

## Are You With Me?

Eric C. Coher

Mark 8:34-9:1

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We left our study in Mark with Jesus drawing a line in the sand concerning His identity. You'll remember that several weeks back, Jesus entered the villages of Caesarea Philippi and asked His disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ" Mark 8:27–29. The word "Christ" is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word מָשִׁיחַ (Anointed One). While the disciples had gotten the answer correct, Jesus now begins to explain what that means. As Jesus explained that he would suffer many things, be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, His disciples responded in bewilderment and dismay, not only because of the implications for Messiahship but equally because of its implications for discipleship.<sup>1</sup>

Our text this morning exposes the heart of Christian discipleship, and at the same time strikes a death blow to the self-centered false gospels that are so popular in contemporary Christianity. The gospel of Jesus Christ leaves no room for the gospel of getting, in which God is considered a type of utilitarian genie who appears to grant the believers' every wish. The gospel of Jesus Christ closes the door to the prosperity gospel, which asserts that if a believer is not healthy and prosperous he has simply not exercised his divine rights or else does not have enough faith to claim his blessings. The gospel of Jesus Christ undermines the gospel of self-esteem, self-love, and high self-image, which appeals to man's natural pride and destroys the spirit of humble brokenness and repentance that marks the gospel of the cross.<sup>2</sup> Simply said, the gospel of Jesus Christ demands my soul, my life, my all. Let's turn our attention to the text before us this morning. Mark, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, pens the following words:

*And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy*

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<sup>1</sup> James R Edwards, *PNTC: The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 252.

<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur, *Matthew 16–23*, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 45.

angels." And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power." Mark 8:34–9:1

Brothers and sisters, "The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever" Isaiah 40:8.

### **I. THE REVELATION (v.31)**

### **II. THE REBUKES (v.32-33)**

### **III. THE REQUIREMENTS (v.34)**

*And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*

A crowd has again formed around Jesus. While in recent passages Jesus has called a person out of the crowd to deal with them individually (i.e. deaf man and blind man), here, Jesus calls the crowd, along with His disciples, and addresses them. What does he tell them? He tells them that there is a price to pay, a cross to bear for those who would follow Him. There is startling honesty in Jesus' words. No one could ever say that he was induced to follow Jesus by false pretenses. Jesus never tried to bribe men by the offer of an easy way. Jesus didn't offer peace; He offered glory. Jesus never sought to lure individuals to Himself by the offer of an easy life. As a matter of fact, the very opposite is true:

*As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Luke 9:57–62*

Jesus would have been a public relations manager's nightmare! Every time He began to attract a large following, Jesus would up the ante. He would tell them how high the cost of following Him would be and the crowds would vanish. Jesus did this so that people would know the truth. He wanted them to know that it would not be cheap or easy to be His disciples.<sup>3</sup>

### **UNIVERSAL OFFER**

If *anyone* would come after me... "would" (**θέλω**) means desires... If anyone desires to come after me. There is a universal offer, but there is not a universal acceptance. While Jesus' yoke is easy, the way of discipleship is hard. Jesus notes three conditions for those who desire to come after Him:

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<sup>3</sup> Alan Carr, *No Cheap Seats*, Mark 8:34-38.

## A. DENY YOURSELF

Jesus says, “Let him deny himself...” Quite literally this means to relinquish the throne. It’s to wave the white flag in surrender. To deny yourself (**ἀπαρνέομαι**) means to completely disown, to utterly separate oneself from someone. It means to forget oneself, to lose sight of one’s self. The syntax speaks of entrance into a new state or condition. Prior to following Jesus there was no impulse to deny ourselves. As a matter of fact, the very opposite was true. We denied ourselves nothing we desired. But coming after Jesus means that I live for Him and not for myself.

Denying yourself means you surrender control of your own self-interest. It means you submit your will to another. It means you abandon all of your reliance upon self. It means giving up self-admiration (look at me), self-serving (It’s all about me), and self-determination (I’m going to do what I want to do). Selfishness is the dominating force in the natural man. But the love of Christ is the controlling force in a person who has been regenerated, born again, made a new creation in Christ. Paul says, “For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; *and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised*” 2 Corinthians 5:14-15. To come after Jesus is to “turn away” from the idolatry of self-centeredness.

Denying self implies that I stop listening to my own voice. I stop leaning on my own power. I stop trying to fulfill my own will and wishes. When I truly deny myself, I have no will but His will. I have no plans but His plans. I have no wants but what He wants for me. When I deny myself, I give up all my rights and I relinquish all control of my life to the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup> Paul tells us, “Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God. You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” 1 Corinthians 6:19–20. You don’t belong to yourself. Jesus has absolute claim on your life.

It’s important to note that there is an *event* of denying yourself (salvation) and there is the *process* of denying yourself (sanctification). Said another way, denying yourself not only characterizes a person when he or she comes to Christ in saving faith, but also as he or she lives as a faithful disciple of Christ. What does this look like?

### PAUL’S EXAMPLE

*But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may*

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<sup>4</sup> Alan Carr.

*know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Philippians 3:7-11*

## **THIS ISN'T A PRETEXT FOR LENT**

It's important to note that Jesus isn't advocating a self-denial of certain things you might want to have like the Catholic practice of Lent. Rather, Jesus is calling you to repudiate your sense of sovereign autonomy. To use John the Baptist's words, "He must become greater, I must become less" John 3:30.

## **B. DIE TO SELF**

If we would come after Jesus, He demands we "take up our cross." This is certainly a misconstrued statement. Jesus isn't just referring to bearing life's burdens or standing strong under life's pressures. The cross isn't a metaphor for difficult circumstances. To view it that way would be to strip it of its significance. The disciples knew what a cross was. It was a bloody symbol of execution and death. Jesus literally said, "Pick up your instrument of execution." It's like saying, "Pick up your electric chair." As followers of Christ, we are willing on death row. We must be ready to die – not just to the flesh, the devil and the pride of life – but actually die. Paul reminds us, "To live is Christ and to die is gain" Philippians 1:21.

In Jesus' day, a cross wasn't a piece of jewelry or a decoration on a church building. A cross was an instrument of shame, humiliation, suffering, torture, and death. When a man took up his cross, he was beginning a death march. In the Roman Empire, a convicted criminal, when taken to be crucified, was forced to carry his own cross. This showed publicly that he was then under and submissive to the rule he had been opposing. Likewise Jesus' disciples must demonstrate their submission to the One against whom they had rebelled but now willingly follow.

When Jesus called His disciples and those in the crowd to take up their cross, they knew exactly what He was talking about! Sadly, that message has become distorted in our day. We have reduced taking up our cross to bearing the burdens of life like a difficult marriage, a wayward child, a heavy-handed boss, or suffering from a physical handicap or incurable disease. Friends, while I don't want to minimize the difficulty of these circumstances, the common trials and hardships you face in this life are not your cross! This is not what Jesus had in mind.

When Jesus tells His disciples to take up their cross and follow Him, He is calling us to die to ourselves. He is calling us to commit to a lifestyle of living death (cf. Galatians 2:20). He is calling us to willingly bear the shame, reproach, humiliation, suffering, hatred, alienation and even the death that may come to those who are associated with Him.

By the way, this phrase also suggests a “once for all” action. We are to take up our cross and never lay it down until we reach the place of our death. As the hymnist wrote, “Must Jesus bear the cross alone, and all the world go free? No, there’s a cross for everyone, and there’s a cross for me.” Have you taken up the cross of Christ?

### C. FOLLOW CHRIST

The Greek here is in the present tense. To follow Jesus is a continual characteristic of a true believer’s life. The Greek verb (**ἀκολουθέω**), means to take the same road as another. These words carry the meaning of submissive obedience. But it is even more intimate than that. The word is associative, which carries the idea, “Let him follow *with* me.” The idea isn’t that of following behind another, but rather accompanying Jesus along the same road.

This phrase also suggests an *ongoing* action. Jesus is calling His people to be *constant* followers. Some people follow on Sunday, but walk a divergent path on Monday. Some people follow the Lord when they need help, but walk their own way when things get better. That is not what Jesus is looking for! Jesus is calling for His people to make a radical commitment to follow Him all the time, all the way to the end of their lives. This is a 24/7 commitment; no days off.

We’ve become so used to these words that we’ve lost sight of their significance. Listen to A.W. Tozer’s words from *Born after Midnight*. He says, “Christ calls men to carry a cross; we call them to have fun in His name. He calls them to forsake the world; we assure them that if they but accept Jesus the world is their oyster. He calls them to suffer; we call them to enjoy all the comforts modern civilization affords. He calls them to self-abnegation and death; we call them to spread themselves like green bay trees...He calls them to holiness; we call them to a cheap and tawdry happiness that would have been rejected with scorn by the least of the Stoic philosophers. What Jesus is saying is that your cross will be proportionate to your willingness to follow Him.”

Three things are necessary in traveling: first, to say farewell (to self); second, to carry our baggage (the cross); and third, to proceed with the journey (follow me).

#### IV. THE REALITIES (v.35-9:1)

*For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power."*

Jesus now gives four reasons why you should embrace discipleship. The next four verses begin with the Greek word **γάρ**, or "for."

##### A. To save your life you must lose it (v.35)

*For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.*

This is certainly a paradox. Jesus says, "the winners will be losers." Jesus gives us the motivation for following him in verse 35. He says that the one who loses his life does it for His sake and the gospel will save it. To lose your life is not an act of *desperation*, but rather an act of *devotion*. Notice Jesus doesn't just say, "For my sake," period. He adds, "And the gospel's." Losing your life is in devotion to Christ and duty to the gospel. In other words, because we live for Christ, we live to proclaim Christ to others.

When confronted by the call to follow Christ, we don't have a "both / and" choice – both Christ and our own lives. Rather, we stand before an "either / or" choice. In Colossians 3:4 Paul says, "When Christ *who is your life* appears, then you also will appear with him in glory." The claim of Jesus Christ is total and exclusive. It doesn't allow a convenient compartmentalization of natural life and religious life (secular / sacred). Friends, your whole life stands under the claim of Christ.<sup>5</sup> The way to save it is to lose it.

##### B. To gain the world means to forfeit your soul (v.36)

*For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?*

Suppose you were able to gain the whole world – that is everything a person could possibly hope for – but it cost your very soul to obtain it. According to Jesus, that would be a poor bargain. Discipleship is a matter of profit and loss, a question of whether we will waste our lives or invest our lives. Remember, Jesus was instructing His own disciples, men who had already confessed Him as the Son of God (cf. 8:29). He was not telling them how to be saved and go to heaven, but how to save their lives and make the most of their opportunities on earth.

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<sup>5</sup> James. R. Edwards, 258.

“Losing your soul” is the equivalent of “wasting your life,” missing the great opportunities God gives you to make your life count. You may “gain the whole world” and be a success in the eyes of men, and yet have nothing to show for your life when you stand before God. This is a tragedy.

Paul says the same thing using different language in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15. He says, “Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.”

*Only one life, ‘twill soon be past,  
Only what’s done for Christ will last.*<sup>6</sup>

### **C. Your soul is extremely valuable (v.37)**

*For what can a man give in return for his soul?*

There is no kind of a relationship that a person can have with God that does not involve giving of his entire life or soul. You can’t work out some sort of a deal with God. We have nothing with which we could even barter or bargain with God. God owns everything in the universe, therefore none of us could ever tempt Him or bribe Him with anything we have in exchange for giving our life to Him for salvation.

The psalmist says, “[Some] trust in their wealth and boast of the abundance of their riches? Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice” Psalm 49:6-8.

### **D. If you are ashamed of Christ, He will be ashamed of you. (v.38)**

*For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.*

The choice you make regarding discipleship makes all the difference on the day of judgment; if you reject Christ on Earth, He will reject you on the day of judgment. Jesus isn’t talking about the shame every born-again Christian feels in his heart from time to time as a result of his cross bearing discipleship. Verse 38 isn’t speaking to the person who cowers briefly in a moment of opposition. Rather, Jesus is referring to the person who, because of his or her shame, never repents and believes. In the case of that person, Jesus says, “The Son of Man will

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<sup>6</sup> C.T. Studd, *Only One Life*.

also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." Jesus will turn away, saying, "Depart from Me, I never knew you." What a tragedy. Friends, don't let your ego cost you the salvation of your soul. Repent and believe.

## **THE KINGDOM COME IN POWER (9:1)**

While our translations bookend chapter 8 with verse 38, this shouldn't be the case. Let me be clear, there is no error with Scripture, just the division of the text in most of our translations, which are not inspired. Simply said, verse 1 of chapter 9 should actually be the conclusion of chapter 8. With that said, Mark closes this section of his gospel with an interesting statement made by Jesus. Jesus says, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Kingdom of God after it has come with power." Jesus asserts that the arrival of the Kingdom of God in power would take place within the lifetime of the individuals being addressed. What is Jesus referring to here? Though some have taught it, Jesus couldn't have been referring to His second coming because that hasn't happened yet. Rather, I believe Jesus is referring to His death and, more specifically, His resurrection. The Kingdom of God "coming with power" points to Jesus' victorious resurrection from the dead, of which the subsequent account of the transfiguration in chapter 9 serves as a visual precursor.

Let's land the plane. Are you clear about the value of your soul and eternity? What do you value, yourself or Christ? This world or God's will? What will you invest your life in, this world or Christ's kingdom? You must choose. You must either go your own way, save your own life, cling to your own stuff, or you must deny your own life, die to your old way of living, and go ahead and follow Christ. The question is, which will it be?<sup>7</sup> Jim Elliot, who was martyred as a missionary to the Auca Indians in Ecuador, wrote in his journal shortly before his death, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."<sup>8</sup> Are you with Jesus?

## **CLOSING BENEDICTION**

Hear this benediction as we bring our corporate worship to a close this morning. Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" Galatians 2:20. And all God's people said, "Amen!" Go in peace!

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<sup>7</sup> Ernie Godshall.

<sup>8</sup> Jim Elliot.