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Texts in Context

Denying Self, Bearing a Cross, and Following Jesus: Unpacking the Imperatives of Mark 8:34

MATTHEW L. SKINNER

According to the lectionary's distribution of Scripture texts, the reading of Mark 8:27-38 occupies what appears to be a rather unassuming Sunday. Depending upon your calendrical dialect, this is the Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 19B, or the current year's Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost. The prosaic tone of all these liturgical labels, however, belies the prominence of this Sunday in the American cultural calendar. Mark 8:27-38 falls on September 14, 2003, the second Sunday after Labor Day. This and adjacent Sundays typically oversee any number of major transitions in the seasons of our lives: children small and large return to school, businesses launch new projects and strategies, churches kick off fall programs with high hopes and glossy fliers. We face autumn and look toward our futures amid pressures to produce, to satisfy, and perhaps to conform. The demands of reestablishing routines, orchestrating new plans, and meeting expectations quickly displace the spontaneity and innocence of summertime.

As we journey soon into the new beginnings of post-Labor Day autumn, what will it mean to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Jesus? More, certainly, than giving up a few things; more than suffering as part of the human condition; more than moving forward on new paths—peering into autumn's transitions, we belong to another.

This same day is, moreover, the first Sunday after the anniversary of the September 11 horrors. For at least as long as this journal's current subscribers live, this date will bring together memory of the past and speculation about the future, forcing Americans and others to reevaluate their assumptions about the world, Christians to reflect upon their vocation in the world, and all peoples to raise questions about God's plans for the world. All told, on such a Sunday as this, feelings of anxiety or hope may accompany thoughts concerning the obligations that our culture places upon us as well as what we expect for our lives. This time stands at the threshold of new challenges, opportunities, and commitments. It does not seem like "ordinary time" at all, but the cusp of a brand-new time.

Within this cultural context filled with demands upon us that promise challenge or renewal, the lectionary's Gospel reading offers a particularly appropriate yet difficult word. Mark 8:27-38 is one of those passages that sharply prod us to consider where we are going and to be reminded that the gospel claims every aspect of one's life and being. In the midst of a thick and multidimensional pericope, Jesus issues an invitation that bears upon the whole of who we are and what we expect for our lives: "If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up her cross, and follow me" (8:34).¹ At first blush, the sentence appears tautologous, ending where it begins by instructing those who wish to follow that they should indeed follow. This circularity, however, emphasizes the central elements (self-denial and cross-bearing) as constitutive of what it means to follow Jesus. The appeal demands our sustained investigation into what it might mean for us—not because these words form the crux of the entire gospel or somehow overshadow the rest of an extremely rich passage with countless implications for Christian theology, living, and proclamation; but because these words pertain especially to the forward-looking and demanding context of September 14. Jesus' imperatives to anyone to deny oneself and take up one's cross reveal a thoroughly prospective orientation—one that points ahead to the future and calls its hearers to regard their lives, securities, and ambitions according to their association with Jesus and participation in God's kingdom. The orientation described in Mark 8:34 is absolute, summoning Jesus' followers away from inclinations to personal aggrandizement and from loyalty to the world's canons of status, power, and achievement.

MARK 8:27-38 IN ITS NARRATIVE CONTEXT

The prospective character of Mark 8:34 emerges with greater clarity when we understand its context within the narrative stream of Mark's Gospel. Jesus' words to his disciples and the multitude in the region of Caesarea Philippi introduce a season of transition and challenge within the Markan narrative. Up to this point, Jesus' ministry has consisted of tremendous displays of power and authority; char-

¹Jesus obviously makes this proclamation to men and women alike. To alternate the gender of the personal pronouns, as I have done, results in a clunky translation, yet it preserves the sense of an appeal issued to individuals, a fact some might miss in the NRSV's rendering ("Let them deny themselves and take up their cross").

acters in the story have received new and astonishing teachings, liberation from oppression, and restoration to wholeness.² The ministry of God's kingdom has so far been thoroughly itinerant, and silent about its termination. All of these characteristics begin to change in Mark 8:27-10:52, as Jesus makes a direct way toward Jerusalem and announces his coming death and resurrection at least three times.³ These central chapters depict Jesus traveling and speaking of his fate, first in an area at the outer boundaries of Palestinian Judaism, then throughout his home territory of Galilee, and finally on the road not far from Jerusalem.⁴ The predictions of his passion interspersed within Jesus' deliberate southward travel serve a recapitulative function. The repetition of predictions throughout the general locations where Jesus has preached and healed earlier in the gospel, and ultimately on the way leading to Jerusalem, forge a connection between what has gone before and what is coming next in the narrative. The cruel passion that Jesus foretells shares an integral relationship with the good news of the kingdom of God that Jesus has announced and enacted in Mark 1-8. The transition begun in Mark 8:27-38 does not suggest that Jesus carries out two *separate* messianic ministries (one of healing and power followed by one of suffering and defeat). The paradoxical yoking of Jesus' acts of powerful liberation and his self-giving powerlessness invite us to consider the way of the cross as a logical conclusion or necessary consequence of a life lived in commitment to the kingdom of God.

“the cruel passion that Jesus foretells shares an integral relationship with the good news of the kingdom of God that Jesus has announced and enacted in Mark 1-8”

Other aspects of Mark 8:27-38 reveal the passage's transitional and connective functions for Mark's story and theology. Apart from two obscure references to himself as “the son of man” (2:10, 28), Jesus has so far shown very little interest in encouraging questions about his identity. His consistent silencing of unclean spirits who know the truth about him (1:24-25, 34; 3:11-12) contributes to the sense that there are things about him to be known that have yet to be disclosed. In 8:27, 29, however, Jesus raises the issue of who he is. After Peter identifies him as the

²This does not mean to imply that the first half of Mark lacks references to opposition and unbelief. See 3:5-6; 5:15-17; 6:1-6a; 7:6-8.

³Jesus makes explicit prediction of his death and resurrection in Mark 8:31-32a; 9:31 (imperfect verbs in 9:30-31 indicate repeated predictions throughout Galilee over an indeterminate period of time); 10:32b-34. Other clear allusions appear in Mark 9:9, 12; 10:45.

⁴Caesarea Philippi represents the northernmost limit of Palestine (Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News according to Mark*, trans. Donald H. Madvig [Atlanta: John Knox, 1970] 171). In this region a small Jewish contingent probably lived among Gentiles (Gustav Hölscher, “Παναίς,” in *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, ed. Georg Wissowa et al., 24 vols. [Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1949] 18/3:598-599). Mark's general ambiguity about Jesus' activities in this place is consistent with other passages in which Jesus' ministry extends to locations inhabited primarily by Gentiles but never fully immerses itself in their settings (see Mark 5:1-20; 7:24-8:9).

Christ—an astounding claim, given that previously in the narrative Jesus has done little if anything that corresponds to contemporary Jewish expectations about the Christ, and the disciples have repeatedly exhibited their obtuseness concerning Jesus (see 4:41; 6:52; 8:14-21)—Jesus proceeds to speak “quite openly” (8:32) or plainly about what must happen to him. Such frank talk stands in sharp contrast to the parabolic or figurative speech that has characterized his proclamation up to this point (see 4:33-34).

We can forgive Peter if all of Jesus’ new talk about suffering, rejection, and death does not sound right to him. Thus far he and Jesus’ other companions have heard the kingdom of God announced and inaugurated only in victorious tones. In fact, they have participated in the same liberating ministry, having been appointed to preach and given authority over satanic forces and diseases (3:13-15; 6:7-13), just like Jesus. Moreover, along with all this unfamiliar and distressing information about who Jesus is and what must happen to him (8:27-33), Jesus’ followers learn something new about the direction that their own participation must follow. Their transition in this passage comes, not only in the challenge of having to comprehend what must happen to Jesus (which they never accomplish), but in the call to follow Jesus precisely to the demise that he has just announced he will experience. With the revelation of Jesus’ fate comes an inclusive call to join him, issued to the whole crowd (and, by extension, to us eavesdropping readers) and not simply to his closest associates: “If *anyone* wants to follow after me...” (8:34).⁵

Investigation of Jesus’ call to self-denial and cross-bearing as the way to follow after him rightly begins with the review of the narrative context and transitional nature of Mark 8:27-38 that I have offered here. Torn from the narrative context that situates Jesus’ imperatives within a discussion of his own identity and fate as the Christ, and within a transitional segment that will lead him to Jerusalem and the cross, Jesus’ appeals to those who would follow him risk devolving into a portable set of empty aphorisms about discipleship. Such words as these, when dislocated from their christological moorings, easily slide into banality if not complete irrelevance, where taking up the cross can become moralized into an act of our personal fortitude or modesty. Whatever it means to deny oneself, it occurs simultaneously with embracing *Jesus* as the one to follow. Instead of choosing or plotting their next steps on their own, Jesus’ followers are to be led there by someone else. They enter and discover the future on the road of self-denial.

THE COMMAND TO DENY ONESELF

Jesus’ call for self-denial does not include a clear explanation of what he asks for, although the other core command in 8:34 (take up one’s cross) surely indicates—as I will explore below—a complementary or equivalent posture

⁵On the gospel’s communication to (Christian) readers through its characterization of Jesus’ associates, see Robert C. Tannehill, “The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role,” *The Journal of Religion* 57 (1977) 386-405.

and not a subsequent step that one performs after figuring out how to deny oneself.⁶ Self-denial obviously involves the relinquishment of an individual's autonomy, running counter to human habits of self-preservation and personal advancement (cf. 9:35; 10:42-44). In addition, the following verse (8:35) offers an explication that underscores the gravity of Jesus' summons: the imperatives of 8:34 are tantamount to losing one's life for the sake of Jesus and the gospel. The paradoxes of 8:35-38 describe surrendering one's self, one's being (*ψυχή*), in response to Jesus in order to gain true life, to experience the wholeness or salvation that Jesus offers in his proclamation of the kingdom of God.⁷ Self-denial and cross-bearing clearly appear as key elements of a person's participation with Jesus.

“denying oneself suggests a posture that does not easily find models today within a culture that prefers jargon of self-actualization, self-discovery, or self-potential”

Even at first glance, denying oneself suggests a posture that does not easily find models today within a culture that prefers jargon of self-actualization, self-discovery, or self-potential. Many among us conceive of self-denial as a form of self-improvement through delayed gratification (putting more money into retirement accounts) or personal discipline (giving up ice cream for Lent in hope of losing ten pounds before summer). Others hear Mark 8:34 as advice for saints and other heroes of supererogation. This call is reserved for the Archbishop Romero, Mother Teresa, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer of the world—special people born for special times. While such interpretations are easy to expose as equivocations, experience reveals that they are not too far off from how many of us stifle the demands of this verse.

Other interpretations of Jesus' appeal deserve to be rejected because of their pernicious effects. Some currents in Christian tradition equate self-denial with self-annihilation or the extirpation of any claim we might dare to make about our value as persons. To the contrary, in no way does this text call people to seek out, rest content with, or glorify in abuse or victimization, as if this sort of suffering was a redemptive state. Such an interpretation does not square with the account of Jesus' public ministry in Mark 1-10, which portrays him and the ministry he confers upon his disciples as dedicated to the eradication of illness, oppression, and misery. As Joanna Dewey persuasively argues, “Mark does not lump all forms of suffering together. The narrative sharply distinguishes between general human suffering,

⁶Although Jesus does not expound the concept of self-denial in Mark 8, some commentators note that later he will act it out in Gethsemane when he submits his will to God's (14:36). See, e.g., Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2000) 89.

⁷The term translated “save” in 8:35 (*σώζω*) appears elsewhere in the gospel to describe acts of healing (3:4; 5:23, 28, 34; 6:56; 10:52; 15:31) and to refer to inclusion in the kingdom or an eschatological deliverance (10:26; 13:13, 20).

which is to be cured or alleviated with Jesus' inauguration of God's rule, and persecution, which is the lot of those who persevere in following the way of God as long as this age endures."⁸ The specific type of persecution that Dewey mentions comes in response to a community of faith's *corporate* witness within a society (see, for example, 13:9-13, which consistently envisions a community of persecuted believers). Nothing about the idea of self-denial in 8:34 suggests a self-destructive form of quietism in the face of gratuitous acts of violation, neglect, or subjugation.

“the definition of self-denial as mere self-restraint ultimately reveals itself as a self-assertive concern to keep certain behavior in check”

Nor does Mark 8:34 issue a call to asceticism that eschews pleasurable experiences and the preferences of one's yearnings. Jesus' imperative does not set one's spirit against the body nor imply that God would always have us choose the most distasteful of two options, lest we be guilty of nourishing self-seeking desires. Several popular Bible paraphrases unfortunately tilt precisely toward this interpretation. For example, The Living Bible restates the “deny oneself” command as “You must put aside your own pleasures.” According to the New Century Version, would-be followers of Jesus “must give up the things they want.” Such renderings imply that Jesus demands mastery over the desires that a person might manifest, not a denial of the self that generates and cherishes those desires. The definition of self-denial as mere self-restraint ultimately reveals itself as a *self-assertive* concern to keep certain behavior in check. As James L. Mays observes, “[A] program of asceticism allows the self to win its own victory,” for a course of moral discipline “can be thought and enacted apart from Jesus.”⁹ Equating the command to deny oneself in Mark 8:34 with austere personal piety also betrays exegetical carelessness, for it neglects the wider contexts of both the passage in question and Mark's Gospel as a whole. First, the primary chords of Mark 8:27-38 are christological, concerning Jesus' identity and his fate. Our participation remains a secondary, derivative matter, and so this passage is hardly “all about us.” Second, the social world depicted throughout the Gospel according to Mark does not square with the individualistic presumptions of many ascetic impulses but reflects an understanding of people as defined by their relations to one another.¹⁰ The imperative to deny oneself must, therefore, speak to a corporate understanding of identity; it must have a social or public dimension with real effects on one's relationships with others.

⁸Joanna Dewey, “Let Them Renounce Themselves and Take up Their Cross’: A Feminist Reading of Mark 8.34 in Mark's Social and Narrative World,” in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001) 30-31.

⁹James L. Mays, “Mark 8:27-9:1,” *Interpretation* 30 (1976) 177.

¹⁰See Bruce J. Malina, “Let Him Deny Himself (Mark 8:34 & par): A Social Psychological Model of Self-Denial,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 24 (1994) 106-119.

We can add more substance to our understanding of what it means to deny oneself by investigating another instance of denial in the Gospel of Mark. Peter's repudiation of Jesus prior to the crucifixion offers a negative model for what it looks like to choose against one's own inclinations and rights. Through verbal correspondences between Peter's denial and Mark 8:34, the gospel invites us to explore Peter's story to learn characteristics of the self-denial for which Jesus calls.

PETER AS A MODEL OF DENIAL

The term that names the act of denying in Mark 8:34, ἀπαρνέομαι (to deny, to disown), appears in only one other context in this gospel: in Mark 14:30, 31, 72 it refers to Peter's threefold disavowal of Jesus.¹¹ A related word, ὀρνέομαι, describes discrete instances of Peter's denial spoken in the high priest's courtyards in 14:68, 70. In exploring three aspects of Peter's actions, we discover an analogy for what it means to deny oneself.

The first characteristic of Peter's denial concerns its ultimate focus upon Jesus himself as its object. Peter repudiates a whole person and not simply his affiliation with that person. Peter's disavowal begins in response to an accusation made by one of the slaves of the high priest, that he was "with" Jesus (14:67; cf. 3:14). His response is oblique, redirecting the attention from acknowledgment of Jesus to the simple incredulity of the girl's testimony: "I neither know nor understand what you are talking about!" (14:68). The same slave girl soon utters a similar charge, that "he is one of them" (14:69). This claim, which Peter immediately denies, concerns his membership in the company of Jesus' followers. But Peter looks and perhaps sounds Galilean to some bystanders, and so they repeat the accusation. Right away, Peter snarls a severe, solemn, and directly personal reply, getting to the heart of the question of his relationship with Jesus by denying Jesus himself: "I do not know this person!" (14:71). While Peter certainly disclaims any association with or accountability to Jesus, the target of his repudiation is "this person." Peter severs himself, not merely from responsibility or obligation, but from Jesus and all that he represents.

Peter's denial of Jesus also expresses itself with a finality that declares Peter's complete separation from Jesus. Just as Peter's words to his accusers come to focus on Jesus with an ultimacy that transcends a simple association with him, so also the repetition of denials suggests the disciple's intent to disown and not merely dissociate himself from Jesus. Peter moves from discrediting the content of an accusation to denying his allegiance to a group, to a profession of complete ignorance ("I do not know this person!") that minimizes Jesus' significance and subtly disparages the value of Jesus' life and ministry. Peter does not offer excuses; in the last sentence that he speaks in Mark's Gospel he claims not to *know* Jesus, indicating a

¹¹Of all the New Testament books, only the Synoptic Gospels include ἀπαρνέομαι. Matthew's use of the term runs exactly parallel to Mark's. The pattern in Luke is very similar.

complete separation between the two men and Peter's refusal to entertain any sense of obligation to Jesus.¹² Peter's maneuver aims to guarantee his personal security in a perilous setting while asserting his freedom from Jesus and any claim that Jesus might have on Peter's past or present. The cumulative weight of his actions demonstrates his commitment to his position.

The third characteristic of Peter's denial is its public context and public implications. While the flight of all who are with Jesus during his arrest in Gethsemane makes a public statement of abandonment (14:50), Peter's denial consists of acts that openly declare no connection whatsoever between the two men. When the slave first discovers and fingers Peter, he is sitting in the half-light among a group of the council members' attendants (14:54). Following his public response to the initial accusation comes a transparent effort to distance himself from Jesus even more, as Peter slides into the forecourt and a rooster's crow attends his retreat toward the exit. But this setting, too, is public. There the slave girl incriminates him a second time, now in the face of a group of bystanders. Peter answers negatively, and soon he denies Jesus a third time before the same bystanders. Each instance of Peter's threefold denial involves a statement to a group of people. These disavowals have public consequences in that they aim to shape others' opinions concerning Peter's affiliation to Jesus and they preserve his life. Peter's denial is not a purely internal event housed in the privacy of his heart. It consists of statements that define him and his standing within a social context.

“Peter’s story suggests that Jesus’ imperative concerns the disowning of one’s own person”

If Peter's actions in the high priest's patios constitute *denial* of Jesus, these three characteristics of his behavior lend fullness to our picture of a reflexive posture of denial—what it means to deny oneself as a follower of Jesus. First, just as the focus of Peter's denial goes beyond renunciation of a relationship or obligation and targets Jesus himself, likewise Mark 8:34 calls a follower to something more radical than denying obligations to oneself or the desires that originate within oneself. Peter's story suggests that Jesus' imperative concerns the disowning of one's own person. This extends beyond mere self-discipline; indeed, it calls every would-be follower no longer to live on one's own behalf and to forsake that which would promise security for oneself. Second, the finality of Peter's denial implies that Mark 8:34 calls for permanent and complete severance. Just as Peter claims not to *know* Jesus, so the self-denial that Jesus proclaims involves the renunciation of any obligation to oneself. In Eduard Schweizer's words, “It indicates a freedom in which one no longer wills to rec-

¹²The simple words “and Peter” in Mark 16:7 announce that Jesus, however, refuses to separate himself from Peter.

ognize his own ‘I.’”¹³ Third, as Peter’s actions in Mark 14 involve a public context and public consequences, so too does the self-denial envisioned in Mark 8:34. To deny someone, including oneself, includes the public demonstration of disavowal and the willingness to enjoy or suffer the public effects. A life of self-denial transcends merely advertising one’s posture as an obnoxious boast. More profoundly, one who follows Jesus continually enacts self-denial through living without regard for the security and priorities that people naturally cling to and that our society actively promotes as paramount. This enactment is not a matter of private piety but of public testimony, for the refusal of a certain way of living directly impinges upon one’s political identity and possibilities. Finally, the image of cross-bearing, which immediately follows the command to deny oneself in Mark 8:34, reinforces and complements these characteristics of self-denial.

DENYING SELF, BEARING A CROSS, AND FOLLOWING JESUS

A first-century audience living within the Roman Empire understood the purpose of crosses: implements of death wielded by the state in contemptuous, very public spectacles of capital punishment.¹⁴ The second imperative of Mark 8:34 calls hearers to neither patient endurance of life’s hardships nor self-effacing obedience. To take up a cross means to resign one’s life. In the first-century world, crosses identified those judged of setting themselves menacingly against the ways of the Roman Empire and, by Mark’s account, against religious and ideological structures—against the standards of this world and those powers that resist the in-breaking of God’s kingdom. The cross, consequently, signifies a person who, on account of his or her actions, values, or identity, has been denounced by others. The cross that followers are to bear according to Mark 8:34 is not Jesus’ cross; the syntax reveals that everyone is to take up his or her own cross, each declaring the forfeiture of one’s life and eschewing self-preservation. Cross-bearers embrace a way of life that threatens the existence of the ideologies of this world that perpetuate the oppression of human souls.

To take up a cross is to recognize that the dominant currents of society stand opposed to one’s manner of life and identity. It symbolizes the world’s denial of oneself. The willingness to bear a cross therefore complements the notion of self-denial and shares the three characteristics of denial that I have described: First, as a device that inflicts death, a cross threatens a person’s very being. Second, a cross performs its function with finality, for it makes a definitive statement. Third,

¹³Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News according to Mark*, trans. Donald Madvig (Richmond: John Knox, 1970) 176.

¹⁴For a provocative and important reflection on the theological significance of confessing that the crucified Christ suffered his fate as a victim of state-sponsored execution, see Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 1-16. See also Jürgen Moltmann’s question, which remains apropos today: “What does it mean to recall the God who was crucified in a society whose official creed is optimism, and which is knee-deep in blood?” (*The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden [New York: Harper & Row, 1974] 4).

cross-bearing occurs in public; this was part of the propagandistic function of a Roman crucifixion. Just as one cannot deny oneself without denouncing ways of self-interest, respectability, and security, so too a cross indicates that Jesus' followers have devoted their lives to the public demonstration or enactment of God's reign.

“the focus is not on losing one’s life for any reason, but doing so as a consequence of embracing Jesus and the gospel”

The imperatives of Mark 8:34 would appear, therefore, to bring us to the verge of self-annihilation, nearly to the destruction of all that makes a person a person, were it not for the fact that these two commands are framed by the call to follow Jesus. As the very next verse makes clear, the focus is not on losing one's life for *any* reason, but doing so as a consequence of embracing Jesus and the gospel. In denying, or saying no to oneself, as an aspect of following Jesus, one's focus turns to Jesus as the antecedent and says yes to him. Thus there is a positive content embedded in this language of self-abnegation and relinquishment of one's life. Likewise, in taking up a cross, or living in opposition to dominant ideologies of this world, one identifies positively with the alternative kingdom that Jesus proclaimed in his public ministry. Such a follower joins a community of other cross-bearers, aligned with Jesus as both the example and the reason for the opposition that a way of life shaped by the kingdom of God will inevitably provoke.¹⁵ This community bears the message of the kingdom in its concrete participation in activities of liberation, restoration, mutuality, forgiveness, and charity—deeds that rightly judge and challenge the powers and persons aligned with this world.¹⁶

The absence of any followers at the conclusion of the Gospel according to Mark reinforces the obvious truth that the life Jesus describes in Mark 8:34 is a contrary one—contrary to the patterns of this world and to our own survival instincts. The way of self-denial and cross-bearing requires, of course, that a person first acquire freedom from those patterns, that one first receive a new set of eyes, a new heart, a new understanding of who one is. Mark 8:34 declares that the image of Jesus as one's leader surrounds and, so, encapsulates his summons to reject self-centered living and those forces that stand opposed to God's kingdom. In our cul-

¹⁵Imitation of Jesus does not find a featured place in Mark's presentation of discipleship. Nevertheless, our post-Easter perspective on Jesus' command to bear a cross forces us to read Mark 8:34 in light of Jesus' own crucifixion. See Ernest Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1981) 39-41.

¹⁶The relative political security enjoyed by most contemporary Christian communities in the Western world forces them to envision metaphorical ways of taking up crosses. As long as these understandings of cross-bearing do not lose sight of the finality, scandal, and sociopolitical implications of Roman crosses and thereby avoid sentimentalism, they can serve as fitting demonstrations of a life of self-denial following after Jesus.

tural context that promotes and adores advancement, attainment, security, and self-interest, Mark 8:34 reminds us that the gospel defines our identity as it claims the totality of our lives. Our witness to this new identity is personal, complete, and public. Peering ahead into autumn's transitions into new obligations and uncertainties, we belong to another. ⊕

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