

“A Popularity Contest?”—Mark 8:34-38

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “A Popularity Contest?”, is Mark 8:34-38 → *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.”* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

How many of you experienced a group classification during your high school days referred to as “the popular kids?” If memory serves me correctly, someone in our school was “popular” because s/he was well-known for some reason. Kids who excelled in sports, drama or music were usually considered “popular” as those were the most visible activities and entertainment frequented by students within the school community and by adults in the community at large. “Popularity contests” extend into adulthood as people seek to be connected to the most

popular person or ideal of the moment. “Popularity polls” abound constantly in an effort to sway peoples’ ideals, commitments and actions.

While it may be true that some of these “popular” people basked in such popularity even to the point of “looking down” on others contemptuously, it is interesting how the categorization of “popular” is based on your own perception of yourself in relationship to the others who make up your “community.” Thus, while you may not consider yourself part of the “popular” crowd, others may. Ultimately, “popularity” is a subjective measure of priorities, ideals and self-image which is actually a very unstable basis for living. The “popularity contest” can never be won because it is based on the relative feelings of fickle people who may like you one moment and despise you in the next.

This was especially true for Jesus. The teaching of Jesus in our text was a response countering the “popular” beliefs of His disciples and the Jews amongst whom He did His earthly ministry. Jesus started it by taking a “survey” of sorts in Mark 8:27 → *He asked His disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”* This is a valid question in light of the fact that, from the beginning of His public ministry, *His fame spread everywhere.* (cf. Matthew 4:24; 9:31; 14:1; Mark 1:28) After hearing the “popular opinions” spreading about Him, He ask His disciples what they’re opinion of Him was—*But who do you say that I am?*—to which Peter responded by the guidance of the Holy Spirit: *You are the Christ.* (cf. Mark 8:28-29)

However, even His disciples' "popular" view of *the Christ*—the Messiah promised in the Old Testament Scriptures—was not proper. When Jesus *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 . . . Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him.* Jesus immediately confronted the misconception of his "popular" opinion: *Get behind me, satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.* (cf. Mark 8:31-33)

The idea of a Messiah or Savior who would let himself be treated so terribly was not the "popular" opinion of His disciples or the people. Their mind was set toward the Messiah who healed their sick, raised their dead, freed them from demon possession and performed all those wonderful miracles which blessed their lives so much! Jesus did not conduct His earthly ministry on the basis of how popular He was in the public's eye. Rather, He conducted His ministry on the basis of being faithful to His heavenly Father's will for the salvation of the whole world based upon the written Word of God. That Word revealed a Messiah Who was God's **Suffering Servant**. (cf. Isaiah 53:3-6.)

Then, *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."* The life of a Christian is not a popularity contest, either

from the perspective of the individual or others. The world is involved in such perceptions but the Church and the individual Christians who make up the Church should never hold such perceptions. We fall into the same “mind-set” as Peter when we think congregations or servants or ministries are “successful” or “popular” or “working” based upon followers, attendance, programs, dynamics, styles and so forth.

The challenge for us Christians is expressed in Jesus’ command in verse 34 of our text to *deny* yourself. This is one of the most difficult things to do. It is especially hard to deny yourself by letting go of your own ways of thinking when those ways match that which is “popular” according to the worldly standards of this sinful world. It is a willingness to go against what is popular in a given context and even express the unpopular truth of God’s Word and Will in Jesus, the Christ. This can be your *cross* that you will have to *take up* as you *follow* Jesus, desiring to be faithful to Him instead of being popular with those around you. The *cross* in Scriptures is always the persecution a follower of Jesus will receive as you submit yourself to Him. It is referred to in 1 Peter 2:21 (as Peter learned) → *For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in His steps.*

Such “cross-bearing” could lead to being killed for your faith in Jesus, the Christ. This may be the meaning of Jesus’ words in verse 35 of our

text: *For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever **loses his life for My sake and the gospel's** will save it.* Yet it goes much deeper than simply dying physically for Christ's *sake and the gospel's*. Jesus expands upon this losing your life for His *sake and the gospel's* in His rhetorical questions of verses 36-37 in our text: *For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? Nothing. For what can a man give in return for his soul? Nothing.*

You may have all the popular success in this life according to the world's standards—friends; good job; wonderful spouse and family; respected by family, friends and community; a reputation of benevolence and mercy; money; fame; you name it—and still forfeit your soul to the devil and eternal suffering in hell. This is the reality of Jesus' warning in verse 38 of our text: *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.* On the other hand, many who have such popular success may strive to present it to God in an effort to get their forfeited soul back and still end up with nothing because there is nothing you can give in return for your soul.

But . . . there is still hope. Jesus' words are spoken to all people today: *If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.* It is time to lose your life in Jesus by repenting

of your sin of idolatry fueled by the popularity context of the world. When you follow Jesus with wholehearted humility you will discover that popularity in this worldly life is nothing compared to the eternal life which is yours through Him! Following Jesus on the basis of the written Word of God brings you to what He fulfilled **for you** when He suffered those things as He was *rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and* killed and rose again from the dead. You are forgiven and given both eternal life and a new life now under the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit when you lose your life through faith in Christ!

Your new life in Holy Spirit recognizes that even though the gospel is not “popular” to the sinful world, it is very “popular” to Christians because it is our power. You will boldly confess in the words of Romans 1:16 → *I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes*. In it you find forgiveness, salvation and the strength to stand against the tide of sin so popular in the world. Even the suffering connected to bearing your cross of persecution is viewed from an unpopular world view. Instead of comparing your sufferings to someone else worse off than you, you will look to something far more powerful than such a meager comparison for strength. Romans 8:18 tells us to *consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing **with the glory that is to be revealed to us***. Giving up everything that’s “popular” according to

worldly standards, we fix our life and focus on Jesus and the life prepared for us with Him eternally in His presence. Amen.

*Let us . . . lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely,  
and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,  
looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith,  
Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross,  
despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand  
of the throne of God.*

*Consider Him Who endured from sinners  
such hostility against Himself,  
so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.*

(Hebrews 12:1-3)

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