**Following Jesus**

Mark 8:27-38

Key verse 8:34 “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.”

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. This was a Gentile territory. Jesus was deliberately separating himself from the crowds to have quiet time with his disciples. He wanted to ask them something very important. Look at verse 27b. “On the way he asked them, ‘Who do people say I am?’” This was a pretty easy question to answer; it was a request for objective information. Today they could look up Jesus’ name in Wikipedia and summarize what people said in five minutes. Look at verse 28. “They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’” John the Baptist, Elijah and the prophets were all recognized as men sent by God with God’s message. They were men who loved God passionately and led people back to God. People of Jesus’ time believed that Jesus came from God and served God’s purpose. They knew that Jesus came from God.   
  
Then and now, most people believe that Jesus came from God and did noble work. Jesus is generally respected by the world’s religions. The general consensus of mankind has been to respect Jesus as a great teacher, a noble humanitarian and a man from God. But to Jesus this was not enough.

Look at verse 29a. “‘But what about you?’ he asked, ‘Who do you say I am?’” Jesus wanted a different answer from his disciples. They had lived with Jesus. The Twelve had seen Jesus calm the storm at sea. Peter, James and John had seen Jesus raise Jairus’ daughter to life. They witnessed that Jesus fed the five thousands of people with five loaves and two fish. What did they say about Jesus? Look at verse 29b. “Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ.’” This was precisely the answer Jesus wanted to hear. Let’s think about what this confession means.

If we are asked the meaning of “Christ”, we probably would say that it means a savior. Yes, you are right that Jesus is our savior. But Jesus is more than a savior. Jesus is our King. The literal meaning of “Christ” is the anointed one. When God chose Saul as the first king of Israel, Samuel poured a flask of oil on Saul’s head. Samuel also anointed David with a horn of oil to ordain him as the second king of Israel. God told David that He will raise up David’s offspring and he will establish an eternal kingdom. All Israelites had been waiting for the promised Christ, the anointed one. They hoped that someday the Christ would come and establish his eternal kingdom.

Peter confessed Jesus as the promised King. His confession came out of his experiences with Jesus. His confession was made out of his love for Jesus. His confession is so important and valuable for Christianity. What makes Christianity unique is Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Christ. Jesus is the Only One who forgives our sins, cleanses us and gives eternal fellowship with God. When we confess that Jesus is the Christ, then we are declaring that Jesus is not only our Savior but also our King to whom we should show our loyalty.

Many people believe in Jesus as a ticket to the heavenly kingdom. People’s usual image of Jesus is a good friend or good shepherd. Jesus is like a friend whom we totally forget in our good time but visit to ask something when we are in need. If your friend treats you like this, do you want to be his or her friend? But I believe that Jesus still bears with us even if we mistreat him so badly.

However, we should not do that to Jesus any more. Once we know the meaning of our confession, we should subject ourselves to the King Jesus or withdraw our confession. Even though Peter, probably the other disciples too, made a great confession, he did not know how to follow up his confession. We also don’t know how to subject ourselves to Jesus. So Jesus began to teach about that.

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, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.” Jesus began to teach about his Messianic task. In summary, he would suffer, be killed and rise again after three days. What Jesus said was unimaginable to the disciples. Especially, Peter could not accept Jesus’ prophecy. Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. To Peter, Jesus was the Mighty King. To Peter, Jesus was a man of truth and compassion. To Peter, Jesus was the most precious man. Also, Peter dreamed to be great as his first disciple. To Peter, Jesus’ death is the thing which should not happen.

Just before, Peter confessed that Jesus is Christ. But he did not listen to his LORD’s teaching but tried to deny it. Jesus rebuked Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.” Last week, we learned about the disciples who failed completely to understand Jesus’ warning for the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod when their minds were full of bread that they forgot to bring. When Peter only thought about his human love for Jesus and his future, he could not follow up the things of God, which is the salvation of human kind through Jesus Christ.

Jesus wanted to teach people what it means to follow Him. Look at verse 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.” What does this mean? Later, Jesus himself would carry his cross and be crucified. In some sense, Jesus tells us that we should die like him if we want to follow Jesus. This is our subjection to Jesus as his servants. Peter was crucified with his head upside down. But this does not mean that we should be crucified on a cross physically.

We should die to our sin and sinful nature. For example, Peter had to kill his own human idea about Jesus and accept what Jesus said. Romans 6:3-7 says, “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.” We were slaves to sin. When we confess that Jesus is the Christ, we die with Jesus and receive a new life from Jesus. We became free men! We are children of God. However, we still have our sinful nature. We should fight against sinful nature every day. That’s our crucifixion.

Jesus prophesied about not only his death but also his resurrection. When he invites us to die with him, it contains a new life in him and resurrection with him. In John 12:24, Jesus explained this truth with a beautiful parable. “I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” Have you ever seen a farmer who is afraid of sowing a seed? “I am so scared. If I sow this seed, then it will be rotten and I will lose this seed!” Are we afraid of dying to our sinful nature? Are we afraid of subordinating ourselves to Jesus? If so, we are spiritually stupid and blind.

Let’s read verse 8:34 again. “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.” We learn that there are steps for dying with Jesus to obtain a new life.

First, we should deny ourselves. Who wants to die? Who wants to be punished? Who wants to be shamed? Who wants to be mistreated? Even Jesus did not want to take his cup of suffering and death from God. He had to struggle to deny himself through prayer. On the Mount of Olives, being in anguish, Jesus prayed earnestly and his sweat was like drops of blood falling on the ground. We feel like dying when we try to deny ourselves. Why, why I should deny myself in this matter? But we should deny our feeling and sinful nature, believing that there is a new life from Jesus when we die to our sins. But the problem is that we don’t recognize that we have something to deny unless we live a life before our King Jesus. Maybe we are totally ok with the worldly standard. Our spiritual blindness and deafness prevent us from finding a spiritual problem. I pray that Jesus shine his light on us to diagnose our problems correctly.

Second, we should take up our cross. The reason why we deny ourselves is that there is something which we want to avoid or we don’t want to do. Taking up our cross is our practical acting out which reflects our self-denial. For example, let’s say that I don’t like someone. But Jesus said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.” After I deny my emotion for him and repent of my evilness, I should say hello to him with smile and invite him for dinner. I have to struggle to love him genuinely.

Third, we should follow Jesus. This means that our death to sin is not one time event. Jesus not only died on the cross but also obeyed God’s will thoroughly throughout his life on earth. Every day we encounter a situation where we should deny ourselves. If our main concern is about works for Jesus and the gospel, we will be made to die to our sins and work for Jesus and the gospel every day. However, this is a true blessing in Jesus. Whenever we lose our life for Jesus, Jesus will give us a new life. Those who follow Jesus will have Jesus’ life all the more.

I heard a story of one husband and one wife. The husband abused his wife habitually. She prayed to God every day that her husband may die soon. But he met Jesus and changed dramatically. He and his wife found a mission from God. It was to take care of orphans. They adopted more than 10 children. Now the wife says proudly that her husband is the godliest man in the world. I don’t think that they suddenly became like saints. I don’t think that they could love and serve orphans without any difficulties. I heard that one of them hung himself at their house. They had to deny themselves and practically serve their adopted children every day. And God changed them so beautifully.

After I got a postdoc offer from SUNY Buffalo, my family struggled to know God’s direction in serving UBF ministry. Should we leave St. George UBF and join Buffalo UBF? Should we remain here? I had an idea that only I go to Buffalo and come back on weekend. But I did not want to separate from my family. I worried about money and frequent crossing the border. Also I was not good at driving. One day I found that I was not seeking my LORD Jesus but myself. God gave me courage to live as a child of God and love his people. I became convinced that God gave me this position in Buffalo which is so near to Toronto to serve St. George ministry continually. I pray that I may take up this cross faithfully by faith.

Peter confessed that Jesus is the Christ. Yes, right! Jesus is the Promised Savior and King. However, he was not like a worldly king who reigns with fear and authority. First he died for the atonement of our sins and rose from the dead to give us a new life. Through his death and resurrection, he established his kingship. Jesus wants us to practice the principle of death and resurrection like him. If we die, then we will live! In your heart, did you prepare the throne of Jesus? Let’s follow Jesus by denying ourselves and taking up our cross for Jesus and the gospel!