

## Following Jesus

Sermon for the Last Sunday before Lent

Sermon Text: Mark 8:31-38



*<sup>31</sup> And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup> And He said this plainly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. <sup>33</sup> But turning and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." <sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>35</sup> For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the Gospel's will save it. <sup>36</sup> For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? <sup>37</sup> For what can a man give in return for his soul? <sup>38</sup> 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."*

If you go to the Leipzig market towards the end of the afternoon, the vendors might start to give away everything that they have for marked down prices. One time, when I hesitated too long at a vendor, he grabbed me by the sleeve and started negotiating with me about a price. I absolutely must buy his product! When he had already reduced his price 10 times, and I still didn't want it, he suddenly said: "Today, I'll give you a really cheap price. Here, I'll give it to you! Now do you want it?" I sometimes feel just like these vendors from the Leipzig market in church. People have no interest in church. They leave the church in droves and those who come, come only rarely. For this reason, we pastors make a huge mistake. We lower the price! That means we cheapen the Gospel of Jesus Christ! The Gospel should always be pleasant, it should irritate as little as possible, nor should it provoke or change people. It should merely serve the purpose of making people feel good. And there are very strange excesses in the church. A church recently posted a special offer in the ads titled: "Believe with pleasure." Underneath it said: "Bible, Whiskey Tasting!" I know we should try everything to bring the Gospel to people and, hats off to the people who make a special effort, yet I see a great risk. The danger is that we change the Gospel itself and make something different out of it than what it really is. When I read the Bible, I notice very quickly that the Bible doesn't do cheap compromises. When people fell into sin, God didn't say: "Oh what a pity, people just can't achieve my goals. But that's no problem, I'll just make it so easy for them so that everyone makes it!" No, I don't read anything like that. Instead, God repeatedly sent prophets to draw people's attention to God's Commandments. Most of the prophets paid for this message with their own lives. And finally, God Himself took this path. No, God didn't continually lower the price because people couldn't endure His Commandments. On the contrary. He kept the bar high for the 10 Commandments. And then He placed Himself under the full weight of the 10 Commandments and under

the full weight of our sins. We know the end result of this path – it was Jesus' death on the cross. And it is precisely this cross that we absolutely don't want. We are against it with our whole being: Peter was the first who didn't want the cross. It didn't suit him. He had imagined his future with Jesus differently. Many take after Peter. For the Jews, the cross is a great stumbling block. In the Islamic religion, the cross represents a huge difference between Christians and Muslims. That's why Islam rejects the cross with all its might. In the Qur'an it states that Jesus didn't die on the cross. It also states that Jesus didn't die on the cross for our sins. But this is not only the case in Islam. It's the same with us! We don't want the cross. We don't want to place ourselves under God's rule. We'd rather become great ourselves and that's why the cross is rejected even among some Christians today. In their opinion, the cross is an outdated symbol and is actually far too gruesome for an attractive Christian culture. For some, the cross is no longer present in their church. For others, it is politely avoided. Jesus must once again say these tough words: "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus had to say it like this because at this point, the difference between God's work and Satan's work becomes clear – so Jesus called His disciples to Him to very clearly explain all of this to them once more. Without the cross, we have no Savior. Without the cross, only a few helpful tips for living a good life remain. Without the cross, we are left alone with sin, death, and the devil! And if Jesus hadn't gone to the cross, we would without a doubt be under the power of sin, death, and the devil.

Jesus explains all this and even makes it personal: "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." What can that mean? Jesus takes up the cross so that we are free? Should we still take up our own cross? That we Christians are closely connected and united with Jesus' cross is a great secret. It is clear that only Jesus could go to Jerusalem to pay for our sins. And yet the whole Church is the body of Jesus and therefore bears the characteristics of the cross. When we are baptized, we become one with Christ. Then we bear the characteristics of our Lord Jesus Christ and must therefore also experience the opposition of Satan in our own lives. We also need to know that wickedness dies in our life. All our godlessness, our self-centeredness, hardening ourselves toward God, all of that dies with Jesus on the cross. That affects each of us personally and it can hurt! Under certain circumstances, it can also mean that not only must inner wickedness die, but we must also give up life itself. Because the opposition doesn't just come from ourselves, but also from outside ourselves. Jesus, as He was about to die on the cross, knew this... and struggled mentally about it...the 12 disciples who stood before Him later followed their Lord in death because they also had to bear the consequences of the cross. They paid with their own lives for believing in Jesus. Today, there are still many Christians who must pay for being Christians with their lives. To what extent are we willing to walk this path with Him and to stay with Him on this path? Taking up the cross, as Jesus describes it here, means that we profess Him who saved us on the cross. Taking up the cross can, God willing, mean that we become like our Crucified Lord. And Jesus makes it even more specific: "whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the Gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" Christ challenges us. He wants to test us. To what extent can our discipleship persist here? Aren't we all too often intent on a secular Christianity that hardly differs from the culture? What good would it do us if the most beautiful music and the most beautiful buildings and the most contemplative church services took place here, but we lost our souls? Losing one's soul precisely because we base our entire Christian existence on our own well-being and not on following Christ. Jesus took the path of the cross. He didn't back away from disgrace and scorn and death. When it was all over for Him, it was still His biggest victory!

I see Peter standing before me. He only wanted the best for his Lord, and he received the worst reprimand of his life. How do I stand before my Lord Jesus? I shudder to think that it could be all or nothing. Either I have gained the whole world and harm, or my soul. If that were God's last word, I would have given up hope. Jesus begins with Himself. He's the one who goes to the cross. And Jesus goes alone. Jesus is in full action! And He does that for me! Jesus goes all out and pays the full price it took to set us free. It is only from this point of view that I can think about living and following Christ. At the end of His speech, Jesus says: "...he will save it." So, it's not just that I lose all my belongings and even my life. On the contrary, Jesus gives us life. That is the meaning and purpose of His life and death – that we may have life! What appears as a loss becomes a gain. This is the Christian life over and over again: you give yourself up and only find yourself in surrendering. You are there for others and that's how you get joy in your own life! You let go of your own honor and find glory with God. We no longer need to focus on our own successes or failures because we trust God completely. We trust Him unconditionally precisely because He has spoken His yes to us once and for all through Jesus. Amen.