

This week's Jesus question of the day comes from the gospel of Mark. And it's perhaps one of the most heart wrenching questions of all. "What do you live for?" In Mark, Jesus asks his question rhetorically, but it still demands an answer from us. "Why would we gain the whole world but lose our souls?" Do we really want to gain, achieve, or become anything that would result in the loss of the life that God intends?

Our answer to this question in real, everyday life terms is an important matter. The answer shapes our attitudes, our perspectives, and our priorities. What are we really living for? This question requires an answer that is clear and faithful.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said something that speaks to this question. "The gods we worship write their names on our faces, be sure of that. And we will worship something — have no doubt of that either. That which dominates our imagination and our thoughts will determine our life and character. Therefore it behooves us to be careful what we are worshipping, for what we are worshipping we are becoming."

What you worship is what you become. So what are you really living for?

Mark's best answer to this can be summed up in one word. CROSS.

Let's look at the events leading up to Jesus' question. First, chapter 8 is the exact halfway point of this gospel with actions leading to this point. In a play we might call this the act 1 finale. Suspense is built. Foreshadowing of what is to come in Act 2 is revealed.

Mark, this great storyteller, leaves the disciples hanging with this dark saying from Jesus. "All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me."

There it is...that word CROSS. The symbol of Christian faith and a hallmark of Mark's gospel. He uses the word cross more than Luke and John and the same number of times as Matthew. In Mark's gospel, Jesus waits until chapter 8 to mention anything about a cross.

And Jesus isn't just referring to himself. He's not just saying. "Hey guys we're headed to Jerusalem know and there's a cross with my name on it." He has the audacity to add this, "Did I mention that there's a cross for you too? If you want to follow me, there is a cross for you to carry too."

I think Jesus purposefully waited until this moment to spring this on his disciples. Imagine if Jesus had said this when he was first calling his disciples. When back in Mark 1:17 Jesus called his disciples, imagine it going like this.

"Follow me I'll show you how to fish for people, and you will experience persecution and hardship in the form of a cross." "Who's with me? Anyone?"

Who would say yes to that?

Imagine if we redesigned our website to say. "Join us and discover sacrifice, struggle and hardships." Can't you see the clicks?

Or how about a banner out front that says. "Join us and suffer!"

That the disciples still even decided to keep following Jesus at that point is a miracle. Who could blame them for jumping ships at this point? What Jesus was saying was unmistakable. If you want to follow me, the cross is unavoidable. You must be willing to lose what you value most to gain what you do not understand.

If I was standing in the disciples shoes right now, I think I'd be tempted to say this. "Wait a minute, Jesus. Are you saying this isn't about me? Isn't this about meeting my needs? Isn't this about making me feel good? Isn't this about helping me be powerful, happy, and successful?"

Why would anyone bother to stick with Jesus when our culture draws us to things like power, happiness, and success. Why bother following Jesus at all?

Will Willimon a retired UMC bishop and dean at the Duke Divinity School chapel tells the story of a call from an angry dad who sent his daughter to Duke. After earning her BS in Mechanical Engineering, she was supposed to go to graduate school. But instead she decided to throw that all away to do mission work with the Presbyterians in Haiti.

“I hold you personally responsible for this”, said the angry father.

“Me?” said Willimon. “Absurd!”

“She has a BS in mechanical engineering from Duke and she’s throwing that away to dig ditches in Haiti.”

Willimon replied, “Well, I doubt that she received much training on digging ditches here, but I’m sure she’s a fast learner and will get the hang of digging ditches quickly.”

“Look”, said the father, “this isn’t a joke. You’re responsible for encouraging her to do this.”

Willimon responded, “Now, wait just a minute! Aren’t you the one who brought her to church and had her baptized?”

Father, “Well, yes.”

“And aren’t you the one who brought her to church – to Sunday school, even, and to church on Sunday morning?”

“Well, yes.”

“And aren’t you the one who read Bible stories to her at night, and didn’t you let her go on ski and mission trip to Vale with the youth fellowship?”

“Yes, but”

“Don’t but me! It’s your fault that she believed all that stuff and that she’s gone and thrown it all away to Jesus, not mine. You’re the one who introduced her to Jesus, not me.”

“But all we ever wanted was for her to be a Presbyterian.”

“Sorry, You messed up. Instead you made her a disciple of Jesus Christ.”

That’s how dangerous today’s question of Jesus is. Our answer to it can change our paths. It can reorient our priorities. It can reframe the way we see the world. But our answer can also lead us to gain the only thing that matters. Life. True life. A soulful life.

The word life is important. The Greek word behind it is psyche. From this we get words like psychology and psychiatry. It can mean life or mind, but it can also be translated as “soul”

The soul is more than just a part of us that continues after our bodies die. It’s so much deeper than that. When we say soul, we’re talking about the totality of our existence. The soul is deeper than our brains, our minds, our ability to think thoughts and to use reason. It’s deeper than our hearts, emotions, our ability to feel, emote, and relate to others. It’s deeper than our gut, instinct, drive, and power.

It is the source of all that it means to be alive. It is what God gave us the very moment God breathed us into creation. Our souls are a gift from God.

There’s no quick and easy definition of the soul. Attempts to describe it, see it, and analyze it still leave us with mysteries about this part of our existence.

But we know we have a soul, don’t we? We especially feel our soul when it is broken or fractured. When your soul is crushed. An experience that went beyond head and heart stuff,

beyond stress, beyond a sad heart or a tired body. A moment when all energy was drained or your insides ached, or you hurt so bad you couldn't describe it. That is your soul

You also might have experienced your soul being lifted. A moment when you felt inspired, overwhelmed, so grateful for everything in your life. Everything perfectly aligned. All right in the world at that moment. That too is your soul.

So let's consider a two-part definition of the soul. First, the soul is the source of our lives. Second. The soul is what draws us toward God.

Like the rest of our body, our souls need to be nurtured and developed, just like a garden needs to be weeded, watered, and protected. This allows the Spirit to work fully and freely to draw our souls into a close personal encounter with God.

Our soul's deep longing for God suggests one reason Jesus may have waited until now to spring this whole cross business on his disciples. Spiritual maturity is not instantaneous. It's a process of small steps. Times of stretching and growing.

Gaining the life that God intends requires a series of losses. Not all at once, not all at the beginning of our spiritual journey. Not in chapter 1 of our lives. Any of us would just walk away. Think about how many important lessons you've learned later in life.

We learn the value of loyalty through the sting of betrayal. We learn about long-term commitment through heartbreak. We learn to spot sincerity by experiencing dishonesty. We learn about grace from our biggest mistakes. We learn how to forgive even when we're wounded more than we can bear.

These are the crosses we learn to bear only when we are ready. Some lessons can't be learned when we're young, when we aren't strong enough, when we can't withstand the stretching.

Mark reminds us of one more important truth. It's not just any suffering that leads to true life, we must experience suffering for Christ's sake.

The invention of the light bulb by Thomas Edison came on his 1000th attempt. Afterwards he said that he did not consider the other 999 attempts as failures, just 999 ways that didn't work. He considered his biggest barrier to be the temptation to stop trying. Each attempt brought growth and learning.

You as a potential lightbulb that God is working on. Turn to your neighbor and tell them you are a potential lightbulb.

God isn't finished with you. God is committed to see you through your entire lifetime. Patiently expectant that you will take up your cross and let your true light shine through.

There are things that can stand in the way of a lightbulb moment. Things like complacency and contentment with our current spiritual life. The belief that we just aren't capable of having God use us.

An important way to gauge the growth of your spiritual life is through your personal, private spiritual practices. Your corporate disciplines. John Wesley considered these so important he made it the 3rd of the simple rules for class societies. Attend to the ordinances of God. Practice the means of grace.

It can be hard to remember to do all of these all of the time. So let's look at an acronym to help with this. GRIP. Give, Read, Invite, and Pray. Get a GRIP!

G – Give financially in a way that is joyful and generous.

R – Read the Bible regularly without fear or frustration.

I – Invite others to Jesus in a way that is natural and unintimidating.

P – Pray with confidence and conviction. Believe that prayer really matters and makes a difference.

That sounds like a future sermon series, doesn't it? Hmmm.

For today let's remember that to grow deeper in our walk with Jesus means to refuse to let spiritual complacency block our lightbulb moments. To discover treasures that have been hidden in our fields. To Get a GRIP by Giving, Reading Scripture, Inviting Others, and Praying. Are you ready to get a Grip? Say this with me. I'm ready to get a GRIP.

God is not finished with you. God is calling you to take up your cross, follow Jesus, and discover the truest, fullest life that God intends for you. It means taking your personal spiritual practices seriously. Give generously, read the Bible, invite others to Jesus, and pray. Who's ready to get a GRIP?

Remember that even if you've taken 999 steps before this one, keep going no matter what. Take that next step. Because God has a light-bulb moment ready for you.