

## **WEEK 7**

### **WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?**

#### **BEFORE THE TALK**

*Welcome the course participants and suggest they take 20 minutes to work through the Study Guide section called **GROUP DISCUSSION 1** with their group.*

#### **THE TALK**

*Deliver the talk. The wording below is intended only as a general guide. The aim of the talk is to recap what the course has covered so far about Jesus' identity and mission, and then to explain what Jesus demands of those who want to follow him.*

A little boy at Sunday school is asked to draw a picture of Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus on their flight into Egypt. The teacher had been telling them about the time in Matthew chapter 2 when an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and warns him to flee with his family from the murderous King Herod. So the little boy carefully draws a picture of a huge airplane and, when the teacher asks him what it is, he points out that it's "the flight into Egypt," indicating Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus who are sitting happily in the passenger seats. "But who's that?" asks the teacher, indicating a shadowy figure in the cockpit. Growing a bit tired of all the stupid questions, the little boy says, "That's Pontius Pilot."

It's not only five-year-olds who misunderstand what Christianity's about. There must be millions of people in this country alone who have rejected what they *think* is Christianity, but who have actually rejected something that is only a pale imitation of the real thing. There must also be a great many Christians who have lost sight of the basics. I want to look now at Mark chapter 8 in order to find out exactly what it means to be a Christian. In this chapter, we see Jesus explaining that a Christian is someone who knows who Jesus is, understands why he came, and is prepared to follow him – whatever the cost.

*Display the following headings.*

Who is Jesus?  
Why did Jesus come?  
What does Jesus demand?

#### **WHO IS JESUS?**

So question 1: who is Jesus? This question has dominated the book of Mark up to chapter 8, and we, the readers, already know the answer. As we've seen, Mark has told us the answer in the very first verse, where he writes that this is a book about Jesus Christ, "the Son of God."

You might think that would drain the book of all interest, but the fact is that *the disciples don't know what we know*. And so we follow them around, watching as they try to make sense of Jesus. Jesus, for his part, forces them to ask questions about who he is by doing amazing things – as we've seen. They watch him calming a violent storm, curing incurable illness, bringing a little girl back from the dead. They even hear him claiming to be able to forgive sin. And yet they don't come up with the obvious answer: that this is God's Anointed One, the Christ, the Son of God, the one who'd been promised throughout the Old Testament. They were expecting it, were desperately hoping for it, but now that he's there, standing right in front of them, they just don't see it.

Have you ever seen one of those “trick” pictures that seem to show one thing but – looked at another way – show something entirely different? The most well-known one is probably the picture of a beautiful young woman that can also look like a hideous old hag.

*Display the picture. (It can also be downloaded from the website at [www.christianityexplored.com](http://www.christianityexplored.com).)*

*I have to admit that despite staring at that picture for a long time, it was ages before I could see the beautiful young woman. All I saw was the hideous old hag. And if you're an amateur psychologist, I'm sure you could have some fun with that fact.*

Well, in a similar way, Jesus also had two faces: the human and the divine. The two were obvious, they were there for all to see, but even though the disciples stared and stared for several years, all they could see was the man. They couldn't see the divine face of Christ. Mark draws our attention to their blindness again and again. For example, he does it in chapter 8, verses 17 and 18. Jesus is exasperated with the disciples: “Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?” And then, quite strikingly, the next incident we read about is Jesus enabling a blind man to see. Look at Mark 8, verses 22 to 26.

*Read aloud Mark 8:22–26.*

The miracle is quite unique. It's the only one of Jesus' miracles that happens *gradually*. First, Jesus touches the blind man, and he begins to see, but only vaguely. Then, he touches him again, and this time the man sees perfectly. Mark wants us to see this as a parallel to the gradual opening of the *disciples'* eyes. Of course, the disciples aren't *physically* blind; they are *spiritually* blind. But – either way – they still need Jesus to heal them.

Then, in verses 27 to 29, we see their spiritual blindness begin to be cured. They won't be fully cured until later, when they understand what Jesus came to do and what it means to follow him, but here, for the first time, is an indication that they know *who Jesus is*.

*Read aloud Mark 8:27–29.*

This is a big step forward for the disciples. Finally, they've recognized that Jesus is the Christ, the King promised in the Old Testament, who would have the power and authority of God himself. Jesus asks them a scorching question here: "Who do you say I am?" It's very personal. And at this point in Mark's Gospel, it also gets very personal for *us*. Who do *we* say Jesus is? What do *we* see as we look at the face of Jesus? Do we just see the human face or can we see the divine face as well?

But it's not enough simply to know Jesus' true identity. Peter gets the question of Jesus' identity absolutely right here, but when it comes to the question of what Jesus came to do, Peter gets it horribly wrong.

## WHY DID JESUS COME?

And so we move on to answer the second question – why did Jesus come? Look at the next verse – verse 30.

*Read aloud Mark 8:30.*

Now that the disciples have seen who he is, what is Jesus' response? He warns them not to tell anyone about him. You see, at this point, their eyes are only half open. Jesus knows that although they can see who he is, they don't yet see why he's come or what it means to follow him. And that's why he tells them not to tell anyone about him yet.

Then Jesus begins to teach them more about himself. It's as if he's starting to correct their partial vision. Look at verses 31–32.

*Read aloud Mark 8:31–32.*

That's why Jesus came. He came to die. In fact, it's necessary that he die. And Jesus knows that very well. He knows that the only way in which sinful people can be brought back into a relationship with God is if he dies in our place.

But Peter has this image of Jesus as king so clearly in his mind that it seems entirely inappropriate to him that Jesus would have to die. And he tells Jesus so. He takes him aside and gives him a pep talk. How on earth can a king bring in his kingdom by *dying*? That's ridiculous. But Jesus tells Peter that he's got it all wrong. Look at verse 33.

*Read aloud Mark 8:33.*

In a way, I don't blame Peter for thinking like this. After all, there are two ways of looking at the cross. If, as Jesus says, we have in mind "the things of men," there is tremendous weakness at the cross. Jesus seems exposed, humiliated, and defeated. From the human point of view, the cross seems to prove conclusively that Jesus has got it all wrong. He was right about so many things, but if he really *was* the Son of God, why couldn't he come down from the cross? A king should be on a throne, not a cross.

But what do we see if we look at the cross from another angle – from God’s perspective? What if we have in our minds, as Jesus says, “the things of God”? Then we can see the cross as part of God’s rescue plan. We can see that Jesus *chooses* to be separated from God so that we don’t have to be, paying the terrible price for our sin, being executed – in our place – for crimes he never committed. From God’s perspective, and from ours if we have in mind the things of God, this is not weakness. In fact, there has never been a more powerful moment in history.

On 13 January 1982, millions of television viewers watched as a balding, middle-aged man swam in the icy cold water of a river in Washington DC. Seven inches of snow had fallen that day. The water was so cold that life expectancy was no more than a few minutes. A helicopter quickly reached the scene, and let down a rope to haul the man to safety. The viewers at home were amazed as the man twice grabbed hold of the rope, *then quite deliberately let it go*. Each time the rope was lowered to him, he had a chance of survival, but he chose to let it go. And – in front of millions of avidly watching viewers – the man eventually died.

It seems like a futile and pointless death. But we need to see the broader picture.

Five minutes earlier, a Boeing 737 jetliner carrying eighty-three passengers and crew had departed from National Airport’s main runway. However, the ice that had built up on the wings as it waited for take-off prevented it from gaining sufficient altitude, it hit a bridge heavy with commuters and then plunged nose-first into the frozen Potomac River. The survivors struggled in the freezing river amid ice chunks, debris, luggage, seat cushions and jet fuel. Thankfully, a rescue helicopter arrived and let down its rope. The television cameras then pick out a balding, middle-aged man. He grabs the rope, and deliberately gives it to somebody else, who is then pulled to safety. The man does this twice before – exhausted – he drowns. When we have all the details in front of us, an apparently futile death is shown to be purposeful, daring and amazingly loving.

And Jesus’ death is all of those things. He also died as part of a rescue mission. In his amazing love he came to earth and died in our place, taking the punishment that we deserved, so that we could enter into a relationship with God. He was forsaken so that we need never be. There are two ways of seeing the cross. We can see it from a human perspective, as a pathetic and needless death. Or we can see it from God’s perspective, as our only means of rescue. Our lives, as well as our deaths, will be determined by the way in which we respond to what Jesus did on the cross.

## WHAT DOES JESUS DEMAND?

And that leads us to our third question: what does Jesus demand? It is not enough to recognize who Jesus is, or even why he came. Just like the disciples, we also need to understand what it means to follow him. Look at Mark 8, verse 34.

*Read aloud Mark 8:34.*

According to Jesus' words here, following him requires a change of allegiance. It also means responding to Jesus' call to die. Then, because these things are not easy, he goes on to give us a convincing reason for following him.

*Display the following headings.*

A change of allegiance

A call to die

A convincing reason

## A CHANGE OF ALLEGIANCE

First of all, Jesus demands a change of allegiance. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself ..." Denying self means no longer living for ourselves. And if you're not sure that you *do* live for yourself, try answering this question: who has the right to tell you how to live your life? Surely our instinctive response is to cry, "No one! No one has the right to tell me how to live, apart from me. *I'm* the only one who should decide what I do." But *God* made us, *he* sustains us, we are dependent on *him* for everything we have, and it is absurd to live in *God's* world as if *we* are the ultimate authorities over our lives.

So Jesus tells us to deny ourselves. He puts it another way in Mark chapter 1, when he tells us to "repent and believe the good news." The word "repent" literally means "to change one's direction." To "repent and believe" means I stop going my own way and instead say, "Lord Jesus, I recognize who you are, and from now on I will allow you to take charge."

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself ..." It's a simple and brief instruction, just half a verse, but I want us to see that it is profoundly radical. There are real issues to grapple with: my time and how I use it; my money and what I do with it; my work and how I approach it; my sexuality and how I view it; my family and how I relate to them.

But Jesus' call is more than self-denial. You may have noticed that there's an additional ingredient to Jesus' command: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself *and take up his cross* and follow me." Not only must we deny ourselves if we are to follow him, we must also *take up our cross*.

## A CALL TO DIE

Remember where Jesus himself is going at this point. He is heading for the cross, as he's just told the disciples. It is striking, and not a little disturbing, to see Jesus immediately turn his attention from the cross he must take up, to the cross we must take up. Jesus warns potential followers that if they are to follow him, they too must head for the cross. Although it's unlikely that any of us will face a literal cross, the command is still a chilling one. Jesus is telling us here that if we commit ourselves to him, it will mean a martyrdom of one kind or another. So this is Jesus' offer to his hearers: "I will die for you, but you must be prepared to die for me, if you want to follow me." It's a call to come and die.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the explorer Ernest Shackleton put an advertisement in various London newspapers to try and find men who would come with him on his polar expedition. The advertisement ran like this: “Men wanted for a hazardous journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months in complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful.” Needless to say, there weren’t many applicants. But Christ’s appeal is similar. Come and die.

Of course, Jesus isn’t saying that everyone who follows him will face a violent death. But, at the very least, they will face suffering. His followers can find themselves marginalized, misunderstood and isolated. Why? Because friends, family, colleagues, and those around you may find your beliefs and conduct uncomfortable or even offensive. For example, if you stand up for Christ’s claim to be “the way, the truth and the life,” insisting that no-one can know God except through him, then you will face opposition.

A Christian is not only someone who sees clearly who Jesus is and why he came. A Christian is someone who is prepared to follow him, whatever the cost.

So with Jesus’ call for a change of allegiance, comes a call to die. If you’ve grasped what that means, you will want to think very seriously before committing your life to Christ. There seems an awful lot to lose. With that in mind, Jesus goes on to give us a convincing reason for switching our allegiance to him.

## A CONVINCING REASON

If we think about following Christ in purely earthly terms, the cost seems too high. So Jesus’ aim in verses 35 to 37 is to give us the right perspective. Look at those verses with me.

*Read aloud Mark 8:35–37.*

This passage insists that our “souls” are the most precious thing we have. If we lose our soul, there is *nothing* we can do to get it back.

By nature we tend to focus on our present circumstances. If something won’t pay dividends *now*, people aren’t very interested. But here Jesus wants to lift our eyes from the present and fix them on the future. And the Bible says that the future is vitally important because it’s eternal. When we die, it’s not the end. Jesus teaches us here that there is a connection between how we live now and what will happen after death.

And there’s a twist, because those who try to save their lives will lose them, while those prepared to lose their lives will gain them. Jesus well knows how much we want to cling on to our lives, to do what *we* want to do when *we* want to do it. But he warns us that if we live in that way, then ultimately we’ll lose the very thing we are so desperate to cling on to. He tells us that if we really want to hold on to our lives, there’s only one option open to us: we must allow him to take control.

Christ will judge the world, whether we like it or not. And we can choose whether or not this judge will also be our rescuer. And ultimately, we will be treated very fairly. We will be treated by Jesus in exactly the same way as we have treated him, as he tells us in Mark chapter 8, verse 38.

*Read aloud Mark 8:38.*

Because Jesus is the person who will return to judge the world, it is not a suicidal gesture to entrust him with my life. In doing so I know that my life will be saved. Moreover, whatever we might lose by following Christ pales into insignificance when we consider what awaits us in heaven. Jesus pleads with us to give up the very things that will destroy us – self-love, self-worship, self-will – and he pleads with us not to waste our souls.

In 1000 AD, 186 years after the death of Emperor Charlemagne, officials of the Emperor Otto re-opened Charlemagne's tomb. Before them was an extraordinary sight. In the midst of all the finery buried with him – the gold, the jewels, the priceless treasure – there was the skeleton of Charlemagne himself, still seated on his throne, still wearing his crown. In his lap, there lay a Bible, and a bony finger rested on Mark chapter 8, verse 36: "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" I wonder what answer Charlemagne gave.

## **AT THE END OF THE TALK**

Let me leave you with the following questions for your groups:

*Display the following questions and read them aloud.*

- "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36). How would *you* answer that question?
- Jesus said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). Do you feel you could do this?
- "A Christian is someone who is prepared to follow Christ, whatever the cost." What is the cost?

*Allow 30 minutes for groups to work together through the Study Guide section called **GROUP DISCUSSION 2**.*

## **AT THE END OF THE DISCUSSION**

Before next week, it would be a great help if you'd do the HOME STUDY section in your *Study Guide*.

As we close our session, I want to say a few words about how we apply what we've learned from Mark. Please turn to Mark chapter 1, verse 15 and see what Jesus says there. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" I don't know where you are with God or what you make of Jesus, but as you see here, the appropriate response to Jesus is to repent and believe. That means we turn from what we know is wrong and trust in what he has done for us on the cross.

Perhaps you are already a Christian. You've responded to what Jesus did on the cross by asking him to forgive you. You want to live a life that pleases him, in gratitude for all that he's done for you. Please keep coming, because the next three weeks will help you go on living for Christ.

Or perhaps you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, and you've still got questions, but you want to know more. I hope you'll find the next few weeks helpful in answering those questions – and let me say how grateful we are that you keep giving your time to understanding this.

Finally, perhaps you know that you are not a Christian, but you've been persuaded by what you've heard. You believe that Jesus is who he claims to be. You can see your own rebellion against God, your own need for rescue, and you want to accept God's forgiveness. Well, if that's you, then I want to give you a prayer that you can pray if you are ready to repent and believe. You are not under any pressure to do this but, if you are ready, this prayer gives you an opportunity to start the Christian life.

If you don't wish to pray this prayer now, then do bear with us. There is also a copy of the prayer in your *Study Guide*, so you can take it home and think it through in private, if you'd prefer.

I'll read the prayer aloud once, so that you know exactly what it says, and then I'll pray it, inviting you to echo it in your heart if you want to.

Heavenly Father, I have rebelled against you. I have sinned in my thoughts, my words and my actions – sometimes unconsciously, sometimes deliberately. I am sorry for the way I have lived and ask you to forgive me. Thank you that Jesus died on the cross so that I could be forgiven. Thank you that I can now see clearly who Jesus is and why he came. Please send your Holy Spirit to help me follow him whatever the cost. Amen.

*Read the prayer again. Read slowly, giving participants time to echo it silently for themselves.*

And can I ask that if you did pray that prayer, do let one of your leaders know so that they can help you as you start the Christian life.

*Thank everyone for coming and bring the evening to a close.*