

**September 13, 2009**

## **Mark 8: The Cost of Convictions**

**Purpose:** To consider the consequences of faithful discipleship

Key Bible reference: Mark 8:27-9:13

Key Verse: Mark 8:34

### **Biblical Interpretation**

With Peter's "confession" (Mark 8:27-30), the second "half" of Mark's Gospel begins. Mark has sometimes been called a "Passion story with an introduction." In Mark 8:27, Jesus begins moving inevitably toward Jerusalem and the cross awaiting him there. Until this point, Jesus has carried out his ministry in Galilee among the crowds. Now, most of what Jesus says is spoken privately to the disciples.

Our Bible lesson includes the first of three "Passion predictions" (also see 9:30-32; 10:32-34) in which Jesus foretells his suffering, death, and resurrection. A pattern appears in each of these predictions: First, Jesus predicts his passion; next, the disciples misunderstand the meaning of Jesus' words; finally, Jesus clarifies his meaning by teaching about discipleship.

Mark 8:27. It is significant that Jesus left Galilee to go to the villages surrounding Caesarea Philippi. This was his first venture outside Galilee into Gentile territory. Since Caesarea Philippi was on the boundary between the Holy Land and Gentile territory, Jesus must decide whether to go toward Jerusalem or away from it. The phrase "the way" occurs several times in the rest of the Gospel of Mark. Often, it means "the way to the cross." This phrase can also mean "the way of discipleship." Jesus asks the disciples who the "people" (crowds) think he is.

Verse 28. Jesus' question to his disciples is answered with the same three titles given

earlier in 6:14-16. The occasion for these titles being scribed to Jesus was Herod's curiosity about who Jesus was.

Verse 29. The same question about Jesus' identity is now turned on the disciples. While this verse is often called "Peter's confession," it is clear that he was speaking on behalf of all twelve disciples. Peter was often the spokesperson for the disciples. Messiah is a Hebrew word that means "anointed one," indicating a kingly figure with God-given power. As we will see, while the disciples knew that Jesus was the Messiah, they did not comprehend what kind of Messiah he was.

Verse 30. Just as the demons (unclean spirits) had been warned to be quiet about Jesus' identity, now the disciples are told to keep it secret. The word translated as "sternly ordered" is the same word translated as "rebuke" in verses 32-33. Many commentators interpret this warning by Jesus as an implicit acceptance of the title of Messiah. What is clear is that Jesus did not deny that he is the Christ/Messiah.

Verse 31. Jesus used the title "Son of Man" rather than Messiah in referring to himself. In the Book of Ezekiel in the Old Testament, Ezekiel is addressed as "O mortal" ("son of man" in the Revised Standard Version) over eighty times. Ezekiel's prophetic ministry was parallel to Jesus' in several striking ways: Ezekiel was filled with God's Spirit and spoke God's

word to the people; he often spoke in riddles much like Jesus' parables; he announced the coming of God's judgment just as Jesus proclaimed the coming of God's reign.

Jesus taught that the "Son of Man must undergo great suffering." Thus he linked his ministry with the "suffering servant" of Isaiah 40-55. There are remarkable similarities between the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 and Jesus' suffering and rejection by the religious authorities. The "elders, the chief priests, and the scribes" are those who made up the Sanhedrin, the council of seventy-one 'who ruled the Jews in religious matters. Eventually, the Sanhedrin put Jesus on trial and convicted him of blasphemy (14:64). The phrase "after three days" can also mean "on the third day" or "a short time."

Verses 32-33. This is the first time that Jesus speaks "openly" of his destiny rather than using metaphors or parables (see 4:11, 34). Because of the nearness of the cross, direct speech was needed. Peter reacted violently to Jesus' directness. He rebuked Jesus. Peter seemed to be rejecting the idea that Jesus would suffer and die. He misunderstood the kind of Messiah ("suffering servant") that Jesus is. By "turning and looking" at the disciples, Jesus conveyed the point that his words of rebuke to Peter were meant for all the disciples to hear. Peter is now cast in the role of tempter because he wanted Jesus to accomplish his mission while avoiding the cross. Like the tempter in Matthew and Luke, Peter wanted Jesus to establish God's reign by taking a painless shortcut around the cross.

Verse 34. In Mark 8:34-9:1, there are five distinct sayings about discipleship. In Matthew and Luke these sayings are scattered in different places. Jesus addresses "the crowd

with his disciples," showing that the sayings are meant for everyone. To "deny" oneself calls to mind the disciples leaving behind homes, professions, and family to follow Jesus. To "take up their cross" calls to mind the condemned carrying their crossbar as part of the Roman method of execution. The cross bearing called for here seems to be metaphorical rather than literal. However, several of the disciples were martyred for their faith. Jesus was issuing a serious call to discipleship that requires self-denial and self-sacrifice.

Verse 35. Jesus gives the paradox of being a disciple: To seek to "save" one's life is to "lose" it. This metaphor could be paraphrased, "Those who desperately cling to life will lose, but those who live in self-giving love will find true life." The phrase "for the sake of the gospel" shows that the commitment to discipleship continued after Jesus' death.

Verses 36-37. The two questions contained in these verses are really statements. Verse 36 may be based on a proverb that was known during Jesus' time about riches having no value in the face of death. The point made by the first question is that true fulfillment cannot come through even the greatest of achievements ("gain the whole world"). The point of the second question is that there is no compensation for losing one's life.

Verse 38. This verse is difficult because Jesus begins speaking of himself in the first person ("me and my words") and then switches to the third person when he refers to himself as the Son of Man. The implication is that there were those in the community to whom Mark was writing who may have been cautious about confessing their faith during a time of official Roman persecution of Christians. This warning

to those who are "ashamed" of Jesus was meant to encourage steadfastness in faith. "Adulterous" probably means "unfaithful" to the gospel rather than sexually immoral.

Mark 9:1. Commentators offer several different interpretations of this verse: (1) The kingdom of God has come in the words and deeds of Jesus; (2) the kingdom of God "come[s] with power" at Jesus' death on the cross; (3) those "seeing" the kingdom of God are those who witness the Transfiguration (9:2-8). The expectation that the first generation of Christians would see the fulfillment of the kingdom of God in their lifetime can be found at several points in the New Testament (see, for example see 1 Corinthians 7:26-31; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18).