

No Upper Limit

Mark 8:27-9:1

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In an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, actor Brad Pitt commented on his role in the movie *Fight Club*, which is the story of a man who has the American dream and yet is still not satisfied. He says this: “Man, I know all these things are supposed to seem important to us—the car, the condo, our version of success—but if that is the case, why is the general feeling out there reflecting more impotence and isolation and desperation and loneliness? If you ask me, I say toss all this. We have got to find something else. Because all I know is that at this point in time, we are heading for a dead end, a numbing of the soul, a complete atrophy of the spiritual being. And I don’t want that.” The reporter then followed up, “So if we’re heading toward this kind of existential dead end in society, what do you think should happen?” Brad Pitt responded, “Hey man, I don’t have those answers yet...”¹

What would Jesus say to Brad Pitt’s very legitimate concern about a numbing of the soul and an atrophy of the spiritual being? Brad Pitt has experienced fame and fortune, and he says there is no fulfillment in that. So where do we find fulfillment in life?

Open your Bible to Mark 8:27. We will work our way through chapter 9:1, as we try and answer the question: Where do we find fulfillment in life?

Our passage starts with Jesus traveling around with the disciples.

Jesus went out, along with His disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way He questioned His disciples, saying to them, “Who do people say that I am?” (Mark 8:27, *NASB)

By the disciples’ response of what the people think about Jesus, it is clear the crowds don’t understand. They haven’t quite grasped who Jesus is.

They told Him, saying, “John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; but others, one of the prophets.” (v. 28)

They have Jesus pegged as a herald, a spokesperson, a prophet of God. But they don’t see Him as Savior, the Anointed, God’s Chosen to die for the sin of the world.

I don’t think Jesus is that concerned about how the disciples answer the question in verse 27. As Bryan pointed out last week, at this point in Jesus’ ministry, He is starting to pour Himself into the disciples. I think the question in verse 27 is a setup for the question He is going to ask in verse 29, and He is very concerned about how they answer that question.

And He continued by questioning them, “But who do you say that I am?” (v. 29a)

Many commentators at this point think Peter speaks for the disciples.

Peter answered and said to Him, “You are the Christ.” (v. 29b)

In saying Jesus is the Christ, he is calling Him the Messiah, the Anointed One, God’s Chosen for a specific purpose. That’s the idea of this term. And we, having read the rest of the New Testament and the rest of the story, understand that purpose being to die for the sin of the world.

For Jesus, it was incredibly important that the disciples get it. He is not just a herald; He is not a prophet. He is the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed.

Please notice here when the disciples confer upon Jesus the title of the Christ, the Messiah, He does not try and correct them saying, “No, no, no, you’ve got it all wrong.” He accepts their designation as God’s Anointed and God’s Chosen.

Friends, that is why we sing songs like “You Are Lord.” We are not looking to just fill a couple of songs before the speaker. We agree with the disciples that this Jesus is the Christ. We are proclaiming He is the Messiah. That is why we sing, “From the depths of the sea, to the heights of the heaven, Your name be praised.” We are joining with those to say that He is the Christ. He is worthy of our praise.

As I mentioned earlier, I think Jesus is very intentional about getting the disciples to state His true identity. And yet, we live in a culture that says it really does not matter who Jesus is.

Several years ago the BBC, the British Broadcasting Corporation, did a documentary on Jesus. The presenter in that documentary, Jeremy Bowen, said this, “The important thing is not what He was or what He wasn’t. The important thing is what people believe Him to have been.”³

My friends, I (and we, speaking from this body) could not disagree more! Who Jesus is is of utmost importance. Our eternal destiny rides on the importance of Jesus.

I think we would agree if we had a problem with our car and we took it to our mechanic, it wouldn’t be enough to say to the mechanic, “You know, whether or not you are really an experienced mechanic doesn’t matter. Just as long as I think you are a mechanic, it will be okay.” Or if we were to get sick and the doctor is standing before us, we wouldn’t say, “Hey, whether or not you’ve got medical training really doesn’t matter, as long as I think you are a doctor.” If we are that concerned about the care of our car or the care of our physical health, how much more should we be concerned about the care of our soul?

My friends, we need to know the guy who is standing in the gap—the guy who is dying for our sins—qualifies. It is not enough to *think* He is. As individuals who follow Jesus and as a body, this is our mission. This is why we are planting a church in north Lincoln. To a culture that says it really does not matter, we want to say, “Yes, it really does matter. All of eternity rides on who Jesus is.” If Jesus led the disciples to make this statement: “You are the Christ”—I think we ought to live our life in such a way and speak our words in such a way that we do everything we can to persuade people to confess and believe that Jesus is the Christ.

Having said that, let me ask you: With whom in your circle of friends are you cultivating a relationship that you might share your experience, your relationship with Jesus? For whom, in your circle of acquaintances, are you praying that they might come to the conclusion, they might come to believe in their heart of hearts that Jesus is God’s Anointed?

If you are here visiting for the first time, I want to assure you that typically I don’t take my theology from Brad Pitt. But I think he has got this right. As a culture, we are facing a numbing of the soul. We are facing an atrophy of the spiritual being, and I appreciate his honesty. He doesn’t have answers. I don’t think as human beings we do either. If we are going to get answers, we need to look to our Creator. We need to look to the one who put the soul and the inner being in place and put it together. And when we do, God the Father says, “There is One who is Anointed. There is one Christ and one Messiah. And His name is Jesus of Nazareth.”

We asked the question: Where do we find fulfillment in life? I tell you this, we start on the road to fulfillment by believing in Jesus as God's Anointed.

One of the curious parts of this passage to me is in verse 29. Peter has got it: Jesus is the Messiah. And in verse 30 Jesus said, "Shh, don't tell anyone."

And He warned them to tell no one about Him. (v. 30)

Why? After this startling revelation, why would you say, "Don't tell anyone"? We don't know. Here is what I think: I think it has to do with the popular concept of Messiah at the time. The Jews were looking for a militaristic Messiah to throw off the Roman Empire in a great military victory. Obviously that concept of Messiah has huge political problems for Jesus.

I think there is a second and more important reason. The Father's concept of Messiah is very different from that of the popular expectations. And Jesus wants to be able to define Messiah according to His Father's will. So much so, in fact, that He does not refer to Himself as the Messiah. He refers to Himself as the "Son of Man."

And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. (v. 31)

The term "Son of Man" comes from Daniel 7:13, and it refers to a highly exalted figure who will one day be served by people of every nation and have a dominion and a kingdom that will last forever. You see, Jesus' choice of terms, "Son of Man," allows Him to shape the concept of Messiah with fresh meaning—according to His Father's will, not according to popular expectations. And the Messiah's majesty will be revealed in Jesus' rejection by the Jewish leaders and violent death, not by a great military victory.

Last week Bryan spoke to us about the fact that Jesus is patient, and in the area of faith He kept teaching and teaching and teaching. The disciples finally got it. It is the same thing here with the idea of a suffering Messiah. We are going to see Mark record the teaching in Mark 9. And we will see Mark record other teaching in Mark 10. We get the idea Jesus is reiterating it until the disciples get it. We find out why in verse 32: it is not initially well accepted.

And He was stating the matter plainly. [*This is about the suffering Messiah. Here is a good friend, Peter.*] **And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him.** (v. 32)

I don't know how many of you are like me, and from time to time you say things and then you think, *Oh, why did I say that? I should have thought before I spoke. Where do I inherit this tendency?* Well friends, it goes back at least as far as Peter. He has just determined that Jesus is the Messiah and now He is going to tell Him his business. That is a bad idea. That is a *very* bad idea. Jesus responds in verse 33:

But turning around and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." (v. 33)

That is a strong rebuke comparing Peter to Satan. What is that about? We won't turn there, but in Luke 4:1-11, one of the temptations Satan lays before Jesus is to say, "Hey, if you will just worship me, you can have the glory of the whole kingdom, all the glory and none of the suffering." Jesus is abrupt here and makes a clear discernment between human interests and

God's interests. Human interests—people like you and like me—want all the glory and none of the suffering. But that is not God's way. God's majesty and glory is revealed in and through suffering. Peter and the disciples must get that difference. And do you know what? You and I must get that difference.

If this passage does not have enough shock value, Mark includes some further teachings of Jesus starting in verse 34. Not only does Jesus have to go the way of death, but so do all of His followers.

And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. (v. 34)

Friends, this is a repugnant metaphor for a Jewish listener. Crucifixion was a Roman means of execution. The Jews hated the Romans. In our day, we think if somebody has to carry some curses and burdens through life that means they have to carry their cross. That is not what it meant in Jesus' time. In Jesus' time, a person carrying their cross was going to their death. Here is the call for those who would follow Jesus, like you and like me, to die—to die to our own interests and to give our life over to Jesus Christ.

That is a really hard concept. Maybe one of the first questions that popped into your mind, like it did mine, was: "Why? Why does Jesus call us to do this?" He answers that for us in verse 35:

"For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it."

Here is what Jesus said: "Do you really want to live? Do you really want to max out on life? Then you need to die." Dying to self to follow Christ is the way of total freedom and complete fulfillment. It is the greatest paradox in life. We live by dying. We want to squeeze all we can out of this life and get every drop out of it. Jesus said, "You need to let go of your desires and wishes and follow Me."

We have been wrestling with this question: Where do we find fulfillment in life? And our friend Brad Pitt has said, "You know, you don't find it in fame or fortune." Then where?

We said we start on the road to fulfillment by believing in Jesus as God's Anointed. I would like to add to this that we grow in our fulfillment by following Jesus' example of giving up control of our life to God. *We grow in our fulfillment in life by following Jesus' example of giving up control of our life to God.*

Sometimes it is a little hard to process and apply verses 34 and 35. Thankfully by the grace of God, we don't live in a culture where Christians are being executed or crucified. So what does this mean?

Colin Smith is a pastor in a church in Arlington Heights, Illinois. He shared that when he was a kid, his dad would take him to farm auctions and would always tell him, "Son, remember when you go to an auction, you need to know your upper limit." I have never been to an auction, but I guess the principle is this: You see a piece of equipment that you want and start bidding on it. You get carried away and you decide that you really want it. You end up spending more than you planned. You need to have that upper limit in mind, and when the price hits that, you are out of the bidding.

Here is what verses 34 and 35 mean for those who will follow Jesus: When it comes to following Him, we can have no upper limit. “Jesus, I will follow You, I will follow You, I will follow You.” It does not mean, “I will follow You to here, and then if that is too high, I am getting out.” No, verses 34 and 35 are saying there is no upper limit in following Jesus.

Here is the paradox: All of us have our upper limit, and as we hold onto those upper limits, we miss out on the life that Jesus has for us. As we let go, as we move through those upper limits, it is then that we experience life to the fullest. We experience life as Jesus would have it for us. No upper limits! That is a hard concept.

The reality of the difficulty of it hit me when I was 23 years old. I had finished my master’s degree at Texas A&M. I felt God’s clear call and leading to go on staff with Campus Crusade for Christ. I was very excited about it... except for one thing. I knew it was not going to fly with my parents, particularly my dad. I flew home to have a conversation with him. I was going to tell him about my decision. He lived up to my expectation. He let me know in no uncertain terms that he was disappointed—that he thought I had been brainwashed and had sold out and that I was flat too weak to go into the marketplace. I worked for Crusade for 15 years, and this was a recurring theme. It was a lot more subtle. He would come in the backdoor, but he was constantly letting his disapproval be known.

I have got to be honest with you. Moving through that upper limit was very painful. But it also brought me a freedom and fulfillment I had never known. Because up until that point, with every decision I had made, there was a shadow that cast over the decision. That was my dad’s approval. It lingered; it loomed. I was never free to make my own decisions. Once I became a Christian at 19 years old, I was never free to follow God. I always had to deal with that. Well, with this decision to work with Campus Crusade for Christ, I learned to live without my dad’s approval. It was a tremendous freedom and a tremendous fulfillment that came with that. Moreover, I look back and I just can’t imagine a more enriching experience, either spiritually, relationally or personally, than I had with Campus Crusade for Christ. It was hard moving through that upper limit, but it brought me a freedom and fulfillment in life that I would not have otherwise experienced.

Now, here is the end of the story. (Stories don’t always end this well.) Six years ago I left Crusade to go into the pastorate. My dad is thrilled that I am a pastor. Finally, at 38 years old, I got a “real” job. I can’t figure out why he is so happy with me being a pastor, but I will just take it as a gift from God.

You have heard about one of my upper limits. May I ask: What are your upper limits? What is it that when you walk with God to a point you say, “No way; this is untouchable”? Is it an ambition? Is it a grudge? Is it a relationship? Is it some position? Is it some thing? Can you identify your upper limits? If you can identify them, do you know those upper limits keep you from experiencing life the way God would want you to experience life? They keep you from experiencing the fulfilling life that God would have for you. If you can identify your upper limits, would you confess them to God and state your desire to move through and turn away from them? Would you ask Him to empower you to do that?

As I think about upper limits, I have been in ministry 20 years. It is my experience that those people who move through upper limits do so when they are living in deep connection with other believers. Go back to the experience with my dad. Folks, I did not walk that path alone—no way, no how. I had friends who were praying for me. With many of these friends I was

processing my feelings of fear beforehand and my feelings of rejection afterwards. I needed the support of the body.

Let me ask you: Who knows about your upper limits? Who is praying for you? Who is holding you accountable that you might take the next step? In your LifeGroup this week or next, would you confess your upper limits to one another, that you might pray and talk about what the next step is—so that you could move through that? I do believe God wants us to move through our upper limits, that we could experience life to the fullest. And I believe He will orchestrate circumstances to push us on.

In the past I shared with you that one of my upper limits is cherished people, particularly my wife and our two children. Three weeks ago our 3 year-old son Drew walked into our room at 5 o'clock in the morning with a swelling so big in his neck he couldn't hold his head up straight. On the way to the emergency room, I was wondering, *God, is this the first symptom of a very serious or even fatal illness?* We got there, and the emergency room doctor said they were probably going to need to hospitalize him. Over the next day his white blood count was off the chart. He had some kind of infection. The next day they diagnosed it as strep throat, and after a course of antibiotics he is fine.

But I have got to tell you, what unnerved me about that was how quickly things turn. We were up with him three hours earlier and at that point I would have said, "Yeah, my kid is a little cranky but his health is fine." Three hours later I would have said, "I don't know." God was using that uncertainty to say, "Andy, with those loved ones, you need to love them in the moment and then you need to put them in My hands." I look ahead. I fear I will squeeze the life out of the relationship with my boys, because what am I going to do when they go to camp, when they get a driver's license, or when God calls them on some kind of mission overseas? God is moving to push me through the upper limit.

What is God doing in your circumstances to move you through your upper limit? Would you submit to His working—that you could take the next step in moving through those upper limits and could experience life to the fullest?

As we go back to our text, Jesus turns to the world of commerce, profit and loss, to make the point that this world has nothing to offer.

“For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?”
(v. 36)

Friends, there is no worldly profit to balance a physical life—let alone, an eternal soul.

“For what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (v. 37)

There is nothing he can give. These are rhetorical questions. The system of values is way out of balance. What Jesus is saying is, "Folks, this life has nothing to offer in comparison to the life I have to offer." Still, these are hard words. It is not maybe initially what we would like to think. For Jesus' hearers maybe it is a little bit unsettling, particularly the concept of a suffering Messiah. They were counting on somebody to come in and kick the Romans out. In fact, maybe some people are even a little ashamed of a Messiah like this. So Jesus says in verse 38:

“For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.”

And then it is as if He says to His listeners, “This is not pie in the sky; this is not fluff. Some of you will experience the power of the kingdom of God personally.”

And Jesus was saying to them, “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.” (Mark 9:1)

Interestingly, in the next verse we read about the transfiguration—a show, a demonstration of God’s power. At least a few in the audience experienced this. I think the ultimate show would be the death and resurrection, and many of Jesus’ followers got to see and experience that.

Why this warning in chapter 8:38 and why this assurance in chapter 9:1? Make no mistake, friends. This is an incredible challenge we have here. We are being called to leave a culture that we know to enter a culture and a world that we don’t know. We are all born into the culture of self. The Bible says we are born with a sin nature. What that means, among other things, is that we live for self. We gratify our own desires. What makes it particularly hard for us living here in the United States is that never has there been a culture that so reinforces the idea of self.

The trouble is, we are drowning in self. And Jesus comes along and says, “I will save you. I will pull you from the culture of self.” It begins by calling out to Him—recognizing and believing in Him as God’s Anointed—and then dying to our desire to fulfill and gratify self to follow God. It is the way of life. It is the way of fulfillment. But it is hard. We want to go back to the culture and the world that we know.

We were missionaries to Latin America and we went to Costa Rica. When we were there about a week, they pulled all of us together and said, “Now, Canadians, Brits, Aussies, New Zealanders and especially Americans, listen. This is a new culture with new values and here they are very simply: people over time, relationship over efficiency. If you can’t handle that, for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of your blood pressure, go home. This place will drive you nuts.”

We spent seven months in Costa Rica and then we went down to Chile. I have got to tell you, I loved Costa Rica. If I could script our lives, we would give the next 15 to 20 years to North Pointe Community Church and then we would go down to Costa Rica to serve. I love the way they do life. I love their values. But I had my moments where I felt the pull of my home culture.

A defining moment came about ten weeks into our stay. I had come up to speed on my Spanish. I was conversational and I had gotten to know the guys in this men’s Bible study. I found out that one of them was a barber and I needed a haircut, so we set an appointment for Saturday at 10:00. Well, folks, I had been there long enough to think, *10:00 is not going to happen*—so I got there at 10:30. He was not there. At 11:00 he wasn’t there. At 11:30 he wasn’t there. About this time, as an American, I would get somebody else to cut my hair. I would say I would call him or something. But that is not their culture. In their culture, you wait!

Well, he rolls in about a quarter to twelve. I am kind of anxious to get my hair cut, so I sit in the chair and I am ready to go. And he begins to talk. And he talks and he talks and he talks. This is going on 15 or 20 minutes. Outwardly I am being very pleasant: “Si, claro. Que bueno.” I am playing along with the conversation. But inside I am thinking three words. Do you know what those three words are? Cut my hair! I had been here an hour and a half. Cut my hair! In that time I am feeling this pull. I thought to myself, *You know, Andy, you made a choice when you came to Latin America. You chose people over efficiency. You chose relationship over time.*

You are living out those values and you would affirm it gives life. I have got to tell you, I wanted to go back to what I knew.

Friends, if you choose this path laid out in Mark 8:27 through 9:1, I am telling you, you are making a good choice. You are making God's way the choice of life. But make no mistake; you are going to feel the pull to go back to the culture of self. Day by day, moment by moment, you are going to be faced with choices. The natural tendency is that I want to gratify myself. I want to do what is right for me. And God's call is to die to those desires and follow Him. I know it is a tough challenge to go from the culture of self to the culture of God.

If our response to this challenge is to say, "I am going to double my effort; I am really going to work; I am going to be committed to dying to self and following God; I am just going to write myself a note right here that I am going to do it"—we will fail by the time we get to the parking lot. It is too hard. It is not in ourselves to live for God. This passage should bring us to a more desperate dependence on God: *God, I can't do life unless You do a work in my heart, in my inner being.*

Jonathan Edwards is recognized by many as the greatest theologian and perhaps the greatest intellect in North American history. At age 17 he penned 21 resolutions by which he would live his life. By the time he died, that list had grown to 70. I would like to tell you what was at the top and stayed at the top of his list of resolutions. It was: "Being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God's help, I do humbly entreat Him by His grace to enable me to keep these resolutions..."²

When we resonate with those words, let us be sensible. We can't pull this off without God's help. I pray this passage of Scripture would bring us to a greater and more desperate dependence on God. And then, as we respond to His work, let us make the moment by moment decision to surrender to Him.

World War II officially ended at 9:04 a.m. September 2, 1945 aboard the *USS Missouri*. The Japanese foreign minister signed papers of unconditional surrender. Do you know what happened after he signed those papers of unconditional surrender? As a nation, Japan was occupied by the Allies, mainly by the United States. Over time their country was rebuilt. Today Japan is one of the most peaceful and prosperous nations in the world. How did that happen? It started with a complete surrender—no conditions and no terms.

We wrestle with: Where do we find fulfillment in life? Where do we max out on life? My friends, I would say in the same way it starts: with a surrender to God with no conditions and no terms. One more time I ask: Where do we find fulfillment in life? I would say that we start on the road to fulfillment by believing in Jesus as God's Anointed, and we grow in our fulfillment by following Jesus' example of giving up control of our life to God.

¹ "Brad Pitt on the American Dream" from www.PreachingToday.com, 2005

² "Jonathan Edwards' Commitment to Resolutions" from www.PreachingToday.com, 2005

³ "Christ's Identity Not Important?" from www.PreachingToday.com, 2005

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Study Questions

The Good News About Jesus According to Mark

No Upper Limit

Mark 8:27-9:1

Opening Discussion

1. In what period of time in your life have you been most fulfilled?

What made that period of time so fulfilling?
2. Would you agree with Brad Pitt that as a culture we are experiencing a numbing of the soul and a complete atrophy of the spiritual being? Why or why not?

Bible Study

1. Are you surprised that, according to Mark 8:28, the people thought of Jesus as “one of the prophets?” Why or why not?

What do you think is Jesus’ purpose behind asking the question of Mark 8:27?

In Mark 8:29, why do you think Peter and the disciples come to a different conclusion about Jesus than the people?

What does it mean that Jesus is the Christ? Particularly in light of Mark 8:27-30, how would you respond to the following statement?

“The important thing is not what He (Jesus) was or what He wasn’t; the important thing is who people believe Him to have been.”

- Jeremy Bowen, BBC, “Christ’s Identity Not Important?” from www.PreachingToday.com, 2005

2. In Mark 8:30, why do you think Jesus instructs the disciples not to tell anyone that He is the Christ?

Starting in verse 31, why does Jesus refer to himself as the “Son of Man”? According to Daniel 7:13-14, who is the Son of Man?

How does Jesus fulfill this description of the Son of Man?

3. In Mark 8:32, why does Peter rebuke Jesus?

If you had been one of the disciples, how do you think you would have reacted upon hearing Jesus’ description of a suffering Messiah?

4. In Mark 8:33, why does Jesus compare Peter to Satan?

5. In Mark 8:34, who does Jesus direct to take up his cross and follow Him (Jesus)?

What does it mean to “take up your cross”? How do you react to the call to take up your cross and follow Jesus?

6. According to verse 35, why does Jesus call His followers to lose their life?

Do you have trouble believing the paradox that you gain your life by losing it for Jesus’ sake? Why or why not?

How do verses 36 and 37 relate to the call of verses 34 and 35?

7. Why might someone be ashamed of Jesus and/or Jesus’ words? When are you most tempted to be ashamed of Jesus and/or His words?

What do you think is the purpose of Jesus’ warning in Mark 8:38?

Why do you think Jesus gives the disciples and us the assurance of Mark 9:1? Where do we read of the fulfillment of this assurance?

Application

1. Who do you know in your sphere of influence that does not believe that Jesus is the Christ, God’s Anointed?

How do you think God wants to use you in the process of bringing that person to believe that Jesus is the Christ? What can you do to take the next step in developing a friendship with this person?

2. When it comes to following Jesus, what are your “upper limits”? Are there any areas of your life that are off limits to Jesus? What makes it so hard to turn these areas over to Jesus?

Do you believe that your upper limits keep you from experiencing the fullness of life that God desires for you?

How do you see God working in your daily circumstances to move you through your upper limits?

Who will you ask to pray for you that God will move you through these upper limits?