict it. There's always going to be a gap.

So the decision becomes if we say that we want to follow Jesus, then are we willing to ask Him, "Jesus, what does it look like then to follow and live that which you have given in this everyday mundane life?" Now, let me ask it this way. This is not about coming to church on Sunday and getting disciplined. It is not about having Sunday schools or ministries or community groups. These are all wonderful, and we ought to give ourselves to them. But I'm talking about the kind of discipleship which Jesus is saying here—this is what He says. "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself." So the decision is in the life that we now have, whatever station it might be, are we willing to deny ourselves living that life?

What do I mean? It's all about—you've heard me say it before. I'm going to repeat it. And I want you to think about this because this is where my brain and heart have been for the past year. What is your liturgy every day? What is your liturgy? Now, if you know the word "liturgy," you might think of it as a specifically religious word. And it is, by and large, used primarily in religious contexts now. But that's not the history of the word.

The history of the word from Latin and Greek is this idea. In ancient Greece, particularly in Athens, a form of personal service to the state which citizens possessing property to a certain amount were bound, when called upon, to perform at their own cost these liturgies or ordinary activities including the presentation of dramatic performances, being involved in musicals, poetic contest, the celebration of some festivals and other public functions entailing expense upon the person involved. Said another way, it was just your public duties as a citizen of Greece. And you had to do it at your own cost. So in some sense, to be involved in that liturgy, in that public ritual as an obligation as a citizen cost you something. In some sense, you have to deny yourself.

We now use it—in a sense, also, that liturgy is the public worship of God's people in a particular order. If you have your bulletin, you can see the order of our liturgy. It is what we give ourselves to. We give of our time, our resources, and we come, and we fellowship together, and we practice this public liturgy in praise of our heavenly Father in God and Jesus Christ and His Holy Spirit. And it comes at personal cost.

But whether you are a Christian or not, or whether you participate in this liturgy every Sunday or not, each and every one of us gets up every single day and performs a liturgy. As an example, you may get up in the morning, and the first thing you do is you reach over and grab a device, and you check email or text, or you see what's going on in the world. Or perhaps you get up and put on your slippers and whatever you do. You go downstairs, you make the coffee, or you pour the coffee, or you get your breakfast, you walk the dog. You get the idea. All of that is a liturgy.

And as one writer, Tish Harrison Warren said,

"We have everyday habits, formative practices that constitute daily liturgies. By reaching for my smartphone every morning, I had developed a ritual that trained me toward a certain end: entertainment and stimulation via technology. Regardless of my professed worldview as a committed Christian, my unexamined daily habit or liturgy was shaping me into a worshipper of

glowing screens."

So she acknowledges that she had all the architecture and infrastructure of rigorous theological doctrinal belief that formed the heart of her faith. But at the street level, what she was doing is she was taking a liturgical order from the world unthinkingly, precognitively, as a habit, and then she began to reflect on it and examine it. And she asked, to what end is this liturgy leading me? Is it leading me into a more Christlike reflection, or is it shaping me into the world's image?

And she says, "These formative practices have no value in and of themselves, except as we practice them, we unintentionally invest them with value because our lives are being shaped by them." It has everything we put our fingers on, when we're brushing our teeth, what we watch, what we listen to, where we walk. All of it is actually forming us. And she says,

"Examining my daily liturgy as a liturgy, as something that both revealed and shaped what I love and worship, allowed me to realize that my daily practices were malforming me, making me less alive, less human, less able to give and receive love throughout my day. Changing this ritual allowed me to form a repetitive and contemplative habit that pointed me toward a different way of being in the world."

So the gift for me, if there is any positive to the pandemic, is it forced me into what MacIntosh users call a force quit. Am I right? Force quit? Yeah, we're good. It forced me to look at my daily liturgy that had been formed pre-pandemic, which I was moving through in a very unthinking way. And I think the Holy Spirit woke me up to ask, what is this liturgy forming me into? Oh, yes, I believe in the cross of Jesus Christ who died for me and took my sin upon His flesh and gave to me His righteousness, the double imputation of Christ's righteousness. I believe in the grace and mercy and love of Jesus, to love neighbor and to love God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. But did my daily liturgy reflect that belief? That's what it forced me to do. And I actually consider it a blessing from the Lord that He used that time at the beginning of the pandemic for me to stop and ask, what am I doing? Who am I becoming?

And so God showed me this just this past week. I'm going to finish on time. Don't worry. I'm going to let you in. Open up a little bit here and let you into the sinful version of what you often don't see because you're not with me every day. So this past week, I was having breakfast. It's the middle of the Giro d'Italia, the tour of Italy. So I get to watch it every day. I have it on my iPad. And I'm having breakfast. I have it on mute. So it's just there. I'm just keeping an idea of what's happening. I'm watching the "Today Show," just seeing what's going on. I'm having my breakfast. And the phone rings, and it's Caroline. So Caroline is on the speaker phone with her mother. And so generally how this goes, I say, "Hey, good morning. Good to hear your voice, Caroline. Good. Good. Good." And so they start talking.

And so at that point, I check out. I get up from the table. I don't even remember what I was going to grab. And I remember hearing a question to me, and I said, "Yes," as if I knew exactly what I was saying yes to. I didn't. So I walk back to the table, I sit down at my seat, and I hear them talking. And I'm like, "So now what is she trying to do?" And Kate looks at me and says, "What do you mean what is she trying to do? You just said yes to it." And all she was trying to do was figure out what her Wi-Fi password was for her work laptop because it was already in her Mac device, which doesn't translate to the PC. Thank the Lord. But she didn't know what the password was, and so she was trying to find out. So the question that they had asked me earlier and I said "yes" to, I didn't even know what they asked me. And so now that Kate is rightly bringing up this very clear issue, I'm now frustrated. She looks at me and is like, "What is"—and then I got defensive.

So three things I realized inside of 30 seconds. One, I had said yes to something I didn't even hear. I sat down. I was in my seat, but I wasn't really present with those around me. And then when that came to exposure, I got defensive.

Now, what I will tell you is only because of the forced quit of last year that I realized in that moment the three things that the Holy Spirit was revealing to me that I was clearly going to go do some business with between me and the Lord after I acknowledged that to my family. I began to see just how easy our liturgy gets in the way of other people, can separate us from other people, can even separate us from ourselves. And more importantly, we fail to see what Jesus might be teaching us in the moment because we're so distracted by what we're doing.

So what in the world does this have to do with the decision that has to be made? The question I ask myself, and I encourage you to ask along with me, is who is the Lord of our life? Not who do we say is the Lord of our theology. But who is the Lord of our life? To say, as Jesus calls us to, "He who would come after me must deny himself," means I begin each day by acknowledging Father, Son, Holy Spirit. I am baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. I belong to Him. We are not first and foremost what our careers are. We are not first and foremost what our marital status is. We're not first and foremost what we do every day. We are first and foremost called to be sons and daughters of the living God. He says who we are. And there I must create and ask, "Lord, by your Spirit, help me to see every day what liturgy am I actually living by, mine or how you want to show up in what I'm doing in my life?"

This is why I'm grateful for the sabbatical, which the session has graciously approved. I'm not ready to enter back into normalcy. I want to stay and continue to learn. I'm not ready for the traffic to come back. I'm not ready for our schedules to be filled up again. I want to continue learning, Lord, how do you want to reshape me? And I'm grateful for that time.

The question is who do you and who do we really want to be the Lord of our lives? Because He says, "All who would come after me must deny himself and take up his cross." Jesus was referring to the fact that He was about to go to the place where He would say, "Not my will but your will be done." So Jesus goes before us on our behalf and takes the Father's will on His own that we might be redeemed and changed. To follow after Jesus means we come to Him with all of our plans, our reading lists, our writing schedules, all of that stuff. And we say, "Lord, this is the life you have given, and this is the day that you have given. Lord, help me to live unto you." This is the decision.

Finally, what kind of person then is Jesus actually seeking? "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Who are the people that the Lord is pursuing to say, "Follow me"?

And here, I encourage you if you have your Bibles with you, or if you want to activate them, turn to the gospel of Luke. First to Luke 5. First, I want you to see the first person, the kind of person that Jesus wants to call. And we see it in reluctant Peter. In Luke 5, beginning at verse 5. "And Simon answered, 'Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.'" So Jesus had just said, "Hey, you're looking for fish. Put them over there."

And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." [ESV]

So the first kind of person that we need to understand that Jesus is calling is in many ways those

who are reluctant, and Peter was reluctant. Here, Jesus is coming to call him and performed a miracle. And Peter's first response is, "Yeah, I'm not ready for that. Depart from me, for I am a sinner." Jesus pursues even the reluctant. Do you see that Jesus, who is the one who is clean, the one who can save? Peter says, "I'm just fine. I'll stay in my filth. Depart from me." But even though Peter is reluctant, Jesus nonetheless pursues him and calls him to Himself. And He says, "'Do not be afraid; from now on, you will be catching men.' And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him." But it's remarkable that Peter's first response is, "I would rather stay in my messy filth and sin than to depart with you. So go." But Jesus pursues him nonetheless.

If you come into these doors this morning reluctant about what you see at the street level of your life, and you don't want Jesus to see your dirty gutters, the sewers of your life, know this. That the Holy Spirit and God's grace is so good and so wonderful, He is not at all thwarted by your desire to tell Him to depart. He loves you evermore than you could ever think that your sin is shameful. His grace is greater. He loves you more than your desire to escape Him. He loves you more that He wants you to see your sin that you might see your need of Him. But thanks be to God that Jesus doesn't give up on those of us who are reluctant, who would rather stay in our filth.

But there's a second person that He pursues. And that's in chapter 7. In chapter 7 of Luke, we read these words from verse 36.

One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." [ESV]

So it's clear that Simon Peter, who was first reluctant and was willing to stay in his mess, Jesus pursued him, drew him to Himself. And now just a little while later, he's in a party of people who see a woman who is clearly a woman with a reputation. And even Simon Peter is clearly caught up in the scandal. "Why are you letting this woman touch you?" Because Jesus simply says to him and gives him the example, who will recognize that they are forgiven, one who is forgiven of a little debt or of a great debt? The answer being obvious. "Simon answered, 'The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.' And he said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon"—so He's turning towards this woman with a reputation, who is messy and everybody knows it. He turns to her, yet He looks at Peter, and He says,

"Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." [ESV]

Peter, who was reluctant, willing to stay in his sin, Jesus now uses as an example to say, "And you think it's a scandal that someone whose sin is so obvious cannot help but worship at my feet?" This is the kind of person that Jesus seeks. He does not require her to get all of her orthodoxy straight, to get her life in order. He puts up no barriers between Him and this woman. He simply says, "Come to me," and she becomes the worship leader in that room.

Dane Ortlund in his wonderful book *Gentle and Lowly* says,

"This is a picture of Jesus. To say that Jesus is loving and merciful or gracious is mild. The cumulative testimony of the four gospels is that when Jesus Christ sees the fallenness of the world all about him, his deepest impulse, his most natural instinct is to move toward that sin and suffering, and not away from it. And what did he do when he saw the unclean? What was his first impulse when he came across prostitutes and lepers? He moved toward them. Pity flooded his heart. The longing of the true compassion, he spent time with them. He touched them. He called them to testify to the humanness of his touch. A warm hug does something warm words and greeting alone cannot. But there is something deeper in Christ's touch of compassion. He was reversing the Jewish system. When Jesus, the clean one, touched the unclean sinner, Christ did not become unclean. The sinner became clean."

Jesus comes, and He seeks even the self-righteous reluctant. But He also comes to the one whose mess is so clear and obvious to everyone. Thanks be to God.

And I don't know what side you might think of your own life. But thanks be to God that Jesus calls each and every one of us wherever we are. He disrupts our life in its beauty or in its mess, and He says, "Follow me."

Really, Lord? Follow me? Really? Lord, what about my retirement? How is that going to go? "Follow me." Lord, is Caroline going to graduate college and have a career? Will she have a family? "Follow me." Yes, Lord. But I want to have influence. Will my life go down into obscure days, and no one will ever remember a single word that I ever said or counseled? "Follow me. Follow me. Follow me." And the Jesus who redeems us, who is good to us, to the prideful and the leper, "Follow me. For I am gentle and lowly in heart."

This is the heart of discipleship. Because at its heart is the love of Christ who will remake us for Himself. Let's pray together.

Father, I thank you for this, your word. I thank you for your people. I thank you for what you're teaching us. I thank you that we can gather together again safely and more normally. Thank you, Lord, because this last year, we've wondered, "Lord, what are you doing?" And yet you've said to us, "Follow me." Lord, I confess I am not good at following you. But we need you. We need your Spirit. We need your Spirit to renew us and to call us to yourself, and to remind us that the one who calls to us "Follow me," that we can trust you to be the Lord of life. All of it, in the extraordinary, and in all of the ordinary. Lord, do this, we ask. And help us to find you at the heart of discipleship, that you might remake our hearts to live this life for your glory. Bless your people. Pour out your Spirit and mercy on your people. We thank you for Eric and Bev. We thank you for their years of service. Lord, bless these two disciples. Bless these two disciples that have blessed so many. Lord, help them to hear you say to them, "Follow me." For you are not done with them yet, and we cannot wait to hear the story of the next chapter because you have brought them safe thus far, and you will safely lead them on. Help us to bless them as

they have blessed us, as we've watched them follow you, Lord, help us to follow you with them. In Jesus's name. Amen.