

“The Things of God”

The Twenty-Sixth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 8:31-9:1; Isaiah 52:13-53:12

In Isaiah 55:8, we read these familiar words: “God’s ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts.” This fact will soon become very apparent in the messianic ministry of Jesus. In Mark 8:27-30, Jesus reveals his true identity to his disciples. Peter, who is the leader of the disciples and responds on their behalf, uttered the dramatic confession which lies at the heart of this gospel— “You are the Christ.” Peter’s confession that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah is the critical turning point in the ministry of Jesus. This confession also leads to a dramatic shift in emphasis in Jesus’ ministry. Jesus now heads south toward Jerusalem, away from the area around the Sea of Galilee. He will also utter shocking words to his disciples which reveal that God’s ways are not our ways. You would expect that if Jesus was the Messiah, and if he came to save his people from their sins, then a glorious new age must be at hand for Israel. Instead, Jesus informs his disciples that the salvation he came to bring will eventually take him to the cross, where he will die for the sins of his people. Understandably, Jesus’ disciples will struggle to fit their new understanding of Jesus identity as Israel’s Messiah with this very troubling prediction of what lay ahead for their master. The disciples will learn first hand that God’s ways are not our ways. The glory God will bring to his people cannot come until Jesus lays down his life for our sins.

We continue our series on Mark’s gospel. We are working our way through the last part of Mark 8, which is not only the literary hinge upon which Mark’s account of the mission of Jesus turns, but recounts the critical moment in the lives of the disciples, who now recognize that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah. Having come to that conclusion, the disciples are immediately confronted by what must seem to them a frightening impossibility. Jesus now tells them his life will come to an end. This shocking news will be every bit as difficult for them to grasp as was understanding Jesus’ true identity.

Like most of the Jews of that age, the disciples believed that the coming of the Messiah meant that God would visit his people with salvation. In other words, when the Messiah came, he would not only bring salvation to Israel and save God’s people from their sins, Israel would immediately enter into her ultimate glory foretold throughout the prophets. Now Jesus was telling them that there was a huge step and several thousand years in between the time of the coming of the Messiah and the final realization of all of God’s messianic promises. Jesus must first lay down his life. A roman cross must come before the messianic glory. And the messianic glory will be seen where it was least expected, outside an empty tomb on the morning of the first Easter. There is still much for Jesus to teach his disciples.

As we saw last time, Jesus healed a deaf man in the Decapolis and a blind man in Bethsaida. These miracles were powerful signs that Jesus alone was capable of removing that spiritual blindness and deafness that kept people from understanding the gospel. While the people of Israel struggled to understand just who Jesus was and what he was doing, Peter’s own spiritual blindness and deafness was now miraculously removed. That this was the case can be seen in Peter’s confession that Jesus was the Christ. Peter was confessing that Jesus was the one promised throughout the Old Testament. Jesus was the one who would deliver God’s people from sin and death. Jesus was the anointed one, Israel’s final prophet, priest and king. Jesus had granted this knowledge to his disciples and they responded in faith. But make no mistake about it, the bestowing of such faith and understanding is every bit as miraculous as the miracles of restoring sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf.

Since this is the major turning point in Jesus' ministry, as far the disciples were concerned, things would never be the same. Jesus already knew where his messianic mission would ultimately take him—to a final confrontation in the city of Jerusalem. Having been given the eyes of faith and the ears of understanding, it was time for Jesus to reveal to the disciples, what lay ahead for him. As we will see in the coming chapters of Mark, that which Jesus hinted at in the parables (that there are “insiders” and “outsiders”) begins to become increasingly clear. Jesus will begin to direct his teaching specifically to the disciples (the “insiders”), not the crowds (“the outsiders”). Indeed, having been given the eyes of faith and the ears of understanding, there is much for them to learn as Jesus' ministry moves toward the city of Jerusalem and a final and dramatic encounter with the Pharisees and the Sanhedrin during the final week of his mission. Mark does not give us a time reference here, but there is some reason to believe that Jesus spent a fair amount of time during this phase of his ministry instructing his disciples (perhaps a year or more), before the gospel reaches its climax in Jerusalem. Mark summarizes this period, giving brief snippets of Jesus' teaching in a number of areas. There is still much to do before our Lord's death and resurrection.

In verse 31 of Mark 8, we move into the second half of Mark's Gospel.¹ Throughout much of what follows, Jesus' tenor and tone changes dramatically, as his words become more emphatic and direct. In a sense, Mark presents what follows as the explanation of what it means to follow Jesus and to be identified as one of his disciples. Three times, Jesus will tell his disciples that he must suffer and die. Jesus does this to prepare the disciples for what is yet to come.

Now that the disciples had acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ, Jesus must instruct them as to what that confession entails. This means that the disciples must come to grips with the most significant event in Jesus' entire messianic mission, his coming death and resurrection. Speaking prophetically, in verse 31, Mark tells us that *“He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.”* Of course, there is a sense in which the full nature of these events cannot be grasped until after they occur. The gospels bear repeated witness to the fact that it was not until Jesus appeared to the disciples after his resurrection that they were able to believe in the fullest sense of the term. But, here, well before these events come to pass, Jesus is instructing them about what to expect. These words also unpack the confession that Peter has just made of Jesus, “you are the Christ.”² If the disciples believe that Jesus is the Christ, they must have a correct view of the Messiah's ministry. They must understand that Jesus came not to restore Israel to its former greatness. Jesus came to suffer and die for the sins of his people. Yes, there will be messianic glory. But it will come in an unexpected form.

While Jesus accepted the designation “Christ” (Messiah) from Peter, it is important to notice that Mark speaks of Jesus specifically identifying himself as the “Son of Man.” The term “Son of Man” is a Greek rendering of an Aramaic term which means “I” (first person singular), but which is almost always used in connection with humiliation, suffering, impending danger, or even death. No doubt, Jesus uses the term as a reference to his coming humiliation.³ It is also a term which is used in Daniel 7:13, where it is clearly a messianic title. In any case, it is a self-designation used by Jesus (some fourteen times in the

¹ See the discussions in: France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 332-333; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 292-294.

² Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 296.

³ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 297.

Gospel of Mark), and is clearly the title that Jesus himself preferred to all others. It not only refers to his coming suffering and humiliation, it also has strong messianic implications.⁴ In using this self-designation, Jesus is tying together Old Testament messianic expectations, while at the same time stripping them of the false political expectations then popular in Israel. In using this term, Jesus also connects himself to that which was foretold by the prophet Isaiah in the 52nd and 53rd chapters of his prophecy, namely that the coming one would also be a suffering servant, who would lay down his life so that God's people could be delivered from the guilt and power of sin. We read of this remarkable suffering servant in our Old Testament lesson, a passage widely-known in Jesus' day. But having just confessed that Jesus is the Messiah, the disciples have no category for seeing the Messiah and the suffering servant as one in the same. Jesus must tie these two images together. Using the title "Son of Man" helps Jesus do exactly that.

Not only will the son of Man suffer many things, Jesus informs the twelve that the conflict they have witnessed between Jesus and the Pharisees, the elders, the chief priests, and certain members of the Sanhedrin, will not only continue, it will intensify. In fact, it will intensify to the point that Jesus will be killed, which, at the very least, implies a violent death at the hands of his enemies. Surprisingly, these enemies are not godless Gentile persecutors, but the religious leaders of Israel. This declaration must have totally shocked the disciples. But Jesus goes on to say that his death is not the end. Jesus makes it plain that after being dead for three days, he will rise again. Of course, human nature being what it is, the disciples focused upon Jesus' talk of death (and the shock such news must have been to them) and not on the resurrection, in which Jesus himself will be vindicated and all his enemies put to shame. This is the thing the disciples will continue to struggle to understand. It won't be clear to them until the first Easter.

In verse 32, we see yet another dramatic change in Jesus' approach to dealing with his disciples. "[Jesus] *spoke plainly about this.*" When speaking about his forthcoming death and resurrection, Jesus did not use a parable or ask a series of questions. He spoke to them directly and plainly. So plainly, in fact, that the disciples, particularly Peter, were astonished, if not angered. Ever impetuous, we read that upon hearing these words, "*Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him.*" How on earth could Jesus be the Messiah and yet speak as though Isaiah 53 was written about him? Every good Jew in the first century knew that Isaiah was speaking about the sufferings of the Jewish people.⁵ They had all probably heard sermons to that effect. If Jesus was the Messiah, how could he be rejected like the suffering servant? How could Jesus be so wrong as to apply that passage to himself? Didn't Jesus understand that when the Messiah came, he would defeat his enemies and that victory was certain? And so, in front of all the disciples, Peter strongly rebukes Jesus for saying such a thing. Peter is about to learn that God's ways are not our ways!

In response to the disciple's behavior, Jesus has a rebuke of his own. According to verse 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 things of God, but the things of men.'*" Since Jesus was rebuked by Peter in front of all, Peter will be corrected in front of all. When Jesus says to Peter, "*get behind me, Satan,*" he's referring to the fact that when Peter rebukes Jesus, and tells him not to go to the cross, he is taking is the same approach that Satan had taken with Jesus during the time of temptation in the wilderness. The notion that Jesus seek to avoid the suffering and humiliation of the cross recalls Satan's offer to Jesus in the

⁴ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 273-275.

⁵ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 304.

wilderness. If Jesus were to do what Peter suggested, the entire plan of salvation would be undone. The Messiah's mission would fail.

No! The son of Man must suffer and die. But this is the very thing that Peter does not grasp. The reason is that Peter is not seeing things from God's perspective. God created all things. God has ordained all things. God has sent Jesus to save us from our sins and this entails the necessity that Jesus suffer and die in our place. Furthermore, Jesus must be perfectly obedient to the will of God so as to fulfill all righteousness. But Peter, who is not God, and who is a sinner, does not understand why Jesus must suffer at all. Yes, Peter has finally grasped the fact that Jesus is the Messiah. But Peter's still looking at this from the perspective of sinful humanity. Suffering is bad. It serves no purpose. Jesus is the Messiah, therefore he shouldn't suffer. Won't Jesus be able to convince all of Israel that he has been sent by God? Won't Jesus bring about the messianic glory promised to Israel in the prophets?

Peter does what any one of us would have done, *if* we had the courage of our convictions. The other disciples didn't say anything and let Peter speak for them. But Peter is so wrong. He has no business whatsoever rebuking Jesus. He knows not of what he speaks. If Jesus is to save us from our sins, Jesus must suffer and die. As one writer puts it, "the way of the cross is the will of God."⁶ Failing to see this, Peter ends up sounding just like the devil! "Jesus, don't go to cross!" And for this complete lack of understanding and impropriety, Peter is rebuked by the master he loves so much!

During the period of time which followed, Jesus addresses a number of the requirements for his disciples, those who are willing to take up their cross and follow him.

In verses 8:34-9:1, Mark gives us a typically brief and staccato-like account of a number of sayings which were uttered at this point in Jesus' ministry. In verse 34, we read, "*Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'*" While Jesus must instruct his disciples as to why he will suffer and die, the crowds, in this case, serve as an object lesson of sorts to the disciples. If anyone, including the disciples, as well as those in the crowds, were to follow Jesus, they must realize the cost of discipleship. The cost is inescapable. Jesus calls all those who follow him to likewise walk in the way of the cross. By this, Jesus does not mean that we must die (or even suffer) for our own sins. In saying this, Jesus means that we must realize that we will bear the shame of his cross, and that we must renounce all forms of self-righteousness. If we believe that Jesus is the Messiah, we must understand that our own confession of faith in Jesus means that Jesus calls us to be united with him in his suffering.

To put it plainly, because our Lord and master will be humiliated, so will we, because we are identified with him. Not only does the way of the cross define Jesus' own messianic ministry, it is also the road-map for all of his followers. Jesus not only speaks to his disciples, he speaks these words to the crowd as well. In doing this, Jesus is forcing them to make a decision. Everyone present must know what it means to follow Jesus. The disciples and those in the crowd who have come to believe that Jesus is sent by God (i.e. that he is the Messiah), must remove from their thinking the idea that the Messiah's way is the way of political triumph and that his presence means that realization of messianic glory will be immediately manifest throughout all of Israel.

On the contrary, the Messiah's way is the way of suffering. Glory will not come until death is defeated.

⁶ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 308.

Jesus' disciples must bear the same shame that Christ would suffer not only at the time of his death, but in his rejection and humiliation at the hands of those whom he came to save—the people of Israel. If those present thought that Jesus' gospel was one of health, wealth and prosperity, they were sadly mistaken. The cross is the road to glory. There are no short-cuts! The coming of the Messiah meant that Jesus has come to suffer and die. This is how he will save his people and how God will visit them bring salvation. Jesus' servants must realize that they are not in any sense greater than their master. If he must suffer, so will they. It is the very essence of his mission.

Thus our Lord's words were not only important for the disciples who still had a skewed view of the nature of the messianic kingdom, they were important for those in the crowds who were following Jesus for all the wrong reasons. Those who saw in Jesus the only hope to defeat Rome and restore Israel, missed the point. Those who saw in Jesus a walking emergency room who came to heal all disease, likewise missed the point. Those who saw in Jesus the latest of an interesting series of teachers, healers, exorcists, and prophets also could not see and understand. None of these messianic dreams fit with the ministry of Jesus. Jesus' way is not the way of political victory, perfect health, and the recovery of traditional values. Jesus is not some self-appointed guru seeking a following.

No, his way is the way of the cross. And if you recognize him as Israel's Messiah, and you want to be one of his followers, then you had better be perfectly clear about where it is that he will lead you. He will lead to the cross, a place where you may not want to go. All those who listened to Jesus from this time on, will now be forced to decide if the cost of following him is worth it. Since the world hates Jesus, it will hate those who decide to follow him as well. Sinful human thinking says "no," it is not worth the cost. But faith says "yes, I will go wherever Jesus leads me."

This was not all that Jesus had to say during this phase of his ministry. At this point Mark groups a series of sayings together, all of which make this same basic point. Mark catalogues them for us in verses 35-37. *"For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"* In uttering these words, Jesus is calling his followers to reject that perspective on life which says, "he who dies with the most toys wins." There is a heaven to gain and a Hell to shun. In effect, Jesus is opening the theological ground under the feet of his hearers, forcing them to decide whether or not the cost is worth it. To live eternally, men and women must die to self. This means that we must renounce all hope of eternal life based upon good works, human righteousness, and human goodness. To live eternally, one must believe the gospel! And therefore, in order to receive the merits of Christ (which include the benefits of his cross and fulfilment of God's righteous requirements of the law), you must reject any confidence in your own goodness and righteousness.

What good is it to gain the whole world (which is exactly what Satan tempted Jesus to do), and then to lose your very soul? So what if someone attains great wealth, celebrity, success and power, if, at the end, they those lose their lives only to face God's wrath in the judgment. Jesus asks one of the most important questions anyone can ask you. How much is your soul worth? How much money, pleasure, power, fame, and sex, would it take to make suffering eternally worthwhile? The sinful mind immediately tries to calculate this out, and may even conclude that a life of the pursuit of pleasure is worth it. "Buy now, pay later." But according to Jesus, even the weakest, poorest, most-despised and sickest Christian possesses something which all the wealth and power in the world cannot attain. Their souls will be saved on the day of final judgment.

Jesus' next statement is clearly directed to the crowds, specifically to those who were forced to decide

whether or not they would follow him to Jerusalem and to the cross. In verse 38, we read, “*If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.*” The shame of the cross and of Jesus’ humiliation will become apparent soon enough. Those who found that shame too much, and who walk away from Jesus because they are ashamed of him, will discover to their shock and dismay that a day is coming when God will vindicate Jesus as well as those who follow him. Jesus is clearly referring to his second advent, when he returns with a glory far beyond that which any in Jesus’ day could have envisioned. On that day when Jesus comes again, God will send a legion of angels and Jesus’ glory will be such that John describes it as follows in the 6th chapter of Revelation.

I watched as [the angel] opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’

On that day, Jesus will be vindicated and all those who rejected him, because he will be despised and humiliated upon the cross, will find that they have gained the world, for a time, but now have lost their very souls. As they have been ashamed of Jesus. Now Jesus will be ashamed of them.

In these words about those who are ashamed of him—a reference to the miracle seekers and political zealots in the crowd—Jesus has been focusing upon the time of the end (the second coming). But there will be a glimpse of this glory soon to come, a glimpse which foretells of this glory yet to come. As Jesus puts it in Mark 9:1, “*And he said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power.’*” Jesus was not only referring to his transfiguration, the very next event recorded in Mark’s Gospel (Mark 9:2-13), he is also referring to the messianic glory which will be manifest in his own resurrection from the dead. By revealing this glory in phases, Jesus is even now preparing his disciples for what lay ahead, and calling for an immediate decision on the part of all those who heard him. The stakes could not be higher. The cost could not be greater. For all those who heard Jesus say these words, the hour of decision had come, even as it has come to us this very day.

What, then, do we take with us from Jesus’ very powerful words?

As we have seen, this section of Mark’s Gospel is especially tense. Jesus is forcing both his disciples and the crowds to make a decision, not only as to his true identity, but Jesus makes it perfectly clear that all those who follow him must realize the cost of doing so. Jesus will go to the cross where he will suffer and die for our sins. He is our only hope of heaven. And we must follow him wherever he takes us. First and foremost, Jesus is telling us that since he will be despised, so too will all those who follow him. Jesus means that the way of the cross is the way of denying all human attempts to be saved apart from his death and righteousness which is only received through the means of faith. The way of the cross leads us to say, “Lord, have mercy on me a sinner.”

Let’s be honest. The cost of following Christ is very great. Following Jesus means going to the cross, and to suffer scorn and humiliation. In practical terms, this means saying no to all other religions and all

other humanly-devised schemes of salvation. There is one way to God—the cross and Jesus’ perfect righteousness. Jesus has just mapped this out for us. Denying ourselves and taking up our cross means rejecting the notion that all people are basically good (the religion of modern America) and unless they are axe-murders, they will probably go to heaven when they die. No, the cross is the only way. Jesus is the only Savior.

But this also means that we must reject all non-Christian ways of thinking and doing. Specifically this means identifying yourself with Christ in a culture which will laugh at you and mock you for doing so. It means obeying God’s commandments when the culture treats them as some kind Victorian relic of the past, or worse as “hate speak.” It means that Jesus comes first in all that we do. It also means some very specific things, like not marrying non-Christians, like not running a corrupt business, and making every effort to serve as salt and light in the city of man, all the while we are despised for doing so. It means assembling together on the Lord’s Day to receive word and sacrament instead of staying home and doing something else. It means raising your children in the faith, ensuring that they receive instruction in both Scripture and basic doctrine, things like catechism, Sunday school, and Christian education. It means a whole host of things, all of which come with a cost.

What Peter did not understand is that since God’s way of bringing about the blessings of the messianic age came only through the cross and the empty tomb, Jesus could say of this fisherman, “you do not understand the things of God.” Jesus corrected Peter’s misconception and made things perfectly clear. To confess Jesus as Messiah, is to confess our allegiance to his cross and passion. If Jesus is who he says he is, then we must go wherever he goes. He is our leader and our master. He corrects us, we do not correct him.

When Jesus tells us that there is one way—the way of the cross, which leads to death to self, and then to eternal life, he rejects all other ways, which include gaining the world but avoiding the shame of the cross. With these words, Jesus opens up a huge chasm between our feet and forces us to jump to one side or the other. In doing this, Jesus forced all those present who heard him teach to make the most important and fundamental decision they will ever make. Following him entails a huge price—shame and humiliation. Not following him entails a far greater price— the loss of your very soul.

You have heard Jesus’ words. You have been given a lesson by the Messiah himself into the mysterious things of God. Which will it be? Gain the world? Or lose your soul? Die to self (really, to self-righteousness, and thereby gain eternal life? Or, do you think the way of the cross is too costly? Either way, it is time to decide. Jesus demanded that of those who heard him preach. He now demands this of you as well. Beloved the way of the cross is the way to glory!