

Mark 9v30-50 Sermon: Selflessness

What does it mean to deny yourself? In one of the central verses in Mark's gospel, back in chapter 8v34, Jesus says "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me".

Last week we saw Jesus showing more of his power and his identity as God's King who's going to the cross. In fact, he predicts his death three times in this section of Mark's gospel, and today's passage starts with the second of those predictions. And each time Jesus says that he must die, he highlights how his followers must be ready to deny themselves, to die to self. If you're a Christian here today, here's some guidance and advice from Jesus himself about what it looks like to be his follower. I think we want to listen closely to what he has to say!

But if you're not a Christian, maybe you're thinking about following Jesus – this is important for you too as it shows us more about what it means to make that change – what has to change and what the guiding principles of life are like for followers of Jesus. And we get Jesus' 12 closest disciples as an example here. Not model followers, not by any means, not perfect examples, but a group of ordinary blokes who are learning what it's like to follow Jesus. If you're at all considering that today, listen in, because Jesus is going to tell us.

And the guiding principle is selflessness. That's the title of our sermon today – selflessness. Denying yourself, denying your self. Charlie was teaching us about this a couple of weeks ago – going through little deaths each day, dying to self, giving up things now for the sake of gaining eternal life. I think this is what our passage today is about. It all feels a bit like some unconnected thoughts, but Mark has put them all together, and I think selflessness is a pretty good way to summarise it. I won't pretend I'm 100% confident about every little detail, but I do think Jesus is elaborating here on what it means to deny yourself. So we're going to see today four things that Jesus teaches us about selflessness and the first one is probably the most crucial one.

1. Selflessness is Christlike v30-32

This is vital to remember. Being a disciple is not about passing a test – it means following Jesus. Walking in his footsteps, doing what he did. And that's why Jesus and Mark start this section by talking about Jesus' death again.

"They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples." This is private teaching for those who are trying to follow Jesus. This is what they need to know about him. "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him and after three days he will rise."

This is Jesus' plan, God's plan for his Son. Death at the hands of the people he created. Jesus will simply not let his followers forget this! It's so important for them to know, because it's the only way they can be saved! Some people say that Jesus is a good moral teacher, someone who came to change the culture and make us better people. Well he does do that, but the life change only comes as a response to Jesus' own selfless act of dying on the cross.

Jesus doesn't sit back and say "There's a cross, take it up, go and be ready to die for me." Jesus says "There's the cross, I have died for you, you can have eternal life, because I have paid for your sin. Now here's how I want you to live if you love me." Selflessness is first and foremost something Jesus demonstrated. And he calls us to it because it is how to be like him.

We don't get to heaven by doing good works. That might be surprising to some of us. But it's true! As Stefan grows up, we hope that he comes to know this for himself. Being a Christian is not about what we do, it's about what's already been done for us. Jesus went to die on the cross for those of us who believe in him. We can't live a godly life unless we understand what Jesus has done for us. Imagine a car without an engine – that's what it's like if we try and obey Jesus' commandments without believing that he died for us. Grace drives godliness. God's grace shown at the cross is what motivates us to live a good life. Selflessness is Christlike, following Jesus' example. So while we hope Stefan is a good, obedient child who listens to his Mum and Dad, and is selfless, like how Jesus describes in the rest of the passage – the more important thing is that he knows what Jesus has already done for him!

If you're not a Christian here today – do you understand that? A Christian may live differently to the rest of the world, but that's not what makes them a Christian. What makes someone a Christian is the belief that Jesus died and rose again for them, to forgive their sins. Any change of life is a response to forgiveness, not something that earns the forgiveness.

The disciples didn't get it, v32, but one day they would and they would spread this wonderful news all over Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

So as we look more about Jesus' teaching on selflessness – let's keep this at the front of our minds. Selflessness is Christlike. Jesus did it first.

2. Selflessness is service v33-37

And now they come to Capernaum, and as they go into a house, Jesus turns to them and says "What was going on back there? What was that argument about? Care to share it with the group?" And "they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest."

"I'm important because Jesus asked me to follow him first" "Yes, but Jesus took *me* up the mountain with him while you were down at the bottom failing to do a miracle." Jesus had told them "deny yourself" and here they are bigging themselves up! How badly they'd missed the point!

And Jesus knew, of course he did, I don't think that's anything to do with him being the Son of God, I think he just overheard their bickering. So here's when he starts teaching them about selflessness.

And what he says is “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last and the servant of all”. It’s another upside-down statement. Remember 8v35 “Whoever loses their life for me and the gospel will save it” Don’t save your life, lose your life. Don’t try and be first, be last of all, and servant of all. Last and servant – they’re two interconnected thoughts. The servant is the one who is last, the one who puts others first, serving them, caring more about their needs than about their own.

This is what it means to deny yourself, this is true greatness in Jesus’ kingdom. Not – “I’m better than you” but “How can I serve you?” This is important for Christian workers, like Charlie, and the elders, and the staff team – we shouldn’t be motivated by status and position. We should be motivated by service. When I speak at church on a Sunday I should seek to build you up in your faith, not to make myself look good. When Charlie sees the church growing, he should think – how can I best help these people in their walk with the Lord – not “Wow, I’m a great pastor”.

But it’s not just leaders or staff workers that need to be servants. It’s each one of us! There’s a way in which it’s ingrained into our culture that it’s nice to serve others. We hold doors open, we get people tea, things like that – but I think what Jesus is calling us to here is something even more radical. Being willing to do the jobs in church that nobody sees or thanks anyone for. Dropping our plans to help a friend in need, and not expecting anything in return. That is true greatness in Jesus’ kingdom. Because – don’t forget – he did it first. He was the ultimate servant, who took the lowest of the lowest positions, to die on a cross.

This plays out in big ways, a real attitude change so that we’re people of service, not people who grab at power and status and who love to be seen by others. People who say “I’ll do what needs to be done” and help out in church in the way that’s needed, instead of insisting on doing the jobs we like, or serving the way we want. And maybe making an effort to be here regularly so you can serve on the teams. But it also plays out in small ways – in the home, in friendships, in public. Putting the tray back at McDonald’s as a way of serving the staff. Coming home promptly after work as a way of serving your family. Welcoming the new person at your work, or sports team, or in church instead of always talking to your mates. That’s being the last and the servant of all. This is the selflessness Jesus calls us to.

And he illustrates it by talking about children. “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.” Welcoming little children is a good test for whether or not you’re willing to be a servant. Because children just don’t care. Those of us who’ve looked after small children – cousins, nephews, nieces, family friends, and particularly those of you who have children of your own will know – you can do all manner of things for a small child, and they won’t thank you, or bat an eyelid. You can give up hours of your time on holiday to play with them and their toy cars, when really you’d like to be sitting reading a book, and the next time they see you they won’t have a clue who you are. You can give up your sleep for months on end because of your baby and they don’t know you’re doing it! They just toddle along trying to eat batteries, not knowing how much you’re serving them. It won’t

win you any status, it won't make you the greatest. But Jesus says that welcoming, caring for little children is equivalent to welcoming the Son of God himself. That's how important it is.

Selflessness is Christlike, selflessness is service

3. Selflessness is harmony v38-41

So the next thing that happens is John pipes up, perhaps he was feeling a little bit guilty about that rebuke that he and the other disciples have just received, so he proudly tells Jesus "Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us." Just imagine how the 12 would have felt when watching this – someone who's not part of Jesus' inner circle is doing what back earlier in chapter 9, Jesus' closest followers had failed to do. And so the disciples went up to this exorcist fellow and said "Sorry, you can't drive out demons in Jesus' name. That's only for the in-crowd to do, and that's not you."

Can you see how backwards their thinking is? Firstly they're stopping demons being driven out. This guy isn't 'trying to cast out demons' the text implies he's succeeding, and they try and stop him! For the 12 disciples, their exclusive status as Jesus' clique is more important than curing someone of their demonic possession. And secondly, this guy is not an opponent to Jesus' ministry – did you see that? He's casting out demons "In Jesus' name"! The exorcist bloke is bringing glory to Jesus by demonstrating Jesus' power over evil forces. And the disciples told him to stop because his very existence threatens their pride!

And Jesus says "You plonkers!" Well actually he's a bit more patient than that, he says "Don't stop him! For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us." Come on lads! He's not going to do any harm against us! You should be concerned about whether he's going to say anything bad about me, not about your own reputation!" This is selflessness: not making yourself more important than others, not being exclusive, not putting yourself at the centre, claiming to be part of the in-crowd while others are just on the sidelines.

Doesn't this sound all a little bit close to home for us in the modern world? Aren't there times when we get a bit jealous when a church down the road that's stylistically very different to us gets a load of people coming to an event? Or when we hear about an American megachurch that has some slightly wacky theology baptising hundreds of people? Don't we sometimes want to tell them to stop "because they're not one of us"? Now, by all means we can disagree, and we absolutely should stand up for what we believe the Bible says, but we mustn't let our differences with other churches or Christian groups fuel our pride. "They're not a *real* Christian, because they don't share the same view on this secondary issue as me. They're not a *real* Christian because the style of their church is different." If there are churches or individuals who love Jesus and are seeking to serve him – they're real Christians! Do not stop them! By all means we can correct, rebuke and encourage – and in some cases that's vitally important! But a) let's not stop people serving Jesus and b) let's not build up a complex saying "We're the in-crowd, you out there aren't real Christians". I know I'm often prone to do that.

But that's selfish – focussing on ourselves. If we are to deny ourselves, to be selfless, then we should be serving in harmony with other Christians. Humbly accepting that Jesus is the one on the throne and that the glory should go to Him. If someone else has a really effective ministry – praise God! That brings him glory! But all too often we want the glory to go to us. We're selfish, and we forget that it's God's work, not ours. And so we should focus on him, and work in harmony with others.

And then v41 I think links into this – “Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.” A cup of water would have been a welcome gift in the climate of the 1st century middle east! And Jesus says that anyone who supports the ministry of the disciples in this way will be rewarded. Again, he's stopping them thinking exclusively, thinking about “us and them” with other Christians. We're all working together, there's a role for everyone in God's mission. Some people go around proclaiming the word, some provide someone with a glass of cold water. And none are better than anyone else. Both are valuable things to do in God's kingdom. Be in harmony with others, work together, don't be proud – deny yourself and work not for your own glory, or to be the centre of attention, but for God's glory.

Selflessness is Christlike, selflessness is service, selflessness is harmony

4. Selflessness is seriousness about sin v42-49

There are two distinct things Jesus talks about here, but both are concerned with selflessness and sin

a) Selflessness is seriousness about others' sin

“If anyone causes one of these little ones – those who believe in me – to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung round their neck and they were thrown into the sea.” Whatever we do, we should consider whether it leads someone else to sin. If it does – put them first, be their servant, and don't do it! Leading someone else into sin is a big deal! Avoid it when at all possible!

Let's take an example – you have a friend who has a problem with drinking and very easily would drink too much, which would be a sin. If you have a glass of wine with dinner, it's not a problem for you. But if you're spending an evening with your friend, and you have wine, and they go home and have two more bottles. You've caused them to sin! So deny yourself that glass of wine – though you might enjoy it, it would cause your friend to sin. Paul goes into this sort of thing in the last few chapters of Romans, we don't have time to look at it now, but the main idea is – don't cause someone else to sin, put them first, serve them, help them resist temptation, be selfless

b) Selflessness is serious about our own sin

Now here comes the graphic section of today's passage. If your hand, foot or eye cause you to sin – get rid of them! Lose your eye now, and gain eternal life! Or keep your limbs now and stay in unrepentant sin, and end up in hell. That word for hell is the word “Gehenna” which is the name for the rubbish dump outside Jerusalem where there was a constant

burning fire. That's vivid picture language for God's judgment, unquenchable fire and worms eating decaying flesh.

Now, we know that Jesus doesn't mean "If you sin at all, that's where you're heading!" We know he's paid the price for our sin by dying on the cross. BUT – Jesus is saying that sin is such a serious business we should take drastic steps to cutting it out of our lives. We can't let it fester! Or it may just draw us further and further away from God. The puritan John Owen said "Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you." If we're complacent about sin, if we don't care about changing our lives – the question we need to ask is have we really grasped the gospel?

And Jesus uses imagery to make that clear, imagery of cutting off hands, feet and eyes. Now I don't think he's being literal, because he picks things we have two of, so removing one isn't going to make the difference. I think what Jesus is doing is showing that there's a real sacrifice involved in rooting out sin from your life. If there's something in your life that's causing you to sin – get rid of it! You may enjoy or appreciate that thing, but that's part of denying yourself and taking up your cross.

If your Instagram account causes you to sin, making your eyes wander where they shouldn't delete it!

If playing sport causes you to sin, causing you to get overly angry and hurtful towards others, give it up.

Selflessness means seriousness about your own sin, getting rid of the parts of your life and lifestyle that are drawing you away from God and causing you to sin. "Give it up" isn't always the answer, there may be better ways to help you keep yourself from sinning. But maybe it is the answer, and maybe sometimes we avoid it because we're selfish and we care more about our stuff and our comfort than our holiness.

So selflessness is Christlike, service, harmony and seriousness about sin.

But what about v49-50

I'd be lying if I told you I fully understood it, but I think v49 is an extension of Jesus' description of judgment – the fire of God's wrath coming on everyone.

And v50, if we look at other references to salt in Jesus' teaching, we see that he wants his followers to be salt. He never specifies what that means but it could be something to do with purity – salt being something that purifies, and preserves. But it could also be tastiness. Salt tastes good, right? Salted butter is infinitely better than unsalted butter!

So if Jesus' followers are going to be salt – they are bringing purity into an impure society, and being attractive, being tasty, having a lifestyle that draws others in and makes them say "That's good, I want to get involved!"

And this is Jesus' guidebook to being salty. This selflessness. This is salty, this is distinctive, this is purifying and tasty. So don't lose it! Don't lose this saltiness! It's no good if you do!

So “Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with one another.” I think he’s going back here to the argument they were having – be selfless, don’t fight about who’s the greatest. Live at peace with one another!

Selflessness is service – serve one another

Selflessness is harmony – work together for God’s glory, not our own.

Selflessness is seriousness about sin – don’t cause others to sin, and root out your own sin

But why? Because Jesus sets the standard for selflessness. He’s our King and our Lord who denied himself and became obedient to death for our sake. His way, the way of the cross, is how we are to live as his followers. Let’s pray.

Charlie’s thoughts

- More on structure, 3 repeats of prediction of death. But don’t worry about that too much.
- A few references to Stefan
- Keep things simple where you can for the benefit of guests
- Can trim introduction a bit, cut stuff about “not 100% confidence”
- Pad out point 1 a bit more, trim points 2 and 3. Add an illustration of grace engine, helpful for the more religious folks
- Point 2, good application, maybe “we should welcome children even though they’re *unimportant*” but don’t worry too much about that, maybe trim it a bit
- Point 3, “in the modern church”. Maybe also cut the word “American”.
- The phrase “secondary issue” is a bit jargon-y, maybe explain what it means
- Good application in point 4