

## What Do You Really Want? Mark 8:29-38

Jesus would be killed? That didn't make any sense to Peter. After all, he had finally come to the conclusion that Jesus was the Messiah. And that in turn meant that Jesus would be a military leader like David, a conquering King at the head of a powerful army, expelling the Romans and restoring Israelite independence. That's what everyone was expecting. And Jesus couldn't do any of those things if he were dead. To paraphrase George Patton, no one ever won a war by going out and dying for his country. He won it by making some other guy die for his country. That's just common sense. So, what Jesus was saying just didn't make sense to Peter, or any of the other disciples for that matter.

Now, last week, we explored one reason why Peter would think like this – his eyes had only been opened partially. Jesus had revealed only part of the truth to him. And so yes, Peter understood that Jesus was the Messiah, but at the same time, he failed to understand what kind of Messiah Jesus was going to be.

And this is largely because Peter didn't grasp the full implications of the very last words of verse 31 – that Jesus would rise from the dead on the third day. For no mere military ruler had ever done anything like that – not even David. And so by claiming that He would rise from the dead, Jesus was saying that He would defeat death itself. And that, of course, would render a military Messiah unnecessary.

And how would Jesus do this? He would defeat death by defeating sin, which was the initial cause of death. And so, in order for Jesus to defeat death, He would thus not only have to avoid sin Himself – He would also somehow have to absorb the sins of all His people. He would have to become the perfect sacrifice for sin, dying so that we might be saved, and rising from the dead so that we might have new life with Him forever. Yes, everything Jesus was saying in today's passage makes perfect sense to us, standing as we do on this side of the cross.

But Peter didn't get it all wrong. For there will come a day when Jesus will appear as pretty much the sort of Messiah Peter was expecting. After all, Jesus says in verse 38 that one day the Son of Man, Jesus the risen Lord will come in the glory of the Father leading the mightiest army the world has ever seen, an army of holy angels. On that great day, He will in fact bring the perfect justice, the perfect peace, and the perfect prosperity, that Peter was so longing for.

And we know all that. But was that Peter's only problem? Had he simply gotten his timeline mixed up, confusing Jesus' second coming with Jesus' first coming? Was that all he needed to have his eyes opened – did he just need to get his facts straight? If so, then why didn't Jesus just explain all the sorts of things we've just gone over? Why didn't Jesus help Peter to sort out the chronology?

Well, maybe He did – after all, verse 32 points out that He was speaking openly, plainly. Maybe Jesus did tell Peter and the rest about how He would be the Suffering Servant, the One Whom Isaiah said would bear the sins of His people. And maybe Peter and the rest simply refused to hear what they didn't like, engaging in what we now call "selective hearing." But in any case, it's obvious that Peter simply preferred the worldly power, prestige, and wealth that always go along with being the close friends of a worldly ruler. And so maybe the disciples kept clinging to their own vision of Jesus right up until the point of His death because that's what they wanted to believe.

And it's these very worldly desires that probably explains the stinging rebuke that we find in verses 35 through 37, a rebuke we would all do well to heed. For it just doesn't make sense to focus all our time and attention on the things of this world. After all, you can't take it with you, right? And no matter how much money you put in the plate, there's no way to purchase salvation for yourself, is there? No, Jesus is clearly encouraging His disciples, and us as well, to prefer the spiritual over the material, not least because of the coming Day of Judgment that Jesus mentions in verse 38. No, on that day, the stuff we have won't make any difference – the only thing that will matter is whose side we're on.

So much is clear, and I doubt any of us would disagree with Jesus' critique of materialism, at least not in principle. Oh, we all could stand to be a bit more consistent in our practice, to focus a little less on the things of this world, to focus a little more on the things of God, but I think we all know that. We're all willing to grant that.

But Jesus' criticism of Peter seems to go much deeper than this, much further than a mere reordering of priorities. Look again at verse 33 – He says Peter is savouring, is setting his mind on the things of men rather than the things of God. In other words, Peter's problem wasn't that he had things in the wrong order – it's that he was going in the wrong direction. And so, throughout this passage, Jesus is questioning not just Peter's priorities, but his fundamental reason for living. For you see, Peter's problem wasn't just that he was more concerned with material things than with spiritual things. No, his problem was that he was leading a self-centered life instead of a God-centered life. In other words, Peter was a whole lot more concerned about Peter than he was concerned about God, where it comes to either material or spiritual things.

Now, our English translations obscure this point quite neatly. We are accustomed to reading verse 35 as a straightforward elevation of the spiritual over the material. Of course we shouldn't be so concerned with clinging to our bodily life – after all, since Jesus rose from the dead, we too can be assured of our own resurrection. And we tend to read verses 36 and 37 in the same way – after all, how can any material thing in this world compare to the value of someone's immortal soul?

But the only problem is that, in the Greek, the word translated "life" in verse 35 and the word translated "soul" in verse 36 is the same word – the word related to our English word "psyche." It is thus very likely that Jesus intended one meaning to inform all these verses. So, is He talking just about our bodily life? Or is He talking about our immortal souls?

Well, if Jesus is just talking about our bodily, earthly life, then the impact of verses 36 and 37 is dramatically reduced, isn't it? Verse 36 simply becomes commonplace – I mean, we all know that no one can take any of their possessions with them when their earthly life is over. And verse 37 becomes almost ridiculous – for haven't many, many wealthy people paid ransom money to kidnappers to release them?

Ah, but what if all these verses are talking about our immortal souls? Verses 36 and 37 then retain a much deeper meaning, a much greater significance, don't they? They become an urgent plea for us all to turn our focus away from the material to the spiritual, to prefer eternal blessings to temporal ones, to value our immortal souls over anything in this world.

But then what are we to make of verse 35? For it would read something like this: “For whoever wishes to save his soul shall lose it; but whoever loses his soul for My sake and the gospel’s shall save it.”

It doesn’t seem to make sense. I mean, it’s easy to see how someone could lose his earthly life for the sake of Christ and the gospel – who knows how many people will die for precisely these reasons at the hands of the ISIS thugs today? But how could anyone lose his soul for Jesus’ sake? Isn’t the whole point of the gospel to save our souls? What is Jesus saying here?

To figure it out, let’s turn our attention to that little word translated in the King James as “will.” The Greek actually means “to wish for or desire.” In other words, Jesus is probing our deepest desires. He’s asking us a very hard question, a much harder question than whether we value the spiritual over the material.

He’s asking us what we really want. What is our true motivation for the Christian life? Peter and the rest of the disciples may have been following Jesus in order to gain worldly power and wealth, and we know that’s wrong. But are we following Him just because we desire our souls to be saved? Do we imagine that Christianity is just some sort of heavenly fire insurance? If so, isn’t our focus really on ourselves rather than on Christ? If so, can we really say that we are better than Peter and those other selfish disciples? Oh, our selfishness might be better informed, but can we really say that we love Jesus any more than they did? Or, like Peter, are we just using Jesus to get what we want?

Here’s a way we can test our true desires – what do we think Heaven will be like? How do we envision the world that is to come? The Muslims imagine it to be a garden full of pleasures. Miss Watson told Huck Finn that “all a body would have to do there was to go around all day long with a harp and sing, forever and ever.” Country singer Craig Morgan has a dying vagrant saying that he is “Almost Home,” visualizing Heaven as an eternal childhood, climbing out of cottonwood trees, jumping into creeks, smelling his mama’s fresh cobbler cooking and getting ready to go fishing with dad. And I suppose most of us imagine Heaven with these or some similar images.

But where’s the focus in all of these visions of Heaven? Isn’t it on us getting what we want? Okay, let’s put it another way – what’s missing from all these visions of Heaven? Jesus. And according to John’s visions in the Revelation, that’s really all Heaven is about – the whole focus is on Jesus, on praising Jesus, on worshipping Jesus. And whatever blessings we might receive in Heaven end up being for Jesus, just as the elders surrounding the throne cast their crowns down at His feet. Heaven is all Jesus, all the time. So, if our ideas of Heaven would still be Heaven without Jesus, we probably won’t like the real thing very much.

So, what does it really mean to follow Jesus? Let’s take another look at verse 35, reading it the hard way: “For whoever wishes to save his soul shall lose it; but whoever loses his soul for My sake and the gospel’s shall save it.” In other words, if all we want is blessings, whether material or spiritual, whether in this world or the next, then we are really nothing more than sophisticated pagans. But if we are willing to give everything we have to Jesus, even trusting our immortal souls to Him, then we will receive the biggest blessing of all – the chance to be with Jesus forever.

And that’s why Jesus talks in verse 34 about self-denial, not just as something He will do for us, but something we need to do for Him. It’s an essential part of the Christian life precisely because it reveals our truest intentions – our Christ-centeredness rather than our self-centeredness. That’s why

Jesus says that whoever wants to follow Him must take up our cross. For the cross is not an image of suffering – it's an image of death. Jesus is thus calling all who want to follow Him not just to accept whatever worldly opposition and persecution may come our way for siding with Jesus, but to die to sin, to die to self, to give all that we are – even our eternal souls – to Him.

So, I guess it boils down to a simple question – what do you really want? What is your deepest desire? Are you still focused on yourself? Do you just want to save your life, or even to save your soul? Or do you want to follow Jesus, giving not just all you have to Him, but all you are, your very life, your very soul to Him?

Does that sort of desire sound a little extreme? Does that sound perhaps even a bit fanatical? Maybe so. But given Who Jesus is, and given what Jesus has done for us, does He really deserve anything less?