

How To Be Truly Happy

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November 4-5, 2006

Winning By Losing Series

Mark 8:27-38

There was a brilliant Christian man who lived in France back in the 1600's named Blaise Pascal. He was a mathematician, who invented the first adding machine in history. He was a physicist whose insight regarding the pressure put upon liquids set the foundation for modern hydraulics. He was an inventor and philosopher. In fact, some people would say that Pascal was among the greatest geniuses to live in the last 500 years. At the age of 31 Pascal had a remarkable vision in which it appeared that his whole room exploded in fire. It was through this vision that this French genius became a sold-out Christian.

Pascal immediately set out to write a great defense of the Christian faith which he never had the opportunity to complete because he died prematurely at the age of 39. But his papers were found following his death and compiled in a book that is titled in French, "Pensees," which simply means "thoughts." Here is one of the thoughts contained in this wonderful book:

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All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man even of those who hang themselves.

What Pascal is saying is that it is a given of human nature to seek your own happiness. And certainly I think this is something I think all of us can agree on that we all would like to be happy. I mean, is there anyone here who says, "Sign me up for being miserable. I would like to be desperately unhappy and permanently remain in that state."

The great tragedy is that even though all of us wish to be happy, we have so many wrong ways of finding happiness. One of the great myths of contemporary American culture is that if you are a woman being absolutely beautiful and desired and famous will make you happy. If I could only be beautiful...If I could only be really desired...If I was the person that they were photographing...If I looked like that woman in the magazine, then I would be happy.

And then you read statements by women who have been in that position and they are so profoundly sad. Marilyn Monroe said, "A sex symbol is just a thing. I hate being a thing." Raquel Welch said, "I am just a piece of meat." On another occasion she said, "Being a sex symbol was rather like being a convict." In an

interview she complained that sex symbols are “tragic figures who have a corner on the misery market.”

Winona Ryder said, “The one good thing to come out of everything that happened [referring to her arrest in 2001 for shoplifting] is that I realized I wasn’t at all happy. I wasn’t happy being so famous and being written about all the time. I am so much happier now that I am not making movies.”

Those of you who are old enough to remember Lynda Carter, back in the 70’s she was Wonder Woman. She had a poster of her in her Wonder Woman costume that sold 5 million copies. She was voted the most beautiful woman in the world. She said, “I think there was a short time where I believed the hype; not the “beautiful” things, but that I really believed I was important. But that didn’t last very long and I didn’t feel good. You become a caricature of yourself and there is nothing real below that. What all of this hype does is that it just makes you scared because you know that is not who you really are. There is that true self inside that wants to connect to people and all of the accolades and all of the praise tends to isolate you rather than connect you to others.”

Nearly 2000 years ago in Mark 8.36 we read,

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³⁶ What good is it for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?

Forget about beauty for a moment. Surely, wealth will make you happy. You know there has been study after study conducted regarding the relationship of wealth and happiness. Do you know what they discovered? Once people’s fundamental needs are taken care of, once people have an adequate amount of food and shelter and clothing and medical care, then increased wealth has almost no impact on people’s overall sense of happiness in life. Once you have your needs met, another \$10,000 or \$50,000 or \$10 billion dollars doesn’t make you measurably happier.

This quest for happiness, this natural law inside all of us that all of us really do want to be happy, is something that the Bible regularly appeals to. The Bible doesn’t say that you are wrong because you want to be happy. I love the way my favorite author, C.S. Lewis summarizes the Bible’s teaching. He writes:

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Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us. Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea, we are far too easily pleased.

The Bible never condemns this natural law inside of us to be happy. What it does condemn is the way we try to go about finding happiness. Let me quote just one more time from Pascal, that brilliant French mathematician and philosopher. He said,

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There once was in man a true happiness of which now what remains is only the mark and empty trace, which in vain he tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present. But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself.

In other words, you and I all have this passion to be truly happy. We try to satisfy that passion for happiness through something in creation – being famous, being beautiful, being wealthy, finding the love of our lives, through our kids, through our homes. How do we deal with this ache inside of us for happiness?

Buddhism teaches that you need to kill that ache. If the thing that makes you miserable is that you desire to be happy, then you have to kill that desire, suppress it, and quench it. The Bible teaches the exact opposite. The Bible teaches that you have this passion for happiness in you, but the way to satisfy your happiness is to give up lesser pleasures so that you can have the greatest pleasure of all, gorging yourself on God. So we read Psalm 37.4

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Ps 37:4 Take delight in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.

And Psalm 34.8

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Ps 34:8 Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed are those who take refuge in him

And Psalm 63.1-5

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Ps 63:1 a You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water. ² I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. ³ Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. ⁴ I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. ⁵ I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you.

I've been doing a series titled "Winning By Losing." As we learn to let go of our pursuit of lesser things and we learn to give up our self will, we find that far from losing, we win. We win happiness and we win God. I've called today's talk, "How To Be Truly Happy." Let's pray.

SLIDE – Mark 8.27-30

²⁷ Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"

²⁸ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

²⁹ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

³⁰ Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

Now almost all commentators on the Gospel of Mark would say that this passage is the hinge of the gospel. For eight chapters the tension in the gospel has been building and building and building regarding who Christ is. We see Christ healing people in the early chapters of Mark. We see Christ stilling the storm and establishing his authority over nature in the 4th chapter. We see him raising a girl from the dead in the 5th chapter. And then we see controversy break out regarding his identity in the 6th and 7th chapters.

Finally, we get to the 8th chapter and right before this incident there is a story of a man who was blind that Jesus progressively heals. He prays for him once; the man's sight is still blurry. He prays for him again and the man's sight is fully restored. That story is a true story, but it is also a parable. It is meant to communicate to us that our vision regarding who Jesus is needs to be progressively restored and healed. As an initial matter, who Jesus is could be a very blurry thing to us. And it is only through repeated encounters with Christ that our vision gets cleared up and we say, "Ah, this is who he is."

So we read this in verse 27,

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Mk 8:27 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"

Now, as I've said, this passage is the hinge of the gospel. Up until this moment, the movement is up, up, up. In fact, Caesarea Philippi is at the very northern point of ancient Israel by a mountain called Mt. Hermon. From this incident on, the gospel takes a very different trajectory and Jesus moves south step by step towards Jerusalem and his rejection and his suffering and his crucifixion. Up, up, up and down, down, down. This is the watershed passage.

Now, it is interesting that we discover who Jesus is at this place called Caesarea Philippi because Caesarea Philippi was in the ancient times a center of pagan

worship. Archeologists have discovered that Caesarea Philippi was a center of the Canaanite worship of the god Baal. Baal was one of the Canaanite fertility gods. Later on when the Greeks and Romans came in, Caesarea Philippi became the center of the worship of the Greek god Pan.

Now, the question regarding who Jesus is was posed by Christ in the precise place where there was a multiplication of the gods – the Canaanite gods, the Greek gods. And in this crowded marketplace of gods, and in this place which then was devoted to the worship of the Roman Empire, Jesus asked the question: Who do people say that I am?

You know, many people struggle with the Christian claim that faith in Jesus is the only way to God and to ultimate happiness. They say that this is incredibly narrow and exclusivistic. And maybe you feel that way. It has become common to hear people say, “No one should insist that their view of God is better than all of the rest.”

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No view of God is better than the rest.

Every religion is equally valid. Clearly there are some of you who feel that way today – that every religion is equally valid. Or maybe put more precisely, you feel like it is incredibly arrogant for anyone to claim that their religion offers a superior revelation of God to any other religion.

Sometimes this opposition to the claimed superiority of one faith over another, sometimes this almost internal revulsion at what sounds like a narrow and exclusivistic claim really has at its source the very good motivation. We look around the world and so often it seems that people who say their religion is superior to other religions are threats to international peace. Some of the folks who believe that their religion is superior to others are intolerant and arrogant and violent. So, in a desire to be tolerant and inclusive, it has become common place to say, “You Christians can’t say that Jesus is the only way to God and to ultimate happiness. He is one of many paths.”

Well, let me respond to this idea that every religion is equally valid. That view can only be true if one of two things were true. 1) There is no God and, 2) that if there is a God, he, she or it doesn’t care what you believe about him. You could believe that God is a tree or a rock or revealed himself as an imperfect force in Eastern religion, or a personal God in Judaism, or as Allah through Mohammed, or as a Trinity through Jesus. It really doesn’t matter. These are your two logical alternatives if you say all religions are equally valid: 1) There is no God; or, 2) If there is a God, it doesn’t matter to God what you believe.

But if you put forward either of those views, you are assuming by faith that the particular view of God that you are pushing is better than the rest. You are

arguing for the very thing that you say you are opposed to. You are saying that your view of God or no God is better than everyone else's. At best, you are being inconsistent; at worst, you are being hypocritical since you are doing the very thing you accuse Christians of doing.

Let me suggest a different way of approaching this. Rather than starting with the conclusion that all religions are equally valid, it is intellectually way more honest to say, "I don't know if Christianity is truer than other religions. What is your basis for making a claim about Jesus that he uniquely reveals God to us?"

You know, there are many lines of proof regarding Jesus revealing God to us.

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Jesus reveals God to us.

Let me suggest a few of the lines of proof. Jesus, unlike virtually every other religious figure in history, claimed to be able to forgive people's sins. Now, this is an incredible claim. And it is unbelievably off-putting if it is not true. I mean if someone steals your wallet and I discover the perpetrator and I say to him, "That's okay, I forgive you," you might say, "Who are you to forgive this person? What right do you have to forgive?"

And yet, over and over again in the gospels, we see Jesus forgiving people for sins they've committed against others and for sins they've committed against God. For example, we read in Mark 2.5-7 these words:

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⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

⁶ Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves,⁷ "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

We see Jesus not only forgiving people, but renaming people. Jesus changed Simon's name to Peter. For a Jew, changing names was something only God could do for your name wasn't just an arbitrary label, your name was your real identity which was given to you by God alone. In the Old Testament only God changed someone's name. Abram became Abraham. Sarai became Sarah. Jacob became Israel. An orthodox Jew who got his name legally changed was excommunicated from the Jewish community. And yet Jesus went around changing people's names, something that only God could do for a Jewish person.

And then Jesus kept pointing to himself. Over and over in the gospels, Jesus says, "Come to me." The Buddha says, "Do not come to me, and do not look to me, look to my Dharma (which means doctrine)." Buddha said, "Be lamps unto

yourselves.” But Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” Every other religious leader in world history, in other words, pointed away from themselves to God. But Jesus constantly called people to look to him and come to him. Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, performed no miracles and did not rise from the dead. Jesus offered as many miracles and his resurrection as evidence for his divinity.

Simply put, a person wins by discovering God revealing himself through Jesus when they lose their insistence that all rights and are equally valid.

Well, we read this response in verses 28-29,

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Mk 8:28 They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

29 “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

You know, true happiness is not found through objective reporting of the opinions of other people. Because Ohio is ground zero regarding the nation’s politics, I was interviewed the New York Times, the BBC, a German television station, the Chicago Tribune, and NPR this week. All the interviews had to do with the interaction of faith and politics. But journalists are trained to remain personally uninvolved regarding the story they are reporting on.

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Keeping Christ At Arms Length

The disciples had more interaction with the crowds than Jesus did and so they were able to report on what the crowds were saying. There are so many folks, when they report on Christ, who speak on what other people are saying about Christ. “Well, you know, I remember my Catholic priest used to say...” “The church that I go to teaches...” “I’ve so many wonderful memories of my grandma and she used to say...” “Such and such theologian talked about the fact that Jesus was...”

I love the teaching method of Jesus because he always hits us right between the eyes. Jesus will simply not allow issues to float three feet above your head. Throughout the gospels, Jesus looks people in the eye and says, “What about you? Where are you at? Are you personally involved in this truth?”

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Making Christ Personal

It is wonderful that you’ve had this nice Bible study about prayer and you shared quotations from your favorite authors or about George Mueller and his orphanage and how he prayed back in the 19th century. But what about you? Do you pray?

Let me make this even more personal. It is easy to have a discussion about sex and morality and the current breakdown of morality and how the media exploits women. But Jesus doesn't leave us there. He says, "What about you? How sexually broken are you? Are you following me in the area of your sexuality? What do you do and does it conform to my will?"

I've discovered over the past 30 years that many people become extremely uncomfortable when a religious discussion becomes personal. What do you believe? Who do you think Jesus is? We want to remain like religious journalists keeping this whole thing at arm's length, maybe telling a few jokes, avoiding the issue as long as we can.

Some of the discomfort comes from the awkwardness of admitting in this very important area of life, you really don't have a well-formed opinion regarding who God is and how you might relate to God. You are pretty clueless.

There is a powerful new book out titled *The Language of God* by Francis Collins. Francis Collins was the head of the human genome project. The human genome contains the entire hereditary code of human beings. When you map out the human genome, it is 3 billion letters long. As Francis Collins writes in his book, faith was not an important part of his childhood. He was vaguely aware of the concept of God. He said, "I've never really personally considered the arguments for or against Christ."

Now, he was working on his doctorate in physical chemistry at Yale University. He decided that his real interest was in biology and so two years into his Ph.D. program, he decided to go to medical school. Here is this brilliant guy studying with the top scientists in the world at Yale University, and then he transfers to medical school at the University of North Carolina.

One day as a medical student, he is making rounds and sits down beside the bed of an old woman who was suffering from a severe case of untreatable angina. And this old woman talks about God and asks this young medical student a question: Well, what do you believe?

Francis Collins said he felt his face flush as she began to share her strong Christian beliefs with him. And Francis Collins stammered out the words, "I'm not sure what I believe." In that moment of interacting with a simple older woman from North Carolina, Francis Collins realized that he had never really seriously considered the evidence for or against belief in Christ. And over the next few days he had this haunting series of thoughts. He said to himself, "Didn't I consider myself to be a scientist? Does a scientist draw conclusions without considering the data? Could there be a more important question in all of human existence than is there a God? Am I answerable to some one other than myself?"

And so Francis Collins, the scientist, the man who was going to go on to head up the project that mapped all of human DNA began to doggedly sift through the evidence regarding the existence of God and who Jesus is. And friend, if you find yourself at that place today, where you are saying, “I have been keeping this whole business of Jesus at arm’s length, pushing it away from my personal involvement. But to be truly intellectually honest, I need to look into this,” let me suggest a few books for you to read. 1) One of my very favorite Christian books is *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis. It is a great overview regarding the Christian faith. 2) *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel, a former legal affairs correspondent for the Chicago Tribune. Lee Strobel is a graduate of the Yale Law School. *The Case for Christ* and *Mere Christianity* – we’ve got both in our bookstore.

But you know it is unsettling to admit that even though you are a very bright person and you may have a bachelor’s degree or a graduate degree, or you are fantastic in your particular line of work – it is embarrassing to admit that on the really big questions of life, you are not very well thought out. It is unsettling to admit that you just don’t know what the ultimate purpose of life is, or how a person can find real peace, or how you discover true happiness, or how to build a relationship with God that is going to see you through hard times.

And so we read Peter’s answer in verse 29,

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Mk 8:29 “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

Peter says essentially to Jesus, “Jesus, you aren’t just “the great” like Alexander the Great, or Peter the Great. You are the only. You are not humanity’s greatest rocket booster shot up in the air. You are a meteor, God coming down to us.” And Peter says, “I believe that. I believe that about you. You are God coming down to me.”

Friend, I will tell you true happiness is not found until faith in Christ becomes very personal for you where you say, “Today, I am laying hold of this. God has come and God is coming for me.”

But what does personal faith in Christ promise for us? Verses 31-32,

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Mk 8:31 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. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

Jesus immediately challenges Peter's understanding of what it means that Jesus is the Messiah. Why did Peter take Jesus aside and rebuke him? What was Peter's objection? Why does Peter protest when Jesus said that he's going to suffer many things and be rejected by chief priests and teachers of the law and that he must be killed?

I think Peter is voicing the objection that every human being has when they don't understand what faith in Christ promises. It is really a very simple objection. Peter is saying what we all say. "Well, if Christianity is true, and Jesus is who he said he is, and I'm in relationship with Jesus, then my life should be going better than it is." If you really are the Christ, if you really are the one we're pinning our hopes and dreams on, if you are the anointed one, the fulfillment of all the promises made to the prophets, then shouldn't we be winning and not be losing?

Everyone protests like Peter. We say to ourselves that faith in Christ is the path to prosperity, not suffering.

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Faith in Christ: The Path to Prosperity

If you really are the Christ and I'm in relationship with you, then you should be healing my wife's cancer, not letting her die. If you really are the Christ, then empty the hospitals. If you really are the Christ, as I've confessed it, and the power of all of God is resident in you, then why does my child still have this disease? If you are the hand of God reaching from the other side, if you are the meteor come down from God into this world, then how can you remain silent in the face of my old age or failing body, or my depression, or my failing situation? Surely, faith in Christ must be the path to prosperity.

Have you never said this? Have you never felt this? Jesus, I believe that you are true and I've personally laid hold of you. Why don't you come down and sweep away the evil that is present in the Darfur? How can you allow children to be thrown on bonfires? How can you allow the ongoing suffering in Iraq, with hundreds of thousands of Iraqis dead, more Americans killed now in Iraq than were killed on 9/11? Jesus why don't you end the growing economic gap between the ultra wealthy in America and the poorest of the poor around the world?

Let me read to you a statement made by the great Christian writer, John Piper. John Piper writes this:

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Christ did not die to make this life easy for us or prosperous. He died to remove every obstacle to our everlasting joy in making much of him. And he calls us to follow him in his sufferings because this life of joyful suffering for Jesus' sake

shows that he is more valuable than all the earthly rewards that the world lives for.

Here is the key part:

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If you follow Jesus only because he makes life easy now, it will look to the world as though you really love what they love, and Jesus just happens to provide it for you. But if you suffer with Jesus in the pathway of love because he is your supreme treasure, then it will be apparent to the world that your heart is set on a different fortune than theirs.

Faith in Christ is the pathway to everlasting joy.

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Faith In Christ: The Pathway To Everlasting Joy

Faith in Christ is not the path necessarily that makes life easy now, or comfortable now. Let me bring this down to earth.

Friends, most people in the world would like to have a better job than the one they have. Most people would like to have more money. Most people would like to have a nicer home. Most folks want an end to their loneliness. We want health. We want easy strong relationships. But if what you're really after is a better job, or more money, or a boyfriend or girlfriend, and you follow Jesus because you think he is going to give that to you, then how are you different than the rest of the world? What distinguishes you from the mass of humanity that is going after these things through other means?

Following Jesus because he will make your life easier is not the path to happiness. You will find yourself disappointed and angry with God because he hasn't delivered. Following Jesus because of who he is, because he is Lord and his is good and he is worth following, following Jesus because in him and only in him do you find everlasting joy is the only way that you will ever truly be happy.

Well, what does it mean to follow Christ? Verse 33,

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Mk 8:33 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."

The disciple's call is to follow after Jesus, not to dictate to Jesus or to lead Jesus, or to correct Jesus regarding how Jesus ought to be acting. The disciple's call is to follow Jesus, to get behind Jesus and to walk in his steps. What a dreadful thing, Jesus says to Peter in verse 33 when he says,

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Mk 8:33 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.”

What a dreadful place to find ourselves in that even though we claim to be followers of Jesus, people who have placed their faith in Jesus, our attitudes, our words could actually be energized not by God, but by Satan. You say, “When would I ever find myself in a place where Satan would be using me?”

Well, one instance could be whenever we are trying to dissuade someone from the path of obedience to Jesus. You are a single person, a single man, a single woman and you decide that you are going to sexually seduce a single woman; you are a single woman and you decide that you are going to sexually seduce a single man – and so through words and persuasion and actions you are moving that person away from a path of obedience to Christ. You are now a tool of Satan. Someone is radically obeying Christ, maybe they feel called to the mission field, maybe they feel called to give an unusual amount of money to the kingdom of God. And even though you might suspect that God is motivating them in this response, you jump in the way of their obedience. You try to dissuade them from missions or dissuade them from giving extravagantly. You become a tool of Satan.

And Jesus goes on to say in verse 33,

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Mk 8:33 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.”

What Jesus is saying is that you’ve got the wrong approach to life. You think you are going to find real happiness going in the direction you are going, but you never will.

What does it mean to follow after Christ? Many years ago Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a book called *The Cost of Discipleship*. In it he distinguished between cheap grace and costly grace.

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Cheap grace verse costly grace

He said,

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Cheap grace means grace as bargain-basement goods, cut-rate forgiveness, cut-rate comfort, cut-rate sacrament; grace as the church's inexhaustible pantry, from which it is doled out by careless hands without hesitation or limit. It is grace without a price, without cost...

Cheap grace means grace is a doctrine, as a principle, as a system. It means forgiveness of sins as a general truth; it means God's love as a merely Christian idea of love. A church that teaches this doctrine of grace thereby confers such grace on itself. Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord's Supper without confession of sins; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the Living, Incarnate Jesus Christ.

What are these human interests? These concerns of human beings? The human interests that Jesus was condemning? The things about which he said, "this will never lead you to happiness?" Certainly included among the way that people think is cheap grace – the notion that I can find the grace of God without repentance. I can find the forgiveness of my sins without any change whatsoever. I can take communion every week, but never really confess. You will never be truly happy with cheap grace because you will never really feel forgiven.

Let me ask you a personal question, friend. Surely, like me, you can look back on your life and say, "There are so many times where I conveyed cheap grace on myself – grace without repentance, grace without change, grace as a doctrine, as a principle, as a truth, but not as a life-transforming power."

But cheap grace will never move you or me towards true happiness. Only real grace, the grace of God, a Word from the Lord when you truly have turned your life around – only that grace from God that humbles our hearts and runs us through – only grace that cost Christ his life and costs us our sins really placed at the cross will make us truly happy.

Well, what does Jesus demand of us then so that we might experience true happiness? Verse 34,

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Mk 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.

What does it mean to deny yourself?

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The Demand of Self-Denial

John Stott, who is one of the great Bible expositors of the 21st century said,

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To deny ourselves is to behave towards ourselves as Peter did toward Jesus when he denied him three times. The verb is the same. Peter disowned Christ, repudiated him, turned his back on him. Self-denial is not denying to ourselves luxuries such as chocolates, cakes, cigarettes, and cocktails (though it may include this); it is actually denying or disowning ourselves. ...To deny oneself...is to turn away from the idolatry of self-centeredness.

Now, self-denial is not denying what we are by way of creation. You will never find true happiness by denying what God made you to be. We don't deny our minds, in order to become more spiritual. You don't deny your rationality, your ability to reason. You don't deny your sexuality as a man or woman. You are not asked to deny your family life, or your love of beauty, or your creativity, or your stewardship of the earth, or your hunger for love and community, or your created urge to fall down and worship God who is majestic. All of that is to be affirmed. You affirm and bless and thank God for who you are by way of creation.

What is it then that we deny in order to find true happiness? We deny, first of all, what we are by way of the fall. We deny our irrationality, all the things that make us crazy and wreck our lives, our moral perversity, our lack of sexual self-control, our selfishness which spoils our family life, our fascination not with beauty, but with the ugly – our use of violence, our pollution of the earth, our isolation and rejection of community, our refusal to fall down and worship God in all of his majesty. We deny everything that is associate with our fallen self.

But there is another aspect to self-denial that we must not overlook. Self-denial for the Christian also includes denying what is not sin, but is inconsistent with the call of God on your life. You know there are many things for the Christian that are not sin, but are inconsistent with God's special calling on your life? For example, self-denial might mean that you have to give up certain relationships that are not sinful. Some of you may be called to world missions. You are single and you are dating someone who is a follower of Jesus, but who has no interest in world missions whatsoever. Self-denial might mean that God is calling you to separate yourself from this relationship. Certainly, a call to missions includes the discipline of self-denial regarding other relationships – with extended family, having your kids grow up around Grandma and Grandpa, it may mean leaving aging parents behind.

Self-denial might include giving up your career for the sake of Christ. Your career is not sinful. But God has a special calling on you and as a result of that, you might be required to turn your back on your career. Certainly some of the

disciples were called to turn their back on their businesses, their jobs. Self-denial – denying what we are by way of the fall, denying what is inconsistent with our call is for the sake of ultimate happiness. Follow me, Jesus said to some fishermen, and I will make you fishers of men.

But it is not just self-denial that Jesus demands of every follower of his, if they are going to find true happiness. Jesus also requires us to take up our cross.

SLIDE

Mk 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.”

SLIDE

The Demand Of Cross Bearing

What does it mean to take up your cross? Let me tell you what it doesn't mean. Your cross is not the problems and difficulties that you encounter in life. It is not just failing eyesight, or your bad back. I once heard Rose Kennedy, the mother of John and Bobby Kennedy, refer to her husband's infidelity as “the cross she had to bear.”

You say, “Well, my boss is my cross.” Certainly, God can use all of your pains and all of your difficulties and he promises to weave it all together for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose. But that is not what Jesus was referring to when he said “pick up your cross.”

What is the cross? Back in Jesus' day, crucifixion was reserved for hardened criminals, rebellious slaves, and rebels against the Roman state. Bible historians said that crucifixion of slaves was designed to prevent rebellion and to maintain the slaves in submission to Roman rule. All the literature on crucifixion stresses this point. Crucifixion was designed to establish the sovereignty of the Roman state, to demonstrate the Roman state's rule in power, and to mark off the crucified as rebellious. It was all designed to force submission to the power of Rome.

What does it mean for you and me to pick up our crosses? It means we stop rebelling against the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, that we stop being hostile to God in some area of our life, that we actively submit ourselves to God allowing his sovereignty and his will to be done in our lives. Picking up our cross means in whatever area God is putting his finger on your life in, saying, “This needs to stop,” you stop. You submit yourself to the living God. You say, “I give up. I surrender. You win, God.”

And you know what happens when you bring yourself to that place where you say, “I give up. You win, God.” The Lord turns to us and says, “You win. You've

just won the greatest prize that any human being can win. You have won true happiness.” What your soul has always been after because in that act of submission, you get God. And there is no treasure, there is no gift you could give yourself, there is no pleasure you could have that is greater than having God in your life. Let’s pray.

How To Be Truly Happy

Rich Nathan
November 4-5, 2006
Winning By Losing Series
Mark 8:27-38

I. What Do We All Desire? (Ps. 63.1-5)

II. Who Is Jesus Christ? (Mark 8.27)

- A. No View Of God Is Better Than The Rest
- B. Jesus Reveals God To Us

III. How Do We Relate To Christ? (Mark 8.28, 29)

- A. Keeping Christ At Arms Length
- B. Making Christ Personal

IV What Does Faith In Christ Promise? (Mark 8.31,32)

- A. Faith In Christ: The Path To Prosperity
- B. Faith In Christ: The Path To Everlasting Joy

V. What Does It Mean To Follow Christ? (Mark 8.33)

- A. Cheap Grace verse Costly Grace
- B. Christ On Our Side verse Us On Christ's Side

VI. What Does Christ Demand Of Us? (Mark 8.34-38)

- A. The Demand Of Self-Denial
- B. The Demand Of Cross Bearing