Denying yourself to follow Jesus

Text: Mark 10:28-31

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**Scriptures:** 1 Kings 19:19-21; Luke 9:23-25; Mark 10:17-31

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 211, 501, 63, 505, 149b

**Series:** The Gospel of Mark (#34)

**Theme:** Jesus teaches his disciples about the costs and benefits of following him

**Proposition:** Be prepared to let go of whatever is most precious to you apart from Christ in order to follow Him

**Introduction**

Have you ever gone without something in the hope of having something better in the future? Perhaps resisting the urge to have second helpings of the first course of a delicious meal so that you have room for desert? Perhaps saving some of your income for a future purchase or for retirement? Parents often teach their children to exercise wise self-control by enforcing rules like only having time on their devices after they have completed their home chores.

The term ‘delayed gratification’, or ‘deferred gratification’, is used to describe resistance to the temptation of an immediate pleasure in the hope of obtaining a valuable and long-lasting reward in the longer-term. This is, in part, the principle behind the teaching of Jesus in our text today. However, the rewards are not temporary earthly ones, but the blessings of eternal life in Christ, both now and in the future. Self-denial is a practice found in virtually every major religion, including Biblical Christianity, but how and why does a disciple of Jesus Christ faithfully practice the self-denial that He prescribes?

1. **Denying yourself – means letting go**

Self-denial can be defined as ‘*sacrifice of one’s own desires and interests*’. We know something of the interests of Peter from Mark’s gospel when we encounter him in chapter 1, casting a net into the Sea of Galilee together with his brother Andrew. However, when Jesus said to him and his brother “*Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men*” (Mark 1:17), Peter and Andrew left their nets, left their ‘trade’, their livelihoods, their families, their previous way of life, and followed Jesus.

Christ had a different desire and interest to theirs. His primary goal is seeking and saving the lost (Luke 19:10). When they left their nets and followed Jesus, Peter and Andrew sacrificed their own desires and interests for the desires and interests of Christ. The same was true of fellow fishermen, James and John (Mark 1:20), of Levi the tax collector, and the other 7 disciples. When Peter says in v28 of our text “*We have* ***left*** *everything and followed you*” – he’s speaking on behalf of the twelve disciples. The word ‘left’ here means to ‘let go’, to send from one's self, to forsake, to hurl away, to put away, to disregard, to put off. It conveys the basic idea of an action which causes separation and refers to total detachment, total separation, from a previous location, condition or affection. Self-sacrifice means going without something or somebody.

Was Peter’s bold declaration true – had he really left everything to follow Jesus? No. He had not yet let go of the desire for self-preservation as a higher priority to confessing Christ. Remember Peter’s vehement threefold denial of Jesus in the courtyard after Jesus had been arrested? (Mark 14:66-72). We know that after His resurrection Jesus restored Peter and the Apostle no longer sought to preserve himself, but his goal was to proclaim Christ whatever the cost, as we clearly see in the book of Acts and in his letters. It is true that Peter ‘*loved not his life unto death*’ (Rev 12:11). He had come to understand the extent of Christ’s call to self-denial: “*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me*” (Luke 9.23).

Peter’s confident statement that the disciples had left everything to follow Jesus was prompted by the previous interaction of Christ with a very wealthy man. This man came to Jesus, not like the Scribes and Pharisees, to test him, but to genuinely seek eternal life. His problem was **not** his wealth. His extensive material possessions themselves were not the barrier to his entering the Kingdom of God, but his great affection for them was.

The self-denial which Jesus calls ALL his followers to practice is the letting go of anything and everything which might impede their love for the Lord. This self-denial is really the removal of all idols of the heart. When we make any person, other than God, the best person for us and the object of our primary desire then we create an idol. Houses, lands, cars, clothing, our own looks, our bodies, our wealth and our status can all be idols. Whatever you most want to hold onto is what is most valuable to you. If that is not the Lord, then you have not fully denied yourself. In essence this is not a new teaching which Jesus brought, but the outworking of the first commandment ‘*You shall have no other gods before me*’ (Ex 20:3).

In our reading from 1 Kings we heard of Elisha who was called to serve as God’s next prophet by Elijah. He ‘burned his bridges’ by sacrificing his team of 12 oxen, together with their yokes. There would be no going back to ploughing for farmer Elisha – he had let go of his former interest in agriculture to serve the Lord as a prophet.

The greatest divine act of self-denial ever performed was that of God giving up, letting go, of His own Son, whom he had loved from before the foundations of the world (John 17:24), on the cross at Calvary. The greatest human act of self-denial ever performed was that of Jesus Christ giving up, letting go of His own interests, not counting equality with God a thing to be grasped, but making himself nothing, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2).

Brothers and sisters, Jesus is not calling you or me to do anything which he himself has not already done. He has denied Himself so much more than we ever will. He is calling all of us to a greater affection for Him and for His mission. Which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **Denying yourself – for a greater affection**

Why we do what we do is more important than what we do. In the Christian life, doing the right thing with the wrong heart motivation is doing the wrong thing. As we noted at the start, self-denial is a practice found in virtually every major religion. For example, in Buddhism, self-denial is seen as a means to spiritual enlightenment, a means of great detachment from the material world. In Islam, fasting is an obligatory act during the month of [Ramadan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramadan). The purpose of this self-denial, the Muslim is taught, is to prevent your spirit from paying excessive attention to anything except Allah. In Roman Catholic teaching, self-denial is for the purpose of self-purification.

The purpose of Biblical self-denial is **not** greater detachment from the material world, not a redirection of attention away from anything apart from God, nor a means of spiritual purification. In addition to these errors, self-denial can be practiced as a form of punishing the body for many wrong and dangerous motivations. The Apostle Paul warns against this approach to religion where man-made regulations for self-denial are followed in Col 2:23 saying **“***These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh*”. Beware congregation that there are many wrong reasons to let go of bodily needs and pleasures.

However, there is a motivation for self-denial which is good and true. This right reason is expressed in our text by the words of Jesus as he responds to Peter’s declaration of having ‘left everything’ to follow Christ Jesus said, “*Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for* ***my sake and for the gospel****, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life*” (Mark 10:29-30).

Did you hear the true motivation for self-denial in the midst of these words? “*For my sake and for the gospel*”. The motivation for self-denial is a **greater affection** for Christ than for oneself, or for anyone or anything else. The motivation for self-denial is a **greater affection** for Christ’s mission – the gospel - than for oneself, or for anyone or anything else. Remember the pearl merchant in one of the parables of Christ? **“***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*” (Matt 13:45)

Following Jesus will not necessarily cost you everything, but it will cost you that which is most dear to your heart apart from him. How can you and I cannot accurately count the cost of following Jesus when we don’t know in advance what we may need to let go of, forsake, hurl away, put away, disregard, to put off in the future? Here is the way:

**Firstly** ensure that your **highest affection is for Christ** and His ongoing work, through his disciples, to seek and to save the lost by proclaiming the gospel. **Then** ensure that your **highest affection continues to be for Christ** and His ongoing work as you live out your life day by day. Ask yourself today - Is Jesus and his mission my highest affection, my greatest goal in life? Is this what I desire above all else? Is this where my treasure really is?

Jesus and the gospel must be the core motivation for our self-denial or else we will have wrong and likely dangerous reasons for going without. There are, however, many blessings which come from self-denial, and also a final warning from Christ which brings us to our 3rd point:

1. **Denying yourself - blessings and a warning**

There is a false teaching which is called ‘prosperity theology’. It is sometimes referred to as the ‘health and wealth gospel’ or the ‘gospel of success’. It teaches that financial blessing and good health are God’s will for all his people and that increased faith and donations to religious causes will result in greater material wealth. The ‘prosperity gospel’ appeals to our natural human desire for gain without godliness.

The message of our text and of the Bible as a whole is NOT that we deny ourselves **so that** we can receive benefits from God. The idea of such an unholy transaction whereby we trade our own interests for greater goodies given by a deity who rewards us for our pious self-sacrifice is contrary to the gospel and appeals only to our fallen, sinful, self-serving nature.

However, as Jesus clearly identifies in our text, there are real blessings which come as a result of self-denial. Listen again to what Jesus says: “*Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel,* ***who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life***” (Mark 10:29-30)

The first thing to note is that Jesus promises a multiplication of what has been let go. His message is “*the blessing from God is far greater than the cost of self-denial*”. Secondly note that ‘a hundredfold’ is a figurative expression, in Luke’s parallel account, he uses the phrase ‘*many times more*’ (Luke 18:30). The blessings which Jesus lists ‘houses, family members, lands’ are also figurative, not completely literal. Thirdly notice that these blessings are to be received ‘in this time’ i.e. in this life and ‘in the age to come’ – in the New Heavens and New Earth. What then are these huge blessings in this life? They include:

* A new family – brothers, sisters, mothers and children in the household of faith (Gal 6:10; Eph 2:19), in the church.
* Holiness – Christlikeness.
* Contentment – a source of great gain (1 Timothy 6:6).
* Joy – a gladness of heart independent of circumstances.
* Peace – a profound inner wellbeing and wholeness.
* Fellowship with God – a communion with the One who loves you perfectly, faithfully and who will never ever let you slip away.

We experience these blessings in the Lord in this life, but they are not yet complete.

* Relationships in our church family can be fragmented at times.
* Our holiness is incomplete, at times we behave in unholy, unsanctified ways.
* Our contentment can be undermined at times by our greed, envy and remaining idolatry.
* We fail at times to count it all joy when we meet trials of various kinds (James 1:2).
* Our peace is compromised because we do not make our requests made known to God in prayers of thanksgiving and supplication (Phil 4:6-7).
* Our fellowship with God is weakened at times, not because God moves away from us, but because our sins, when unconfessed, distance us from Him.

The blessings of self-denial are incomplete in this life, but will be perfected in the age to come. In the New Heavens and New Earth, we will enjoy perfect family life with all of God’s people, we will be in reality what God now declares us to be via the righteousness of Christ – completely holy. We will be free from all sin. We will enjoy complete wholeness and well-being of body and soul. Our fellowship with the Triune God will be continuously close and glorious. These blessings are the essence of eternal life.

Now there’s one more consequence which comes with self-denial. Can you see it there in v30? ‘with persecutions’. Do you struggle to see how that last one can be in the company of a list of multiplied ‘blessings’? The truth is that if you are persecuted for the content of the message you proclaim about Christ Jesus and the gospel of salvation, then you are very blessed. We know this is true because Jesus said so! “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account*” (Matt 5:10-11).

If Jesus is your highest affection, your greatest love and proclaiming the gospel is your main goal, then you will be blessed through persecution! That is exactly what Paul wrote to the Philippian church: **“***For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake*” (Phil 1:29) Some of the blessings which accompany persecution for Christ’s sake include:

* Confirmation that He is indeed your greatest love.
* Confirmation that you are proclaiming the gospel effectively.
* Continuing spiritual growth of a type and intensity that is difficult to obtain apart from persecution.
* Contentment with personal weakness as the strength and power of Christ is experienced (2 Cor 4:7ff; 12:10; Rom 8:35-39).
* Comfort that He will never leave you nor forsake you in the midst of your struggle.

Our text today ends with a puzzling verse: “*But many who are first will be last, and the last first*” (v31). This does **not** mean that there will be a complete reversal of rank in the New Heavens and New Earth where those of wealth and status in this world will become the ‘low-class citizens’ and the poor and lowly will automatically become those of ‘highest class’.

Peter and the disciples perhaps thought at this point that they deserved greater honour in return for their many sacrifices in following Jesus. Remember that earlier, as they came to Capernaum on their way to Jerusalem, they had been ‘*arguing with one another about who was the greatest*’ (9:34). Jesus is warning his disciples and us when He says, “*But many who are first will be last, and the last first*” (v31).

It is **not** the person who denies himself or herself the most that will have the highest rank in the Kingdom of Heaven; but the person who is ‘*the servant of all*’ (9:35). The Lord’s heavenly value system is far different from earth’s value system. Those who are esteemed and respected in this world (like the rich young ruler) and those who think highly of themselves because they have sacrificed so much in their eyes to follow Christ, may not find themselves where they expect to be in the Kingdom of Heaven.

So let’s be careful not to practice pious self-denial with the idea that we will automatically gain greater favour and privilege from God. Instead, be in the habit of asking yourself “*Am I ready and willing to let go of whatever or whoever I must in order to put Christ and the gospel first in my life?*”. Humbly exercise self-control with sanctified ‘delayed gratification’ and you will be blessed both now and into the future as you follow Christ.

AMEN.