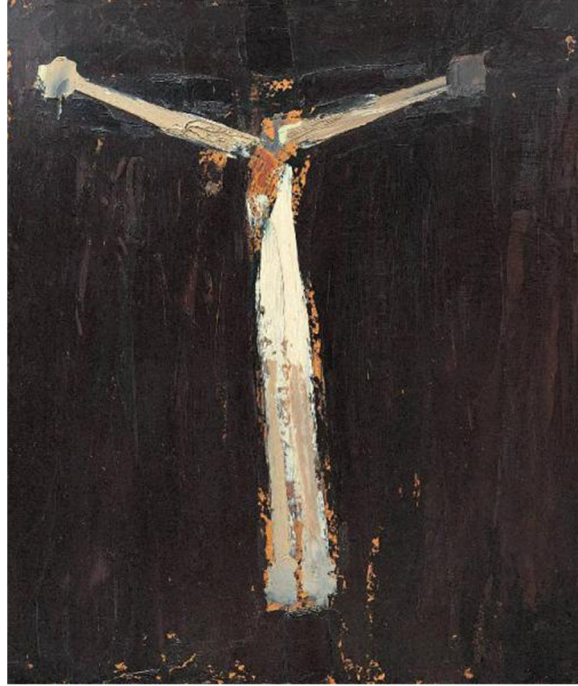


# Letting Go for Dear Life

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



## Prayer of Illumination

Startle us, O God, with your truth  
and open our hearts and our minds  
to your wondrous love.  
Speak your word to us;  
silence in us any voice but your own  
and be with us now as we turn our attention,  
our minds and our hearts, to you,  
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

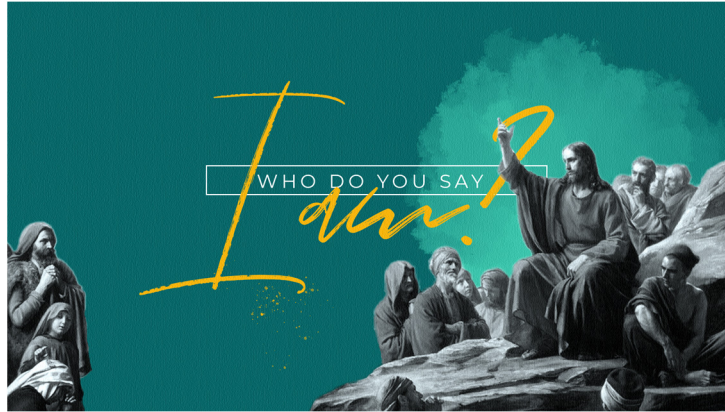
## Background

There are a lot of questions in Mark's gospel. But THE central question is this:

*Who is Jesus?*

Mark establishes this in the very first verse in his gospel:

"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ."



"Christ" isn't Jesus' last name. Christ means "Anointed One" or in Hebrew "Messiah."

Ten verses later, God declares Jesus' identity at his baptism: "You are my Son, the Beloved."

The demons Jesus cast out in Mark proclaim his identity quite clearly:

"The Holy One of God"

"The Son of God"

"Son of the Most High"

But the disciples however struggle with Jesus' identity in Mark. When Jesus miraculously stilled the storm, the dumbstruck disciples could only say, "*Who is this?!!*" Just a few verses before our gospel passage, Peter has his bright and shining moment, a watershed moment in his understanding of Jesus' identity.

When Jesus asks him, "Who do you say I am?" Peter says, "You are the Christ" or "You are the Messiah." As we'll see, Peter's definition of Messiah will need to be deconstructed and redefined.

Jesus is still asking us, his modern-day disciples, today: *Who do you say I am?* So as we hear our gospel reading, let us all ask ourselves two questions:

Who is Jesus?

And what does it mean for us to follow him?

*So let's hear now...*

### **Scripture: Mark 8:31-38 (NRSVue)**

<sup>31</sup> Then he (Jesus) began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup> He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup> But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

<sup>34</sup> He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. <sup>36</sup> For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup> Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup> Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

## SERMON – *"Letting Go for Dear Life"*

*"What will it profit a person to gain the whole world and lose his soul?"*

This is the main question in Johann Wolfgang Goethe's legend of Faust. It's considered by many to be the greatest work in German literature. In the epic poem, Heinrich Faust yearns to gain knowledge of absolute truth and the meaning of life. To do this he's willing to make a pact with Mephisto—the devil. Faust was willing to do anything—even sell own his soul to attain this knowledge. Basically, Faust wanted to become . . .God. In the end, Faust dies a bitter and disillusioned man. He wasn't able to be God and he was forever separated from God.

But in a surprising twist, Goethe gives the Faust legend a new ending. In his version, Faust has a last-minute conversion, almost like a blinding Damascus Road encounter that the Apostle Paul had. Faust is blinded, banished into the darkness—but then rescued from the devil by the heavenly hosts.

Goethe seemed to be saying that by going through this blindness, this dark night of the soul, this death to self, that the human soul comes to life and matures. So by the mercy of God, Faust is admitted into heaven because he realized that life was about something and Someone so much greater than himself. Life was about God—not *being* God.

The call of Jesus to follow is not just for the Twelve or the spiritually elite. Jesus summons ALL of us to walk in his ways. "If ANY want to become my followers, they must...." The way of the disciple is the way of Christ—which is the way of the cross.

For the first time of three times in Mark's gospel, Jesus clearly and plainly spells out what kind of Messiah he is. He is anointed by God for:

- AFFLICTION (suffering)
- REJECTION
- EXECUTION
- CRUCIFIXION  
and only then...
- RESURRECTION

ALL the religious centers of power would be against the Messiah: the elders, chief priests, and scribes. It's THIS road that's the ONLY ROUTE to redemption. The cross isn't a tragedy, an accident, or a mistake. The cross is God's divine plan. You can't have Christ without the cross.

Jesus' definition of the Messiah TOTALLY went against the grain of how the Messiah was understood at that time. EVERYONE knew the Messiah was about:

- TRIUMPH
- VICTORY
- CRUSHING ENEMIES
- MAKING ISRAEL STRONG AGAIN

Everyone knew this except for, well...*Jesus*. But have no fear...Peter's here to set Jesus straight!

Peter saw this as a "come to Jesus moment"—for Jesus. So he takes Jesus aside and rebukes the one he just called Messiah. The word "rebuke" is the same word Jesus used when he cast out demons. And so it's almost like Peter sees Jesus as possessed for thinking such outlandish things about the Messiah—it was heresy. Blasphemy.

Jesus was not meek or mild in his response. Looking at all the disciples, then Peter, Jesus rebuked Peter and the disciples. "Get behind me Satan!" These are purely human thoughts you have. Peter, your mind is set on human things, not divine things. Snap out of it.

Jesus would not let Peter's Plans get in the way of GOD'S PLANS. And that's exactly the Evil One's "MO." Get BEHIND me, NOT in FRONT of me. You're getting ahead of me. Get behind me and follow me and MY way, NOT your way.

Frank Sinatra crooned, "I DID IT MY WAY." Well, that's not an option for Jesus followers. If you want to walk the road with Christ, you must turn away from your own path.

"If ANY wish to come after me," says Jesus, "let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me."

## **DENY YOURSELF**

Self-denial isn't just "giving up something for Lent." It's not giving up SOMETHING, but SOMEONE... namely your very self—and not just for 40 days.

Give up, renounce, reject, disown, disavow, forget YOURSELF: YOUR goals, YOUR plans, YOUR aspirations, YOUR desires.

This word "deny" is the same word used when Peter "denied" Christ, but instead of denying Christ, we deny ourselves.

We've heard the phrase, "Hold on for dear life." Jesus turns that upside down and tells us to do the opposite:

**"LET GO for dear life."**

If you want to find yourself, lose yourself. When Christ is your life, you're most truly YOU. LOSING your life means GAINING ETERNAL LIFE. Fame, fortune, attention, reputation—can't hold a candle to Christ. SURRENDER to the Savior.

Next, **TAKE UP YOUR CROSS**. Lay down your life, but TAKE UP your cross. Not someone else's cross—your cross. Jesus isn't mincing words: die to yourself. To be able to say "yes" to God means that you have to say "no" to yourself.

- Say "NO" to taking the COMFORTABLE WAY.
- Say "NO" to selfishness.
- "NO" to our natural inclinations.

But say "YES" to:

- Christ's commands and directions.
- Say YES to life,
- YES to a life of service,
- YES to a rigorous, exciting, challenging, painful, and meaningful way of life—a blessed life that blesses others.

## FOLLOW JESUS

Keep following Jesus, continually, present tense. Keep renewing your commitment, keep repenting and denying yourself—daily. By God's grace, let Christ live through you.

Jesus isn't talking about a few cosmetic changes or minor tweaks here and there.

No, Jesus is talking about a major overhaul, a transformation. A transfiguration.

What Jesus is basically saying to us is:

- "Let me take the keys and driver's seat of your life."
- "Give up your own way of trying to figure things out."
- Do it "my way."



*"The Last Gladiator Fight"*

Telemachus was a late 4<sup>th</sup> century eastern monk who went into the desert to pray, study Scripture, and meditate in order to find his soul. He sought fellowship only with God. But one day he realized he was being selfish with God's love—basically just keeping it to himself. He heard Jesus' call to serve God, by serving others.

Telemachus knew he needed to leave the desert and head back to the city and civilization to share God's love with others. He felt compelled to travel to Rome to do this. He had no idea how he would do it or what he would say. Rome at this time had converted to Christianity—but one pagan practice remained: the gladiator games. Telemachus found himself in the arena and was shocked to watch the violence and killing. He could not sit down or stay quiet.

He made his way to the front, climbed the barricade, and entered the arena. The old man stood between two gladiators who were about to fight.

"Let the games go on!" yelled the masses.

One of the gladiators pushed the man down. He got back up again and stood between them. The crowd began throwing stones at Telemachus and urged the gladiators to kill him. The commander of the games gave the order, and the old man in the hermit robes was put to death by the sword, in front of 80,000 people.

Immediately a hush came over the crowd—they realized the gravity of what they'd done: they put a holy man to death. The gladiator games that day were cut short. And the colosseum never hosted a gladiator game after that.

The historian Edward Gibbon, who authored "*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*," wrote:

"Telemachus' death was more useful to mankind than his life."

Some things are lost by holding on to them. Other things are found by losing them.

Missionary Jim Elliot put it this way decades ago:

*He is no fool who gives  
what he cannot keep  
to gain that which  
he cannot lose.*

- Lose your "self" so you don't lose your soul.
- Don't trifle away your life on empty, meaningless things. You can be a huge success, while having an utterly empty life.
- Be a God-pleaser, not a people-pleaser.
- Seek God's glory and God's will. Seek not your own glory and your own plans.
- Don't be ashamed of **Christ and his words** or He'll be ashamed of you.

Both Matthew and Luke have Jesus also say the positive of this:

- Acknowledge Christ, and he too will acknowledge you.

Each of us has to answer Jesus' pointed question:

***Who do you say that I am?***

Do you say Jesus is as a: Poet or Politician or Philosopher?

A Storyteller or Sorcerer that conjured wine at weddings?

A Revolutionary or a Renegade?

Or is Jesus your LORD and LEADER, your SAVIOR, Your FRIEND, your MASTER, your MESSIAH, THE TRUE HUMAN BEING and THE SON OF GOD? The ANOINTED ONE, the CHOSEN ONE?

The CHRIST?

Jesus doesn't say "Admire me," "Observe me," Or even "Worship me."  
He does say, "Follow me."

Jesus also says, "Come to me." Give me your burdens, also give me your very self—that your old self may die. So I can make you a new creation.

"I have been crucified with Christ," says the Apostle Paul,  
"and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."

That's where we find our true selves.

That's where the real life is.

Don't hold on for dear life.

LET GO for dear life.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "*Crocefisso No. 18*" by William Congdon (1912-1998)

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