**Whoever wants to be my disciple**

Mark 8:31-9:1 (Key verse: 8:34)

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

Last week passage ended with a bang. Peter had clearly confessed who Jesus was, after Jesus had asked who do you say I am? Peter said, you are the Masiah the Christ. We learn from other books of the bible, Jesus response, *“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.”* [Matthew 16:17] This means that Jesus is our Lord and savior king. He is the one person anyone could ever need for life. Jesus saved us from the power of sin and dearth through the cross. How then can we be his disciple? How can we follow Jesus because it is Jesus who can save us and point us to live a true life? In today’s passage, Jesus teaches us, what it means to follow him. It is not just about what is a Christian life. It is about how we should live our lives given to us. Every person has got only one life. There is also a saying, YOLO you only live once, which should actually be, YODO you only die once. Through this passage Jesus also says, our life is more precious than the whole world (36). How can we save this precious life? How can we live a full life? First, we must know and confess that Jesus is the Mesiah. And secondly, as Jesus teaches us today, we must deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus. Have we lost our lives for Jesus and his gospel? It is my prayer that God help us receive one word in our hearts today. Amen!

Just after Peter has confessed who Jesus was, the Mesiah, the Christ, the savior of the world. Jesus begins to tell them what must happen to him. 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, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that **he must be killed** and after three days rise again.” Jesus had to suffer many things, be rejected and be killed however after three days will rise again. Why did Jesus have to suffer and die in miserably? We learn that this was already prophesied by Isaiah, “5But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. 6We all like sheep have gone astray, each one has turned to his own way, and the LORD has laid upon Him the iniquity of us all.” Jesus suffered and was killed because of our sin. Though people take sinning lightly, sin involved serious punishment ultimately death. Sin makes our lives dirty and evil. It torments our conscience and souls. We cannot be satisfied and happy. Ultimately dearth is the punishment of sin. Because death entered this world because of sin. However, Jesus received all these penalties. He received the sufferings, death and judgement which was supposed to fall on us. Jesus did all this so that mankind may have hope or a chance in life through Him. Because Jesus is our savior and shepherd of our lives, Jesus endured all the sufferings for our sake. However, his life did not end up in dearth. He rose again from the dead after three days. The resurrection of Jesus shows that Jesus has conquered the punishment of sin and death. That whosoever places their faith in him can receive salvation by believing in what he has accomplished for you and me.

However, when Jesus taught his disciples about his sufferings as the Mesiah, they were shocked. This was indeed shocking because, Jesus was not saying these things as though it is a possibility. But that, they must happen. He said, **He must suffer, he must be rejected and he must be killed**. Peter could not comprehend it at all, we read in verse 2, that Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Jesus. It is usually ok If my Master’s student says to me, I do not agree with you on this, because I think so and so. But another thing altogether for my student to now rebuke me. Peter could not comprehend how can the Mesiah suffer that way, be rejected and killed. Then Jesus rebuked Peter, look at verse 33, “But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” Jesus rebuked Peter so harshly, even calling his dear disciple Satan. Why? It was because just like Satan, Peter did not think of the things of God, but only the things of men.

In what sense then did Peter think only of the things of men? Just like the Jewish leaders, they hoped that the Christ might come and liberate them from the roman rule and make them a super nation, which rules the world. Moreover, Peter because he was the top disciple, expected he would get the highest position in the new kingdom and exercise power. It was because of this ambition that he was following Jesus, enduring all hardships. And so when Jesus said that he must be killed, that he will die, Peter could not help but rebuke Jesus. He rebuked Jesus because he only thought of himself. He did not think about the things of God. The things of God were to have Jesus be crucified so he may atone for mankind sins and save them. By objecting to Jesus, Peter was hindering the things of God. He was acting like Satan who is also power hungry. This must have been frustrating for Jesus for though he had chosen them to preach the meaning of his upcoming death, they were only concerned about the things of men.

Let us look at verse 34, “Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” ‘Denying himself’ means that we should put God’s work and plan first, not our own works and thinking. For Peter, he had to deny his desire to expect Israel to be super power and to be raised to the highest position in the kingdom.

Not only Peter but also most people want to achieve their human desires or ambitions through Jesus. Even street vendors follow Jesus and prays to him with the expectation that he will become great businessman. Some people also want to reform the society through Jesus and some make demonstrations to clean our environment through Jesus. Some are promised job positions If they can but believe in Jesus. Others are told, in Jesus, they will never suffer but always be happy and live comfortable lives, the list goes on and on. However, when it comes to following Jesus, we should deny such thinking from our human desire.

Jesus also said, that we should take up our cross in order to follow him. If we follow Jesus, some hardships will occur without fail. For example, without Jesus in our lives, we only need to study, work or run a household, only focus is on this world. Whereas those who follow Jesus will have a concern on the things of God, additional dimension in their lives. They recognize that they are not only physical beings, but also a spiritual beings, who cannot only be concerned about physical things, but also spiritual things. They may devote themselves to the gospel work. Because their values and purpose are different from those of the world, there arises conflicts. For example, in our world we now bombarded with same sex marriages, our basic education department wanting to introduce gender neutral toilets at schools, abortion and so on. Whereas those who follow Jesus have different world view on what is marriage, that we are born either male or female. All these difficulties and decisions to live a life separate from that of this world, is the cross we carry as we follow Jesus.

Many believe in Jesus in order to live at ease, they are driven to follow Jesus in order to live a comfortable life or achieve their own human dreams or wants. Many because of their living conditions have become venerable to believe false teachings on what it means to follow Jesus. They receive promises such as, if you follow Jesus your disease will be gone soon. If you follow me, you will never die from this sickness. I sat in one church back home where the preacher taught that, if you believe in Jesus even though you do not have matric, God would grant you a position of someone who has a degree because you are a child of God. Everyone in the congregation shouted praises and hallelujahs. But when there is something comfortable, there is no truth.

Once we seek to live comfortable lives, our hearts and lives easily become corrupt and foolish. Because some want to make money comfortably, they deceive others because they are also deceived. Because some want to succeed easily, they do not make time to learn but rather try to flatter others. In my experience as lecturer at Wits I can say above 90% of students, will be glad to simply obtain or buy the Wits certificate than to do the three to four years to learn and be developed. Because of seeking a comfortable life many deceive themselves to think the Wits certificate has magical power to grant one a successful life. Seeking a comfortable and quick happiness, also results in many addicted to drugs, pornography and lately social media feeds. Likewise, those who live a life of faith easily distort God’s words and end up living a double life.

Jesus did not promise to give us a comfortable life. Jesus promised to give us the truth and true happiness. Jesus said, “if you would come after me, you must take up your cross.” It is my prayer that we may all deny ourselves and follow Jesus taking up our own crosses. However, let us look at, what makes us not to deny ourselves and take up our cross? I believe it is because, when we try to do so, all kinds of concerns come to our mind. If I deny my thinking or plan, what will happen to my true self? What if I end up suffering all my life? What If my life becomes all boring and I end up losing my life and die without even being happy? However, in verses 35-36, Jesus said, “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. 36What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”

Man’s life is so precious because it is only one. Man’s life is more precious than the whole world. Because Jesus even says in verse 37, “37Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?” So people are reluctant to lose their life. However, while we are eager not to lose our lives, it still begs the question, does the kind of lifestyle we are living make our lives more precious? Rather our worries and fears grow bigger and bigger. Our hearts become troubled and stressed. In the end we end up not achieving anything worthwhile, nor taste the joy of living or the worth of living. We end up dying in the end. How can this kind of life become precious? For indeed, whoever wats to save his life will lose it.

Then how can we save our life? How can we make our life more precious and live a meaningful, joyful life? Jesus said, “Whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.” In short, by losing our life, we can we save it and make it more precious. **The way to make our life more precious does not lie in keeping our life for a long time. It depends on how preciously we are using our life and to what we are devoting our life.** If we are engrossed in lustful thinking or waste our life sleeping, then we cannot say that kind of life is precious. If we use our precious life only for the purpose of living comfortably, then that kind of life is not precious at all.

Why is Jesus life precious? It is because he lost his life in order to save all mankind? Why is Mother Teresa’s life precious? It is because she not only denied herself and took care of forsaken, dying people but also took up her cross for such people, following Jesus. Why is the lives of our missionaries precious? It is because they denied themselves, took up the cross of Jesus to serve Africa Campus students. They lost their lives for Jesus sake and for the gospel. The way to save our life is not to spare or keep our life, but to use it for doing the most precious thing. Jesus taught us that the most precious thing is to lose our life for him and for his gospel. This is how we can deny ourselves, carry our crosses and follow Jesus.

In this passage I am reminded of what it truly means to be a follower of Jesus. What it means if I am to truly follow Jesus. Though am a leader in our ministry I realizing through passage that, I have put a lot of make-up in appearing as a follower of Jesus. Because of a number of religious activities I do. I still find myself seeking a comfortable life, relying on others and my profession for an identity and meaning. Whereas Jesus has done everything for me to be pure and righteous before God. I have my human ideas and plans on how I can become a professor. Those ideas and plans still leave me with a lazy mindset, still finding myself wasting time on a weekly bases instead of procrastinating a lot.

I am realizing that I want to be professor for my own sake and not for Jesus sake. It is also relatively comfortable to stand here before you and share the word of God with you. However not so comfortable to be on the streets of campus sharing the word of God with others. Or to even engage in sharing the gospel with work colleagues. In certain times I would even feel some shame to even share or talk about Jesus with certain colleagues. However, Jesus says “if anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.” Jesus even includes in in this adulterous and sinful generation to indicate to stress the point, how can anyone really be ashamed of him and his words, for it is He and his words that have saving power. Yet to be ashamed simply indicates how I am so concerned about saving my own life, concerned about the things of men and not the things of God. Jesus has made It clear, that of I want to be his disciple and follow him. I must deny myself, take up my cross and follow him. Just as for Jesus to be my savior and lord, he had to suffer, be rejected, face all kids of shame and die.

How can I claim to follow Jesus and yet not identify with Jesus. Jesus says to me, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” I pray that I may deny myself, take up my cross and follow Jesus. May I deny my human ideas and plans of how I can become a professor but carry my cross and follow Jesus. May I grow into being a professor shepherd not for my own sake, but for the glory of God and His redemptive work. Pray with me that I may deny myself, carry my cross and follow Jesus. Amen!

In conclusion, many believers may wonder, why is there no joy though I follow Jesus? Well the answer could be, we refuse to deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow Jesus. We are still seeking our own lives, we are still eager to save our own lives through many plans and ideas. Then, how can we live a precious life with true joy and reward? We must deny ourselves, take up our cross and lose our lives for Jesus and his gospel. We must find our identity and worth in Jesus rather than rely on things in this world for identify. Then we will truly find out what true life is. May we not be ashamed of Jesus and his words in this adulterous and sinful generation [38]. May the lord give us enough grace so His word may come into our hearts. Amen!