

The Biggest Loser

Mark 8:31-38

Bryn MacPhail / March 4, 2012

Many of you have no doubt recognized that I have borrowed my sermon title from the NBC television show with the same name.

I can't think of a better title to apply to our text of study this morning.

I want to focus in on Mark chapter 8, verses 34 to 38.

In our day it is quite common for professionals to attend conferences related to their particular field. These conferences are usually designed with a view to helping a person *succeed* at a higher level.

Well, here in Mark 8:34 and following, we have a kind of ad hoc conference. Mark tells us that a “**crowd**” has gathered, and that they are interested in hearing what Jesus has to say.

You could summarize what Jesus offers by saying:

“One must lose in order to win.”

Or, you might say, that a follower of Jesus should strive to be “The Biggest Loser”.

What Jesus recommends here is not only counterintuitive, but it is also counter-cultural. And not just for 1st Century Palestine, but also for 21st Century Bahamas.

We live in a society that is largely structured around *competition*. There are laws and etiquettes in place, which aim to keep the competition civil, but let’s not miss the competitive structure we’re a part of.

Students are in competition with one another to get into particular colleges.

Businesses are in competition with one another to attract more customers.

Within particular businesses, there is often competition between colleagues for promotion.

And, as we are seeing here in our own country, *political parties* are competing fiercely for the support of the Bahamian people.

As consumers, we compete for the resources made available to us.

Society is structured in such a way, that we constantly feel the pressure to acquire and to accumulate.

We often feel pressure to get ahead of others and to win.

But then we come to Jesus and He turns these principles on their head.

Enduring wealth comes from giving up things.

Winning comes from losing.

The first instruction Jesus gives is, "**If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself**"(8:34).

Let me begin by suggesting what denying oneself is *not*.

Denying oneself is not the same as self-neglect. Nor is Jesus asking us to harm ourselves in any way.

Another way we tend to think of self-denial is in terms of giving up something. This is the time of year when we often hear about people giving up things for Lent.

This is not what Jesus means when He instructs us to **deny** ourselves.

The best description of self-denial that I have heard says, "we are to deny that we own ourselves."

This cuts to the core of our existence.

Our natural inclination is to be in control. We want to be the master of our own destiny.

We don't want someone else telling us how to live our life.

And yet, this is precisely what Jesus is calling for.

Jesus is saying, if you want to be My disciple you need to do as I do.

To be a follower of Christ you must be truly prepared to follow Him.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul explains:
"You are not your own; you were bought with a price"(1Cor.6:19b, 20a).

To deny oneself then, is to surrender every aspect of your life to Jesus Christ.

To deny oneself is to do nothing for your glory, and everything for God's glory.

And, as if that wasn't challenging enough, Jesus adds to His command instructing us also to **"take up (our) cross and follow (Him)"**.

And what does Jesus mean by this?

Many people think that a cross is any trial or hardship you are going through, such as, a health problem, a bothersome relative, or an inconsiderate neighbor. "That's my cross," we say.

But this is not what Jesus meant. The cross, at its core, represented 2 things: *humiliation* and *death*.

Jesus is stating that to be His disciple means making oneself vulnerable to humiliation and, potentially, to death.

When we recognize this, we can begin to appreciate why Jesus would also warn the disciples to not be ashamed of Him.

When we recall that most of the disciples were eventually executed for their allegiance to Jesus, the subsequent command to not be ashamed takes on a most profound meaning.

Admittedly, we have it pretty easy in our culture. I don't think too many of us have been harshly persecuted for our faith in Jesus.

I'm acutely aware of the differences between my ministry and the ministry of the apostle Paul, for example.

Virtually everywhere Paul went; he was beaten up. Sometimes they threw stones at him.

By contrast, almost everywhere I go, I get served tea and cookies.

We may not live in a context where we are persecuted for loving Jesus, but we do live in a context where we are tempted to elevate our own needs and preferences above the needs of others.

Jesus challenges this.

He says, **“Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”** (8:35-37).

There it is again:

Winning by losing.

Success by sacrifice.

We also see here Jesus assigning a value to our relationship with Him.

We are being told that our allegiance to Jesus is the most valuable thing in the world.

Jesus is not picking on wealthy people here. Nor is Jesus even saying that gaining the whole world is a bad thing.

Jesus is saying that to gain the whole world *at the expense of your soul* is a bad thing!

He is saying that if you possessed everything under the sun, it would not equal the value of having your soul redeemed by Him.

Jesus is telling us that our relationship with Him matters more than everything and, as such, should take priority over all things.

Again, our problem is not that we have worldly possessions or that we engage in worldly affairs.

Our problem is that we have become attached to these things.

Our problem is that these things have become our priority.

When this happens, Jesus becomes merely an “add on” in our life, and Christian activity becomes something we engage in with our leftover time.

But what does Jesus say?

He says that **“whoever loses his life for Me and for the gospel will save (their life)”** (8:35).

I don't want to sound like I've got this all figured out. Nor do I want to suggest that I'm great at “losing my life” for Jesus.

But I am convinced of my need for this. I want to get better at losing. I want to get better at sacrificing for Him and for others.

Although this principle is counterintuitive, it should not surprise us.

As Tim Keller puts it, “When Jesus went to the cross and died for our sins, He won through losing...(Jesus) didn't take power; He gave it up—and yet He triumphed.”

The apostle Paul frames it this way—Paul says, **“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus”** (Phil. 2:5).

In other words—be Christ-like in your approach to life.

What does that look like Paul?

I'll tell you: **“(Jesus) being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to cling to, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross”** (Phil. 2:6-8).

Being Christ-like means we don't cling to our rights in every situation. We resist the spirit of entitlement.

Being Christ-like means we are willing to accept a lower status.

Being Christ-like means we will absorb a humiliating loss if it benefits another.

No one has ever given up as much as Jesus did when He came to earth in human flesh, and subjected Himself to death on a cross.

But, of course, the sacrifice of Christ was not in vain.

Paul goes on, **“Therefore, God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow...and every tongue confess that Jesus is LORD, to the glory of God the Father”** (Phil. 2:9-11).

Exaltation by humiliation.

Salvation by sacrifice.

Winning by losing.

This was the governing principle in Jesus’ earthly ministry.

And here in Mark chapter 8, Jesus says it should be the governing principle in the lives of His followers.

Friends, I realize that we live in a competitive world.

We live in a world where it is socially acceptable to focus on your own wellbeing as top priority.

But this is not the way of Jesus.

A “me first” attitude is not the same attitude that was in Christ Jesus.

I want the best for each and every one of you.

I want each and every one of you to experience success and satisfaction...but what I’m suggesting is a road to success that is less travelled.

I want you to be ready to give things up—time, energy, and resources.

I want you to be prepared to occupy a humble position.

I want you to do this remembering Jesus said that the one who loses the most actually gains the most.

The biggest loser is really the biggest winner.

Let us commit ourselves to losing...to the degree that our losing helps us, and others, to gain Jesus Christ.

