

**Losers Keepers**  
**Mark 8:34-9:1**  
**ABC 9/10/23**

Today we return to our study of the gospel of Mark. Chpts 1-8 give a record of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, where He established Himself as a teacher & miracle-worker. Mark gives us facts to demonstrate that Jesus is the promised Messiah & Son of God. He begins his gospel, **The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God** (Mk 1:1). That's his theme. He moves us relentlessly to Caesarea Philippi where Jesus asks His disciples, **Who do people say that I am?** They replied, **John the Baptist... Elijah... one of the prophets.** Jesus then asked, **who do you say that I am?** At that point, Peter gave the right answer: **You are the Christ** (8:27-30). The 1<sup>st</sup> half of this gospel is about the identity of Jesus (1:1-8:30). The 2<sup>nd</sup> half concerns His mission (Mk 8:31ff). Jesus didn't come to conquer Rome but to suffer & die as an atoning sacrifice for sin. After Peter's confession, Jesus focuses more intently on His closest followers. He warns them of His coming death & resurrection & teaches them about the cost of following Him. After Peter's confession, Jesus predicts His coming death, the 1<sup>st</sup> of 3 passion predictions. In each cycle, Jesus predicts His death (8:31; 9:30-31; 10:32-34), followed by some demonstration of pride, ignorance, or self-interest by the disciples (8:32; 9:33-34; 10:35-41), & then Jesus teaches about humility, self-sacrifice, & the suffering way of the cross (8:34-38; 9:35-37; 10:42-45). Our passage this morning is in the midst of the 1<sup>st</sup> cycle. Following Jesus' prediction in vs 31 of His death & Peter's rebuke of Him (32) & Jesus now teaches about following Him & gives a sobering call to self-denial, suffering, & surrender. **8:27-9:1**

Here we find 5 sayings of Jesus dealing with the cost & consequences of discipleship (34-38), followed by a puzzling statement (9:1). Jesus has just defined His mission to the disciples as suffering, death, & resurrection. He now turns to the crowd & His words, **come after Me**, is an open invitation for all to place their faith in Him & join His disciples. But to do so comes at a cost. To follow Jesus means more than just identifying yourself as His disciple. It means renouncing self & journeying with Him even to death. Those who follow Jesus must do so on His terms, not theirs.

**1. Jesus, Not Self A. Deny Self** (34) **Deny** is a strong word meaning *to have no association with or to disown completely* (Mk 14:30-31, 72). To **deny** oneself is to renounce your claim to yourself,

your desires, ambitions, & personal goals & submit completely to Jesus. Those who want to follow Jesus must be willing to disown themselves & give up everything for His sake (Mt 13:44–46). They must abandon both their self-righteousness & their sin. Being a follower of Jesus isn't part-time or half-hearted work. Those who deny themselves have learned to say, **Not My will but Yours...** (Lk 22:42). We must say *NO* to self & *YES* to God. Every moment of every day we must submit to God's control. Denying self takes shape in many ways. For some, it may mean leaving job & family as the disciples did. For the proud, it means renouncing the desire for status & honor. For the greedy, it means renouncing an appetite for wealth. The complacent will have to turn their backs on their love of ease. The fainthearted will have to abandon their craving for security. The violent will have to repudiate the desire for revenge.<sup>1</sup> & on & on it goes. Following Jesus requires saying *NO* to every other ambition, passion, desire, dream, goal that we might have. We don't live for money. We stop living for people & their approval. We don't live for the future & our retirement. We don't live for Friday & the weekend. We don't live for vacation. We don't even live for family. To follow Jesus means you don't live for those things any more. There can be no competing desires. He is in charge & we must do as He commands.

**B. Take Up Your Cross** **If anyone wishes to come after Me he must ... take up his cross.** This is the 1<sup>st</sup> mention of the cross in Mark's gospel. The word **cross** originally meant a stake set in an upright position. Before the Romans, the Persians, Greeks, & others practiced crucifixion as a means of exposing an executed corpse to shame & humiliation. The Romans perfected the method & it was their favorite means of execution for the worst of criminals & the greatest of enemies. The goal was to produce maximum torture, humiliation, & terror. Most crucifixion sites were near major roads to make them visible to the public. Generally, the upright stake was left at the place of execution while the crossbeam was carried by the victim (15:20–21). The victim would then be tied or nailed to the cross & allowed to slowly die from exposure, infection, & asphyxiation. Estimates suggest that as many as 30,000 Jews were crucified during Jesus' lifetime.<sup>2</sup> When Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> David E. Garland, *Mark*, p 333

<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur, *Mark 1–8*, p 427

used a cross to explain the cost of discipleship, His audience knew what He meant: An instrument of execution, one designed to prolong the agony of death for as long as possible. To **take up** your **cross** doesn't mean to accept a life of hardship, as it's often used today. Your bad boss, nagging spouse, wayward kid, or some ache or ailment isn't what Jesus is referring to. To take up your cross is to subject yourself to excruciating & shameful execution by crucifixion. It's a picture of a condemned man who's forced to take up & carry his own cross to the place of execution. However, what the convict does under duress, the disciple of Jesus does willingly. He voluntarily & decisively accepts the pain, shame, & persecution that's going to be his because of his loyalty to Jesus.<sup>3</sup> If Jesus was saying this to us now, He'd say, *let him deny himself & enter the gas chamber or sit in the electric chair*. When Jesus required not just a denial of self, but also a taking up of your cross, He meant a willingness for self-sacrifice, a devotion to Him that would go to the point of sacrificing one's life. It demands all of us. We sing, *Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all*,<sup>4</sup> but do we mean it? Of course, this doesn't mean actual martyrdom for everyone. It does mean a willingness to renounce everything for Jesus. Luke explicitly says this by adding **daily** to Mark's **take up his cross** (9:23). By requiring disciples to carry their cross daily, Jesus expects them to be willing to join the ranks of the despised & doomed. They must be ready to deny themselves even to the point of giving up their lives.<sup>5</sup> To take up your cross means to deliberately choose a path of rejection, suffering, loneliness, betrayal, denial, hatred, insults, persecution, mental anguish, & even death for Christ's sake. That's what it means to take up your cross.

**C. Follow Jesus** Jesus' words **follow Me** indicate that discipleship requires loyal & continual obedience to Him. The verb **follow** is the same word found in Jn 10:27 where Jesus described believers as His flock, **My sheep hear My voice, & I know them, & they follow Me**. Like sheep submitting to the voice of their shepherd, genuine followers of Jesus are characterized by loving obedience to Him & His Word. As He explained to a group of **Jews who had believed Him**, **'If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine'** (Jn 8:31). At the end of His ministry, Jesus

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<sup>3</sup> William Hendriksen & Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Mark*, pp 329–330

<sup>4</sup> Isaac Watts, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, #274 in our hymnal

<sup>5</sup> Garland, p 328

reminded His followers, **If you love Me, you will keep My commandments** (Jn 14:15), & **If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word** (23), & again, **You are My friends if you do what I command you** (Jn 15:14). Jesus clearly considered a life of obedience to be a nonnegotiable reality of true discipleship. That's what it means to follow Jesus. The rest of the NT echoes this. Though believers aren't saved on the basis of their good works (Eph 2:8–9; Titus 3:5–7), those who have been saved will demonstrate the fruit of a righteous life (Mt 3:8; Gal. 5:22–23). Obedience is a sign of regeneration (Lk 6:43–45). As John explained,

**By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, "I have come to know Him," & does not keep His commandments, is a liar, & the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked** (1 Jn 2:3–6).

Those who live in obedience to Jesus show they're truly His disciples, following Him. Self-denial, cross bearing, & obedience aren't works that earn salvation but are characteristics of true faith & new birth, which is the gift of God (Eph 2:8; 2 Tim 2:25) imparted by His Spirit at the moment of salvation. Those whom God saves He transforms (Ezek 36:25–27), so that out of love for the Savior, we eagerly deny ourselves, endure suffering, & obey His commands. Jesus doesn't want followers who marvel at His deeds but don't follow His example. If He is the Christ, & He is, then He expects to be followed & obeyed. He doesn't ask for minor adjustments in our lives but a complete transformation of them. He calls us to bear a cross, being willing to give up our life for Him. Disciples must do more than survey the wondrous cross, glory in the cross of Christ, & love the old rugged cross. To take up your cross means you have enrolled in the school of suffering. It means *subjecting yourself to shame, to the 'howling, hostile mob.*<sup>6</sup> Admirers can acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah & even as the Son of God, but they dig in their heels when He calls them to follow Him on the path of the cross. An error to be guarded against in this is the idea that a person would be able in his own power to deny himself, take up his cross, & follow Jesus. Conversion & sanctification, though our responsibility, is impossible without regeneration (Jn 3:3, 5), which is the work of the

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<sup>6</sup> Robert H Gundry, *Mark*, p 436

Holy Spirit in us. The Spirit doesn't leave us to our own resources but remains with us, enabling us to do what otherwise we could never do.

**2. Four Fors** In vss 35-38 each sentence begins with the word **for** which introduces the consequences or results of denying self, taking up your cross, & following Jesus.

**A. Vs 35** Those who choose to **save** or *preserve* their physical **life**, by avoiding the cross, will **lose** their **life**; but those who **loses** or *sacrifices* their physical **life** for the sake of Jesus & the gospel will **save** their **life** or soul. Jesus' point is that those who desire to be His disciples, rather than seeking prosperity & ease, must be willing to endure persecution, rejection, hardship, & even martyrdom for His sake. To follow Jesus is to walk on a path of adversity & mistreatment (Jn 15:18-21). Not every believer will die as a martyr, but every faithful follower of Jesus will love Him so fully that even death isn't too high a price for eternal joy. All Christians will suffer to some degree because the world hates those who belong to Him (2 Tim 3:12). True conversion causes a person to view Jesus as so precious that no personal sacrifice is too much. As Paul explained,

**For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal (2 Cor 4:17-18).**

Those unwilling to surrender their lives to Jesus, choosing instead to cling to sin, selfish ambition, & acceptance by the world, will one day lose their souls to everlasting death. But those willing to abandon everything for the sake of Jesus & His gospel will receive eternal life. In other words, losers are keepers. We say, *finders keepers, losers weepers*. But in God's system losers are keepers.

**B. Vs 36** Vss 36-37 include 2 rhetorical questions that bring out the implications of vs 35. In vs 36 the idea of saving one's physical life is taken to its ultimate end. **36**

What if one doesn't just survive in the world but rises to rule it, gaining all its power, prestige, & wealth. What if Satan offered you what he offered Jesus? **The devil took Him to a very high mountain & showed Him all the kingdoms of the world & their glory; & he said to Him, "All these things I will give You, if You fall down & worship me"** (Mt 4:8-9). Imagine for a moment that a person should gain the whole world, all its treasures & resources, the cattle on a 1,000 hills, all the world's

splendor, prestige, & pleasures, but in the process of doing this should forfeit or lose the right to possess his own life or self, what good will this do him? The implied answer is, *no good whatsoever, only evil*. This becomes even clearer when you realize that earthly goods don't last. When the person dies, he can't take any of them along with him. But the soul, the self, exists on & on & on. All the selfish person's treasures are gone now. But even if he still had them, he won't be able to be exchanged them for peace with God. What profit is it **to gain the whole world** yet forfeit your soul, that is, to miss out on a relationship with the Creator God? For those who joyfully embrace that reality, it's incredible to think that anyone would forfeit eternity in heaven for a few fleeting years of self-indulgence in this life. Yet that is what most people do (Mt 7:13).

If vs 36 looks at the emptiness of preserving one's physical life, vs 37 speaks of the inestimable value of saving one's soul.

**C. Vs 37** This can be understood in 1 of 2 ways: 1) as emphasizing the great value of gaining eternal life, or 2) as stressing the impossibility of buying back a life/soul once it has been lost. If the 1<sup>st</sup>, the question means, *What would be worth sacrificing in this tempory world to gain eternal life?* The answer is, *Everything & more!* One thinks of Jesus' parable of the pearl of great price, where a man is willing to sell everything to buy the most precious of pearls, representing the kingdom of God (Mt 13:45–46). In the 2<sup>nd</sup> interpretation, the phrase serves as an implication of vs 36. *Once you've lost your life/soul, what could you pay to buy it back?* In this case, the answer is, *Nothing at all*. This seems more likely & recalls Ps 49:7–9, which speaks of the impossible ransom price for a human life: **No man can by any means redeem his brother Or give to God a ransom for him—For the redemption of his soul is costly, & he should cease *trying* forever—That he should live on eternally, That he should not undergo decay.** Suppose one were to gain *the whole world*, everything one could possible hope for, at the cost of one's soul. It would be a poor bargain, a losing proposition according to Jesus.

**D. Vs 38** Jesus next warns his disciples about the judgment, when each one will have to give an account before the Judge. The warning implies that when the Son of Man comes in the **glory of His Father**, He'll come as Judge (Mt 25:31–32). Jesus warns His disciples not to retreat from His coming

shame in the eyes of this world as the crucified Messiah. They must side with Him in His suffering & humiliation or they'll not be at His side in the glorious age to come. Our stance toward Jesus in this life determines the final verdict. & yet we all have a deep desire not to be embarrassed or ashamed, so we hide our devotion to Jesus from the world. But despite all the dangers of the Christian life, despite the hate that the world directs at Christ & His disciples, we dare not keep our love for Him secret. If we know Him, we must openly profess our allegiance to Him.<sup>7</sup> Here Jesus uses the threat of judgment to encourage His followers to be faithful. The purpose of Jesus' 1<sup>st</sup> coming was to suffer & die as the only sacrifice for sin acceptable to God (Mk 10:45). But, as He reminds us here, a future day is coming when He'll return as King in triumph & judgment (Rev 19:11–16). Vs 38 gives another consequence of true or false discipleship, now in terms of Middle Eastern values of honor & shame. To be **ashamed of Me & My words** is parallel to saving one's physical life by rejecting Jesus & the gospel (35). Those who refuse to identify with Jesus in His shameful death in the present realm will experience the same rejection by the Son of Man when He comes to reign. Jesus calls them **this adulterous & sinful generation**. 1<sup>st</sup>-century Judaism had replaced true religion with dead traditions & superficial legalism. Though the nation no longer worshiped physical idols, their religion had created an idol out of their ceremonies, traditions, & rituals (Mk 7:6–13). Their description as **adulterous** recalls the prophets' description of the nation Israel as an unfaithful wife to God (Is 1:4, 21; 57:3-10; Ezek 16:32-36; Hos 2:3, 13). By using the title **Son of Man**, Jesus connects Himself to Daniel's vision (Dan 7). One day, in fulfillment of that prophecy, Jesus will return as King & Judge (Mk 14:62). He'll return to earth in glory to establish His reign over the whole world. The rugged cross will be replaced by a royal throne. When that day of reckoning comes, the Lord will destroy His enemies (2 Thes 1:7–10), & they'll be cast into eternal hell (Rev 14:10–11). For believers, the return of Christ is our blessed hope, a comforting promise that we eagerly wait to see fulfilled (Titus 2:11–14; Rev. 22:20). In the meantime, we aren't to be ashamed of Jesus or His Word (Rom 1:16; Phil 1:20; 2 Tim 1:12; 1 Pt 4:16). Having abandoned our sin & self-effort, & wholly embraced Jesus in faith, we rest in the knowledge that we're forgiven &

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<sup>7</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Mark*, p 204

redeemed. The wondrous reality is that our Savior isn't ashamed of us either. As the book of Hebrews reveals, Jesus is not ashamed to call them brethren (Heb 2:11), & God is not ashamed to be called their God (Heb 11:16). For unbelievers, the certainty of final judgment is a terrifying reality (Heb 10:29–31). As the Scriptures declare, It is appointed for men to die once & after this comes judgment (Heb 9:27). On that day, those who refused to abandon their sin or who trusted in their self-righteous efforts, & who've rejected Jesus will be irrevocably & eternally condemned to hell (Mt 7:21–23; Rev 20:11–15). But those who obeyed the invitation of the gospel, embracing Jesus in humble, repentant faith, won't be put to shame (Rom 9:33). Having abandoned this world for Jesus' sake, they'll live with Him forever in the world to come.

**3. A Puzzling Statement** Jesus' last saying in this series is a difficult one since it seems to indicate that Jesus will return before the death of some of His disciples. **9:1**

The saying is emphatic, beginning with Jesus' solemn introductory formula, **Truly I say to you**. There have been many interpretations of what it means that some of the disciples won't die **until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power**. Here are a few:

- 1) a preview of the glory of the kingdom revealed in the transfiguration of Jesus that follows;
- 2) the present display of the kingdom in Jesus' words & actions, which the disciples must see with eyes of faith;
- 3) the crucifixion & resurrection of Jesus as the inauguration of the kingdom;
- 4) the coming of Spirit at Pentecost in the beginning of the kingdom age;
- 5) the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 as a preview of the final judgment; or
- 6) the coming of the Son of Man & the consummation of His kingdom.

While this last view might seem the most natural reading, it has problems. Elsewhere Jesus denies knowledge of the time of the end (13:32), so why would He predict it here? The most widely held & most likely interpretation is the 1<sup>st</sup>, where the transfiguration functions as a preview & guarantee of the coming return of Jesus. In other words, the coming of Jesus' royal reign **with power** is foreshadowed in His transfiguration, recorded next (9:2–8). The biggest problem with this view is the oddity that Jesus would say that *some* of the disciples wouldn't die before witnessing this event. Why would anyone expect any of the disciples to die within the next few days? One possible explanation suggests that the *some who won't die* are the 3 disciples who'd experience the glory of the kingdom *in this life* at the transfiguration while the others wouldn't experience that glory



until the final resurrection. This also helps to explain Jesus' reference to the kingdom coming **with power**. While all the disciples were presently experiencing the presence & the power of the kingdom in Jesus' words & deeds, Peter, James, & John would have a unique experience of its glory **with power** at the transfiguration.<sup>8</sup> Whatever the correct interpretation is, one thing I know for certain is that the Word of God does not fail. I also know that Jesus is truth incarnate & when He said that something was going to happen in a certain time frame, I know it happened within that time frame. There's a lot in these few vss. What's it all mean for us?

**4. Application** The paradox of salvation is that it costs us nothing yet it costs us everything. Mark's original readers literally faced the prospect of death for being Christians in Nero's Rome & he wanted to encourage them to face it with courage & to resist the temptation to retreat. Most Christians today don't live with that danger. Yet many of us are tempted to retreat from dying with embarrassment when we stand up for our faith. We can't live as a disciple of Jesus the same way we watch TV, sitting in a recliner with remote control in hand, ready to switch channels whenever anything unpleasant, boring, or demanding appears on the screen. To gain true freedom & to share in Christ's glory we must deny ourselves, take up our cross, & follow Him (34). Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, *The cross is laid on every Christian. The 1<sup>st</sup> Christ suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world.*<sup>9</sup> Freedom from the things of this world means freedom to become all that God wants us to be. By giving up our physical lives for Jesus & for the gospel, we gain true spiritual life. Those who strive to protect all they have in the end lose it, since this world is passing away (1 Cor 7:31). Yet we constantly face the temptation to seek worldly security rather than risk our lives for our Lord. Many devote themselves to gaining the security that this world provides, but there's a difference between *feeling* secure & *being* secure. Those who surround themselves with material goods, insure them fully, & accumulate a comfortable nest egg may feel secure. They're like the rich fool who says to himself, **you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink & be merry. But God said to**

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<sup>8</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, pp 372–376

<sup>9</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p 89

him, ‘You fool! This *very* night your soul is required of you; & *now* who will own what you have prepared?’ (Lk 12:19-20). Those who risk their lives even to the point of death for Jesus rest in the complete security of God. Those who devote themselves to gaining the whole world, climbing ladders of worldly success, achieving prestige, acquiring luxuries, don’t find fulfillment. They may find themselves asking, *I’ve reached the top, become #1; so what?* It means nothing for eternity. Both ancients & moderns have experienced this empty feeling. Lucius Septimus Severus (146–211) died with these words, *I have been everything & everything is nothing. A little urn will contain all that remains of one for whom the whole world was too little.*<sup>10</sup> This is a constant refrain throughout the NT. James tells the rich to **to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away** (Jas 1:10). Peter quotes Is 40:6, 8, **All flesh is like grass, & all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, & the flower falls off, but the word of the Lord endures forever** (1 Pt 1:24–25). John reminds his readers that **the world is passing away, & also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever** (1 Jn 2:17). From a human perspective, it sometimes seems as if the wicked prosper & the powerful succeed. But in the end there will be a great reversal, as God brings low the proud & exalts the humble. We also face the temptation to evade Jesus’ demands by substituting a more pleasant, less rigorous form of Christianity. Many today appear to want choices, not eternal imperatives. We live in a consumer driven society, & many approach religious life no differently from any other aspect of their life. They come to Christ as consumers, wanting to know, *What am I going to get from this?* They want a full-service church with pleasing worship, a good youth program, excellent child care, nice facilities, pastoral care when they need it, & entertaining preaching. They prefer religion à la carte & opt for the salads & desserts, but not the main course with its demands of self-denial & cross-bearing. Though disciples of Jesus are called to humility, service, sacrifice, & even death, there’s also the promise of vindication & reward. Those who take up their cross for Jesus & for the gospel will inherit true life (35). They’ll become **heirs of God & fellow heirs with Christ** (Rom 8:17). The promise of reward is also implicit in Jesus’ statement, **whoever is ashamed of Me & My words ... the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him** (38). The

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<sup>10</sup> David E. Garland, *Mark*, p 339

reverse must also be true & is stated in both Matthew & Luke: **everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven** (Mt 10:32; Lk 12:8). The transfiguration is a glimpse of this coming glory. Paul speaks of the **crown of righteousness** which the Lord will give not only to him but to all those who long for Christ's appearing (2 Tim 4:8). James writes of the **crown of life** that the Lord has promised to those who love Him (Js 1:12). For Peter it's the **crown of glory** that will never fade away (1 Pt 5:4). At the end of Revelation the glorified Jesus makes the promise, **Behold, I am coming quickly, & My reward is with Me** (Rev 22:12). Just as the Son of Man will be vindicated at the right hand of the Father, so His followers who persevere will also be glorified.<sup>11</sup> Following Jesus means a radical shift in the our minds & hearts. As a sinner, our whole life is inward-focused. It's all about me. As a sinner, I push myself to the center of my world. As a sinner, I worship my own glory. As a sinner, I want to set my own rules. As a sinner, I reduce the world down to what I want, what I feel, & what I think I need. The DNA of sin is self-focus & selfishness. A disciple of Jesus is different. This sacrifice of self-denial & cross-bearing demanded of disciples is perfectly demonstrated in what Jesus Himself was willing to do. He wasn't One that called people to go somewhere He wasn't willing to go. He called people to follow Him in devotion, commitment, self-denial, & in this sacrifice of giving up His life. It's the same sacrifice we must be willing to make for His glory. Are you truly a disciple of Jesus? Are you following Him? Where must you deny yourself today? Are you willing to die for what you believe? We must confess Christ as the suffering Messiah & Savior. We must embrace the life He exemplified & calls us to. We must bear crosses because we are living like Him. We must lose our lives for Him, for losers are keepers. If we confess Him, the Son of Man will rejoice in us.

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<sup>11</sup> Strauss, pp 376–378