

Series – ALL IN

#1 Take Up Your Cross

Luke 9:23-25; Mark 8:34-37; Romans 12:1, Galatians 2,5, & 6

Introduction: As I began my Jesus-Centered Bible-reading plan for this year, I've been reading through the entire gospel of MARK this month.

Among the four Gospels, Mark is the most concise account of "*the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God*" (1:1).

The author, John Mark grew up in Jerusalem and was among the first-generation Christians (Ac 12:12). He had the unique opportunity of being associated with three NT apostles: Paul, Barnabas, and Peter. According to second-century church fathers, Mark derived the content of his Gospel from his association Peter, wrote it in Rome and designed it for Roman believers.

It is distinctively a Gospel for the Romans, and it begins abruptly and proceeds rapidly from one episode to another. This is a Gospel of action, emphasizing what Jesus did rather than what He said.

Mark presents Jesus as the Son of God and the suffering servant Messiah. The first half of the book focuses primarily on Jesus' mighty miracles and His authority over sickness and demons as signs that God's kingdom is at hand.

As chapter 8 begins, Jesus feeds a crowd of 4,000 people and heals a blind man from Bethsaida. At this point, Jesus still had thousands of enthusiastic fans that followed him everywhere he went—from town to town. Jesus loved them all. He showed them compassion and kindness. But every so often Jesus would say or do something that **separated true followers from the free-lunch fans.**

Peter makes his famous confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. But then makes the mistake of chastising Jesus for predicting His death. That brings us to the last paragraph of Mark 8, beginning with 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.***"

35For 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? 37Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? 38If 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." (Mark 8:34-37 NIV)

Let's PRAY

Today I'm beginning a series of messages that addresses our Vision Theme for this year – **ALL IN**. (Show mugs, water bottle, book)

If you have ever heard the term "bet the ranch" that came from what would happen sometimes in the Wild West. Gamblers would come in and bet hand after hand and if they really felt like they had a shot at the big pot they would literally put the deed to the ranch on the table and bet the ranch that they had a winning hand. Back in the day you could literally take a piece of paper, sign your own handmade promissory note and bet everything that you had on that particular hand. Today it is known as "**going all in.**"

For those of you who like challenges, you are going to love this series. Think about the most nervous moment of your entire life. Maybe it was a time you had to speak in front of a group of people. Or perhaps it was right before a big test or a job interview. Or waiting to check the locker room door to see if you made the team. Maybe you get nervous before flying on a plane. For most of us however, our most nervous moment was when we were about to get married...making a covenant before God that would be until death do us part.

STORY: There was a man that was getting married who was standing before the pastor taking his vows and the pastor said, "Will you take this woman for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness or in health?" He thought it was multiple choice, and he said, "**I'll take better, richer and health.**" As you know, that is not the way it works in marriage. In marriage it is "all in" when it is good, when it is bad, when you are happy, or when you are not. It is 'til death do you part. Jesus demands no less.

Too many churches are looking for decisions. Jesus is looking for disciples.

One Bible scholar put it this way: "It is impossible to claim to be a follower of

Jesus without being a disciple, or to be a participant in some great work without pulling your weight. Someone was once talking to a college professor about a younger man and he said, "So and so tells me that he was one of your students." The teacher said, 'He may have attended my classes, but he was not one of my students.' (KF?)

It is one of the supreme problems of THE CHURCH that there are so many **fans** of Jesus and so few **followers**. Jesus is not looking for "weekend warriors" who come once a month to a National Guard type meeting. He is looking for full-time 'spiritual warriors'.

When Jesus said this, the cross was seen as a terrifying object of torture, suffering, and execution. If you were carrying a cross, you were on your way to being crucified. When Jesus makes this statement, the disciples were shocked.

"Jesus, is this really what you want from us?" These men had walked away from their work, some left behind families to follow Jesus and now He tells them, get ready to carry your cross.

Now some say...I have a terrible disease, care for handicapped child, elderly parent, poverty...that's my cross to bear. That's not what this means.

The disciples have seen the miracles Jesus has done. How he has healed the sick, lepers, paralyzed, blind and deaf, raised people from the dead. Jesus has authority over wind and waves and calmed the stormy seas. He has driven demons out of people. He had just fed a multitude with a small lunch. And now He tells them, ***"The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."*** No wonder Peter told Jesus he didn't like that plan.

The truth is, we have an uneasy relationship with the Cross because Jesus doesn't just talk about His cross, He talks about our cross.

With these verses, Jesus wanted to separate the fence-sitters from the followers. The question is: where are you?

Jesus gives us three indicators of an ALL IN Christ-follower.

Keep in mind that when God sent Jesus Christ to this world, He went "ALL IN."

When Jesus went to the cross to die for our sins, He went "ALL IN." As a result, Jesus is looking for us to be "ALL IN."

Here is what Jesus says ALL IN looks like.

I. Deny Yourself

Every time I read the first two words that Jesus said it never fails to blow my mind. Notice the first word, "***Whoever wants to be my disciple...***"

I would have thought Jesus would have said, "Since everyone would come after me." I would think that if there is one person everybody would want to follow it would be Jesus.

I find it incredible that not everyone then or now wants to follow Christ. Jesus is definitely "pro-choice." He only wants people to follow Him who want to follow Him. He will not force you to follow Him. He will not coerce you to follow Him. He will bless you if you follow Him, but He won't make you follow Him. You've got to decide on your own that you want to follow Him.

That also tells me that I have the right to stand up anytime, anywhere, and say to anybody, "**If you want to follow Christ you can.**" He will accept anybody, anytime, anyplace under any circumstances that wants to follow Him.

There is no such thing as a person who wants to be a follower of Jesus but can't. But there are plenty of people who could become followers but won't.

Jesus gives us the answer as to why many people don't want to become a follower, because to do so, He goes on to say, '***Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves...***' (Vs. 23)

It is easy to deny things. It is easy to deny pleasures. It is easy to deny other people, but it goes against our very nature to deny ourselves. **Just so you know, denying self is not the same as self-denial.**

Jesus isn't talking about self-denial the way people talk about giving up chocolate or giving up a night of fun so they can study for an exam. This word deny is used in

only two contexts in the Gospels. Here and when Peter denied Jesus, saying: "I don't know this man you're talking about." That's a denial.

Denying myself is saying to the guy in the mirror, "I know you want to be treated well, but we're going to put on an apron and serve. I know you think we should go first, but we will go last."

Denying self is when we cash it all in...surrender all that we have, all that we are, all that we could get, and all that we can ever become to follow Jesus.

Jesus challenges us to deny ourselves, to realize it's not about me. It's not about you. It's all about him! In the opening line of his best-selling book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, Rick Warren writes, **"It's not about you."** He continues, **"The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God."**

If we want to follow Jesus, we need to deny ourselves. MercyMe illustrates this idea quite comically in their song **So Long Self**. The song paints a picture of a man breaking up with himself.

Well, if I come across a little bit distant, it's just because I am

Things just seem to feel a little bit different, You understand.

**Believe it or not but life is apparently not About me anyways.
But I have met the One who really is worthy, So let me say**

So long, self. Well, it's been fun, but I have found somebody else.

So long, self. There's just no room for two so you are gonna have to move.

**So long, self. Don't take this wrong but you are wrong for me,
farewell.**

Oh well, goodbye, don't cry. So long, self.

This goes against the norm of everything we are taught, everything we see and everything we hear in our modern materialistic, me-first culture. Rather than deny ourselves, we are taught to satisfy ourselves.

I want to tell you about the person at this church that gives me the most problem. This church member is my biggest headache. Now, I really hate to call his name out loud, because I really like this guy. And yes, he's here.

He has good intentions, and I love being around him and I think you like him too. In fact, I can never get away from this guy, because the church member that gives me the most trouble is ME. I must constantly remind myself to get out of the way so Jesus can have His way.

Jesus said, "If you are going to follow Me, step one is deny yourself." You must put Jesus *before* you, *above* you, *ahead* of you and *instead* of you.

This is hard enough, but then Jesus raises it up another level...

II. Die to Yourself

'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily... ' (Luke 9:23, NIV)

That doesn't translate very well to us today. You must remember that the cross was a symbol of death. Today, Jesus would have said, "Take up the electric chair" or "Take up the gas chamber." or "Take up the firing squad."

The cross. They are everywhere. Perched on top of churches. Carved into graveyard headstones. Engraved in a ring or suspended on a chain.

But Jesus isn't talking about something you wear, carry in your pocket, or stick on the bumper of your car. In Jesus' day, the only reason a person carried a cross is so that they could die on it.

Peter Hiett preached a provocative message entitled ***"Marriage: A Sneaky Way to Get a Person Crucified."*** What in the world does marriage have to do with crucifixion? When you think about it, you don't sign up for marriage because

you're thrilled about the prospect of learning to deny yourself or losing your old way of life; you don't go into it thinking, "Oh good, this is going to be really hard. Thank goodness I'll finally get to have my character defects nailed and my selfishness flogged.

When you listen to the way of Jesus, it seems crazy. Turn the other cheek? Pray for those who persecute me? Don't even look at others lustfully? Visit those in prison? Give your hard-earned money to those in need? It's overly demanding. It's unrealistic. It's a hard way to live.

This is what it means to **"take up your cross."** That's just what Jesus and some of his followers did. The apostle Peter reportedly was crucified upside down, for his faith in Jesus, and most all the disciples were martyred for Christ.

For us it means to put yourself, your ego, your desires, your wants, your ambitions in a casket. Close the top and you bury it. If you are going to follow Jesus, you've got to have your own personal Golgotha.

STORY: A Century ago, a band of brave souls became known as one-way missionaries. They purchased single tickets to the mission field without the return half. And instead of suitcases, they packed their few earthly belongings into coffins. As they sailed out of port, they waved good-bye to everyone they loved and everything they knew. They knew they'd never return home.

A. W. Milne was one of those missionaries. He set sail for the New Hebrides in the South Pacific, knowing full well that the headhunters who lived there had martyred every missionary before him. Milne did not fear for his life, because he had already died to himself. His coffin was packed. For thirty-five years, he lived among that tribe and loved them. When he died, tribe members buried him in the middle of their village and inscribed this epitaph on his tombstone:

**When he came there was no light.
When he left there was no darkness.**

When did we get the idea that God wants to send us to safe places to do easy things? That faithfulness is holding the fort. That playing it safe is safe. That there is any greater privilege than sacrifice? That radical is anything but normal. Jesus didn't die to keep us safe. He died to make us dangerous. Faithfulness is not

holding the fort. It's storming the gates of hell.

Most people's spiritual normal is so subnormal that normal seems radical. For first-century disciples, normal and radical were synonyms. Christians today have turned them into antonyms.

I'm not suggesting 'we will die physically for Christ, but we must die to ourselves. If Jesus hung on His cross, we could certainly carry ours!

In his book, ALL IN, Mark Batterson says, **“We have Americanized the gospel or spiritualized the American Dream. But neither one comes close to the true gospel. We want God on our terms, but we don't get God that way. That's how we get false religion, and a false god we've created in our image. You only get a relationship with God on His terms. You can take it or leave it.”**

“The gospel costs nothing. We cannot buy it or earn it. It can only be received as a gift, compliments of God's grace. So, it costs nothing, but it demands everything. And that is where most of us get stuck-spiritual no-man's-land.

We're too Christian to enjoy sin and too sinful to enjoy Christ. We've got just enough Jesus to be informed, but not enough to be transformed. We want everything God has to offer without giving anything up.

We want to buy in without selling out. We're afraid that if we don't hold out on God, we'll miss out on what this life has to offer. It's a lie. It's the same lie the serpent told Adam and Eve in the garden that 'God is holding out on you.'

Jesus is asking us to do for Him what He has done for us. Just before He uttered this challenge, He said, ***“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”*** (Luke 9:22, NIV)

Simply put Jesus died **for us** and now He asks us to die **with Him**.

That is exactly what Jesus meant in verse 24. ***‘For whoever wants to save their life***

will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.' (Luke 9:24, NIV)

ILLUSTRATION: A few years ago, there was a newspaper article that is probably among the saddest true stories ever written. There were some Siamese twins who were joined together at the neck all the way down. The doctor came to the parents of these twins and said, 'If I do not perform surgery very quickly, both twins are going to die.'

The parents said, "You obviously have our permission. Begin immediately." He said, "You don't understand. It is not that simple. I can save one, but I can't save the other. I can save either, but I can't save both. What I am telling you is the two of you must decide on which one is going to live, and which one is going to die.'

If Jesus is going to live in you, you must die to you. Your heart is like a throne and either you are on that throne or Jesus is on that throne.

One great preacher put it this way, **"In every man's life there is a throne. When self is on the throne Christ is on the cross, but when Christ is on the throne, self is on the cross."**

Carrying our cross is necessary. Carrying our cross is humbling. Carrying our cross is something we do - **daily**. "Let him...take up his cross daily..." No vacation. No holidays. No cheat days. No sick days. No summer holidays. Every morning, we wake up to die to self, so we can follow Jesus.

ROMANS 12:1 ***"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."***

What does this daily cross-carrying look like? The Apostle Paul wrote about this in his letter to the Galatians:

"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal. 2:20)

"And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." (Gal. 5:24)

“But as for me, I will never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The world has been crucified to me through the cross, and I to the world.” (Gal. 6:14 CSB)

Paul paints a picture here of total dedication. Jesus is saying, **“If you want to follow me, you’ve got to be all in.”** You don’t take your cross for an hour on Sunday mornings. You take up your cross daily. Jesus doesn’t want just some of your life; He wants all your life!

It is only when you ***deny yourself*** and ***die to yourself*** that you are ready to take the last step of following Jesus which is... **‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.’**

III. Devote Yourself

The word ‘follow’ is a very interesting word. It comes from a prefix which means ‘like’ or “same.” It is attached to a word that means ‘way.’ It literally means to ***‘walk in the same way’*** or ***‘to take the same road.’***

The idea is not just following behind someone, but to walk beside someone as you go in the same direction. To follow someone meant then that you submit to their authority. You give up all your rights. You give up all your freedom. You give up all your desires, all your wants, all of your ambitions and surrender to the person that you are following.

The only way you are ever all in with Jesus is when you completely surrender. Surrender implies losing and nobody wants to be a loser. Our culture teaches just the opposite. You never give up, you never give in, winning is everything and surrendering is not an option. Yet, Jesus amazingly says this, **“The only way to victory in the Christian life is surrender”**.

Jim Elliott, the great missionary, who died trying to take the Gospel to the Auca Indians in South America famously said, **“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”**

Here is what is at stake. ***‘What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?’*** (Luke 9:25, NIV)

Until you die to yourself, you are trapped in a body of sin. But by faith, you enter Christ's death, the old nature (or old man) is nailed to the cross, and you are resurrected into new life. This is what Jesus means by **'take up your cross and follow Me.'**

- As Cain slew Abel, as Esau sought to kill Jacob, as Ishmael persecuted Isaac; as Joseph's senior brothers bound him up in a dry pit: so does the self-life to everything spiritual.

- Notice that in all these examples of scripture it is always the older trying to defeat the younger. The old man came first.

- Self cannot crucify self. We need to give up self to the cross of Christ.

When you enter the life of the Spirit by faith, you are entering into Jesus' finished work. You are entering into His death so you can be raised to His life.

In 1896, Charles M. Sheldon penned the words of what has become a classic, inspirational, and best-selling novel titled **In His Steps**. In this book, Sheldon tells the story of a local church whose members pledged, for an entire year, not to do anything without first asking the question, ***"What would Jesus do?"***

A hundred years later, the book was reprinted under the title **What Would Jesus Do?**

Conclusion: When Jesus says, "Come dine with me"—most of us are pleased to accept. When Christ says, "Come do life with me"—experience the difference my companionship makes—many of us are intrigued.

But when Jesus says, ***"Come die with me"***—come take up your cross with me, come experience my death—there is something in almost all of us that cries out with the apostle Peter, ***"Never, Lord!"***

Remember, Jesus started off saying, ***"If any of you wants to be my follower..."*** So right off the bat, before Jesus even finishes His sentence, we've got a decision to make: **Do you want to follow Jesus or be content just being a fan.**

In two thousand years, the invitation hasn't changed.

Jesus still says, ***"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me"*** (ESV). No matter what your story, no matter what you've done, Jesus invites you to follow Him. Anyone who has ever laid awake in bed and thought I don't know what to do with my life. Anyone who has ever wanted more out of life. Anyone means everyone.

So, what's your decision?

Are you ready to deny yourself, carry your cross, and follow Jesus? You cannot live a cross-less Christian life.

Jeremiah 6:16 reads: ***"This is what the Lord says: 'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.'"***

Ask yourself the hard question today, 'Are you all in? Have you bet the ranch on Jesus Christ?' When it comes to your church are you all in?

How about your marriage and family? Are you all in? Are you all in with your priorities, your time, your money? If you are single today, are you all in when it comes to your sexual purity and your holiness?

Hernando Cortes was from Spain and in 1519 he came to Mexico and landed at Vera Cruz. He had been given orders to conquer the land and to build a colony. When all his men were off the boats, he did something in which he has been remembered throughout. He burned all his boats. He looked at his men and said, **"We will either win this victory or we will die; we are not going back."**

There is only one way to follow Jesus Christ - burn the boats, bet the ranch, and go ALL IN.