

First Serve

Studies in the Gospel of Mark

Text

Mark 8:34-9:1

Topic

Calling upon us to follow Him as His disciples,
Jesus praises the value of denying ourselves

Title

"Applaudable Deniability"

Introduction

Do you have a song? One that, if it comes on the radio, you say,
*"That's **our** song!"*

Entertainers often have a song that was written just for them.
Frank Sinatra, for example, had *My Way*. Originally a French pop
tune, Paul Anka took the melody and wrote English words
especially for Sinatra.

The lyrics celebrate the independent spirit of the man nicknamed
"The Chairman of the Board." The song builds to this conclusion:

*For what is a man, what has he got?
If not himself, then he has naught
To say the things he truly feels and not the words of one who
kneels
The record shows I took the blows and did it my way*

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Mark 8:34-9:1

"Applaudable Deniability"

In another stanza, the lyrics anticipate Sinatra's defiant thoughts about his death:

*And now, the end is near
And so I face the final curtain
My friend, I'll say it clear
I'll state my case, of which I'm certain
I've lived a life that's full
I traveled each and every highway
And more, much more than this, I did it my way*

Think about that, in the clear light of what you know about eternity. Is that the song you want to sing to Jesus on the other side of the "final curtain?"

No, you'll want to be able to sing something like this:

*I have decided to follow Jesus;
Though none go with me, I still will follow;
My cross I'll carry, till I see Jesus;
The world behind me, the cross before me;
No turning back, no turning back*

Those lyrics are based on the last words of a man in north-east India, who along with his family was converted to Christianity in the middle of the 19th century through the efforts of a Welsh missionary. Called to renounce his faith by the village chief, the convert declared, "I have decided to follow Jesus." In response to threats to his family, he continued, "Though no one joins me, still I will follow."

His wife was killed, and he was executed while singing, "The cross before me, the world behind me."

His display of faith is reported to have led to the conversion of the chief and others in the village.

I'm not sure if the anonymous martyr was thinking about the words of Jesus in our text, but both his words, and his witness, give perfect expression to everything the Lord intended when He said, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."

Don't think about martyrdom, and be put off from following the Lord. Start by considering the invitation, "Whoever desires to come after Me."

I do; so do you, if you are a believer. Since we desire to come after Jesus, we'll want to pay close attention as He discusses the price, but also the profit, of discipleship.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Jesus Discloses The Price Of Following Him As His Disciple, and #2 Jesus Defends The Profits Of Following Him As His Disciple.

#1 Jesus Discloses The Price Of Following Him As His Disciple

(v34)

We can liken Jesus' words to the Terms and Conditions dialog box that pops-up on your computer or mobile device when you first load a program or an app.

You want to start enjoying the app, but you can't do anything until you click "Agree."

Have you ever actually read the Terms and Conditions? Probably not; they're fifty pages long, and, in one sense, it doesn't matter what they say, because if you want to use the app, you must click Agree.

That discipleship pop-up dialog box is verse thirty-four:

Mar 8:34 When He had called the people to Himself, with His disciples also, He said to them, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.

This is the bedrock principle for discipleship as laid down by Jesus. The remaining verses of chapter eight, and verse one of chapter nine, justify the high cost of discipleship.

A couple of preliminary observations:

- Jesus' "disciples" were the twelve. They had been with Him quite some time, as His disciples, yet here Jesus was calling them - His disciples - to discipleship.
- The call to discipleship was also made to other "people," to "whoever" was in that crowd. Most of them must have been nonbelievers whom Jesus was calling to salvation and, simultaneously, to discipleship.

What this tells me is that we should urge folks to count the cost when they first get saved. It is also normal to urge those who are long-term believers to further discipleship.

Maybe, when you got saved, the preacher cautioned you to count the cost and you understood that you had to go all in for Jesus, and you've never wavered, not for a moment, from His lordship over your life.

More likely is that you committed your life to the Lord, but have had times in your walk where you recommitted.

I think the most common experience we have is summed up by the phrase, "Every disciple is a Christian, but not every Christian is a disciple."

I think, in fact, that a lot of Christians are not growing with the Lord because, at some point, Terms and Conditions pop-up on the screen of their life, and they don't click "Agree." It leaves them stuck, unable to move further, unable to move forward.

Do you feel stuck? Today could be a turning point in your relationship with the Lord.

Bear in mind that Jesus had just told His guys, in verse thirty-one, that He "must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again."

That is where He was going - to the Cross, then to the tomb, then out from the tomb.

When He said, "Whoever desires to come after Me," it wasn't a generic invitation to walk with Him. It was a specific invitation to walk a similar path - to the Cross, to the tomb, then out from the tomb.

The disciples, and the people, were expecting Jesus to walk into Jerusalem and proclaim Himself King, and establish the kingdom of Heaven on the earth. The disciples, and the people, were excited to "come after" Jesus along that path.

But His destination had changed on account of the rejection of the national leaders of Israel. There was a new path - the one that led to death and beyond.

To "follow" Jesus along that path meant they would need to "deny [themselves]," and that they would need to "take up [their crosses]."

We happen to be in the Lent season of the Roman Catholic Church. Their doctrine encourages you to give-up something for the time period, denying yourself its pleasures, as a token of your devotion to Jesus Christ.

That is not what "deny yourself" means; not at all. And it isn't something that has a time limit; it's continuous.

To "deny yourself" means you deny **self**. You no longer consider yourself independent of God's rule over your life, but as belonging to Him, to do with you as He pleases, not as you please.

It means you give total control of your life to Jesus. Remember those bumper stickers that read, *Jesus is my co-pilot?* Tear that off. He's not your co-pilot; He's your pilot. Get in the backseat, and don't be a backseat driver.

Speaking of being in the back seat... What do you think of driverless cars? Google's self-driving car is piloted by software called Google Chauffeur. Lettering on the side of each car identifies it as a "self-driving car."

Google plans to make these cars available to the public in 2020.

The car isn't driverless; it's driven by something more intelligent than you, with far better reaction time.

Jesus is like that - only to infinity, with no possibility for failure or malfunction. It's just so hard for some of us to sing, *Jesus, Take the Wheel*.

Who is at the wheel in your life? If it's Jesus, is He only there to steer you successfully through some danger, or crisis - after which you plan on driving again?

Self is our default pilot. Self-driven life could be tattooed on every human being. We need a cover-up tattoo after we get saved. Jesus-driven is what we're going for.

We have the example of the twelve, so let's use it. They thought they were on their way to positions in the kingdom. Instead, if they chose it, they would be on their way to persecutions, and martyrdom.

One of them said "No" to discipleship. Judas betrayed the Lord, selling Him out for thirty pieces of silver.

The rest of the boys said "Yes," and they denied themselves. They were reviled, beaten, imprisoned, and eventually martyred - all but John, who was exiled to hard labor on Patmos in his old age.

Do we pity them? Do any of us think they somehow wasted their lives? Or are we grateful for their decision to deny self for Jesus, and for the Gospel?

"Take up [your] cross," Jesus said next. We have cheapened what He meant by talking about certain sufferings, or burdens, as "our cross to bear."

I've known wives who say that their husband is their cross to bear.

That isn't what these words mean. In first century Israel, execution of heinous non-Roman criminals was by crucifixion. The condemned man would be compelled to carry part of the cross upon which he was to be crucified.

Jesus was going to be crucified, after bearing part of His cross outside the city to the Place of the Skull.

The immediate meaning, to the disciples and to the people, was that they, too, were probably going to be killed, should they choose to follow Jesus.

For multiplied millions of believers throughout the church age, it has meant just that - martyrdom for the sake of Jesus and the Gospel. There are many accounts, in Foxes Book of Martyrs, of people being converted as a saint was being martyred, who immediately joined that saint and were themselves martyred.

Short of actual martyrdom, bearing your cross means not just that you are willing to die for Jesus if it comes to it, but that you already consider yourself a dead man, or a dead woman.

There are some advantages to approaching life as a dead person. Nothing can hurt you if you're dead. You don't have any worries or anxieties about life if you're dead. You won't be controlled by your fleshly appetites either.

Is this depressing you? It shouldn't. Again, I appeal to the believers who have gone before us. The apostle Paul, right after he was saved on the road to Damascus, was told how many things he must suffer for Jesus Christ, and for the Gospel. There are lists of his sufferings that make you cringe.

Yet he said of all his sufferings, both physical and emotional, that they were light afflictions that lasted for a moment. We are grateful for Paul's choosing to deny self, and to bear the cross.

You might be thinking, "If those are the terms and conditions, there's no way I'm clicking on Agree."

If that's my choice, and your choice, then it's why we will never grow any farther. A suffering Savior requires suffering saints.

If you're leaning towards disagreeing, **don't decide yet**. Jesus wants to explain a few things to you about why His terms and conditions are really quite extraordinary.

#2 Jesus Defends The Profits Of Following Him As His Disciple

(v 35-9:1)

If you are at all inclined to maintain your status quo as a Christian who is not a disciple; or to remain a nonbeliever; please first give careful consideration to the five things Jesus points out in our remaining verses.

Here's the first thing to ponder:

Mar 8:35 For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.

Jesus was addressing both believers and nonbelievers. His words must therefore have impact to all who hear them.

Let's say you are not a believer; you are by no means a Christian. After counting the cost of following Jesus, you don't want to lose your life for Him, but would rather live the life you have to the fullest. You'd rather pilot your own car, so to speak.

You can do that, but it is at the peril of losing eternal life, and perishing in a place of eternal conscious torment.

Save your self-life and you lose eternal life. It's a terrible decision. Yes, the Lord is making certain serious demands upon your life; but, in the long run, it's your best choice to follow Him.

How would this same verse apply to a believer? Well, if you live for self, you'll certainly be forfeiting rewards when you see the Lord. You will, in fact, suffer loss at the Reward Seat of Jesus.

Don't shrug that off lightly. You're talking about looking into the beautiful but probing eyes of the Lord Who bought you at the cost of His own death on the cross. He's the One who has a plan for your life, to complete the good work He has begun in you.

Do you really want to be flippant about discipleship, and disappoint the Lord? Is that the account you want to give Him?

Jesus presents a second argument:

Mar 8:36 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?

The nonbeliever who rejects Jesus, or the believer who wants to refuse discipleship, is choosing earthly things over eternal things. The Lord puts that choice into perspective. He exaggerates for the sake of argument, and assumes you could "gain the whole world."

Think about it: The "world" is temporary, and is one day going to be destroyed, and there will be a new earth, and new heavens. Thus the world you gain cannot be compared to the soul you lose in the process.

What does "loses his own soul" mean? Does it mean forfeiting salvation?

Yes - to a nonbeliever. Your pursuit of satisfaction with the earthly will overshadow the eternal, and you will be lost forever.

If you are a believer - can *you* "lose your soul?" Yes, but in a different sense. You lose it in that you will never be satisfied with the world. It will eventually hit you that you are falling short of the high calling God has for your life.

We can confidently say that the world cannot satisfy the believer because we have the testimony of a guy who, in effect, gained the whole world. His name was Solomon. He was the son of David, and Israel's third king.

He had it all, in every earthly pursuit you can imagine. He drinks, becomes wealthy, acquires power, buys property, experiences sexual gratification, and views artistic entertainment. None of these experiences satisfies him.

In the end he declared it all to be vanity and realized the only true satisfaction in life comes from your submission to God.

Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 3:11, "... He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end."

In today's language, we would say that people are born hardwired to sense that there is eternal life. You can never be satisfied with earthly living, because you were made for eternity.

C.S. Lewis put it like this: "If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world."

The third argument for following Jesus is in verse thirty-seven:

[Mar 8:37](#) Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?

MasterCard hit gold with their ad campaign about things that are priceless. It resonates with us, because deep inside, we know that intangible spiritual things always take priority over mere material things.

The saving and the satisfying of your soul are two profitable results of your decision to follow Jesus. It may seem as though His demands upon your life are extreme; but, in the long run, you cannot put a price on submitting to Jesus.

The fourth thing Jesus wants us to consider is in verse thirty-eight:

Mar 8:38 For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."

Before we talk about the profit of discipleship from this verse, stop and realize Jesus just said something amazing. He referenced His Second Coming, His return to the earth, to judge the world, and to establish the promised kingdom.

We know exactly what Jesus was describing. He'd be crucified, but rise from the dead. He'd ascend into Heaven, only to return, in His Second Coming.

That coming would be preceded by a time of great trouble on the earth. It's prophesied in the Old Testament, called the time of Jacob's trouble, among other things. We know it as the seven year Great Tribulation.

Then there is the delay between the Ascension of Jesus into Heaven and His Second Coming. We live in that delay - in the church age.

As to discipleship, and the choice to deny self and bear the cross, when Jesus returns, there will be a reckoning. Everyone will give an account to Him.

- For church age saints, this account will be given at the Reward Seat of Jesus, after our death or rapture.
- For the people who must endure the future Tribulation, this account will be on the earth, at the Second Coming.

The argument here is simple. If you refuse discipleship, you will avoid any possibility of reviling or ridicule for being a follower of Jesus. You'll fit in with the rest of the world, and avoid any trouble or suffering for the sake of the Gospel.

But that means you are ashamed to be identified with Jesus, or with His saints. Thus, when Jesus comes, He will be ashamed of you.

It's one, or the other; we can't have it both ways.

The fifth, and final, argument Jesus puts forth for choosing discipleship is the first verse of chapter nine:

Mar 9:1 And He said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power."

The literal fulfillment of this prediction is explained in the verses that follow in chapter nine. Jesus takes three of the guys with Him up a mountain, where He is transfigured before their eyes. The veil that hid His deity from them was temporarily lifted, and He shone like the sun.

Jesus said this, however, before He was transfigured, as part of His arguments that discipleship is the only profitable choice.

BTW - I'm sure you know that when the books of the Bible were originally written, they did not contain chapter or verse references. The Bible was divided into chapters and verses to help us find Scriptures more quickly and easily.

The chapter divisions commonly used today were developed by Stephen Langton, an Archbishop of Canterbury. Langton put the modern chapter divisions into place in around 1227AD. The Wycliffe English Bible of 1382 was the first Bible to use this chapter pattern. Since the Wycliffe Bible, nearly all Bible translations have followed Langton's chapter divisions.

The Hebrew Scriptures we call the Old Testament was divided into verses by a Jewish rabbi by the name of Nathan in 1448AD. Robert Estienne, who was also known as Stephanus, was the first to divide the New Testament into standard numbered verses, in 1555. Stephanus used Nathan's verse divisions for the Old Testament. Since that time, beginning with the Geneva Bible, the chapter and verse divisions employed by Stephanus have been accepted into nearly all the Bible versions.

Back to Jesus' prediction. What does it say about discipleship? Walking with Jesus doesn't just mean a life of death and crosses. It means a life of power and victory.

He would bear His cross and be crucified; but He would rise from the dead, ascend into Heaven, and be seated at the right hand of God. He would return, as He indicated.

It's not revealed here, but we know from the other Gospels, and from the Book of Acts, that Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit upon His followers.

The power of His resurrection is available to any and to all of His followers. We are described as seated, spiritually speaking, in Heaven, with Jesus.

In other words, we should look at the present in light of the certainties of these future events.

It's a common plot-point in many sci-fi stories that the person from the future bets on sporting events that he already knows the outcome. We wish we could know the future - not simply to become wealthy betting on it, but to change it for the better.

Well, we do know the future - at least in outline form. We can change it for the better:

- We can change it for the better of individuals with whom we share the Gospel, in that they will not perish, but have everlasting life.
- We can change it for the better of nations, as we call upon their citizens to "Repent!," and seek the righteousness that exalts nations.
- We can change the future in that, in a way we don't fully understand, our living as disciples can hasten, or speed up, the coming of the Lord (according to Peter in his second letter).

I'll close with this. Imagine every morning, as you wake up, your first order of business (after making coffee!) is to get into God's Word.

As you open your Bible to read, every time, this dialog box pops-up: "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."

It's up to **you** to click "Cancel," or "Agree."