

## **“Truth about our faith” 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.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

I think that today's Gospel reading reveals no less than the truth about Christianity. At first it may not seem to be the most pleasant summary. I propose that as we meditate upon Jesus' words, we try to answer two very important questions.

**First, what is Christianity really about according to how Jesus explains it here? And, second, why would anyone want to be a Christian?**

So, what is Christianity really about? It is an important question. We need to know the answer if we want to be up for the Great Commission – making disciples. It is not that easy. Why? For one, we want to look good in the eyes of others.

We want to present our faith in a way that is acceptable and attractive to people around us. Therefore, often you can see how Christians try to show how many benefits come with being a Christian.

Some may promise: “Come, we are such a loving community!” Except, broken sinners gathered in the Church aren't necessarily the most loving community. And that is fine, we are not perfect, we all are sinners in need of God's forgiveness and restoration. There is no need to hide it and to pretend that everything is fine. This is one community where we should be able to be honest.

Others may say things like: “We have such engaging events happening, many programs, great coffee, superb music, they are top notch, come and join us!” Except that such awesome events often are nothing else than mimicking after the way the world entertains us, offering us what our sinful flesh craves for.

Yet others may say: “See we are modern, going with the times, relevant, progressive!” Which really means that we are in the world and of the world. No difference. Or yet others may offer miracles, healings, God's own power to make our wishes come true, success and life free from suffering. Come and be blessed!

Great bite for the desperate! Christians may say things like these with good intentions, hoping that those outside will notice us, will like us, and maybe will join us. We would hope that at least Jesus would affirm and help us in all such efforts.

But as we listen to Him, He seems to offer no help at all. **“I must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes [that is by all the important people in society whose views really matter] and then be killed in the most brutal way.”**

Doesn't sound like a great way to promote your movement, or to encourage your followers. Who would find that appealing? Dear Peter takes things in his hands and does the best to correct those awkward ideas. He goes ahead and begins to rebuke Jesus! Peter rebukes Jesus...

Jesus turns around, sees the other disciples and people and... Unbelievable! He forgets all the principles of respectful dialogue. What a shame! Instead, He declares: **“Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”**

So much about how to honour those who speak against the Word of God. Then it gets even worse, Jesus makes his sales pitch! Jesus doesn't invite us to set our minds on all those sorts of good things that Christians may try to offer to attract outsiders to their communities.

Jesus silences Peter. I guess He silences everyone. **“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”** What a great line ... if you want to drive people away. But Jesus doesn't stop there, He continues:

**“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 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.”**

It seems that Jesus is of no help at all if we want to make Christianity appealing to the world. That is, indeed, a hard saying, and who can listen to it?! We could rephrase what Jesus said and put it this way. If we are ashamed of Jesus and His words now, then Jesus will be ashamed of us when He came in the glory of the Father.

If we are ashamed of being Christians because we want to have a better life here and are afraid of being rejected or losing something because of our commitment to Jesus, then we better think about what is at stake.

We may hope by shying away from Jesus to gain something in this life. But by doing that, we risk losing everything in the life to come. That's what is at stake. And why would we be ashamed of the One to whom we owe everything, who sacrificed Himself for us, who has prepared for us a glorious future, instead trying to please and look more acceptable in the eyes of those who are His enemies? Doesn't make sense!

So, what are we to do? The word is very clear. Turn away from your selfish desires, deny yourself, be faithful to Jesus and the message that He has entrusted to us, even

if it makes your lives more difficult, and joyfully follow the example of our rejected and suffering Lord Jesus.

We can see that what Jesus here expects from His disciples is – do not be ashamed of Him. What is the opposite of being ashamed? Being honoured to be His disciples and, if needed, to suffer rejection together with our Lord. Yes!

Being honoured, being grateful for the unbelievable privilege that is given to us, that we are called children of God. Being honoured and rejoicing to live out our identity, delighting in God's wisdom for our marriages and families, appreciating God's blessed order for His household, the Church, striving to be generous and gracious, serving and witnessing, striving to live fully as God's children.

This is not only good news; this is great news. Wonderful news. You are chosen by the holy God before the creation of the world. You are called to be members of His own family. You have received this gift of God that surpasses our understanding.

While being a part of this wicked generation, you already are made heirs of the New Heavens and the New Earth, where God Himself will dwell among us. Why would we be ashamed of it? It doesn't even make sense. We should overflow in joy and gratitude, praising our Lord Jesus whenever we can, in words and actions.

But what does this '**deny yourself**' mean? A few examples. Don't try to satisfy what your sinful heart desires, instead, learn what Jesus expects from you, learn to love and to desire what is truly good and beneficial for you and others.

Follow Jesus' example, serve people in your life, pray for opportunities to tell about Jesus and the Father. Don't be obsessed with chasing your happiness or entertaining yourself, less TV, less Internet, instead, spend more time listening to our Lord Jesus.

Rethink your stewardship, don't waste money on luxury, on things that you don't need. Rather give to the Gospel, so that more people can come to know Jesus. Don't use your holidays for meaningless parties, or socializing or hobbies that only boost your ego, but come and support God's saints as we all worship together.

How appealing does that sound? Much gain or fun for us? Yes? No? Sounds a bit like a cross... at least to our sinful flesh. The cross for us is nothing else than inconveniences and sometimes losses that we may need to suffer because of our Christian faith, because we want to honour and praise Jesus and follow Him, live according to His Word, instead of living just like this adulterous generation.

We can't prioritize our wishes above everything else and to be faithful followers of Jesus at the same time. The truth about Christianity is that it is not about us looking for our good or trying to satisfy ourselves. It is about following our rejected Lord, about honouring and praising Him, about learning to love what is truly good, and striving to live that way.

That is challenging. **That's why our second question – “knowing all this, why would anyone want to be a Christian?”** There are very good reasons. Remember, what

happened after Jesus' crucifixion and death? He rose from the dead in a new, resurrected, glorified and imperishable body.

More wonderful and beautiful than we can imagine. And He promised that He will raise us up as well. That all His people, whatever weak or imperfect we are now, whatever broken or hopeless our lives may be, we will have such new, resurrected, glorious and beautiful bodies.

More than that, the whole world, the heavens and the earth will be restored, so that there will be no more sin, nor pain, nor suffering, nor death. Instead, the Holy God Himself will dwell among us, and we will see Him face to face as He is.

It will be a life of never-ending joy and blessedness, where all our deepest longings are satisfied. It will be a life for which our God has created us. This wonderful hope, as Paul the apostle said, is what makes all the challenges, rejection and suffering of this life look insignificant, and it makes following Jesus so joyful.

If you were still listening, now you could say: "Aha, Pastor, we got you! You said that following Jesus is not about desiring something for ourselves, but now you are saying that the main motivation, the main hope for Christians is all these promises in the life to come. What about that? Isn't that selfish?" Glad that you asked!

The thing is, that all these mind-blowing and humbling promises for the life to come are not something that we desire for ourselves. We couldn't even imagine such grandeur. They are what God your Father and your Lord Jesus desires for you.

This was His intention from the very beginning. You all are created for much, much more than even the best experiences in this age. You are created for life in God's very presence. He desires to have you with Him. He desires to bless you.

He desires that you receive everything that He as our loving Father in His generosity and creativity has prepared for you. He wants you to be there and to overflow with joy and praise. This eternal hope is not what we naturally desire.

This is what our Triune God wants for you. This is what He will deliver when Jesus returns in the glory of His Father with His holy angels. It is about our Father's eternal will being fulfilled; His mission accomplished!

This is why we are Christians. This hope is what keeps us going even when we have our crosses to carry. And you know it from your own experience, that even the things that our old selves may see as crosses, can become the most joyful and uplifting experiences when we carry them together with Jesus.

This is the truth about Christianity revealed. It is not about our gains in this worldly sense, even as our Lord often chooses to bless us abundantly. Christianity cannot be appealing or popular according to worldly standards. But properly understood it is about incredible and abundant blessings for us according to the plan of our God.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, don't be ashamed, be honoured to bear the name of Jesus. Bear it proudly. Bear it graciously. Deny your sinful desires with joy, carry your crosses gladly, for you know what awaits you when Jesus returns. Amen.