

Mark 8:31-38

³¹Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

³⁴He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Historical Context

The Christian church at the time of the Renaissance was riding high. It dominated the personal, social and political lives of Europeans. The landscape was dotted with its magnificent cathedrals. The church could command armies to do its will. Its leaders lived like princes, surrounded by wealth and pomp. In its return to the Bible, the Reformation rejected this “theology of glory” in favor of a “theology of the cross.”

Theme: Follow Him and His Ways

Jesus astonished and dismayed the disciples with the news that he would undergo suffering, be rejected by the religious leaders and killed. This news was so contrary to the disciple’s expectations. But, it was Jesus’ way of helping them begin to understand that “my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways.”

By our human nature we want to be prosperous, strong, successful and influential. Jesus has other priorities. He came to serve, not to be served. His ways are not our ways, yet he invites us to follow him and his ways. To follow Jesus is to live lives of service to others, to serve rather than to control and dominate. It means the opposite of being proud of station and status for ourselves at the expense of others.

The “theology of the cross” or “to deny oneself” does not mean a contrived kind of humility. We are called upon to do the very best we can with the talents and abilities God has given us. To “deny oneself” means to keep one’s priorities in harmony with what Jesus told us in the two “great commandments” — love God and love your neighbor (Mark 12:28-31).

Jesus gives us this hope for the future, but in this text, we are called upon to follow him not just for this future, but in this life.