

Mark 8:34

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

Analysis

This verse articulates the non-negotiable cost of following Jesus with three radical demands. "Whosoever will come after me" (ὅστις θέλει ὀπίσω μου ἀκολουθεῖν, *hostis thelei opisō mou akolouthein*) establishes that discipleship is voluntary—"will" (*thelei*) indicates volitional desire, not coercion. But the cost is absolute. First, "let him deny himself" (ἀπαρνησάσθω ἑαυτόν, *aparnēsasthō heauton*) demands radical self-renunciation—not merely denying oneself certain pleasures but denying the self's claim to autonomy and supremacy. This is death to self-will, self-interest, and self-worship. Second, "take up his cross" (ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ, *aratō ton stauron autou*) invokes execution imagery. In the Roman world, condemned criminals carried their cross to the execution site—to take up one's cross meant accepting a death sentence. Jesus calls disciples to die to sin, self, and the world. Third, "follow me" (ἀκολουθεῖτω μοι, *akoloutheitō moi*) commands ongoing allegiance—the present imperative indicates continuous action. Following Jesus means walking the same path He walked: obedience, suffering, death, and resurrection. These three commands progress logically: self-denial (internal reorientation), cross-bearing (public identification with Christ's shame), and following (ongoing obedience). Reformed theology emphasizes that this isn't works-righteousness but the inevitable fruit of genuine salvation—true believers, regenerated by the Spirit, progressively die to self and live to Christ.

Historical Context

Jesus spoke these words immediately after Peter's confession (Mark 8:29) and the first Passion prediction (Mark 8:31). Peter had just rebuked Jesus for predicting suffering and death, revealing that he expected a conquering Messiah, not a suffering servant. Jesus' response—calling Peter "Satan" (v. 33)—demonstrates that rejecting the cross is satanic temptation. This teaching on discipleship's cost radically challenged first-century messianic expectations and continues to confront comfortable Christianity. In the Roman Empire, crucifixion was the most shameful execution reserved for slaves and rebels—no Roman citizen could be crucified. To "take up the cross" meant accepting total disgrace and death. Early Christians understood this literally—many were martyred for confessing Christ. Polycarp, Ignatius, and countless others chose death over denying Jesus. But even Christians not called to physical martyrdom must daily die to self—Paul wrote, "I die daily" (1 Corinthians 15:31) and "I am crucified with Christ" (Galatians 2:20). Church history records that whenever Christianity becomes culturally acceptable and comfortable, it loses the radical edge Jesus demanded. Genuine discipleship always costs everything.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

1 John 4:8 — God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. In what specific ways does self-denial challenge contemporary culture's emphasis on self-fulfillment, self-expression, and self-actualization?
2. How does understanding cross-bearing as daily dying to self and sin reframe your approach to difficulties, suffering, and sacrifice in Christian life?

Interlinear Text

καὶ	προσκαλεσάμενος	τὸν	ὄχλον	σὺν	τοῖς	
And	when he had called	G3588	the people	unto him with	G3588	
G2532	G4341		G3793	G4862		
μαθηταῖς	αὐτοῦ	εἶπεν	αὐτοῦ	Ὅστις	θέλει	ὀπίσω
disciples	unto them	also he said	unto them	Whosoever	will	after
G3101	G846	G2036	G846	G3748	G2309	G3694
μου	ἐλθεῖν,	ἀπαρνησάσθω	ἑαυτὸν	καὶ	ἀράτω	τὸν
me	come	let him deny	himself	And	take up	G3588
G3450	G2064	G533	G1438	G2532	G142	
σταυρὸν	αὐτοῦ	καὶ	ἀκολουθεῖτω	μοι		
cross	unto them	And	follow	me		
G4716	G846	G2532	G190	G3427		

Additional Cross-References

Matthew 10:38 (Cross): And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me.

1 Kings 14:8 (Parallel theme): And rent the kingdom away from the house of David, and gave it thee: and yet thou hast not been as my servant David, who kept my commandments, and who followed me with all his heart, to do that only which was right in mine eyes;

John 10:27 (Parallel theme): My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me:

Galatians 2:20 (Cross): I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

Galatians 5:24 (Cross): And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts.

1 John 3:16 (Parallel theme): Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

Numbers 14:24 (Parallel theme): But my servant Caleb, because he had another spirit with him, and hath followed me fully, him will I bring into the land whereinto he went; and his seed shall possess it.

Matthew 16:24 (Cross): Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

Romans 8:17 (Parallel theme): And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.

Luke 9:23 (Cross): And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.

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