

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO “BELIEVE IN JESUS” FOR SALVATION?

Sunday, September 8<sup>th</sup>, 10 a.m. - Teaching #2153

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I'd like to consider two passages of Scripture as we look at this subject:

**Mark 1:14-15** - “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, [15] and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.’”

**Mark 8:34-38** - “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. [35] For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. [36] For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? [37] For what can a man give in return for his soul? [38] 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.’”

Mark is the apostolic author in both texts and Jesus is the speaker in both texts. Also, the gospel is the subject in both texts. They are both about finding forgiveness and life eternal in Jesus Christ.

But they feel very different. One - the first - seems *easier* in terms than the second. One just says “*repent and believe in the gospel*” (1:15). The other demands *self-denial*, *cross carrying*, and *losing one’s life* (8:34-35).

Here’s the question I want to ask. Are these two texts describing the same thing? And I think the reason that’s an important question is it’s very easy for church people to think that “*believing the gospel*” salvation is salvation for your average *run-of-the-mill Christian*, while the more demanding instructions about losing one’s life, daily cross-carrying, and incessant self-denial are for your *hard-core* Christians - the kind that end up as missionaries in India or go into full-time ministry of some sort.

We need to be clear-headed about this issue. Is there a *tier system* offered for conversion? Does Jesus offer one standard form of conversion for average Christians and another long-form sign-up for hard-core Christians? Or is the “*believe the gospel*” text about *getting started* in the Christian life and the “*self-denying, cross-carrying*” text about *getting more serious* about Christ later on?

This is no slight matter. We *want* to evangelize. We *want* to proclaim the gospel. We *want* to tell people to turn from *unbelief* to *belief*. We want to say what Paul and Silas said when they called their captors to faith in Christ Jesus - **Acts 16:31** - “And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’”

These are beautiful, inviting words. They seem to invite everyone in. But then there are these other challenging words from the lips of Jesus. How shall we account for the radical sounding difference between our two opening texts?

The reason is important for everyone in this room today. *Jesus knows how neglectful we all tend to be to fill up that word “belief” with its actual content.* The New Testament truth is there is *no conversion whatsoever* for followers of Jesus with limited interest. They may *claim* salvation till the cows come home but no such salvation exists in the New Testament.

Here’s a typical situation in my mind. I was at a social function a few years ago. A man came by the table at which I was seated. He used to come to this church all the time. Now I rarely see him. As we talked and did a bit of innocent catching up he mentioned another function he had been at with a rather famous media figure. Everyone here would know this person.

Then it happened - like it so frequently happens. My friend said, “*O yes. He’s a great guy! In fact, he’s a believer*” And there was that word - “*....a believer.*”

Now, maybe this prominent man was a believer and maybe he wasn’t. I’m glad it’s not my job to sort those things out. But these two texts at least make me ask the question - *What concept of ‘believer’ are we usually carrying around when we use the term?* How are *believers* defined by common conversation today and how are they defined by our Lord and the New Testament? Are we talking about the same thing? Or are we using a label that no longer has a New Testament definition?

Don’t get me wrong. There’s certainly nothing wrong with that wonderful New Testament description - “*believer.*” We are *commanded* to repent and *believe*. The problem surfaces when we throw around that beautiful term, applying it to ourselves and all sorts of people, without ever filling it up with the kind of content Jesus poured into it.

Now we're at the heart of the issue of our two opening texts. My understanding of our two texts today is Jesus *introduces* the concept of **believing** in **Mark 1:15** and *explains* what He means by that term in **Mark 8:34-38**. And He does this because, both in His days on earth and ours today, we are reluctant to pack into that phrase - "**believing**" *the gospel, or "believing" in Jesus* - everything our New Testament means when it's used.

Let me say it again. Our Mark 8 text isn't *changing the terms of the gospel*. Jesus isn't *replacing* belief. He's revealing its *essence*. He's defining what redeeming belief *is*.

Now let's watch and see how Jesus explains the nature of "**believing the gospel**."

1) **BELIEVING THE GOSPEL MEANS FOLLOWING JESUS. AND FOLLOWING JESUS MEANS THE DEATH OF ONE SELF AND THE CREATION OF ANOTHER SELF**

**Mark 8:34-35** - "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. [35] For whoever *would save his life will lose it*, but whoever *loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it*."

By calling out to the whole crowd along *with* the disciples Jesus makes it clear His words are for *any and all* who had intention of following Him. These are *universally applied terms*. In other words, there is no possibility whatsoever of relationship with Jesus that doesn't take its shape from these words. "**Believing the gospel**" only exists in this way. These are the *only* terms for *any* followers of Jesus.

Of course, there is grace for when I fail and mess up and repent of my faulty attempts to fulfill all these terms. Who could stand otherwise? But there is no grace whatsoever for *denying* these terms exist. There is no grace at all for those who *redefine* the terms of discipleship.

Allow Jesus to settle this in your mind. **Believing the gospel means there is a self-life denied (34), a self-life crucified (34), and a self-life lost (35)**. So, as stated in our first point, there are always *two selves* involved in believing in Jesus. There is a *self denied* and there is another self *doing the denying*. There is a self *crucified* and there is another self *doing the crucifying*. There a self *lost* and there is another self *counting or reckoning that losing*.

Believing in Jesus means the creation of a *new self*. That's why Jesus called it a *new birth*. It is the complete *birthing* of another self. But the birth of this new self doesn't replace the old self *automatically*. This new self *deals radically* with the old self - *denying it - crucifying it - and losing it*.

This process *is* what Jesus called **believing the gospel**. That's the important point here. This *two self process* is the first step in what Jesus means when He calls His followers to "**repent and believe the gospel** - **Mark 1:14-15** - "....Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, [15] and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; **repent and believe in the gospel**.'"

2) **THE ESSENCE OF THE LIFE OF THE NEW SELF IS TREASURING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL AS MORE PRECIOUS AND WORTHY OF PURSUIT COMPARED WITH ANYTHING ELSE IN THIS WORLD**

This is the clear implication of Jesus' words in **Mark 8:35** - "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life *for my sake and the gospel's* will save it."

The new self is a *calculating* self It is constantly assessing and comparing the true value of things. I mean that in the best sense. **Believing means calculating**. The new self isn't interested in *old self-preservation*. It doesn't reckon like the old self. It wisely *compares* all things to the surpassing delight and treasure of **Christ and the gospel** - "....*whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's*...."

This is so important. The old self is *denied* and *crucified* and *counted lost*, true enough. But this is not done out of *morbid duty*. This is not a *dour believing*. Christ has been found as *treasure* - **Matthew 13:44** - "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then *in his joy* he goes and *sells all that he has and buys that field*."

That is Jesus' description of **believing** in Him. The essence of **believing** in Christ is finding in Him such eternal satisfaction that the treasures of the first self are seen as the imposters that they are. They are passing fancies that can't be kept. All else is fading in light of eternal joy in Christ and the gospel.

3) **JESUS IDENTIFIES TWO THREATS TO AUTHENTIC, SAVING BELIEF IN HIMSELF AND THE GOSPEL**

**Mark 8:36-38** - “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? [37] For what can a man give in return for his soul? [38] 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.”

The two threats to belief in Jesus and the gospel are always the same. They have never changed. Jesus identifies them for us. The two threats are the **love of earthly possessions** and the **love of earthly praise**.

a) **First, the love of earthly possessions - Mark 8:36-37 - “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” [37] For what can a man give in return for his soul?”**

Suppose my heart, while sitting in church and singing praise choruses and bowing in prayer, considers the practical worth of Jesus and His words and then considers the joy and excitement of all my material possessions and concerns.

Suppose I stop and actually consider the **gladness** I find in Jesus and the **gladness** I find in all my earthly things. And suppose my heart is more drawn to my earthly things than to Jesus and His words.

Then suppose my turning from Jesus and my commitment to earthly things results in my actually **possessing the treasures I pursue in measures beyond my wildest dreams**. Amazon is mine. Google is mine. FaceBook is mine. Apple is mine. Gaining the whole world is no longer just a poetic phrase. It's very close to a reality.

And then I die. And I instantly realize I have committed eternal suicide. I want desperately to fix things. But Jesus says I can't. That's the meaning of the second perplexing question in **verse 37** - “**For what can a man give in return for his soul?**”

Well, nothing. There is nothing to give. None of my earthly possessions remain. And none of them would be of any worth because the price of my salvation was paid in Jesus Christ. And I considered Him of less worth than all those treasures that have now left me hopelessly lost.

And in one horrifying moment I discover the deep meaning of Peter's words in **1 Peter 1:18-19** - “**...knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, [19] but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.**”

There is no material purchase of eternal redemption. So in one eternity settling moment I realize the eternal cost of not believing in Christ as the greatest treasure of my life.

I said there were **two** unchanging threats to believing in Jesus and the gospel. The first is the addictive **love of present material things**. Now on to the second:

b) **Second, the love of earthly praise - Mark 8:38 - “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.”**

Here's the second universal threat to believing in Jesus. We all live our lives in front of **two audiences**. There is this present “**adulterous and sinful generation**”(38), and there is our **coming Lord and millions of holy angels** (38).

And the answer to the question, “**Do I believe in Jesus and the gospel?**,” is found in whose approval do I crave the most? **Whose smile and approval do I live for?**

I can't have both. There is a self in me and a self in you that loves the approval of the surrounding culture. There is a self in me and a self in you that worships being loved and accepted by all. There is a self in me and a self in you who doesn't want to appear **against** cultural values and assessments. Jesus says that self must be **denied, and crucified, and lost** by the self born through believing Jesus and the gospel.

Make sure you truly believe in Jesus. Make sure that new self - created through divine power through the

cross of Jesus and the new birth - make sure that new self looks at that old self every day and says, ***“You are no longer me. The treasures I have don’t compare to Christ. The praise of this world is empty and adulterous to my Risen Lord. I will gladly lose this life so I may joyfully believe in Christ Jesus forever and ever!”***

That’s what it means to ***“...believe on the Lord Jesus Christ” and be saved (Acts 16:31).***