

## The cross-shaped life

### Mark 8:34-38

Do you think the UK is a Christian country?

The answer we give all depends on what we think the question means.

For example, if we are asking...

**Does the UK have lots of church buildings scattered around the country?** The answer would be yes.

Or if we mean...

**Does the UK give Christianity a prominent place in its national life?** The answer is an obvious yes. Many of our historic laws are based on Christian ethics, church services are conducted at significant moments in national life and the Church of England even gets to put some of its bishops in the House of Lords.

But what if we mean...

**Is the UK full of people who are genuine Christians?**

It all depends on what it means to be a Christian.

If it means someone who believes in God then yes the UK is full of Christians. Atheists are still small in numbers. Most believe in some sort of God even though they are confused about the divine identity.

If it means someone who hasn't committed a crime worthy of prison then again yes the UK is full of Christians. This is how many people view Christians, people who are morally good and functionally kind.

**What does it really mean to be a Christian?** This is what Jesus explains in this section of Mark's Gospel.

He blows away our confusion and presents a crystal clear definition.

Look at verse 34. **Read verse 34.**

The **first thing** I want to point out is that being a Christian is highly relational.

It's **not** ultimately about **obeying rules** or **practicing rituals**. No, it is about having a **personal relationship with a real person** called Jesus.

Jesus speaks about following **me**.

Let's get this clear.

A Christian not someone who simply believes in God.

It's not someone who has a genuine interest in spiritual things.

No, a Christian is someone who has a real relationship with the risen Jesus Christ.

Let me say that it is possible to be very passionate about the Christian faith and yet not be a genuine Christian.

**Let me tell you the story of the Pastor who became a Christian through his own sermon.**

His name was **William Haslam** and he was a Vicar in Cornwall during the 19th Century. One day, much to his surprise, his gardener became a Christian and he didn't quite know what to make of this.

He visited a friend who told him bluntly that the reason he didn't understand was because he himself was not yet a Christian. His friend told him about the living waters that Jesus promised, welling up from within to eternal life. William Haslam then admitted that he did not know of such a thing, but would dearly love to have it. Then he left.

The following Sunday, Haslam climbed into his pulpit and this is how he describes what happened next.

"As I went on to explain the passage, I saw that the Pharisees and Scribes did not know that Christ was the Son of God or that he came to save them. Something was telling me all the time, "You are no better than the Pharisees yourself, you do not believe he is the Son of God and that he came to save you any more than they did."

"I do not remember all I said, but I felt a wonderful light and joy coming into my soul, and I was beginning to see what the Pharisees did not. Whether it was my words or my manner or my look, I know not; but all of a sudden a local preacher, who happened to be in the congregation, stood up and putting up his arms shouted out in a Cornish manner, "The parson is converted! The parson is converted! Hallelujah."

And in another moment his voice was lost in the shouts and praises of three or four hundred in the congregation. Instead of rebuking this extraordinary brawling as I would have done at one time, I joined in the outburst of praise."

He then describes how at least 20 people in the congregation cried out for mercy and professed to find joy and peace in believing, including three members of Haslam's own family. The news spread like wildfire throughout the town that the Vicar had been converted by his own sermon!

Friends, let's ensure that we have a **personal relationship** with Jesus.

The **second** thing I want to highlight from what Jesus says in verse 34 is that being a Christian is all about **personal denial**.

Jesus says whoever wants to be my disciple must **deny** themselves.

Please notice what Jesus doesn't say. **He doesn't say deny things to yourself**. He's not asking us to give up things like chocolate and ice-cream. He's not saying that to really get in touch with God you must lose connection with all the physical things in life until you experience a mystical union with the non-material oneness of invisible reality.

No, he says that a Christian is someone who denies himself.

**We all know what it means to deny something.**

Suppose someone accuses you of some dreadful crime and you deny the accusation, what are you doing? Well, you are saying no it wasn't me.

Or if someone accuses me of owning **a hideous pair of tartan trousers** then I will deny the accusation. With great passion I will say, "No, these are not hideous but magnificent trousers with great practical use."

To deny something means to say no to it.

Jesus says that a Christian is someone who denies himself.

In short, this means a person who says no to their own self-rule and yes to the loving rule of King Jesus.

It is a conscious decision to dethrone our self and enthrone Jesus instead.

This is **counter-initiative** and **counter-cultural**.

We live in a country where Frank's Sinatra's My Way is played with pride at many funerals.

And now, the end is near  
And so I face the final curtain  
My friend, I'll say it clear  
I'll state my case, of which I'm certain  
I've lived a life that's full  
I've traveled each and every highway  
And more, much more than this  
I did it my way

**This is one of the most anti-Christian songs it is ever possible to write!**

This is because being a Christian involves **personal denial**.

A Christian is someone who says no to self and yes to the Saviour. This doesn't mean we instantly do everything Jesus says. But it does mean there has been a fundamental declaration to allow Jesus to be in charge.

Being a Christian involves personal denial.

**Third**, being a Christian involves **personal witness**.

In **verse 34**, Jesus talks about take up our cross and following him.

This is a very dramatic way of teaching that following Jesus involves talking about our faith in him with those around us.

Carrying a cross in the 1<sup>st</sup> century was **not a private hobby**. It was a **public spectacle**.

It involved an individual carrying their cross beam through the streets on the way to their execution.

**What do you think happened on the way?** The people didn't praise the criminals. They mocked them. The crowd was hostile and the whole experience was embarrassing and painful.

Jesus could simply have said that being a Christian will involve public testimony. But instead he used this highly evocative picture of carrying our cross.

### **Why?**

- Jesus won't ask us to do anything he hasn't done himself
- The focus of our witness should be on the cross
- It reveals that our confession of Christ won't always be comfortable experience. Often the reason we fail to cross the pain barrier is because we don't want to experience the discomfort of rejection.

Jesus is very clear, being a Christian involves personal witness.

### **Why would anyone choose to do this?**

Why not keep our heads down and our hearts focused on ourselves as number 1?

This is what Jesus answers in verse 35. Listen to what he says.

**Read verse 35.**

Notice the connecting word. **For**. Why live like this? **For** whoever wants to save his life will lose it but whoever loses his life for me and the gospel will save it.

The crucial question is, **what does it mean to lose our life or our soul?**

The Bible certainly speaks about the futility of living our earthly lives without knowing Jesus.

It was the Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal who argued that within each one of us there is a “god-shaped gap.” That is, at our deepest level we were made for a personal relationship with our Maker and only this relationship will truly satisfy.

I think the description a life without Jesus is captured brilliantly by these words from a journalist called Bernard Levin. He writes, “Countries like ours are full of people who have all the material comforts they desire, together with such non-material blessings as a happy family, and yet lead lives of quiet, and at times, noisy desperation, understanding nothing but the fact that there is a hole inside them and that however much food and drink they pour into it, however, many motor cars and television sets they stuff with it, however many well-balanced children and loyal friends they parade around the edges of it...it aches.”

In short, without Jesus, we lose our souls in this earthly life.

Although this is true I don’t think this is the focus of what Jesus means here. I say this because of what we read in verses 36 to 38.

### **Read verses 36 to 38.**

Jesus continues speaking about losing our soul or losing our life.

However, his focus on when we **might lose it** is not during this earthly life but on the future day when Jesus will gather everyone who has ever lived around him and will divide humanity into those who will spend eternity with him and those who will be lost forever.

What good is it to gain the whole world and yet forfeit your soul **on that day** when Jesus comes back?

**Play the What If game with me.**

Just imagine you get the whole world. You won’t but just imagine you could own everything you wanted.

And just imagine everything you owned brought you all the satisfaction you wanted.

On your dying day you are in bed surrounded by all your family who love you. Sons and daughters. Grandsons, grand daughters and great grand children. And you contemplate everything

Your life whizzes past in your mind and you smile. Life has been good. Your bucket list is complete. And there are no regrets.

Then you stop breathing and your head hits the pillow for the last time. This is when you wake up to the biggest nightmare of all. You realise that Jesus is the rightful king of the universe and you have rejected him. In fact, you realise that the translation of ‘I did it my way’ in heaven is ‘I committed treason against your loving authority.’ This means without a Saviour our soul is lost for eternity.

At this point there is no way of changing the outcome. Did you notice the finality in **verse 37**? “What can anyone give in exchange for their soul?” Nothing. Christ exchanged his life to save our souls. But the change to benefit for this beautiful sacrifice is in the here and now. Once we cross over it is too late.

**Our Barclaycard has no currency in heaven.** No prayers will help.  
Our destiny is set.

**The consequence of spiritual adultery is spiritual separation.**

**Why choose the way of personal denial and personal witness?**  
Because it is worth it in the end.

Please don't misunderstand me. Being a Christian is definitely much more joyful and much more satisfying than any other pursuit in life. However, in Mark chapter 8 Jesus doesn't focus on the present. He says, consider the future.

**Think not just of the next 50 years but the next 5000 years.** Let this motivate us to choose Jesus in the here and now.

When I was preparing this sermon I was struck by who Jesus is speaking to in these verses. Did you notice who Jesus gathers around him in **verse 34**? The **crowds** and his **disciples**

This means this is a message not just for those searching for truth but those who have already started following Jesus. In short, we **all** need to be reminded of what it truly means to follow Jesus.

**Where does this connect with us this morning?**

**Are you still searching?** Know what it really means to be a Christian. Say no to yourself and yes to Jesus. Recognise that public witness is part of personal relationship. It will all be worth it.

**Are you a follower of Jesus?** Let's be committed to a full denial of ourselves, not a partial one. And let's be more bothered by the praise and smiles of Jesus on the last day than by the praise and smiles of those around us.

Or if I can put it like this, let's not allow the threat of awkward conversations and personal mockery to stop us speaking about Jesus. In fact, let's realise this is the big fear we must overcome if we are to open our mouths for Jesus. The truth is, we will often be treated like fools by those around us. However, my brothers and sisters don't worry. It will all be worth it. I say this because eternity is real.

**Let's pray.**