

Giving in Grace 3: Mark 8. 27–38

Good morning. This morning, we're going to look at what this well-known pivotal passage has to say to us, and how that message impacts our finances, as part of our Giving in Grace series.

So, let's do a short exegesis of the passage, let's 'get the meaning out':

The passage seems to fall into three main sections to me.

(vv27-30) What just happened? – They recognised Jesus as Messiah, the saviour, over and against the world's opinion. Whatever the world's opinion, he gives them this opportunity for a moment of clarity; He is the Messiah, the one who will save them! This is a pivotal moment in Mark's gospel.

(vv31-33) Now Jesus sets himself towards Jerusalem. He identifies obedience, suffering and sacrifice as key to his work as Messiah, or rather, in his words, Son of Man, shifting the emphasis slightly.

Peter doesn't like this, does he. He rebukes his Lord.

Think about that: how does one rebuke one's Lord?

This is partly why Jesus castigates Peter, who has forgotten his insight just verses before.

Peter is saying "Be Lord, Lord, but as I see it!" He has not, **yet**, fully accepted or surrendered to Jesus' vision, has he? That vision means, for him, suffering and death.

(34-38) Then it gets worse! Not only does HE have to suffer, but so must all who follow him! He now identifies obedience, sacrifice and suffering as key to following him! He really lays it on the line: THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS, AND THIS IS WHAT THE STAKES ARE! Let's hear those words again...

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

The cost of discipleship, of following Jesus, is a personal cross, the loss of your life. People carrying crosses aren't bearing a burden through life; they have lost their life, they are dead-men walking, on their way to execution!

Unsurprisingly now, for those of us used to the topsy-turvy reward scheme of the Kingdom, in this loss of life is liberty itself! **The reward is your very life, your soul!**

This is high stakes stuff, involving nothing less than the losing or gaining of life, and it defies the world's logic. To gain one's life, one must lose it.

How must this have sounded to the disciples? A warning, *caveat emptor*- buyer beware. Make sure you know what you're about to get into, right? A fair warning from a fair master. It's like the last chance get out I used to give people when I worked in canoeing, just before a big rapid. You can get out and walk round this, but if we keep going, you have to commit! There are rocks, and waves and rapids and weirs; you're going to get wet and you might get scared or even fall in, but these are the consequences of going this way.

How did it sound to those who first heard it, to Mark's readers in the 1st or early 2nd century? I think this must have been a comfort, for they were already being persecuted! Mark may well have been written into the Roman community of persecuted Christians in the 60s, when Peter and Paul died. To such an audience, Jesus' words that persecution for following him is reassurance that their master knew what was coming, he had walked the path before them and *they were on the right path!* 'Don't worry guys, however hard this is, this is supposed to happen!'

How does this costly gospel sound to us? It is a warning, but a familiar one, which we often even shrug off.

I don't know about you, but I don't feel very persecuted. I don't have an actual cross to pick up. I read this passage, I ponder it for a bit, and I tend to move on.

The question that cuts me, that pulls me up short, is "Who do you say I am?"

I stand here like Peter and confess that Jesus is Messiah, but do I obey unswervingly, even when I don't like what he says, even when I don't understand?

So often I feel like Peter. I'm so thankful for him in the gospels, he gives me hope. He keeps trying. He keeps making the same sort of mistakes I do, but he keeps growing, and loving Jesus.

We are often like Peter, we humans, we Christians, we people of Henleaze.

We get it, and we don't. We surrender, and we keep hold of no-go areas in our discipleship, we want Jesus to be Lord on our terms. "Be this kind of Lord, please."

Our own discipleship bears the hallmarks of both insight and resistance. Often looking back, and sometimes in the moment, we recognise milestone moments of spiritual maturity and growth. But such moments are experiences alongside our blind spots, known and often unknown, and our no-go areas for discipleship. Life is lived out in the tension between our desire for the things of God, our ambivalent desire for our human flourishing and our capacity for sinful self-serving. Such ambiguity is the canvas on which the discipleship challenge to faithful stewardship and grace filled generosity is painted.

(Giving in Grace website)

Who do we say he is? Is he the one who saves? Is he Lord? Or is he Lord on our terms?

Implications for giving

So, how does this link practically to our sermon series on finances, 'Giving in Grace?'

Let's be clear; I'm absolutely not saying you need to give more money to St Peters! I am saying we all need to involve God in the decision of how much we give, and that our giving should be to the extent that it costs us. One message of this passage, and one that is pretty consistent with overall message of the Bible, of the Church through the ages, is that Jesus is Lord! Lord of All! HE deserves be part of this decision, of this area of your life as much as he deserves to reign over every other aspect of your life, it just happens to be that we're looking at our finances.

God's call on our finances, our stewardship of that which he, after all, gives us, is generosity, costly generosity. Thankfully, in such cross-shaped, costly generosity, there is freedom, in that topsy-turvy system of the Kingdom.

*At the end of their book The Paradox of Generosity Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson write this: 'generosity is paradoxical. Those who give their resource away, receive back in turn. In offering our time, money, and energy in service of other's well-being, we enhance our own well-being as well ... By clinging to what we have, we lose out on higher goods we might gain. By holding on to what we possess, we diminish its long-term value to us.... In short, by failing to care well for others, we actually do not properly take care of ourselves'.
(Giving in Grace website)*

A sales pitch for the Parish Share.

Other people during this sermon series can sell you the vision for St Peters, what we need money for, our dreams of a youth-worker and so on. Others can do that; I would like to take the opportunity to say 'thank you.'

I am an ordinand, on a full time residential training programme at an excellent Bible college, just over the downs. I have faithfully and prayerfully investigated my calling, and representatives of both the Church as a whole and my sending Diocese in Yorkshire, believe I am fit to be prepared for a life in ministry, serving the Church in working out the mission of God, and this preparation costs. The church of England is paying for all this!

I say that, but of course, the Church doesn't have any money of its own, it has your money, and my money, the faithful tithes of Christians up and down the land. Christians like us, in churches like this, paying their parish share, part of which is paying for my housing and training (along with a considerable contribution from my wife who works very hard, I must say, while I'm doing the thanking!).

This Church of England, it's a wonderful thing. Its parishes seek to meet the spiritual needs of every individual in the country. Its churches seek to help people up and down the country find God and journey with him.

This church needs vicars. I believe it is going to grow, I have a dream that revival will come to this land again. How wonderful it would be for the Church to be easily able to afford to train and house all those it will need to do this work. Please believe that in giving to St Peters, in contributing to that parish share, you are funding something important. At least one of us ordinands will be at the meetings this week, if you want to hear about what the Church is getting for your money. We are very grateful that you have given us this opportunity, and I for one am trying to live up to that privilege and responsibility.

Action points

I'm just about done, but I don't want this to be just another sermon, for any of us. In order to truly learn, to grow, we need both understanding and action. Let me encourage you to think NOW, when are you going to deal with the practicalities of this, when are you going to act?

Stop now, take a moment. When can you sit down and have that conversation with your spouse, or with yourself? We have one more sermon in this series, and a little more time in small groups. We have those meetings with the PCC this week on Tues Weds and Thursday.

After all the talk, when will you sit down and look again at your finances, prayerfully? Will you ask God to speak to you about your giving? Will you assess it honestly, asking how generous, how costly it is? (It may even mean giving less, which is completely fine, if that is where God leads you!)

Will you consider moving to being a planned giver, using Direct Debit? I know I have found that to be a very simple way of honouring God, by periodically sitting down with Victoria and prayerfully deciding how much to give to whichever organisations we feel led to. It's also enormously useful for the church to know how much is coming in on a regular basis.

Let me close with this. I believe God is asking us all this morning...

- Is Jesus Lord of our finances?
- Have we let go of any no-go areas of discipleship?
- Is his costly discipleship being worked out in our generosity?

I hope so. I know I, for one, have some thinking and praying to do.