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Mark 8:34-38 "A High Carb Message in a Low Carb World"*

Main Idea: According to Jesus' words in Mark 8:34-38, if you are considering being His disciple you must come to grips with two weighty matters.

I. The invitation is heavy (34).

A. You must deny yourself.

1. He's not talking about giving up a few bad habits.
2. He's talking about a radical reorientation of your life.

B. You must die to yourself.

1. Jesus lived to die.
2. We must die if we want to live.

C. You must follow Him.

1. It's not "my life" any longer.
2. I must go wherever He leads and do whatever He says.

II. The incentives are heavy (35-38).

A. What's at stake is your salvation (35).

1. If you live for yourself, you will lose your life.
2. If you give your life to Jesus, you will save it.

B. What you must assess is the value of your soul (36-37).

1. You will spend eternity somewhere.
2. To gain the world and lose your soul is a bad investment.

C. What you are facing is an appointment with the Son (38).

1. Jesus says He will treat us the way we have treated Him.
2. Are you living this day in light of that day?

Take It to Heart: In light of the weight of His call...

1. We need grace.
2. We need to respond.

There's a stranger rhetoric these days circulating these days. It's all around us. It goes like this, "You can have it all, and it won't cost you a thing."

We hear it in beer commercials. *Same taste, half the calories.*

We hear it in exercise equipment advertising, you know, the ones where you see the model with the athletic figure, and hear the promises, "Buy our product and you can look like this, too. And all it will take is five minutes a day four times a week." Yea, right.

The credit card companies feed us the notion with a passion. By the way, I'm greatly concerned by this. Young people get married and want to enjoy the standard of living they saw their parents have, without realizing the work and sacrifice that made it possible. The easy solution is credit cards. *You can have it all and it won't cost you a thing.*

We hear it in the realm of morality—or I should say "immorality." We've chucked God's standard for purity and sought ways to justify the sin and hide the danger. We find so-called experts who tell us what we want to hear, and they talk about "safe sex," the notion that you can engage in a life of sexual promiscuity but be okay because you've taken steps to protect yourself. It's just another form of *you can have it all and it won't cost you a thing.*

Down deep we often know the rhetoric isn't true, but we hear it so much that in time we may even begin to

believe it. Or at least we find ourselves *wanting* to believe it. We like the notion that we can have it all and it won't cost a thing.

If that weren't bad enough, something worse has happened. Some are bringing that notion right into the church. "God is love," they say. "He wants you just as you are," they say. "Just pray this prayer, and you'll have eternal life," they say. And there's no talk about sin or repentance, just the baptized version of the same mentality we've been describing...*you can have it all and it won't cost you a thing.*

My friends, know this. God's salvation is free, but it's not cheap.

The stakes are high. If you buy into the notion of indiscriminate credit card living, you can ruin your financial stability; and if you buy into the notion of safe sex, you can end up dying physically, but know this. If you buy this notion when it comes to your relationship with God, the eternal destiny of your soul is at stake.

I'll say it as plainly as I can. There is a cost, *a high cost to being a disciple* of Jesus Christ.

And here's the challenge we face. To use the vernacular of the day, if we're going to be faithful to our God-given mission, we have a *high carb message* to preach to a *low carb world*.

"What's that mean?" you ask. Well, you know what kind of world we live in, a world that wants to think you can have it all and it won't cost you a thing, where we buy the notion that if we just "cut carbs" we'll be healthy (and so there's an exploding fad about cutting carbs these days, but a refusal to face the fact that it takes more than cutting carbs to have good physical health, like good old exercise for starters). That's our world and you know it well, a *low carb world*.

But we have a *high carb message*. I'm not talking about your physical diet now. I'm talking about what Jesus said. I'm talking about the message Jesus gave us to preach, a message that we easily ignore, a message about the high cost of discipleship.

We need to give careful attention to Jesus' message. You'll find His "high carb" message through the gospel accounts. We'll find it as we come to our morning text in our journey through the gospel of Mark. According to Jesus' words in Mark 8:34-38, if you are considering being His disciple you must come to grips with two weighty matters.

I. The invitation is heavy (34).

First, let me remind you of the context. As we saw last time beginning in Mark 8:22, there are three characteristics that make Jesus unique. First, Jesus has power like none other. We saw that illustrated in Jesus' healing of the blind man in verses 22-26. Second, Jesus is a person like none other. Some people were saying He is a great man (27-28), but Peter said He is the God-man (29). Thirdly, we discovered that Jesus had a plan like none other. In verses 31-33, He predicted His suffering, His cross, and His resurrection. Peter didn't understand the plan and opposed Jesus, but the Lord rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan," he told him. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." In short, Jesus made it clear that lived to die.

At that very point, verse 34 says, Jesus called the crowd to Him. He had something He wanted every disciple and every would-be disciple to hear. He told them that they must die if they want to live. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

He had just predicted His cross. Now He talks about *their* cross. The fact is, as Wiersbe points out, "If there was a cross in *His* future, there would be one in *their* future as well." Suffering isn't only the divine purpose for Jesus, but for Jesus' followers as well.

As Jesus looks into the eyes of those in the crowd that day, He knows that some of them (just like today) were following Him only because of the miracles. There's something they needed to know. If you want to be a disciple, there is a price to pay, a high price. That's not popular in a low carb world, but it's the gospel truth. The invitation is heavy.

How heavy? There are three steps Jesus said you must take if you are considering being His disciple. Here's the first...

A. You must deny yourself. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself."

During World War II, when Winston Churchill took over leadership of England, he told his people in plain terms that he offered men "blood, toil, tears and sweat." Churchill didn't pull any punches. He could help his nation. He would help his nation, but there would be a price and all would share in it.

Please note something. Jesus took steps so the *crowd* would hear this. So many ministries today take a different approach. Get the sinner in the church however you can. Offer him whatever his self-focused heart wants to get him into the building (good music, programs he likes, cappuccino), tell him about Jesus, get him to pray a prayer to "receive Jesus," and THEN, surprise him with, "Oh, by the way, it's going to cost you something to be a follower of Jesus." And we wonder why so many turn away from Christ. The fact is, they never really followed Him in the first place. They didn't know they had to.

Jesus made it clear right up front, "If anyone would come after me." Note the offer is to *anyone*. Whosoever will may come. You can come to Jesus this very day if you desire—and you need to for He alone can give salvation. But if you come, you must *come*.

What does that mean? First of all, you must deny yourself. Please note He didn't say to deny yourself *something*. He said to deny *yourself*. There's a difference. What is it? A key one...

1. *He's not talking about giving up a few bad habits.* Oh, that's part of it but it goes much deeper.

2. *He's talking about a radical reorientation of your life.* To deny yourself is to say no to yourself (and as we'll see momentarily, to say yes to Christ). You must say no to your natural love of ease and comfort. You must say no to your self-focused instincts and desires. If you want to be Jesus' disciple you can, yes, but you must renounce self and stop making self the object of your focus in life.

Picture a wheel. In the middle is a hub. The wheel revolves around the hub. When we're born self is the hub. Life for each of us revolves around *self*. But if you want to be Jesus' disciple, that must change. You must get a new hub, a new center for your life, a new orientation for how you approach life.

Now compare what Jesus is saying to the far too typical message preached in our day. "Come to Jesus and He will give you what you need (and want): abundant life, a better marriage, fulfillment, peace, and more." And then part two of the message, "Come to our church because we've got what you want: programs for your kids, a place to feel acceptance, and more."

Granted, there's some truth in all this. Jesus does offer us much, indeed what no one else can give, life that's abundant and eternal. And the church has so much to offer a hurting sinner—and should offer it.

But the unspoken implication of this kind of preaching—and the listener hears it well—is this. *Jesus and the church exist FOR YOU.* It's all about *you*. You can have it all and it won't cost a thing.

When Jesus preached He offered much, yes, but His invitation was clear. Step one: you must deny yourself. Here's step 2.

B. You must die to yourself. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself *and take up his cross*." Luke adds, "Let him take up his cross *daily* (Luke 9:23)."

Cross bearing isn't simply putting up with some minor (or even major) inconvenience or irritation in your life. It's not what the man thinks who says, after his car breaks down for the third time in a week, "Oh well, what can I expect with a Ford? Jesus said I would have to bear my cross."

No, that's not it. What was a cross in Jesus' day? An execution device for criminals, right? The picture Jesus has in mind, and so did those who heard Him, was of a man already condemned who was required to carry his cross to the scene of his execution. He wasn't dead yet, but he was as good as dead.

To take up your cross involves a willingness to be regarded as a criminal. You must face the fact that living for Jesus may well cost you what it cost Jesus. Let the connection sink in...

1. *Jesus lived to die.*

2. *We must die if we want to live.* To be a Christian is to be *like Christ*. Yes, that means to love and do good like He loved and did good. But it also means to be willing to die as He did, in obedience to the Father's will. He who took up His cross calls us to take up our cross.

Don't misunderstand. Jesus' cross and our cross aren't entirely the same. There's a redemptive aspect to Jesus' cross that puts His cross in a category all by itself. We are sinners and need atonement for our sin. He was sinless and did not need atonement. He *provided* atonement for sinners. Where? On His cross. When He cried out, "It is finished," He was announcing that His atoning work was done. The cross we bear has nothing to do with atonement. That is the work of His cross alone.

But something else occurred on His cross, something we do share. On the cross Jesus renounced self and obeyed His Father's will. He sacrificed self and devoted Himself to fulfill His Father's plan, suffering included.

That's the cross we share with Him. We must die to self and choose to obey the will of God, no matter what the cost. And there will be a cost. Obedience to the will of God always involves a cost, a *cross*, for such obedience brings about the hostility of the world. It means outward trouble and inward conflict.

You say, "That's a weighty invitation!" Yes, it is. To become a disciple of Christ, you must take up your cross. J. D. Jones helps us ponder the implications of cross bearing:

"You have yours. I have mine. They differ from one another; but there is not one of us who does not know that there are things in us to be fought, and repudiated, and torn up by the roots, if we would follow Christ. Do not confine what I am saying to what we speak of as the grosser sins. We can see that the drunkard and the profligate have to say good-bye to their evil habits before they can follow Christ, and we know what agony that means in many cases. But it is not to them alone this demand applies. It applies also to us. For there is not one of us who does not know perfectly well that in our hearts there are things to be repudiated and put away, if we want to follow Christ."

Look at your own heart. What's there that must go? If you are not willing for it to go you cannot follow Christ. "Are you saying I must get rid of my sin before I can follow Christ?" No, but you must be *willing* to get rid of your sin. He knows you are unable to stop sinning on your own, and He will provide the power for the needed change. But you must be willing *to be changed*.

Jesus is using strong language. There is no punishment more torturing than crucifixion. And that's the image the Lord uses to depict what must happen to us when we come to Him. That's the image the rest of the New Testament uses to describe true Christians:

Romans 6:6—"For we know that *our old self was crucified* with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin."

Galatians 5:24—"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have *crucified the sinful nature* with its passions and desires."

Galatians 6:14—"May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the *world has been crucified to me*, and I to the world."

If you want to be Jesus' disciple you must deny self and you must *die to self*. From a human perspective you are losing yourself. From God's perspective you are finding yourself. Thirdly...

C. You must follow Him. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross *and follow me*."

There's a children's game most of us have probably played at one time. It's called "Follow the Leader." It's an easy game to understand, not always quite so easy to play. The rule is simple: just do what the leader does, no more, no less. The difficulty depends on who the leader is and what the leader does.

That's what we're called to, beloved. *Follow the Leader*. We go where Jesus goes. And where did He go? "To heaven," you say. "We follow Him and He takes us to heaven." Absolutely, He is the way to heaven. But where did He go first? To the cross. Yes, first comes the cross, then the crown.

"You must *follow Me*," Jesus said. What does that mean? If I choose to follow Jesus two things result.

1. *It's not "my life" any longer*. He is now my Master. That's what the term "Lord" means. To receive Jesus as your Savior and *Lord* means you surrender your life to Him.

2. *I must go wherever He leads and do whatever He says*. You can only have one Master, my friend, one person calling the shots. If you want Jesus, He'll enter your life and give you hope and forgiveness and salvation. Yes, no matter how great your sin He will enter your life.

But know this. He *will* enter your life. And He will change your life. And He will begin to use your life for His holy purposes. Are you willing? Can you say as did the hymnwriter, *Where He leads Me I will follow...?*

Paul stated his testimony clearly, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me (Gal 2:20)."

Peter discussed this in 1 Peter 2:20-21, "But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. *To this you were called*, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps."

Now you see why I call it a *high carb message*. It's a *weighty invitation*, isn't it? If you're carrying a cross around it tends to affect the way you view and live your life. The fellow who was carrying his cross to the execution site didn't chat to his fellow cross-bearer about the weather and how his business was going. "Hey, fellow, what'd you think of the ballgame last night?" No, when you know you're going to die it tends to change your perspective on what's really important in the time you have remaining in this life.

This is Jesus' invitation, beloved. To be His we must deny ourselves, die to ourselves, and follow Him.

At this point we might think, "If the cost is so high, I'm not sure I'm interested, or at least not now." Jesus addressed that type of thinking next by laying on the table a second weighty matter.

II. The incentives are heavy (35-38).

A word about the setting. When Mark first penned these words he was seeking to minister to Christians living in Rome around the year A.D. 60. They were facing persecution, severe persecution, quite possibly martyrdom. Mark knew what they were thinking, what anybody who's facing execution would think. "Is it worth it? Maybe I should renounce my allegiance to Christ and save my neck. *Is death for Christ worth it?*"

The answer is, yes. There are some heavy incentives for saying yes to Jesus' invitation. Jesus gives three incentives.

A. What's at stake is your salvation (35). "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it."

There are some things that, if you keep them, you lose them. In order to keep them you must *use* them. A talent is like that. If you use it, it will develop and become even better. If you bury it, you'll lose it.

When it comes to your life, the options are clear.

1. *If you live for yourself, you will lose your life.* You can scratch and claw your way through life, grabbing all the goods you can get—and you may succeed in getting a lot of stuff. But then what? No matter how much stuff you get, in the end you will lose your life. R. Alan Cole says it well, "Life, like sand, trickles between our fingers whether we will or no, and to grasp it more tightly means only that it flows the faster from us." On the other hand...

2. *If you give your life to Jesus, you will save it.* Only Mark includes the phrase "and for the gospel." That makes it clear just how one loses one's life for Christ. It's by investing one's life for the spread of the gospel. As Cole observes, "The Christian therefore has not two goals, but one: Christ and His gospel are ultimately one."

The aspirations most people live with are *too low*. They have goals about their careers and personal comfort and so on. But it's all about *this life*. Jesus calls us to live with eternity in mind. Only a person who has eternity in mind will give his life to Jesus, for though it may cost him this life he knows he is gaining eternal life.

Incentive #1: What's at stake is your salvation.

B. What you must assess is the value of your soul (36-37). "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"

The question of the hour is this. *How much is your soul worth to you?* The facts are these—and they are non-negotiable—two facts.

1. *You will spend eternity somewhere.* God created you in His image. He made you as a human being distinct from every other creature. He gave you a *soul*. That means you will not cease to exist when your physical heart stops pumping. When you die your soul will go somewhere, one of two places. If you know Jesus, you will go to be with Him forever. If you don't know Him, you will spend eternity cut off from God in torment.

It makes sense, doesn't it? If you followed Jesus in this life, you will be with Him in the life to come. If you didn't want to follow Him in this life, why would you expect to be with Him in the life to come?

2. *To gain the world and lose your soul is a bad investment.* Jesus' question is worth repeating, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" Think about your soul, my friend. You will spend

eternity somewhere. Whether you live in this life five years or fifty-five years or one hundred and five years, this life will end. Then eternity begins. How much is your soul worth? It's certainly worth more than the temporal pleasures (trinkets) this life has to offer.

Sadly, some people (many people) are selling their souls in pursuit of shallow, temporal pleasures. Perhaps you are. It's a bad investment, dear one.

What's at stake is your salvation. What you must assess is the value of your soul. Thirdly...

C. What you are facing is an appointment with the Son (38). "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

There is incredible pressure in this world NOT to follow Christ. If you follow Christ the world calls you foolish, outdated, even dangerous! One of the things you will battle most is *shame*. If you listen to and give in to the world, if you give in to *shame*, you won't follow Christ.

But Jesus talks about something that makes the shame of the world pale in significance. It's another cause for shame.

1. *Jesus says He will treat us the way we have treated Him.* Hear His words again, "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him..."

If you're ashamed of someone you distance yourself from them. You don't want to be seen with them.

E.g.—

Jesus says that if we have done that to Him—we didn't want it to be known that we believed in Him or identified with Him—He will do the same to us. He will treat us as we have treated Him.

When? The reference to "his Father's glory with the holy angels" refers to the event known as the final judgment. Paul mentions both in 2 Thessalonians 1:7, "This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels."

He is coming again. He will see us and we will see Him.

I don't want Him to be ashamed of me when I see Him. I can't imagine anything worse than to look into the eyes of the One who died on the cross as my sin-bearer...and see that He's ashamed of me.

Yes, He offers a heavy invitation. But the incentives are heavy, too, and this is the heaviest of all. What you are facing is an appointment with the Son. And what you need to answer—and so do I—is this...

2. *Are you living this day in light of that day?* That day is coming.

Jesus actually gave a foretaste of it in the very next verse, Mark 9:1, "And he said to them, 'I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power.'" And six days later He took Peter, James, and John with Him up on a high mountain and let them see Him in His glorified state. He even permitted them to hear His Father's assessment, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him (9:7)!" And that's what we must do, *listen to Him*.

His invitation is weighty. And so are the incentives.

Take It to Heart: In light of the weight of His call...two things.

1. *We need grace.* You say, "If we preach this kind of message, no one will respond!" Yes, they will. Why? Because God is a God of grace. God has chosen a people and He is at work preparing the hearts of those people. Jesus didn't die merely to make salvation possible, but to save the people the Father had chosen and given to Him (John 17:24 "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world."). And the Holy Spirit is working in the hearts of those people, granting repentance and faith to sinners.

No sinner will respond to the invitation Jesus extends, not left to himself. He needs grace. And grace—God's unmerited help—is available.

In order to deny self, we need grace. In order to take up our cross, we need grace. In order to follow Jesus, we need grace. And grace is available. Therefore...

2. *We need to respond.* Respond to the Master's call. *If anyone would come.* Hear His invitation, dear friend. Hear it well. And respond to day.