

PREPARING FOR EASTER

Mark 8:31-38

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

We are preparing for Easter. We are in the days that lead up to it and are now only a few Sundays away from our Easter celebration. We are in a season called Lent. This is a 40-day period leading up to Easter. It’s a season of preparation, where we prepare our own souls – a season of cleansing, of renewal, of fasting. It actually takes place over a 46-day period. I know that’s confusing. The reason is it begins on Ash Wednesday and it continues until the Thursday before Easter. It’s a period of 46 days but we call it 40 days because the Sundays are not included. The reason we don’t necessarily fast or observe Lent on those Sundays is because each Sunday is like a mini-Easter. We are anticipating the resurrection of our Lord on those given days.

The word itself in the Latin means 40 or 40th. A parallel is drawn to the wilderness experience of Jesus as he prepared for ministry, fasting for 40 days in the desert, in the wilderness. So for 40 days we come aside and we prepare ourselves. We seek the Lord for cleansing, for renewing, and it’s a season of fasting.

Here’s what’s fascinating to me about Lent. It’s a time of great joy. From the moment we begin and as we anticipate its beginning, there is something just joyous about it. Now, you’re thinking: “Joy?”

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Fasting? Joy? Hmmm....” But the reason is that it so tightly aligns with the central message of Christianity. The cross is the central message. It is the center. It is at the heart of Christianity.

The Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 2:2: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Or again, Paul in Galatians 6:14: “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

Now, when we say that the cross is the central message, it’s probably helpful to understand that we include the resurrection in that statement, in that idea. The biblical writers will sometimes refer to the cross, and it’s shorthand for all that’s associated with the cross – the cross and the resurrection. The resurrection points back to the cross, saying the sacrifice of Jesus has been accepted. Sin has been paid for, death has been defeated, and Jesus is raised from the grave. This is the center of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ – to be a Christian.

So when you read about the life of Jesus in the four gospels (there are four books beginning the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John -- we call them gospels), they tell about the earthy life and ministry of Jesus. Fully 30%, conservatively speaking, is given to the last week of Jesus’ life. So 33 years old, 3+ years of ministry, but nearly a third of all of that material is committed to these last few days. In fact, it’s been observed over and over again that the gospels are really the story of the cross and everything else is an introduction to that message.

In the gospels we are prepared for the message of the cross through this passage and two more. In other words, in all four gospels Jesus predicts his death three times. That’s rather stunning because the four gospels are all very different, especially John, but even Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They are addressing a different audience and their emphasis varies. There is only one miracle performed by Jesus that’s recorded in all four. I said that in one of the CEDAR classes that I am teaching and someone piped up: “Oh that must be water into wine.”

I thought it was really funny that a wine miracle was believed to be the most important. It’s actually the feeding of the 5000 that is recorded in all four gospels. But there is a parallel here where these predictions of Jesus’ death are found in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John -- in John in a different form, and they have this effect for us. They prepare us emotionally. They prepare our souls for what’s coming as anticipation begins to build. Then when it happens, we are ready to fully engage emotionally in the account of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Here's what's fascinating. It's especially clear in the book of Mark that these predictions follow a pattern. There is a prediction, there is a response, and then there is a teaching. There is a prediction, there is a response, and there is a teaching. From that, we are going to pull out three points:

- I. The cross is working for you.
- II. The cross is working in you.
- III. The cross is working through you.

So the cross, as the central message of Christianity is working for you, in you, and through you. Let's go to the text.

We read the first prediction in Mark chapter 8, verse 31: "And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said this to them plainly." If you flip over a chapter to Mark chapter 9, verse 30, you will see the second prediction.

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

The third prediction, Mark chapter 10:32:

And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise."

Three predictions.

I. The cross is working for you.

How shocked the disciples were to hear these predictions by Jesus. It's very clear even as we hear the predictions that they didn't understand. They couldn't comprehend. They could not even imagine that this would happen. It was not just their affection for Jesus. It was not just their passion, their love, their admiration for him, but look at all that Jesus could do! Look at the miracles that he performed – the miracles of nature, the miracles of healing, the miracles of deliverance. Was there anything beyond his grasp or his ability or his authority? His teaching was nothing like they had ever heard before. And the thought that he would be executed was unimaginable. How could it even happen? After all, who could oppose Jesus and win?

But what was beyond their understanding was that this was the will of God and that Jesus would die for them. The third prediction in Mark chapter 10 ends with this explanation: The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Jesus gave his life as a ransom. He paid the debt of sin for all who believe in him.

We call this, biblically, the doctrine of justification. It's a term that Paul uses rather widely. In Romans chapter 5 he talks about those who are justified by faith, who have peace with God. They have a new place of standing. They stand before God in a new position, in a place of God's favor, and acceptance, and blessing, and grace. And that is all received by faith in Jesus Christ and what he has done for us.

Paul begins there in Romans 5 to list out all of the benefits of justification. It's a legal term. It's a courtroom scene where we stand before God, guilty because of our sin, with a penalty of death to pay. And Jesus pays our debt. Our sin is placed on him, his righteousness upon us, and our position with God is changed – not because of anything we've done, but because of what Jesus Christ has done for us.

It's not just found in Paul. Jesus himself spoke of justification. In Luke chapter 18 he tells a remarkable story. This story is about a Pharisee and a tax collector who go in to pray. As they stand there in the place of prayer, the Pharisee, the religious leader, begins to boast. He says, "God, I thank you that I'm not like other men. I thank you that I fast twice a week. I thank you that I tithe, I give a tenth of all that I have. I'm not like this tax collector over here – this extortioner, this adulterer. I'm not like him." Then the tax collector beats his chest and cries out to God: "God, have

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mercy on me.” Then Jesus makes this statement: The tax collector leaves justified, with a new position, a position before God of God’s favor and acceptance.

Now, part of what’s so fascinating about that story that Jesus tells in Luke 18 is that it’s in the middle of an extended teaching on prayer. The story comes in under that to undergird this very important teaching. Jesus actually teaches in Luke 18 that when we pray, if we ask we’ll receive (Luke 11 and Luke 18). Specifically, he says, “Don’t give up in prayer. Keep asking. Keep asking. And if you will persist and persevere in prayer, that will be an expression of faith. That’s how God wants you to live. He wants you to live before him bringing your requests and your needs in an attitude of faith and dependence, trusting in him.”

So how does the story of the tax collector and the Pharisee connect? Well, it’s just so beautiful to see how Jesus wants to protect us from self-righteousness – the attitude that thinks that God will hear me through my vain repetition, through my praying much, through my elegance in prayer. Somehow Jesus must mean that if I’m to persevere and ask again and again that I’m earning some kind of merit before God. Jesus says, “No! It’s mercy. It’s grace.”

Over and over, Jesus cut at the root of this idea that we would take religious things like giving to the poor and prayer and fasting and use them to try to obligate God or earn God’s acceptance or favor. Friends, this is what I want you to see. I want you to see the good news of Jesus Christ -- that righteousness is a gift from Jesus Christ because he died for you, and you stand in a position of forgiveness in Christ.

So when we come to the season of Lent and we begin to examine ourselves and say, “God, I want to draw near to you. I want to set aside some earthly things. I want a season where I decrease and Christ increases,” we understand that we are not earning forgiveness in that moment. We are not all of a sudden becoming likable unto God. We are accepted and we receive forgiveness because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It’s especially important when it comes to the spiritual disciplines to understand that our position, our foundation with God is the grace of God.

Don Miller writes about his observation of an interview he saw with Tom Arnold, a comedian. These are his words: “I caught an interview with Tom Arnold regarding his book, How I Lost 5 Pounds in 6 Years.” Sounds like a comedian, doesn’t it? “The interviewer had asked why he had written the book and I was somewhat amazed at the honesty of Arnold’s answer. The comedian stated that most entertainers are in show business because they are broken people, looking for affirmation.

‘The reason I wrote this book,’ Tom Arnold said, ‘is because I wanted something out there so that people would tell me that they liked me. It’s the reason behind almost everything I do.’

For the Christian, that reason is this: Jesus Christ died for you. You are adopted into God’s family because of what Jesus has done for you. Christ, the cross, is working for you. Trust in Jesus Christ. Accept forgiveness. Do not try to earn it.

II. The cross works in you.

Let’s go back to the first text, Mark 8:32. Mark records a response following each of these three predictions. There are three responses but they are amazingly similar. Look at the response, now by Peter, in the middle of verse 32 of chapter 8. “And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.” That’s just not a good thing to do, right? He began to rebuke Jesus. “But turning and seeing his disciples, he [that is Jesus] rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.’”

Flip over to Mark 9:33, please -- the second prediction. This is what immediately follows that prediction. “And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he [that is Jesus] asked them, ‘What were you discussing on the way?’ But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.” Who was the greatest?

Flip over to Mark 10:35. This is the very next verse after the third prediction. “And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’ And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” They’re not asking for much, are they? “For all of eternity we want favored seats of honor.” Verse 38:

Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” And they said to him, “We are able.” And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

Look at verse 41: “And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John.” If you have children, you can relate to this scene, perhaps. There was this argument over who was the

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greatest. Jesus predicts his death – his brutal death – and they are arguing about who is the greatest.

So Peter, after the first prediction rebukes Jesus. He says, “Nope. It will never be.” After the second prediction they argue about who is the greatest. After the third prediction James and John ask for privileged seats in all of eternity and the other 10 are upset.

The cross works in you. Their response is surely something that we can identify with. We need not just a change of position with God (the cross is working for me), but we need an inner transformation. We need the grace of God to continually bring renovation to our motives, our deepest desires, and dreams. This is the clear message of scripture.

At first their objections were somewhat understandable. We understand that they are thinking the cross is not necessary. “Your death is not necessary. Look at your power and authority. This doesn’t have to happen.” At first it’s understandable that they probably just imagine God working in an entirely different fashion. But what becomes clear in time is that there is actually a prideful, selfish ambition that’s at work. It reveals a darkness in the human heart that we can respond to.

God wants to save us before God and also from the inside out as he gives us a new heart. This is such good news. This is such wonderful news: The power of the cross by the Spirit of God to bring change within us. The prophets promised this. Ezekiel 36:26: “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”

When we gather to worship God, church, it’s so important for us to sing to the Lord, for us to come prepared, early, ready, ready to worship the Lord. When that happens, we engage our entire selves to the Lord. We lift holy hands to the Lord. We open our hearts. We sing with our lips. We are saying that this is not a performance. This is the people of God coming together to love God and to adore him. When we do that, there is a process of God’s truth being internalized in our hearts as the word of God in song is proclaimed in worship to the Lord.

Sometimes this might happen to you. It happens to me. I come to worship and my mind drifts. I think, “I wonder what’s for lunch?” And I think, “I wonder what’s going on with this son or daughter? I hope they’re in church today, wherever they are.” I have three of my sons visiting today. Right? You know the sensation of being drawn away, or even just being indifferent. It probably doesn’t happen during the preaching, but it could happen.

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Listen! What a glorious opportunity to say, “Oh God, bring the work of the cross in my heart. Renew love for you and the things of God. Lord, I’m so worried about this. And my heart is drawn after this. And this is a good thing, but I want it so bad it becomes a dangerous thing. Thank you for the cross that’s at work in me!” Or, “I am just so mad at my spouse right now!” “Oh, God. I’m just so arrogant.” “Wait, there’s hope. There’s hope that you’ve replaced this cold, stony heart with a heart of flesh. And you’re renewing me with the message of your mercy, your sonship, your love. Glory to God!” God is working within us.

As I come to the cross, even in the season of Lent I’m not just confessing little external things. I’m looking at the driving forces beneath those sins and saying, “Jesus paid to slay and remove that spiritual idolatry, rebellion, and indifference. Glory to our crucified and risen savior!”

Friends, let me just say this before moving on to the last point. When we find ourselves battling addiction, stubborn sin, particularly sexual sin, it’s so helpful for us to understand that though those addictions in all forms have been reinforced through external practice, they point to a condition of the heart where we need a deeper work of grace.

As we do that, accountability is helpful. Practical steps that we take are helpful, but accountability is not a silver bullet. The only thing powerful enough to transform your heart and your mind and your thinking is the cross of Jesus Christ.

So embrace these practical considerations. Jesus said that if your right hand offends you, cut it off. I think part of the application of that (obviously that’s metaphorical) is that he is saying to be radical in your opposition to sin, and practical, but our ultimate hope is in the cross. So the best accountability is the accountability that’s asking you: “Hey, how is the struggle coming? How is this area coming in your life?” But it’s an accountability that keeps speaking the message of hope that Jesus has conquered the sin and that he’s greater than the trial and the addiction and the attitude. It is pushing you to say, “Hey, let’s be at church every week. Let’s connect relationally. Let’s spend time daily on our own praying.” Why? Because these things will not earn us merit with God, but they will help us to draw near to God, to drink in deeply of the Spirit of God, to receive the grace of God.

III. The cross works through you.

You see what's happened? There's a prediction, they respond really, we would say biblically "in the flesh," and he teaches them then three times. Mark 8:34:

And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Jesus now teaches about the cross. Here is his teaching: The cross will work through you. It will change your position to God. "My grace will work in your heart, bringing transformation, but now you live the life of the cross." Mark 9:35, again teaching immediately follows the response.

And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

We are called to be servants. We are called to receive everyone as valued and with dignity before the Lord. Mark chapter 10:42, the third teaching. Again, right behind the response -- prediction, response, teaching.

And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Jesus is teaching us: "My cross will give you a new standing before God. It will work an interior renovation within your own heart, but I'm calling you to live a life that is the life of the cross. Friends, if you are visiting here and you are new to the church, I need to ask you for forgiveness, because many times the church has not in any way portrayed the description of leadership that's laid out here - of true servant leadership, where we are not promoting ourselves, but we are exalting Christ.

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I wish that I could say I haven't failed in this area. I can't say that. My hope is in my position before God in Christ and that he is working in my heart. But if you're a part of Riverside, we want to just nail a stake in the ground and say: "This is essential to what Christianity is." And the whole idea that would say that's an offensive message – "Let's just tell people they can come to Jesus and just get more" -- I don't know that we could ever do that and be true to the Bible.

Now, you will get more. You'll get more of everything. More for all of eternity. More joy, more peace. This is why I started off the message saying, "You know, there is something so awesome about Lent. It just resonates in the heart. You will hear it expressed. I will have a person come and say, "Man, I have been in this conflict at work. I have been just like this with a Christian at work. And you know what? I just felt like I needed to stop. I needed to be quiet. I needed to back up. I just needed to make room. And you know what? Immediately when I did that, God just swept in! Everything changed."

I've heard husbands come and say, "You know, I've been complaining and bickering and irritable with my wife. When I stopped blaming and stopped accusing and just stopped ramping up my expectations and took a step back, I said, "Okay, God. It's not about me getting my way. What are you doing? Help me look at my own life," immediately God came in and began to work. It's so true, that in that first teaching where Jesus says, "What does it profit a man if you gain the whole world and lose your own soul?" The minute we stop trying to gain the whole world and we just die – the beauty, the Spirit of God begins to fill us and renew us. And life is good.

Church, I'm not calling you to less. I'm calling you to more! I'm calling you to a greater life, a life where your whole confidence is that: "My position has changed before God because of what Jesus Christ has done. And you know what? He's in me. He's working. He's renewing me. I'm not very good at it, but he is helping me to live a life of serving other people."

Now, here's the beauty of it. You come along to Lent and you're going to give up something, right? You're going to give up dessert. Just hypothetically, right? But your wife is this amazing cook and she tempts you over and over and over. And then you stumble. I might have stumbled last night. The cross works for me.

Here's what I want to illustrate for you. The moment we begin to say the cross works through me, it will expose things in our heart (the cross works in me) that are not right, and weaknesses and areas that come out that are not consistent with that call to service. It's an invitation in that moment to

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go back to #1: The cross works for me. It is working in me so that the cross will work through me. That's part of the great value of the third point. It doesn't secure us a place with God. The first does that. But it reminds us that that is our foundation with God (the first) and it calls us back to this place of keeping our trust in Jesus and pointing us to our need. It also gives us a vision for a great life in Jesus Christ.

Will you join me in that life? Will you say yes to the cross of Jesus Christ? It's central to who we are in Jesus. Would you bow your head please? We are going to end the service in just a moment. If you're here and you're unsure of your relationship with Jesus, I would like to pray for you. If your standing with God is not secure because you have not trusted the cross to work for you, I want to encourage you today to trust in Jesus Christ.

If that is you, would you lift your hand and say, "Brian, pray for me. I want to say yes to the invitation to trust in Jesus. I want to say yes to trusting in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of my sin. I want to say yes to the cross of Jesus and the payment of my sin." Just lift your hand up and let me see it.

Lord, I pray for those lifting a hand right now. And I pray that they would trust in you, that they would reject that whole idea modeled by the Pharisee: "Oh, I thank you that I am better than others," but that they would follow the example of the tax collector and say, "Oh God, have mercy on me." And that in this moment they would believe and trust that you have died for their sin, payment is made, and that they would trust in you. Several of you are lifting your hand. I want you just to pray to the Lord: "Lord, forgive me. I trust in Jesus as my Savior, as my substitute, paying the penalty for my sin."