

# Right Answer, Wrong Formula

Mark 8:31-38

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Most of us remember going through math classes, even if it's been a long time. You surely remember doing homework and solving pages and pages of problems. Once you get the basics down, you start learning formulas for different kinds of problems. You learn how to find area, perimeter, volume, and many other different formulas. Math teachers will tell you that it's not enough to just put down the right answer, you need to show your work. That's because you can somehow stumble upon the right answer, but not actually know how to solve the problem correctly. There is a famous meme that plays on this idea. On a student's paper, the teacher had written, "I don't know how, but you used the wrong formula and got the right answer." If we get the right answer using the wrong formula, we'll keep making mistakes moving forward. It's important to get both parts right.

We see this same truth in our passage this morning. Last week, we ended with Peter's marvelous declaration that Jesus was the Messiah. That was the correct answer. In our passage this morning, we quickly discover that though Peter had the right answer, he had used the wrong formula. Jesus takes the time to correct his understanding. I suspect that as we look at Jesus' instruction to Peter, we'll find our own understanding and formulas challenged as well.

## Peter's Rebuke

Our passage picks up some time after Jesus healed the blind man we saw last week. Jesus had begun to try to give His disciples a glimpse of what was to come in an effort to prepare them. This is how Mark describes the scene.

<sup>31</sup> Then Jesus began to tell them that the Son of Man must suffer many terrible things and be rejected by the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but three days later he would rise from the dead. <sup>32</sup> As he talked about this openly with his disciples, Peter took him aside and began to reprimand him for saying such things. <sup>33</sup> Jesus turned around and looked at his disciples, then reprimanded Peter. "Get away from me, Satan!" he said. "You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's." (Mark 8:31-33, NLT)

Jesus began to tell the disciples what was going to happen to Him. He said that He must suffer many terrible things, be rejected by the religious leaders, and be killed, but that then He would rise from the dead three days later. Of course, with the benefit of hindsight, we know that's exactly what happened. Jesus knew what lay ahead for Him. He knew the path He was walking would lead to the cross. But He also knew what it would accomplish. So Jesus walked boldly, unswervingly forward.

But what Jesus was saying didn't make sense to the disciples. They were convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, but because their understanding of what that meant was wrong, they couldn't even conceive of what Jesus was saying.

For hundreds of years, the Jewish people had been under the control of foreign entities. The Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and then the Romans had all ruled over the people of Israel. The days of David and Solomon and the great kingdom of Israel were a distant memory. The Jewish people believed that when the Messiah came, He would restore the nation of Israel, making it even greater than it was during David's reign. He would overthrow their oppressors (who at this time, were Rome), and would set up a kingdom that would be the envy of the entire world. The Jewish people were waiting for the Messiah to make them into a world power once more. This was surely how the disciples viewed the Messiah—and this is what they expected from Jesus.

So when Jesus began talking about being rejected by the leaders and being killed, it didn't compute. They believed Jesus was the Messiah, they were sure of it, and based on their understanding of who the Messiah would be, what Jesus was saying simply couldn't be true. Their problem was that they were using the wrong formula, misunderstanding who the Messiah truly was. Here's how one author explains it,

Jesus does not explain his mission to his disciples simply to predict future events but to verify for his disciples that what is about to happen fulfills God's plan. The disciples can understand it only after the fact because this plan runs counter to everything they were conditioned to expect. Lofty visions of majesty fill up their eyes and the noise of cheering crowds plugs up their hearing so that Jesus' teaching about suffering and death flies in one ear and out the other. It is all a muddle to them.<sup>1</sup>

It isn't until they see the risen Christ that they begin to put the pieces together. It is then that they remember everything Jesus had said would happen. And then they begin make sense of what God's great purpose had been. It is at that point that they begin to understand that God's plan for the Messiah was far greater than they had imagined.

But at this point, they don't get it. And that's when Peter speaks up. My guess is that Peter was not the only one who was thinking that what Jesus was saying couldn't be true. It's possible that everyone was thinking the same thing and kind of looked to Peter to say something to Jesus. It's also possible that Peter was the only one who said out loud what he was thinking. Whatever the case, Mark tells us that Peter took Jesus aside and began to reprimand or rebuke Jesus for saying such things.

Part of us can't believe that Peter would have the audacity to tell Jesus that He was wrong. We can't imagine speaking to the Lord and telling Him that what He was saying was incorrect and so He should stop speaking...but we do the same thing all the time in practice, even if we don't say it out loud. We try to force God to conform to our own presuppositions about Him, we imagine that He must think like us, and so we tend to

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<sup>1</sup> Garland, David E. *Mark*. The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996.

hear only what we want to hear. In that, we are no different than Peter. Which is why we need to hear Jesus' rebuke to Peter as a rebuke to ourselves as well.

Jesus responds to Peter with some of the harshest words He ever speaks to His disciples, saying to Peter, "Get away from me, Satan!" I imagine that everyone stopped in their tracks. This was not the way Jesus normally spoke, and it surely took them all off guard. I think that was the point. Suddenly, Jesus had their full attention.

Why does Jesus call Peter Satan? It's because Peter was promulgating the same idea that Satan did when Jesus was being tempted in the desert at the beginning of His ministry. Satan was holding out to Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. Jesus was holding out for something far better, even though it would mean great suffering. Peter is saying is essentially the same lie Satan had whispered to Jesus. Now he is whispering it to Peter. Later, he would whisper it to Judas as well.

Jesus tells Peter that he is seeing things only from a human point of view, not from God's. What an important reminder that is for us. We so often interpret everything through the lens of our own understanding. Our ultimate litmus test is whether things make sense to us. If something doesn't make sense to us, then we conclude that it must be wrong. But that overlooks an important truth—we don't understand everything! It makes sense to us that God would understand far more than we do!

We've learned this in other areas of our lives, haven't we? We don't always understand how the medicines our doctors prescribe work, but we trust that they know more than we do. We don't always understand why the mechanic tells you to do certain things to your car, but you know they understand things more deeply than you. And as parents, we tell our children to do things that don't make much sense to them at the time, because we see the bigger picture. We see things they simply cannot see yet. The same is true in our relationship with the Lord. We must recognize that we don't see things as clearly as we think we do. We must learn to rest in His guidance and provision rather than our own understanding. Peter didn't do that, and often neither do we. Jesus tries to get Peter's attention, and I think He's trying to get the attention of all of His disciples (even us), because what He's about to say is important, but it's also impossible to grasp from a merely human perspective. The point is simple—we must trust what He tells us, even if we can't make sense of it right now. If what the Lord says doesn't make sense, it's our understanding that is incorrect, not the Lord.

## **The Correct Formula**

After rebuking Peter by saying, "get away from me Satan," Jesus goes into an explanation that is intended to give us the right way to understand what He was doing.

<sup>34</sup> Then, calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me.

<sup>35</sup> If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it. <sup>36</sup> And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? <sup>37</sup> Is anything worth more than your soul? <sup>38</sup> If anyone is ashamed of me and my message in these

adulterous and sinful days, the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when he returns in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” (Mark 8:34-38, NLT)

What Jesus describes is completely the opposite of what the disciples thought the Messiah would do. They thought the Messiah would set up an earthly kingdom, and that they would rule together with Him. But Jesus shows them that His plan is completely different. People today still often have the wrong formula when they think of Jesus. They think following Jesus means He will make life easy and will give us the earthly blessings we want. What He says in these verses gives us a very different picture.

Jesus tells them that if anyone wants to be His follower, they must do three things: give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow Him. These are familiar words to many Christians, but it’s imperative that we stop and unpack what this means.

**To give up your own way** means to stop trying to live for yourself and for your benefit. The Christian life requires us to deny ourselves. This doesn’t mean that we forgo everything we like, but rather that we recognize many of our desires are sinful. Giving up our own way means that we begin to do battle with our evil tendencies and desires. Listen again to what one commentator says about this.

Every day we must open ourselves up to God’s initiatives and control. Self-denial takes shape in many ways. For some, it may mean leaving job and family as the disciples have done. For the proud, it means renouncing the desire for status and honor. For the greedy, it means renouncing an appetite for wealth. The complacent will have to renounce the love of ease. The fainthearted will have to abandon the craving for security. The violent will have to repudiate the desire for revenge. On it goes. Individuals know best what hinders them from giving their lives over to God. Entire churches too may need to learn to deny themselves—to tithe their offerings to help other struggling congregations rather than build a new recreation center with a bowling alley and basketball court, to go without new choir robes so that the money can go instead to missions.<sup>2</sup>

To give up our own way means putting to death the attitudes and desires we know are contrary to the Lord. It means allowing His priorities to guide us rather than our own.

**To take up your cross** means literally to be willing to die for Christ. Though the disciples hadn’t witnessed Jesus being crucified yet, they were familiar with what it meant to take up your cross. Crucifixion was a common method of Roman execution. It was meant to be a spectacle, a way of reminding people what happens if you don’t go along with Rome. So when Jesus says to take up your cross, this would have flown in the face of everything the disciples believed about the Messiah. Rather than overthrowing Rome, Jesus was telling them to let Rome win. This seems utterly ludicrous, but Jesus goes on to explain why it isn’t: because the things of this world don’t last. We should be willing to sacrifice whatever we have in this world to prepare ourselves for the next. Jesus says that the only way for us to save our lives is to lose them. We must give up the life this world holds out in favor of the life Jesus calls us to.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

One of the most famous examples of this was the missionary Jim Elliot. He was part of a missionary team who was killed as they tried to minister to a tribe who had never heard of Jesus. Prior to his death, Jim Elliot had written the following words in his journal—words which guided his life.

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

This is what Jesus was saying. We must be willing to sacrifice *everything* we have in this life for Him. That sounds extreme, but it makes sense when you remember that nothing in this world will last. But sacrifices in this world are deposits in Heaven. We cannot keep the things of this world, so it makes sense to trade them for that which we cannot lose.

**To follow Him** means exactly what it sounds like—we go where He leads us. While it's a simple concept in principle, it's far more difficult in practice. Jesus will lead us to places very different than the places we would go on our own. Jesus will call us to go in a different direction than everyone else in the world. Our world will not understand following Jesus in this way. We may be mocked, ridiculed, and called names for following Jesus. They will make us feel like fools because we don't value things like the world does. Following Jesus requires us to trust His leading more than our judgment or the judgment of the world.

Admittedly, these are hard teachings. But Jesus tells us the reason they are so important: if we are to save our souls, we must give up the things of this world. If we try to hold on to the things of this world, we will not only lose them, but we will lose our very souls. But if we let go of the things of our world, we will find a far greater life with Christ for all eternity.

This is the challenge Jesus issues. It's not enough to have the right answers to the questions Jesus asks, we must actually be willing to follow Him, no matter the cost.

## **Application**

It's easy to say that's what Jesus is telling us, but I don't want to stop there. Let's look at what that means practically. Here are some principles we must apply.

**First, we must allow the Lord to correct our understanding.** We are all like Peter in that tend to hear what we want to hear. We interpret everything through the lens of our own preconceived notions of how things ought to be. The result is that when we open the scriptures and read something difficult, we conclude, "well that can't actually be what He meant." Or we conclude that what the scriptures are saying doesn't apply to our situation. When we do this, we make the same mistake as Peter. A better approach is to come to God's Word expecting it to challenge and change our preconceptions. We should come to God's Word looking for it to change us. We must start by recognizing that we aren't the way we should be, and we need God to change us. If we start there, we'll be more willing to hear what God says, and less apt to interpret things according to our own desires.

**Second, we need to examine our priorities.** We live in the world and know how much it tries to push us into its mold. The result is often that we drift from the Lord little by little and find ourselves living according to the world's patterns and standards rather than God's. So let me challenge you to stop and take stock of your focus in life. What is it that is truly driving you? It's an uncomfortable question because much of the time we know our priorities are wrong. There are many good things that we can allow to have too high of a priority in our lives.

- We can be seeking "success" in our careers rather than to honor God in them.
- We can buy into the lie that we are hurting our kids if we don't allow them to participate in every activity available to them, so we spend all our time running to kids' things and make no time for the Lord—for us or for them.
- We can be more enamored with acquiring trinkets of this world than we are with investing in people.
- We can place a greater emphasis on being well-liked than we do on telling people the truth that can save them.
- We can make ourselves busy with all sorts of things that have no eternal value, leaving us with no time to do the things that matter.

This is hard because it is a radical teaching. But we must learn to live in the light of eternity. We should order our priorities based on what will last, rather than on what is popular right now.

**Finally, we must follow the Lord.** It's good for us to know what God tells us to do—but it's not the same as actually doing it. Mark Twain is said to have remarked, "Some people are troubled by the things in the Bible they can't understand. The things that trouble me are the things I can understand." Our challenge is to do the hard work of realigning our lives to follow the Lord. There was once a popular bumper sticker that said, "God is my co-pilot." If God is your co-pilot, then you need to switch seats! So often, we want God to be along for the ride with us, but we want to be in control. That's the wrong way to approach things. We must start by looking to see what God says, and then we must put it into practice. This is something that needs to become the consistent pattern of our lives. True followers put the Lord in the driver's seat, trusting that He knows where He's going, even when we don't.

Our years of math classes, along with this account with Peter and the disciples teach us that it's not enough to know the right answer—we've got to get the formula right as well. It is not enough to say we believe Jesus, we must actually take Him at His word and follow Him. Jesus doesn't promise us this will be easy. In fact, He promises that we will have to take up our cross. He promises that following Him will cost us many of the things our world values most. But He also reminds us that while the things of this world will not last, He will. We should live our lives with the perspective that eternity gives. If we believe Jesus, then we'll live the way He tells us.

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