

## Mark 8:34–9:1 — How Do I Become A Christian?

September 22, 2019

Good morning CrossWinds. I want to begin today with a question. How does someone become a Christian? If someone was to ask you, “What should I do to become a Christian?” What would you say?

In many churches this weekend, pastors will give gospel invitations asking people to become Christians. How do we know they are giving the right invitation so that people who respond to their invitations actually become Christians?

This morning, we are going to look at the original gospel invitation. This is the original invitation on how to become a Christian given by Jesus himself so we know it is authentic.

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 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 (ESV)

These verses are not unique to Mark. They are also found in Matthew 16 and Luke 9. I say this because this invitation to follow Christ is so important that it was mentioned directly by three gospel writers.

Lest you think that these are a few isolated verses about how costly it is to become a Christian and follow Christ, let me show you a few other verses around the New Testament that show us becoming a Christian and following Christ is a costly thing to do.

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Luke 14:26 (ESV)

Jesus said that if you want to become a Christian, expect that it will have great relational cost. You must love Jesus more than your own family. When Jesus said you need to hate your own father and mother,, he was not talking about absolute hatred. He was talking about relative hatred. Our love and loyalty to Christ is to be so great that even the love for our parents, those we love most, is to be like hatred in comparison to our love of Jesus. If we will not and do not have a love for Jesus like that, we cannot be his disciple. Following Jesus is hard.

Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. Luke 14:31–33 (ESV)

Jesus said that if anyone is going to be a Christian and follow him, he or she must not become a Christian simply because it impulsively feels like the right thing to do at the moment. You should not become a Christian because at the end of a Christian concert you are filled with emotions. Becoming a Christian is a cold, calculated decision you make, not an impulsive emotion.

A Christian needs to think through what it will cost to follow Jesus and decide you are willing to pay that high price. Becoming a Christian means Jesus will go before everything else in our lives. Jesus needs to be first in our finances. He needs to be first in our dating. He needs to be first in our entertainment. If you

haven't thought through the fact that becoming a Christian and following him will cost you everything, Jesus said you cannot be his disciple.

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 (ESV)

Here we have two people that wanted to become Christians and be disciples of Christ. They wanted to follow Jesus, but it didn't work out well for them. One guy said he would follow Jesus but first he had to bury his father. That sounds reasonable. A funeral couldn't take more than a week. Why couldn't Jesus wait a week for this guy to follow him? The problem is "bury my father" is a Hebrew idiom that means to take care of his father until his death. This guy wanted to follow Jesus but only after his father was dead and gone. Maybe this guy worked the family farm with his father. He didn't want to follow Jesus until his father was dead and he inherited the family farm from his father. Jesus said, "No way. You can't put working the family farm to secure your financial future in front of following me."

Similarly, another man told Jesus he would follow him but he first wanted to go home and say farewell to his family before he joined Jesus' band. It seems like a reasonable request until you realize that it appears this man was only willing to follow Jesus after he was sure his family was well provided for before he followed Jesus. Like the first man, he would follow Jesus after he was

independently wealthy and it was comfortable to travel with Jesus. Once again, Jesus said, “No way. Following me comes before trying to secure the financial future for your family.” In both of these cases, Jesus said, “You cannot be my disciple if there is something in your life that is more important than me, even if it is your family.” Jesus said becoming a Christian and following him is a hard thing to do.

Let’s return to the Gospel of Mark and look at the text so we can learn more about the high cost that comes with following Jesus. The text breaks into two parts. First, how do I become a Christian and follow Jesus? Second, why is the high cost of becoming a Christian and following Jesus worth it?

### **How do I become a Christian and follow Jesus?**

**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.” Mark 8:34 (ESV)**

Before we look at this verse, let’s remember the context. Last week, we saw Jesus gave his disciples a final exam. He asked them the question that hung over the first half of this gospel: Who do you say that I am? Peter answered the question correctly. “You are the Christ. You are God in the flesh.” This was the high point of Peter’s life. Through a gracious gift of the Holy Spirit, he figured out what nobody else in the Gospel had understood, the true identity of Jesus.

The problem is Peter, and the other disciples, had trouble understanding that Jesus being the Christ meant he was not going to establish an earthly kingdom. They thought Jesus would make Israel the leading nation that would rule the world. Peter and the other disciples thought Jesus would make

Jerusalem the capital city of the world. The Romans would be destroyed. Peter thought the disciples would reign on earth with Jesus in a royal earthly court.

The problem was that immediately after Peter identified Jesus as the Christ, Jesus told the disciples he was going to suffer many things, be rejected by the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem, was going to die and rise after three days. Jesus suffering, being rejected, and dying was contrary to everything the disciples expected. Peter took Jesus aside and told Jesus he had the wrong plan. Jesus responded by rebuking Peter and telling Peter he had the wrong plan. Jesus even said to Peter, "Get behind me Satan." That hurt.

Then Jesus moved from talking to his disciples to calling the crowd around him and telling the disciples and the crowd what it meant for anyone to follow him.

### **I must deny myself.**

This is easy for us to misunderstand. When we think of denying ourselves, we think of self-denial. We think it is a good idea if we go on a diet or deny ourselves chocolate cake for lent. Jesus was not talking about giving up sugary foods. Jesus said that to follow him we must begin by denying ourselves.

Instinctively, we think we are the most important people in the universe. We think the world revolves around us. We live for what we want in life. We live to achieve our goals. We think life is about what we want and what will make us happy.

Jesus said that if you are going to follow him, you can no longer be at the center of your life. Jesus must become the new center of your life. Christians no longer live life saying, "What do I want?" We live life saying, "What does Jesus want?"

The question is not what I want in a girlfriend or boyfriend but what does Jesus want me to look for in a girlfriend or boyfriend? The question is not what do I do with my money? It is what does Jesus want me to do with his money? The question is not what do I want to do with my free time? The question is what does Jesus want me to do with my free time? If he isn't pleased with the way I use my free time, I need to change.

The question is not what do I want to do for a career but what do I think Jesus wants me to do for a career? If deny myself and Jesus is at the center of my life, I want to ask myself how I can use my time, energy and talents for him.

Sometimes young Christians get tricked into thinking about this the wrong way. In high school, when they graduate they are asked what they want to do with their lives. What is a career that will make them happy? Young Christian adults should ask a different question. It is not, What do I want to do with my life? Instead, with the 30-50 years I have in front of me, how can I make Jesus' name famous with my life? It may be a traditional career in the workplace that is the way you want to serve Jesus. It may be a mission work because that is the way you are denying yourself to serve Jesus. It could be many things, but the key is that following Christ means life is not about you.

Another way we can get this wrong is thinking that denying ourselves is telling Jesus what we want to do with our lives then asking Jesus to bless our plans. This looks right but at its core it is flawed. It is not having a willingness to denying yourself. Following Christ begins by saying life is not all about me. My life is to be lived for Jesus. Jesus is in charge.

Some of you will think denial of self and living for Jesus is not worth it. You will regret it because you will have unfulfilled dreams. Here is what Jesus says to that.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it." Matthew 13:44–46 (ESV)

In both of these parables, being part of the kingdom of heaven is worth losing everything to acquire. It is worth giving up yourself, your dreams and desires to put obtaining the kingdom of heaven in front of all of them. In the end, no matter what it costs us, following Jesus is worth every sacrifice we make.

### **I must take up my cross.**

This is another phrase that has been misunderstood. When we hear about carrying a cross, we often think of that as enduring a minor inconvenience. That is not what this was saying. In this culture, carrying a cross meant death. Crucifixion was a common thing in the time of Jesus. Some estimate that during the approximately 30 years of Jesus' life the Romans crucified approximately 30,000 people. One time they crucified 800 at once. Another time they crucified 2,000 at once. Death by crucifixion was the most horrid form of death the Romans could create. It was death where people dangled in agony for up to a week before they suffocated through exhaustion and agony. Victims typically carried the crossbeam of their cross to the place of their own execution before they lost their lives in unbelievable agony.

Jesus just told his disciples he was going to suffer and die. Then, he said that if they wanted to follow him and be his disciple they must also be prepared to suffer and die, maybe even on a cross, just like him. Jesus said that if you are going to follow him, you need to be willing to even face death like him. All but one of the disciples died a horrid death because they followed Jesus. If we follow Christ, we need to be prepared to suffer. As Jesus said earlier, we may be rejected by our families, our friends, our relatives and even lose our jobs. If you are going to follow Christ, realize it may cost you everything. You may even face a horrifying death, just like Jesus.

Some of you remember in 2015 when ISIS beheaded 21 Christians by hacking their heads off with hunting knives. They were given a choice — if they renounced Christ, and turned to



Mohammed, they would live; if they stayed faithful to Christ, they would die. All of them died, and there was so much blood it turned the ocean red. How could they die this way? They knew that Jesus said following him meant they needed to deny themselves and take up their crosses. Dying for Christ is a real possibility if you are going to follow Christ.

Mark's original audience was the people in Roman. Some of you know the history of ancient Rome and the war against Christians that was undertaken by Roman emperors like Nero, Domitian, and Caligula as they killed thousands of Christians in some of the most barbaric ways. The words of this gospel were an



encouragement and reminder that suffering for Christ, even death for Christ, is to be expected.

We live in a privileged time and a privileged place. Most of us will never face dying for Jesus by a hunting knife taking off our heads, but we will face some measure of suffering and rejection for Christ. Nevertheless, it is not just people of the Middle East that may lose their lives for Christ; that can even happen in America.

Some of you know the story of a girl named Cassie. She had become a Christian after attending the YMCA of the Rockies. A few months after that, she ate her breakfast cereal and went to school just like it was another day of school at Columbine. She was in the school library when she was told to get under the table because there was a shooter in the school. One of those shooters came into the library with a gun in his hand, saw her under the table and pulled her out. He put a gun to her head and said, “Do you still believe in Jesus now?” She said, “Yes.” Then he pulled the trigger, and she lost her life.

There is always the possibility that following Jesus may cost you your life in middle America, not just the Middle East.

**Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. 1 John 3:13 (ESV)**

**I give my loyal obedience to Jesus.**

The Greek term for “follow me” literally means “to imitate me.” It is asking, “What would Jesus do?” Loyal obedience is obeying Jesus’ actions and words, no matter what it costs.

**Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him. John 14:21 (ESV)**

Jesus gave us a basic definition of what it means to follow him. First, we must deny ourselves. Our lives are not about what we want for our lives but what we can do for Jesus with our lives. Our lives are about not living to serve ourselves but living to serve Jesus. Second, we must be willing to suffer for following Jesus. This suffering can be mild, and it may just be inconvenience, but it can be severe. It may result in us paying the ultimate price and even losing our lives for Jesus. Suffering and dying for Christ is not a strange thing. It is a normal thing. Third, we must live lives of loyal obedience to our master. We obey his commands.

The problem is, how can denying ourselves and living for Jesus be worth it? How can suffering for Christ and maybe even dying for Christ be worth it? Why would anyone want to spent his or her life living for Jesus? Why would anyone be willing to suffer for Jesus? How can that be worth it? That brings us to the second half of Jesus' message when he said everything we give up for Christ today, even giving up our very lives, is worth it from the perspective of eternity.

### **Is the high cost of becoming a Christian worth it?**

**The only way to save my life in the next world is to be willing to lose my life for Jesus in this world.**

**For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. Mark 8:35 (ESV)**

If you want to hang onto your life in this world, keep control of your life in this world and live for yourself in this world, you can do that. You may be able to keep enjoying life temporarily while ignoring Jesus, just know you will lose your life eternally. You will spend eternity in hell. It is only those who are willing to deny

themselves and even embrace suffering for Jesus that in the end will save their lives eternally.

One thing that did a great disservice to the church in recent years was the false belief spread in the church that you could have Jesus as the savior of your life, but not the Lord over your life. That meant you could claim you trusted Christ at age 4 and but have no interest in Jesus for the rest of your life until you die, and that was fine because you prayed a salvation prayer at age 4. That doesn't fit with this text. Jesus said saving faith in Christ will always lead to Jesus becoming Lord over our lives and submitting everything to him.

Jesus said that self-denial, loyal obedience and willingness to suffer for Christ, even to the point of death, is not a bad deal. Actually, it is a small price to pay for what you get out of it. If you live for yourself now, you will spend eternity in hell. If are willing to deny self, obey Christ, and suffer now, you will spend eternity in heaven because of your relationship with Jesus. Any inconvenience we have for this life is a minor inconvenience compared to the reward we will receive in the next life.

And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. 1 John 2:17 (ESV)

Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy... Hebrews 11:35–38 (ESV)

Hebrews 11 shows us what it means to live by faith. It shows us how some people suffered and died because of their faith in Christ. Some even refused to

be released from torture because they knew that the more they suffered for Christ in this life, the greater their reward would be from Christ in the next life.

**Saving my soul is more valuable than all the wealth of the world.**

**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? Mark 8:36–37 (ESV)**

Some people will say, “Why should I deny myself and my dreams and goals? Why should I obey Christ? Why should I suffer for Christ? Living for Christ will cut down my standard of living. If I deny myself and embrace suffering, I most likely won’t be as successful in business as I hoped to achieve. This being a disciple of Jesus stuff is too costly!”

Jesus said, “Think about this. I am offering you a great deal. I am offering you your soul. By living for me and embracing suffering for me, I am saving your soul. You could become rich, but it wouldn’t matter if you are not my disciple.”

I couldn’t help but think about Steve Jobs. He was the founder and CEO of Apple Computer. When he died of pancreatic cancer, he was worth more than \$10 billion dollars. If he was still alive, today his Apple stock would leave him worth \$31.6 billion dollars. The problem is that his money doesn’t matter. He didn’t have a relationship with Jesus. He will spend eternity suffering for sin because he never asked Jesus to pay for his sin. My friends, every single person who becomes a Christian, even if they have to pay a high price for self-denial and suffering, is infinitely richer than Steve Jobs. Because of Jesus, you have the one thing Steve Jobs with all of his money could not buy, that is the salvation of your soul.

As Jesus said, “What can you give in exchange for your soul?” There is no amount of money that can buy a human soul out of hell. It doesn’t matter how much you are worth or what you have on earth. All that matters in eternity is the salvation of our souls and the only way to be saved is to trust in Christ and live as disciples of Christ. That is why giving everything up for Jesus is absolutely worth it.

**It is the only way to have confidence for the Day of Judgment.**

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. Mark 8:38 (ESV)

Jesus reminded us this world will not go on forever. There is a day when Christ will return. We studied the Day of Judgment in our series on hell. For most people, the Day of Judgment will be a horrifying day when they stand before Jesus and their lives are fully exposed to Jesus then judged by him. That judgment will not be to determine heaven or hell but will determine the degree of eternal punishment in the lake of fire based on the sin committed in this world. The greater the sin in this life, the greater the suffering in the lake of fire in the next life because hell is fair.

The good news is that for those who have denied themselves to live for Jesus, they have chosen a life of loyal obedience to the commands of Jesus, and were even willing to suffer, and if necessary, die like Jesus. Because of their faith in Christ, they will be brought home to heaven and the new creation.

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 9:1 (ESV)

This verse actually doesn't belong to chapter 9. It belongs at the end of chapter 8. It bridges chapter eight and nine together. It is one of the most frequently misunderstood verses in the Gospels. Let me explain it.

This verse appears to say Jesus would return before all of his disciples died. It appears to say Jesus' return to earth would be in a very short time. The problem is all the disciples are dead and we are still waiting for Jesus to return. This verse doesn't appear to make sense. What is it saying?

Mark just told us that denying ourselves to follow Christ, living a life of loyal obedience to Christ, even being willing to suffer and die like Jesus if that is what God calls us to do is completely worth it. We will know all the sacrifices we make to live as a Christian are worth it in eternity and on the Day of Judgment. When Christ returns on the Day of Judgment, all of his glory — that was concealed when he was on earth — will be revealed. The question is, how do we know this is true? How do we know Christ will return in glory for a final day of judgment?

In the Gospel of Mark, the kingdom of God is bound up with Jesus. Mark said some will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God. In this Gospel, the kingdom of God is bound up with Jesus' coming in power.

Next week, when we get to Mark 9:2, we find that six days after this Jesus took three of his disciples up a mountain where he was transfigured before them. He revealed his power and glory. Not all the disciples saw this, only three of the disciples saw Jesus in his glory. The way they saw Jesus in the glory of his transfiguration was a preview of the way Jesus will look when he returns in glory

on the Day of Judgment. Six days after this, Jesus' transfiguration was a preview of his glory in the middle of history so we know he will return in glory at the end of history.

So while people are denying themselves for Jesus and suffering for him, they are wondering if the suffering and denial is worth it. Will Jesus return in glory and win? The answer is, look at the glory of Christ in his transfiguration. That was a preview of his glory that everyone will see when he returns at the end of history and makes it all worth it.

Further evidence that Jesus' transfiguration in Mark 9 was a preview of the glory of Jesus that will be revealed on the Day of Judgment comes from 2 Peter.

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. 2 Peter 1:16–18 (ESV)

Peter said we are not following a myth about Jesus' return in glory, but we had a preview of what it will be like on the mountain in his transfiguration.

## **Conclusion**

What does it mean to become a Christian and a disciple of Christ? According to Jesus, becoming a Christian is the most costly thing you can do in your life. It involves giving all of yourself to Jesus. It is denying yourself. It is making the desires of Jesus more important than your own. It is even being willing to suffering like Christ, if that is the path God the Father chooses for you.

Being a Christian and living as a disciple of Christ may mean you *lose everything for Jesus in this life, but you will gain everything by following Jesus in the next life.*

Now I want to talk to a number of you this morning. This morning we learned what Jesus said about being a disciple. Following him is the most costly choice we can make, but it is worth every sacrifice we make because it is the only way to save your life in the next world. The salvation of your soul is worth more than money can buy. It is the only way to not be ashamed when we see Jesus on the day of judgment.

The problem is that this morning, some of us came into this room with a different idea of what it means to be a Christian. We looked at Jesus like an eternal life insurance policy. We were only concerned about him if we needed him. We can live our lives for ourselves and wilt when we face suffering faster than a weed hit with Roundup in the summer.

That is not what it means to be a disciple of Christ. Today, I invite you to change. I invite you to become a Christian and a disciple of Jesus. I invite you to the hard work of denying yourself, the hard work of suffering for Jesus if that is what God calls you to do. It is hard, but it is worth it. Any suffering and loss we face for Jesus in this life is nothing compared to the blessing of the saving of our souls for the next life.



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