

Historic Commentary

(Second Sunday in Lent - Year B)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Mark 8:31-38 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Mark 8](#), from a 13th century document called the *Catena Aurea* that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the Patristics and others.

[Augustine](#): How hard and painful does this appear! The Lord has required that “whoever will come after him must deny himself.” But what he commands is neither hard nor painful when he himself helps us in such a way so that the very thing he requires may be accomplished.... For whatever seems hard in what is enjoined, love makes easy.

[Caesarius of Arles](#): What he commands is not difficult, since he helps to effect what he commands.... Just as we are lost through loving ourselves, so we are found by denying ourselves. Love of self was the ruin of the first man. If he had not loved himself in the wrong order, he would have been willing to be subject to God, preferring God to self.

[Tertullian](#): “Your cross” means your own anxieties and your sufferings in your own body, which itself is shaped in a way already like a cross.

[Caesarius of Arles](#): What does this mean, “take up a cross”? It means he will bear with whatever is troublesome, and in this very act he will be following me. When he has begun to follow me according to my teaching and precepts, he will find many people contradicting him and standing in his way, many who not only deride but even persecute him. Moreover, this is true, not only of pagans who are outside the church, but also of those who seem to be in it visibly, but are outside of it because of the perversity of their deeds. Although these glory in merely the title of Christian, they continually persecute faithful Christians. Such belong to the members of the church in the same way that bad blood is in the body. Therefore, if you wish to follow Christ, do not delay in carrying his cross; tolerate sinners, but do not yield to them. Do not let the false happiness of the wicked corrupt you. You do well to despise all things for the sake of Christ, in order that you may be fit for his companionship.

[Augustine](#): Turn, rather, to these teachings, my very dear friend: take up your cross and follow the Lord. For, when I noticed that you were being slowed down in your divine purpose by your preoccupation with domestic cares, I felt that you were being carried and dragged along by your cross rather than that you were carrying it. What else does the cross

mean than the mortality of this flesh? This is our very own cross which the Lord commands us to carry that we may be as well armed as possible in following him. We suffer momentarily until death is swallowed up in victory. Then this cross itself will be crucified. The cross will be nailed to the fear of God. We would hardly be able to carry it now if it forever resisted us with free and unfettered limbs. There is no other way for you to follow the Lord except by carrying it, for how can you follow him if you are not his?

Augustine: This precept by which we are enjoined to lose our life does not mean that a person should kill himself, which would be an unforgivable crime, but it does mean that one should kill that in oneself which is unduly attached to the earthly, which makes one take inordinate pleasure in this present life to the neglect of the life to come. This is the meaning of “shall hate his life” and “shall lose it.” Embedded in the same admonition, he speaks most openly of the profit of gaining one’s life when he says: “He that loses his life in this world shall find it unto life eternal.”

Caesarius of Arles: When the Lord tells us in the Gospel that anyone who wants to be his follower must renounce himself, the injunction seems harsh; we think he is imposing a burden on us. But an order is no burden when it is given by one who helps in carrying it out. To what place are we to follow Christ if not where he has already gone? We know that he has risen and ascended into heaven; there, then, we must follow him. There is no cause for despair—by ourselves we can do nothing, but we have Christ’s promise....One who claims to abide in Christ ought to walk as he walked. Would you follow Christ? Then be humble as he was humble. Do not scorn his lowliness if you want to reach his exaltation. Human sin made the road rough. Christ’s resurrection leveled it. By passing over it himself, he transformed the narrowest of tracks into a royal highway. Two feet are needed to run along this highway; they are humility and charity. Everyone wants to get to the top—well, the first step to take is humility. Why take strides that are too big for you—do you want to fall instead of going up? Begin with the first step, humility, and you will already be climbing.

Clement of Alexandria: Those who neglect good works may fail to grasp just how much the good work of God has benefited them. Hence they are less capable of praying fittingly so as to receive good things from God. And even if they receive them, they will likely be unaware of what has been given them. And even if they enjoy them, they will not enjoy worthily what they have not understood. For from their lack of knowledge they will not grasp how to use the good things given them. And from their impulsiveness they will remain ignorant of how to avail themselves of the divine gifts offered.

Caesarius of Arles: While there is much in the world to love, it is best loved in relation to the One who made it. The world is beautiful, but much fairer is the One who fashioned it. The world is glorious, but more delightful is the One by whom the world was established. Therefore, let us labor as much as we can, beloved, that love of the world as such may not overwhelm us, and that we may not love the creature more than the creator. God has given us earthly possessions in order that we may love him with our whole heart and soul. But sometimes we provoke God’s displeasure against us when we love his gifts more than God himself. The same thing happens in human relationships.

Suppose someone gives a special gift to his protégé. But the protégé then begins to despise the giver, and loves the gift more than the one who gave. Suppose he comes to think of the giver no longer as friend but enemy. Just so it is with our relationship with God. We love more those who love us for ourselves rather than our gifts. So God is known to love those who love him more than the earthly gifts he gives.

Tertullian: The faithful are not ashamed that the Son of God was crucified. Hence they are shameless in a good sense through their contempt of shame, and foolish in a happy sense. The crucifixion was indeed a shameful event, viewed humanly. Yes, the Son of God died! This is to be believed precisely amid its being an offense to humanity. The Son was buried! He rose from the dead! This fact is made all the more poignant by seeming all the more absurd. But how could any of this be true if he himself was not truly the One he made himself known to be?

Cyril of Alexandria: He who as God was beyond suffering, suffered in his own flesh as a human being. When he became flesh, being God, he did not in any way cease to be God. Precisely as he entered into the created order, he remained above creation. He remained as giver of the law when he came to serve “under the law.” He retained the inviolable divine dignity precisely when he took on “the form of a slave.” It was precisely as only begotten Son that he became “the firstborn among many brothers,” while still remaining the only begotten. So why should it seem so strange that he should suffer in the flesh according to his humanity, even while transcending suffering according to his divinity? Thus the ever astute Paul says that the Word himself who is “in the form of God” and equal to God the Father “became obedient even unto death, death of the cross.”

John Calvin: Having given a proof of his future glory, Christ reminds his disciples of what he must suffer, that they also may be prepared to bear the cross; for the time was at hand when they must enter into the contest, to which he knew them to be altogether unequal, if they had not been fortified by fresh courage. And first of all, it was necessary to inform them that Christ must commence his reign, not with gaudy display, not with the magnificence of riches, not with the loud applause of the world, but with an ignominious death. But nothing was harder than to rise superior to such an offense; particularly if we consider the opinion which they firmly entertained respecting their Master; for they imagined that he would procure for them earthly happiness. This unfounded expectation held them in suspense, and they eagerly looked forward to the hour when Christ would suddenly reveal the glory of his reign. So far were they from having ever adverted to the ignominy of the cross, that they considered it to be utterly unsuitable that he should be placed in any circumstances from which he did not receive honor. To them it was a distressing occurrence that he should be rejected by the elders and the scribes, who held the government of the Church; and hence we may readily conclude that this admonition was highly necessary. But as the bare mention of the cross must, of necessity, have occasioned heavy distress to their weak minds, he presently heals the wound by saying, that on the third day he will rise again from the dead. And certainly, as there is nothing to be seen in the cross but the weakness of the flesh, till we come to his resurrection, in which the power of the Spirit shines brightly, our faith will find no encouragement or support. In like manner, all ministers of the Word, who desire that their preaching may be

profitable, ought to be exceedingly careful that the glory of his resurrection should be always exhibited by them in connection with the ignominy of his death.

But we naturally wonder why Christ refuses to accept as witnesses the Apostles, whom he had already appointed to that office; for why were they sent but to be the heralds of that redemption which depended on the coming of Christ? The answer is not difficult, if we keep in mind the explanations which I have given on this subject: first, that they were not appointed teachers for the purpose of bearing full and certain testimony to Christ, but only to procure disciples for their Master; that is, to induce those who were too much the victims of sloth to become teachable and attentive; and; secondly, that their commission was temporary, for it ended when Christ himself began to preach. As the time of his death was now at hand, and as they were not yet fully prepared to testify their faith, but, on the contrary, were so weak in faith, that their confession of it would have exposed them to ridicule, the Lord enjoins them to remain silent till others shall have acknowledged him to be the conqueror of death, and till he shall have endued them with increased firmness.

If any man will come after me.

These words are used for the express purpose of refuting the false views of Peter. Presenting himself to everyone as an example of self-denial and of patience, he first shows that it was necessary for him to endure what Peter reckoned to be inconsistent with his character, and next invites every member of his body to imitate him. The words must be explained in this manner: "If any man would be my disciple, let him follow me by denying himself and taking up his cross, or, let him conform himself to my example." The meaning is, that none can be reckoned to be the disciples of Christ unless they are true imitators of him, and are willing to pursue the same course.

He lays down a brief rule for our imitation, in order to make us acquainted with the chief points in which he wishes us to resemble him. It consists of two parts, self-denial and a voluntary bearing of the cross. Let him deny himself. This self-denial is very extensive, and implies that we ought to give up our natural inclinations, and part with all the affections of the flesh, and thus give our consent to be reduced to nothing, provided that God lives and reigns in us. We know with what blind love men naturally regard themselves, how much they are devoted to themselves, how highly they estimate themselves. But if we desire to enter into the school of Christ, we must begin with that folly to which Paul (1 Corinthians 3:18) exhorts us, becoming fools, that we may be wise; and next we must control and subdue all our affections.

And let him take up his cross.

He lays down this injunction, because, though there are common miseries to which the life of men is indiscriminately subjected, yet as God trains his people in a peculiar manner, in order that they may be conformed to the image of his Son, we need not wonder that this rule is strictly addressed to them. It may be added that, though God lays both on good and bad men the burden of the cross, yet unless they willingly bend their shoulders to it, they are not said to bear the cross; for a wild and refractory horse cannot be said to admit his rider, though he carries him. The patience of the saints, therefore, consists in bearing willingly the cross which has been laid on them. Luke adds the word daily – let him take

up his cross Daily – which is very emphatic; for Christ’s meaning is, that there will be no end to our warfare till we leave the world. Let it be the uninterrupted exercise of the godly, that when many afflictions have run their course, they may be prepared to endure fresh afflictions.

For he that would save his life shall lose it.

It is a most appropriate consolation, that they who willingly suffer death for the sake of Christ do actually obtain life; for Mark expressly states this as the motive to believers in dying – for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel – and in the words of Matthew the same thing must be understood. It frequently happens that irreligious men are prompted by ambition or despair to despise life; and to such persons it will be no advantage that they are courageous in meeting death. The threatening, which is contrasted with the promise, has also a powerful tendency to shake off carnal sloth, when he reminds men who are desirous of the present life, that the only advantage which they reap is, to lose life. There is a contrast intended here between temporal and eternal death, as we have explained under Matthew 10:39, where the reader will find the rest of this subject.

For what doth it profit a man?

The word soul is here used in the strictest sense. Christ reminds them that the soul of man was not created merely to enjoy the world for a few days, but to obtain at length its immortality in heaven. What carelessness and what brutal stupidity is this, that men are so strongly attached to the world, and so much occupied with its affairs, as not to consider why they were born, and that God gave them an immortal soul, in order that, when the course of the earthly life was finished, they might live eternally in heaven! And, indeed, it is universally acknowledged, that the soul is of higher value than all the riches and enjoyments of the world; but yet men are so blinded by carnal views, that they knowingly and willfully abandon their souls to destruction. That the world may not fascinate us by its allurements, let us remember the surpassing worth of our soul; for if this be seriously considered, it will easily dispel the vain imaginations of earthly happiness.

For the Son of man will come.

That the doctrine which has just been laid down may more deeply affect our minds, Christ places before our eyes the future judgment; for if we would perceive the worthlessness of this fading life, we must be deeply affected by the view of the heavenly life. So tardy and sluggish is our mind, that it needs to be aided by looking towards heaven. Christ summons believers to his judgment-seat, to lead them to reflect at all times that they lived for no other object than to long after that blessed redemption, which will be revealed at the proper time. The admonition is intended to inform us, that they do not strive in vain who set a higher value on the confession of faith than on their own life. “Place your lives fearlessly,” says he, “in my hand, and under my protection; for I will at length appear as your avenger, and will fully restore you, though for the time you may seem to have perished.”

In the glory of the Father, with his angels.

These are mentioned to guard his disciples against judging of his kingdom from present appearances; for hitherto he was unknown and despised, being concealed under the form and condition of a servant. He assures them that it will be far otherwise when he shall appear as the Judge of the world. As to the remaining part of the passage in Mark and Luke, the reader will find it explained under the tenth chapter of Matthew.

And then will he render to every one according to his actions. The reward of works has been treated by me as fully as was necessary under another passage. It amounts to this: When a reward is promised to good works, their merit is not contrasted with the justification which is freely bestowed on us through faith; nor is it pointed out as the cause of our salvation, but is only held out to excite believers to aim at doing what is right, by assuring them that their labor will not be lost. There is a perfect agreement, therefore, between these two statements, that we are justified freely, (Romans 3:24,) because we are received into God's favor without any merit; and yet that God, of his own good pleasure, bestows on our works a reward which we did not deserve.