

God's Interests/Man's Interests
A Summary of Jesus' Teaching to the Disciples
Mark 8:27-9:50

The passage we will be considering represents the time required to walk from Caesarea Philippi, north of the Sea of Galilee, to the Judean wilderness, a distance of roughly 135 miles. Mark makes it clear Jesus used this long walk for some concentrated time with His inner circle of disciples. Jesus began to explain the endgame for His mission: He was going to suffer, die, and rise from the dead. The disciples responded to Jesus' repeated warning with denial, confusion, and avoidance. They would not understand until after Jesus returned from the dead.

There are three major themes in Jesus' teaching during this period. The first we already mentioned, Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. His confrontation with Peter gives us the second: Peter was not setting his mind on God's interests, but man's. Finally, Jesus shows His men the path to a life oriented around God's interests.

Jesus must have been feeling urgency at this point of His ministry. All signs pointed toward a confrontation with the religious leaders in the next few weeks. He was clearly dismayed by His disciples' failure to grasp His teaching (Mark 8:14-21). The time was short and His men were thick-headed. He circled back to these three main themes again and again. Given Jesus' sense of urgency, these themes should be considered the essential core of His teaching. We should do our best to unpack Jesus' teaching, applying it to our lives in the modern age.

Suffering, Death, and Resurrection

The disciples were struggling to wrap their heads around Jesus' identity. He openly declared Himself the Messiah on multiple occasions. He accepted John the Baptist's description, "The Lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world". He revealed Himself to the woman at the well (John 4) as the long-awaited Messiah. His unapologetic embrace of the title was at the core of the Pharisees' antagonism toward Him. All who observed Jesus struggled to understand how to apply the prophecies about the Messiah. He didn't seem to fit what they understood.

One line of prophecy clearly indicated the Messiah would suffer, most notably in Isaiah 53. Despite the imagery of the Passover Lamb, the prevailing interpretation of the Suffering Servant was a metaphor for the suffering endured by Israel on behalf of all mankind. The concept that the Suffering Servant was a person who would die as a substitute, like the Passover Lamb, for the sins of the people was not commonly understood.

The people (scholars and lay people alike) preferred the promise of the Triumphant King, a Messiah who would come to conquer Israel's enemies, restore David's kingdom, and put the Jews at the top of the heap over all humanity. The disciples clearly expected this outcome and were planning a prominent role for themselves in the Messiah's government. The Jewish

leaders wanted the Triumphant King but quickly soured on Jesus' version when they realized He would depose them. Like the disciples, they expected prime positions in Messiah's government. The problem with Jesus was He didn't fit neatly into either line of prophecy. He would muddy the waters by referring to Himself in one moment as the Triumphant King (or acting like it), then He would flip the script and talk about His imminent death. He referred to Himself as the "Son of Man" when asking the disciples how people identified Him, a clear reference to Daniel 7:13-14; then predicted His own suffering, death, and return from the dead. Talk about confusing!

On the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus gave His closest friends a foretaste of what they would see in heaven, then talked about His upcoming death and resurrection, *then* assured them Elijah, in the form of John the Baptist, had come. The prophetic reference to Elijah is Malachi 4:5, the warning Elijah will come before the "great and terrible day of the Lord". Peter, James, and John's heads must have been spinning! No wonder they were afraid to ask for clarification.

The clarity of hindsight allows us to see Jesus was guiding the disciples to embrace the idea He was both the Suffering Servant *and* the Triumphant King. The rest of the New Testament shows they finally got it after Jesus ascended to heaven. The Suffering Servant had to come first to complete four critical tasks:

- Learn through experience what it is like to be human (Hebrews 2:16-18; 4:14-16).
- Model human life as it was meant to be lived, fully dependent upon the Father.
- Prepare a "people for His own possession, zealous for good works" (Titus 2:11-14). He was laying the foundation for His reign as the King by spreading His kingdom "under the radar" by making disciples throughout the world.
- Suffer, die, and be raised again as:
 - The atonement for our sins.
 - The propitiatory sacrifice that satisfied God's wrath.
 - The complete model of our life in God, the willingness to sacrifice our interests to pursue God's interests. We live a cycle of death, burial, and new life.

The Kingdom of God is simultaneously present now and expanding as new disciples are brought into the family of God. The Kingdom of God is also something we look forward to in the future. Jesus' second coming will usher in His final victory against all opposition and the establishment of His reign as the Triumphant King. Those who chose to follow Jesus will be there to serve as His willing, eager subjects, prepared for His reign.

God's Interests versus Man's Interests

When Jesus matter of factly told His disciples He was heading toward Jerusalem to be rejected, murdered, then rise again, Peter immediately reacted. He refused to accept Jesus' warning of what was coming. He was probably moved by two motives: First, Jesus was his friend. No one wants to hear their friend is about to die. Peter's second motive was more selfish. He had aspirations of ruling with the reigning Messiah. Jesus could not possibly be heading toward a

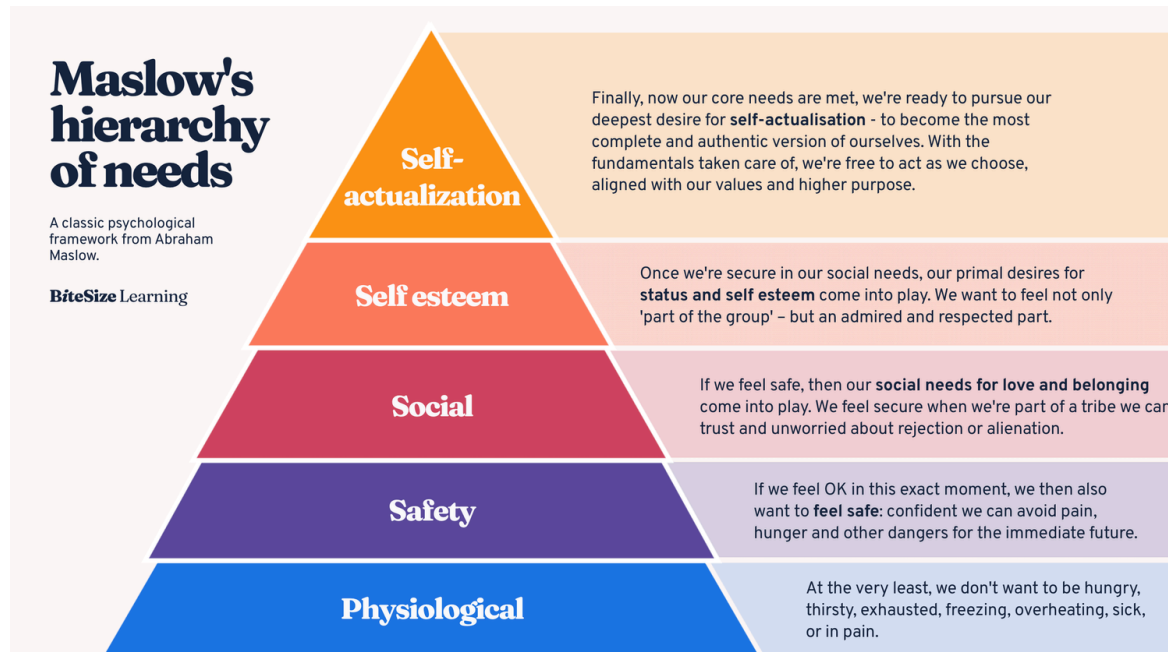
throne if He was going to die. If Jesus wasn't going to be the King, Peter wouldn't be one of His advisors.

Jesus reacted to Peter in the harshest possible way. "Get behind me, Satan!" The words must have cut Peter to the core of his being. Jesus was either referring to him as His adversary, an enemy, or as the great adversary, the devil. Peter didn't understand God's plan, Jesus' role in it, or the importance of Jesus' death and resurrection to him. His vision was clouded by man's interests, eclipsing God's interests.

What are man's interests? It is important to understand the answer because it will help us to see where we, like Peter, allow our interests to get in the way of God's interests. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, developed by psychologist Abraham Maslow, provides a framework to understand Peter's confusion. The basic premise of Maslow's theory is that we must be satisfied at the lower levels of the pyramid (see the diagram below) before we can move upward. There are two major flaws, from a Christian perspective, but the concept is still helpful for our discussion about the exchange between Jesus and Peter.

The first flaw is at the top of the pyramid. Man does not reach his highest in self actualization. God's plan is to bring us to be like Jesus, the perfect man (see Romans 8:28-30; Ephesians 4:13; 1 John 3:1-3). The second flaw appears when we look at the Hierarchy of Needs through a biblical lens. We meet God at each level of the pyramid. The Holy Spirit uses the challenges of each level to move us upward to be more like Jesus. That is how all things work together for good (Romans 8:28).

Jesus' accusation that Peter was focused on his own needs at the expense of God's interests not only exposed Peter, but each of us as well. The needs illustrated here are loud, demanding our attention. This is why we must determine to "seek first [God's] kingdom and His righteousness" at every level of need, trusting Jesus' promise "and all these things will be added to you." (Matthew 6:33). The "things" to which Jesus was referring are the essential needs outlined in Maslow's theory. They were the "things" clouding Peter's mind.



(<https://www.bitesizelearning.co.uk/resources/maslows-hierarchy-of-needs-theory>)

The next question we need to ask is, “What then, are God’s interests?” It is not hard to understand Peter’s confusion at this point. He likely was thinking, “How could your death, Jesus, serve God’s interests? That makes no sense.” He was probably stunned by the harsh tone of Jesus’ rebuttal.

The prophecy pointed to by Jesus calling Himself “Son of Man” (Daniel 7:13-14) helps answer the question:

“I kept looking in the night visions,
And behold, with the clouds of heaven
One like a Son of Man was coming,
And He came up to the Ancient of Days
And was presented before Him.

“And to Him was given dominion,
Glory and a kingdom,
That all the peoples, nations and *men of every language*
Might serve Him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
Which will not pass away;
And His kingdom is one
Which will not be destroyed.”

Peter thought he was advocating for the fulfillment of this plan. He *wanted* Jesus to be this King, the long-awaited fulfillment of God’s promise to King David (2 Samuel 7:8-17). What Peter failed

to understand, what we continue to fail to understand, is that this Kingdom demands a particular type of people to populate it. We are not qualified on our own merits. Jesus came to call and prepare the citizens of God's Kingdom. This mission began at His birth and would be fulfilled upon His resurrection. It demanded His death as the atonement for the sins of God's people and as propitiation to appease God's wrath at that sin (Romans 3:21-26). Jesus' resurrection would decisively declare justification for those who believe in Him. It would graphically proclaim our future. We will experience a new *kind* of life now, and a resurrection of our own; a transformation into the very likeness of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15; 1 John 3:1-2).

The Kingdom *is* coming. But God is delaying the coronation of His Son for two reasons:

- To invite more people into citizenship, the reward for following Jesus by faith.
- To refine His people, using the challenges of this life to shape them into Jesus' likeness.

This is God's interest in a nutshell. We play a critical role in both of the reasons for this interminable delay of the advent of the King. The means of fulfilling His plan for our lives is the final section of Jesus' extended conversation on the hike to Jerusalem.

**Deny Yourself.
Take Up Your Cross.
Follow Me.**

Three simple statements. Each seems pretty clear and straightforward. And yet we have been misunderstanding them for nearly 2,000 years. That doesn't mean we have been *entirely* wrong. I am not suggesting I have found a new interpretation of Jesus' words. We have simply continued to allow our understanding of God's interests to be clouded by our own. We are so much like Peter!

When we read "Deny yourself!" our minds generally turn to obvious sin or the little self indulgences that make life tolerable. Our unexamined assumption is somehow God's interests, His expectations for our lives, are at odds with our interests, our own expectations for our lives. That leads us to think if something feels good, or is fun, God doesn't want us to do it. He's the great Executioner of Fun. But self denial has another face that will lead us to our best possible life. It is the choice to deny short-term pleasure or gain with the anticipation of a greater reward in the future. Self denial is the choice to forsake my idea of how things should be done or of how my life should go in favor of what God says is best. If we will accept it, this is God's plan for us. It was to this that Jesus was directing our attention. Our lives are essentially learning this one lesson, to trust God's ways above our own.

The cross is such a graphic, horrific way to die that Jesus' words, "Take up your cross!" lead us to assume His command automatically means terrible suffering. We somehow fail to see our

present life is filled with suffering of one sort or another. Some of it is our own fault. We also fall prey to the sins of others, both as intended victims or as collateral damage. We are simply inadequate, in and of ourselves, to meet the demands of our families, our work, and our own selves. Something has to give. Suffering ensues. It is not a question of whether or not we will face hardship. The question is to what end do we suffer?

Jesus was calling us to something more. He was calling us to choose the trail He blazed that fulfills His interests while at the same time fulfilling our *best* interests, too. Our interests are not at odds with God's. Our *best* interests are literally nested within God's interests. When we accept our cross, whatever that happens to be, the suffering that is part of life becomes meaningful. It serves a purpose. It advances God's Kingdom. It becomes a tool in the hands of God to refine us into the kind of people who qualify to be citizens of His Kingdom.

To take up one's cross means to step wholeheartedly into the garden God has given us, taking responsibility for its health and growth. When God created Adam and Eve, He placed them in a garden and delegated to them responsibility for its thriving. The command, "Be fruitful and multiply." still stands today. God delegated the care of the garden to His children, but He did not abdicate. Instead, He used the Garden of Eden as a living laboratory to collaborate with His children, teaching them how to live. He partnered with our original parents. Now, thanks to our adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ, we have the same opportunity. The Holy Spirit residing within us was sent to teach us how to live. We learn to listen, to trust, to obey as we do the hard work of sowing, cultivating, and reaping our garden.

What is your garden? It is your sphere of influence: your own soul, your family, your friends, the church community, your neighborhood, and your workplace. Outside of yourself, each element of your sphere of influence has people God wants to draw into His family. You are the means God has chosen to reach those people. Your presence and influence can change the people and circumstances around you for God's glory. Your submission to God, denying yourself and taking up your cross, brings about subtle changes in you, too. You can become more like Jesus every moment. And His Kingdom grows.

You must learn to follow Jesus; the last command He gave when telling His disciples how to go after Him. Jesus chose men to be His apprentices. They were with Him constantly, observing His behavior, hearing His teaching, asking Him questions. They modeled themselves after the Master. You must follow that same path. You became an apprentice to Jesus when you accepted His offer of eternal life through the forgiveness of your sins. Now you must renew a commitment every day to be a studious, attentive apprentice, absorbing the lessons prepared for you by your Master. You have to put the lessons you learn into practice. You will grow. And His Kingdom will grow.