

Redefining Success (Mark 8:34-38)

We're looking at all the ways Jesus confronted both His own culture and by extension, every culture with the values of the kingdom of God in the gospel of Mark; and this morning I want to look at how radically different Jesus' definition of success is from that of His culture and ours. What is success in America today? Is it measured by fame, by wealth, by accomplishment? One thing's for sure. Our culture defines success in individualistic terms. Being successful in America means me getting what *I* want; achieving *my* dreams, fulfilling *my* potential and reaching *my* goals. Of course, we don't always put it that way; we claim that we just want to be successful for our family; like professional athletes who say, "I have to think of my family," when they leave one team to make more money playing for another; or we may talk about the good of others as in "The only reason I want to be president to serve my country," or "I only want my church to grow so that more people will hear the gospel." But the American definition of success is fundamentally about me – my fame, my happiness, my accomplishment. Why is that? According to the Bible, self-absorption has been inherent in human nature ever since Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and chose to be their own god instead of worshiping the one true God; and as a result, humans have been ruled by our own self-interest ever since. Now with proper training and nurture, we gradually learn to put others first when appropriate, and to look at things from other's point of view; but selfishness and self-absorption continue to lie just below the surface. Think about all the stress we experience every day which is generated solely by my concern for myself: our fear about our reputation and what people think; our worries for our rights, our plan, our way, our wants, and our needs. If I could only forget about myself, most of my fears, anger, worry, stress and tension would vanish; which is the way Jesus lived. Jesus was the most selfless man to ever live and as we might expect, His definition of a successful life is very different than our definition.

I want to continue looking at the passage in Mark 8 which we began to look at last week. The disciples have just returned from preaching and healing in the villages of Galilee and as they report back to Jesus about what happened, He asks them what people are saying about Him – "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples report that everybody knows that Jesus is special because He is doing things nobody has ever done; but opinions about who He may be vary. Some think He's John the Baptist back from the dead or one of the Old Testament prophets; but nobody knows for sure. Then Jesus asks the disciples who they think He is and Peter says, "You are the Christ" – the Messiah, the king and savior promised throughout the Old Testament and for whom the Jews have been waiting for centuries. Peter nails it and this conversation becomes a milestone in Jesus' ministry as His disciples begin a new phase in their training; because now that they know who Jesus really is, He begins to teach them why He really came: not to be the military or political leader which they and Israel expects but to die. "*And He began to teach them that 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.*" Jesus says that He didn't come for a crown but for a cross; He didn't come to reign but to be rejected. Last week we talked about how who Jesus is and why He came is at the heart of Christianity and the critical issue of faith. Those who believe that Jesus is who He says He is and that He came to do what He said He came to do are Christians; those who do not believe that He is who He says He is and that He came to do what He said He came to do are not. Christianity is Christ and a Christian is a believer in Christ; one who trusts that Jesus is the Christ who came to die in our place so that we might live forever. If you weren't here last week, I encourage to listen or to read last week's message on Creekside's podcast or website because it explains the very heart of the Christian faith. Now Jesus' disciples have a hard time accepting this new information. This isn't what they signed on for. And when Jesus confirms what they hoped; that He is indeed the long-awaited Messiah, they expect to be part of the new administration when Jesus comes to power in the earthly kingdom of God. But Jesus immediately destroys those hopes when He tell them that He's going to be rejected and killed by the leaders of Israel; that not only will He die but that He must die – and if you don't understand why Jesus had to die, I encourage you to check out last Sunday's sermon. All this is too much

for Peter. Mark 8:31 *"And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him."* This is not what Peter was hoping for because it's not what Peter's culture was hoping for. Israel thought they needed a political and military savior, a Messiah who would defeat the Romans and make the world Israel's empire. Peter take Jesus aside and says, "You're not supposed to die, You're supposed to rule so that we can rule with You." *But turning around and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter and *said, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's."* (Mark 8:33) Jesus says, "You don't want what God wants; you want what you want – because you don't know what you really need. Your problem isn't the Romans. Your problem is the sin within you which separates you from God, ruins your life and the lives of others; and will send you to hell. That's what you need to be saved from and that's the mission God sent me to accomplish." That brings us to the verses we're going to look at this morning. Mark 8:34-38 *"And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. 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. 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."* Jesus says, "Now that you know where I'm going - and that all this isn't going to end at the palace but at the cross, you need to reevaluate whether you still want to be my disciple. If you intend to keep coming after Me, then you're going to have to do three things. Deny yourself. Take up your cross daily. And follow Me wherever I lead you." Jesus not only clarifies His mission in this passage but clarifies what following Him in this world will require; and in doing so, He redefines success. Jesus' definition of a successful life is very different than our definition of a successful life; and I want you to notice three specific differences between the way Jesus defines success and the way we define success: a different purpose, a different path and a different perspective. Following Jesus begins with accepting Jesus' definition of what constitutes a successful life in this world; because as long as we view following Jesus through the lens of our culture's definition of success, we will be frustrated with Jesus - just like Peter was. I cannot be at peace with Jesus until I want what He wants for my life.

Understanding Jesus' definition of a successful life begins with understanding His purpose for us. Do you know why you're on earth – the purpose for which you were born?" Jesus alludes to that purpose in vs. 34. *"If anyone wishes to come after Me..."* We won't understand Jesus' definition of success until we understand His purpose for our life; to be His disciple and to follow Him. When Jesus said, *"If anyone wishes to come after Me,"* the people who heard Him would understand Him to be saying, "If anyone wants to be My disciple, My apprentice and mentee." Although we use the words, "disciple" and "disciple-making" fairly regularly at Creekside, a disciple is not a familiar term in our culture. However, disciples were very common in Jesus' culture. A disciple is a student because becoming someone's disciple was the only way to get an education or to learn a trade in first century Israel. A disciple would attach himself to a master to live with him and to learn from him all that he could until he became like the master. Tradesmen had disciples, the rabbis had disciples and Jesus had disciples. In fact, disciples were the first name for Christians because every Christian was a disciple of Jesus, learning to follow Him and to obey all He commanded. Laurie and I saw the film *Risen* a couple of weeks back and to my surprise, I actually enjoyed it. I usually stay away from movies about the Bible because I get too worked up when I think they give a false view of Jesus; but even though *Risen* is fiction, it follows the Biblical story very closely. My favorite scene in the film occurred right after the risen Christ appeared to His disciples in the upper room and then disappears and the disciples have no idea what they're supposed to do next. Mary Magdalene is there and she says, "I think you're supposed to go to Galilee. When He first appeared to me outside the tomb, He said, "Tell My disciples to leave for Galilee and I will see them there." So all the disciples immediately pack up and leave for Galilee. The central character in the movie is a Roman tribune named Clavius who has just stumbled into the upper room and can't believe what he sees. Clavius not only watched Jesus die on the cross but was also in charge of His burial in the garden tomb; and so He is dumbfounded by the fact that the man He saw dead and buried a few days ago is now alive. As the disciples leave the upper room, he asks Bartholomew where they are going. "To Galilee." Clavius asks, "Why?" Bartholomew smiles and replies, "We're followers. We follow." And I thought, "That's it. That's the essence of what it means to be Christ's disciple; we follow Him." Our job is not to come up with the best plan we can for our lives or to pursue our own ambitions or desires. A disciple follows. Christ's purpose for us is to simply follow Him; to go where He sends us, to do what He tells us to do and to say what He tells us to say; to live no longer for ourselves but for Him who lived and died in our behalf. That's God's

purpose for my life and a successful life will be measured by how closely did I follow and not by what did I accomplish or attain or achieve for myself. Did I follow Him or did I take off on my own? Am I following Him in my marriage and in how I treat Laurie? Am I following Him in my family and how I treat my children and grandchildren? Am I following Him in the ministry and in my leadership of Creekside? Am I following Him on my swim team, in my neighborhood, in my community? Is knowing Christ and doing His will my sole purpose in life? We're discussing Genesis in my community group and Monday evening we talked about chapter 11 where most of our discussion centered on the tower of Babel story which occurs several generations after the Flood as the descendants of Noah are multiplying. Following the Flood, God gave Noah and his sons the same command as He gave Adam and Eve: to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth; and yet the descendants of Noah and his sons refuse to scatter as God commanded, choosing rather to stay together. In fact, they build a great city and a tower to reach into heaven; "make a name for themselves" and to prevent themselves from being scattered over the earth. For the first time in history, the whole human race is united but they are not united because God is their king but they are united in their rebellion against God; trusting in their collective power rather than trusting Him and stepping out into the unknown. God breaks up the rebellion by confusing their languages so they can't work together any longer and they scatter throughout the earth according to their language group which marks the beginning of the different races and cultures of the world. The tower of Babel reminded me that we can be too successful and powerful for our own good and that our success in doing the opposite of what God wants us to do can ruin us unless He, out of His great love for us, thwarts those plans once we stop serving His purpose. I realized that a lot of things I've done in my ministry have been motivated more to make a name for myself than to serve Christ and that I need to remind myself daily that the purpose of my life is not achieving the things I want to achieve but rather following Christ; and therefore the measure of my life is my obedience, not accomplishment, recognition of power; because God can take those things away in an instant. Our culture defines success in terms of achieving our own plans; Jesus defines success in terms of following Him and His plan.

Now because Jesus has a different definition of success, He describes a different path to success; not up but down; because that is the path Jesus is walking. Jesus just told His disciples that He is on His way to a cross and not to the palace they thought. Therefore, anyone who wishes to follow Him must be ready to walk that same path. Let's look at vs. 34 again. *"If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me."* If my purpose in life is to follow Jesus as His true disciple, then I'm going to walk the same path He walked and that path will require me to deny myself and to take up my cross just as He denied Himself and took up His cross. So what does Jesus when He says that everyone who wants to follow Him must deny himself? Denying yourself simply means saying NO to yourself; saying NO to what I want, to what I think I need, to what I want to do right now and to the way I think things should be. Why would Jesus' disciples have to deny themselves to continue to follow Him? Because Jesus is going somewhere they don't want to go; to public rejection, arrest, torture, and death. Where Jesus is going goes against all of their natural desires for self-preservation and the pursuit of happiness. Now it's clear why Jesus' disciples would have to deny themselves to keep following Him at that point in history; but what about us today? Why do we have to deny ourselves in order to follow Him? Self-denial is the test of who really is the ultimate authority in my life; me or Jesus. Following Christ means going where Jesus is going and doing what Jesus is doing rather than going where I want to go and doing what I want to do. That's why it is impossible to be Jesus' disciple without denying myself. If I don't have to deny myself, Jesus isn't in charge, I'm in charge. Now before we talk about what healthy self-denial looks like, let's talk briefly about what self-denial is NOT. Self-denial is not self-hatred. We don't deny ourselves because we're so evil and everything we want is wrong. Jesus was perfect yet even He had to say, "Not my will but Yours be done." to His Father. We don't deny ourselves because what we want is wrong or evil; we deny ourselves because no matter how legitimate my desires may be, Christ's desires always come first. Self-denial is not self-hatred and neither is self-denial self-delusion or pretending you don't have desires or needs. I've met Christians who pretend they don't need anything - they don't need friends, or love, or money. Jesus meets all my needs. That's just not healthy because it's not honest. Self-denial is not living in denial and pretending that I don't have any desires or needs. Self-denial is being very honest with God about what I want and what I need and asking Him to provide those things, just as He's commanded us to - but never making the fulfillment of those desires a condition of whether I'll follow Christ. Self-denial is not self-hatred or self-delusion; nor is it self-destruction. At the opposite extreme of people who pretend they have no needs are people who define themselves by their needs. I have to have this or express that to be who I am; and because they define themselves by their desires, they see

self-denial as suicide. If I can't express my sexuality or develop my talent or pursue my dream, then I am repressing who I really am and doing myself great psychological injury. If I don't constantly monitor and discover and express and fulfill my needs and desires, I will lose myself. Jesus would tell you, "No, you won't. You are more than a package of wants, needs, drives and desires. You're more than a little bird with its mouth open, "feed me, feed me." You are a child of God, created for a much larger purpose than yourself." And as we'll see in a minute true fulfillment comes from achieving that purpose - not from fulfilling all of my limitless desires.

So if self-denial is not self-hatred or self-delusion or self-destruction, what is it? Denying yourself is simply saying NO to anything that gets in the way of following Christ. It's the same for any area of achievement; before you can accomplish anything significant - whether it's in athletics or music or art or writing or business or parenting - we must learn to say NO to anything that gets in the way of those pursuits. We will either experience the pain of self-denial or the pain of regret. You can pretty much divide people into two groups; feelers and doers. Feelers run their day by how they feel. Doers do what needs to be done to reach their goal. Feelers take their emotional temperature throughout the day, figuring out what they feel like doing now. Their lives are controlled by the fluctuations of their feelings; by their biorhythms, what they had for lunch, a cup of coffee from Starbucks, an annoying phone call, a headache. Feelers typically start a lot more things than they finish. They make more commitments than they actually keep. They ask questions like, "Do I feel like making that phone call now?" "Do I feel like writing that thank you note?" "Do I feel like praying and reading my Bible?" "Do I feel like attending that meeting I said I'd attend?" That's why people describe feelers as flaky. Doers know in advance how they will be spending their day because they have made those decisions in advance. They decide what they want to achieve and what needs to be done to achieve it and then just do it. They have learned to say NO to their immediate feelings, to immediate gratification, and to anything else that would distract them from their purpose. A feeler is almost always comfortable but is seldom satisfied. A doer experiences many satisfactions throughout the day, even though some of them are preceded by discomfort. And what Jesus is saying is this: if you want to be My disciple, you will have to learn to be a doer rather than a feeler. You'll have to say NO to your immediate feelings so you can say YES to Me.

"If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily. This is the first time Jesus mentions the cross, and He's not talking about His cross but His disciples' cross. These men were familiar with the sight of condemned men, carrying their cross to their own execution. A man with a cross had no future plans. His life no longer belonged to him; and Jesus tells these men, "If you want to be My disciple, that's the attitude you'll need every day; you'll need to take up your cross daily." The cross was the most shameful kind of death, reserved only for the worst criminals; who hung naked for hours - sometimes for days at a public crossroads, dying slowly while people mocked him. The cross was the ultimate symbol of society's rejection and Jesus says, "If you're going to follow Me, that's what you'll have to embrace each day. That's why you're going to have to deny yourself because nobody wants to carry a cross." Remember, for Jesus the cross was voluntary. His life wasn't taken from Him, He chose to lay down His life for us. And our cross is something we choose - out of obedience to Christ - to take up daily. Some people think their cross is anything bad that happens to them - sickness or losing their job, or the neighbor who plays loud music late at night. "That's just my cross to bear, I guess." Wrong. The cross isn't something that happens which is beyond your control. Everybody suffers in that way. Your cross is suffering you choose in order to be obedient to Christ. Choosing to stand up for what is right even when it means rejection and hatred, choosing to keep your mouth shut and not return slander for slander, or evil for evil, but to seek peace and reconciliation; choosing to bear whatever suffering comes as a result of being obedient to the will of God.

Now here's what I hope you can see. The path to success - as Jesus defines success; the path to life and productivity and joy - is a painful path; a path which requires self-denial and voluntary suffering in order to follow Jesus wherever He goes. That means that following Jesus will not always be convenient or comfortable. And if I always do what I want to do, then I'm not following Jesus. If daily I'm not having to say no to some things I want to do in order to follow Him; or if I never suffer because I'm following Him; then according to Jesus, it's because I'm not following Him. The question we must ask ourselves every day is this. "What did I deny myself today in order to obey Jesus?" The comfortable, convenient path is not the path which leads to life. Let me give you one practical application. Today throughout the U.S., church attendance is falling. There is only one county in our

country where church attendance has risen rather than fallen over the past decade. It's not because less people are attending church; it's because people are attending church less. Where a decade ago, the average Christian might have attended church 2 or 3 times a month, today the average Christian attends once or twice a month. We see this at Creekside. We have more regular attenders than in the past but they attend more infrequently. Why? Well, you know. There are more conflicts on Sundays than there used to be; more teams schedule practices and games on Sunday mornings than they used to back when I was coaching; more families schedule parties and family events on Sundays, people travel more on Sundays. In fact, as our lives have gotten busier and busier, Sunday has become the day to get the things done we can't fit into the rest of the week – or the only day we have to crash and rest. There are a lot of other things competing for your time on Sundays; which tests how high a priority attending church is for you. To be here, you have to say no to something else; and so church attendance is one picture of whether you are following Jesus or not. The Scripture is clear. Hebrews 10:24-25, *"Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near."* Christ calls us to regularly meet with other believers to be taught, to worship Him and to encourage each other; and so if that is not my habit, I am not following Him. That's why a little thing like attending church on Sunday is really a test of my discipleship. Will I deny myself and say yes to Jesus or do something else which seems more important or more desirable? Jeff played soccer for 8 years and I helped coach the team and we were very good. Our kids won far more often than we lost and Jeff was an integral part of that team; one of our best if not the best defender we had. But we made it clear that we wouldn't be there on Sundays and we missed some important tournament finals because they were on Sundays. Did that hurt? Sure, at times, nothing seemed more important than the team; but I don't think Jeff and Jenny would have the same commitment to Christ and to His people if Laurie and I had not modeled the importance of attending church on Sundays. And that's true of everything Christ calls us to do; whether it's taking regular time to study the Bible or to pray or to attend a small group or to share our faith with somebody – it is never convenient or comfortable. It's not supposed to be. It is always a test of whether I am following Christ or following myself and will always involve self-denial and pain. The path to life is always the path of self-denial and cross-bearing and if following Christ doesn't cost me or isn't inconvenient or uncomfortable, I'm probably following my own plan far more than I am following His. Jesus defines success as following Him which is why the path to success will always involve self-denial.

So why would anyone want to follow Jesus? It almost sounds like Jesus is trying to talk us out of becoming His followers. "Come follow Me - and suffer inconvenience, rejection, embarrassment, shame, and death." There's a great recruiting slogan! "Join Me and let's get crucified together." But Jesus doesn't stop there. He now shows us why it is to our great benefit to follow the path He followed and to deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and to follow Him. He gives us a new perspective on success. Why deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus? Here's why; *"For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it. For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His glory, and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels."* That's the great paradox of life in this world. It is only by denying ourselves that we fulfill ourselves; only by losing ourselves that we find ourselves; only by dying to ourselves that we save ourselves. Jesus says you only find your life by losing it for His sake. You only find happiness when you stop looking for it. The happiest people in the world are not the people who get everything they want; or those who have the financial means to satisfy every whim and desire. The happiest people in the world are not the most comfortable people. The happiest people in the world are those who serve a cause greater than themselves, who deny their natural desires for comfort and safety to follow Christ wholly. Remember the story of Narcissus from Greek mythology? Narcissus was an extraordinarily handsome young man with whom all the nymphs of the woods were hopelessly in love but Narcissus ignored them all. One maiden became so upset her love for Narcissus was not returned that she prayed that he too would feel the same pain she felt. The avenging goddess Juno decided to answer that prayer. One day while Narcissus was hunting in the woods, he discovered a fountain of extraordinarily clear water and he stooped to drink, he saw his own reflection in the water and immediately fell in love with himself. When he tried to kiss or to embrace his own reflection, it fled away, only to return again after a moment to renew his fascination. Narcissus was unable to leave the fountain. He had to have this beautiful creature he saw in the water, and spent the rest of his life weeping over the image which refused to return his love. Over time, his health failed and he gradually lost his beauty and vigor which had once

charmed the nymphs until he died. Juno - like most of the Greek goddesses really knew how to hold a grudge. Today we get the term *narcissism* - which means an exaggerated preoccupation with one's self - from the myth of Narcissus and most of us are closet narcissists; in love with ourselves; self-absorbed, self-preoccupied, and ultimately self-destructive. Like Narcissus, we are our own greatest fan and our own greatest enemy; because the sin which lives within every person always speaks to us in the first person. Sin never says "You should do this." Rather it says, "I should do this." We mistake the voice of sin for our own voice and the desires of sin for our own desires and are blind to how our selfishness and self-absorption is killing us just like it killed Narcissus. That's the perspective Jesus teaches us we need to have in order to follow Him. Doing what I want will not fulfill me; it will destroy me; but doing what Christ wants will bless me because He knows what I need far better than I know what I need and He turns every cross carried for Him to our advantage. He works all things for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. When we seek first His kingdom, all things are added to us. And this is the same path He walked for us.

What does success mean for you? What would you need to see at the end of your life to conclude that you lived a successful life? For me, it would be to know that I followed Christ. I put Him first; I completed the course He set for me, I accomplished the work He gave to me, I was faithful to do what He gave me to do.

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