

The Deliverance of Discipleship, Part 1

Luke 9:23

Luke 9:23, that's where we're going to camp today. These are the demands of discipleship. "If anyone wants to come after me," Jesus says, "let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me." I just want to give you a general comment that applies to all three of those commands in that verse. They sound, there, like Jesus is giving permission to a would-be disciple, "Let him deny himself" and "Let him take up his cross."

It's a third-person imperative that can be translated that way, but while it may sound like a permissive imperative, let him do this, let him do that, it's actually much stronger than that, here. These are demands. We could translate it this way: If anyone wants to come after me, if he has that desire, if he has that intention, he must deny himself. It's not an option. He must take up his cross daily...he must follow me. And this isn't moralism. This isn't Jesus saying, do this, and you'll get that. That's why he said, "If anyone wants this."

He presupposes the work of God in the soul to convert the soul, to give it a new nature. He's calling out to all those in whom the Holy Spirit has worked, bringing about new birth, bringing about regeneration. To some of those hearing Jesus at this time wouldn't get it. Some of those hearing Jesus may be there at his cross, shouting "Crucify him! Crucify him!" But later, they may come back after the Spirit is working in them to cause them to be born again later. They'll come back to this text and say, You know what? I want to follow him. I want to come after him.

So these are demands of discipleship. They're demands of discipleship, but it's not, do this to get; it's, you've got this. Here's how you follow Christ. Here's how you follow him. These are the demands, and we, when we are obedient to these three commands of Christ, they become the very means of our deliverance from our three greatest enemies, deliverance from the flesh, deliverance from the world, and deliverance from the devil himself. So these demands, obedience to these commands of Christ, they become the means of our deliverance. They become the means of our escape. They become the means of our sanctification, of our growing in holiness.

And what we find, here, is that following Christ means leaving everything else behind. To save your life, you must lose it. To profit for yourself, you must forfeit everything; you must forfeit the world. If the Son of Man is to embrace you when he comes, if you're ever to see the fullness of his glory on that day, you must embrace his shame today. You must bear his reproach now. You must walk with him. You must bear the cross.

By mentioning the cross, here, Jesus has intentionally put a very vivid and horrid metaphor and picture in the minds of the people of his day. He's calling all would-be disciples to follow him to the place of public execution, shameful execution, humiliating execution, nailed up high on a cross so everybody can see, stripped down naked, nothing keeping your shame from the leering, jeering crowds.

He's picturing here a train of would-be criminals, condemned by the world, filing along one after another, each condemned man, each condemned woman carrying that cross beam, trudging along to the final appointment with their own death. Jesus could not make the true demands of a Christian disciple any plainer than this, any starker than this. If you intend to follow Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, it is the end of you.

Most people turn away immediately because they want none of that. I mean, if this life is all you've got, just one trip around the merry-go-round, here, who wants this deal? But there are some who hear this, and they still want to follow. What's up with that? He's talking to those who want this. He's talking to those who desire for this. He's talking to those who long for this with an abiding, deep longing that they can't get rid of because something's been done to them. They understand what Jesus means, and they want it more than anything.

They're willing to sacrifice everything to get it because, listen, for them it's not a sacrifice. It's deliverance. It's their very salvation, and not just in the distant future in the sweet bye-and-bye, when I'll finally be delivered from all the difficulties, and pain, and struggles, and trials I have in this world and on and on and on it goes. No, it's deliverance right now. It's deliverance right now. So is that you? Let's find out.

We need to start by making sure, we really understand Jesus' demands, here. When he, what does he mean, here, when he calls us to follow him? As I said, our Lord means to deliver us, and according to his infinite goodness, and according to his profound wisdom, according to his immense love for us, he means to deliver us, to give us good, to give us a blessing. And in

his mercy and compassion, he wants to deliver us from our greatest enemies: the flesh, the world, and the devil.

First, You must deny, you could say, your old self. Jesus said, "If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself." This refers to the nature of Christian discipleship. The nature of Christian discipleship, which, which begins at the very moment of its inception. It begins with the commitment to self-denial. That is the first and most fundamental element of Christian discipleship. This is what we should tell people when we evangelize. We should tell them, you, you understand before you too quickly pray the prayer and receive Jesus Christ as your Savior, you must understand it's the end of you. It's denial of self.

What does that mean, then there, to deny yourself? What does it mean? The verb *arneomai* has to do with refusing, disdaining, resisting. Someone who practices this verb *arneomai*, he's putting a distance between himself and whatever is the object he is denying, the direct object, whatever he intends to reject. In this case, the direct object, here, is a reflexive pronoun, it's himself: *heauton*, himself. So the one who does the denying, the one who does the renouncing, he himself receives

that action. He's also the one who is denied, who is being denied.

There's actually, though, another sense in which Jesus calls us to *arneomai* ourselves. This is what Jesus means. The verb, verb can also mean, to refuse to pay attention to. Okay? To disregard, to renounce one's own interests, that's the idea, here. One lexicographer provides this explanation, "To say 'no' to oneself firmly and radically is to treat oneself as a negligible quantity that should never enter into consideration, to suppress oneself, in a way, a meaning reinforced by the image of the bearing the cross, which leads to death." End quote.

So basically, to deny yourself means to live a life of saying, no to yourself. No. I want that, no! I want to go that direction, no! Treat yourself like a scolding parent might treat you; no, no, no, no, no, no! That's how we're to live. That's what Jesus is saying. As a basic, fundamental, defining aspect of living our lives, Jesus wants us to walk day by day, is saying, no to self; no to desires; no to ambitions; no to pride; no to self-exaltation, no, no, no, no!

Now, why would anyone want to do that, to treat oneself as a negligible quantity that should never enter into consideration? In the era of our modern, secular age, to

suppress oneself is rank heresy. This will never make it on Oprah. How is it that we're understanding self-denial as something positive? It's deliverance. Let me give you two reasons. First, a negative one and then a positive reason. Why would we want to deny self? First, we desire, here, to say, no to ourselves, because we no longer want for ourselves what we have naturally wanted for ourselves from our birth. So we're willing, now, we're even eager, we are zealous to deny ourselves. Problem here in being human is not with our biology. It's not our ontology. It's not a flaw inherent in the fact that we're human beings.

This is not some, as I said, some existential denial of reality, that we are not who we are. This isn't a denial of our existence or the renouncing of self in some ontological or biological sense. God still expects us to feed our bodies with food, to get sleep, to groom ourselves, and all the rest. Self-denial is not to be equated with self-starvation, some kind of severe, even immoral treatment of the body, like is so common today of saying, I'm not a man, I'm a woman, or I'm a woman, not a man. It's not that. Or I'm not a woman or a man, I'm a, I'm making it up as I go along. It's not any of that.

There are some of us, though, on this planet who by the mysterious operation of the Spirit of God, by the grace of God, we have come to see God for who he truly is. We see him and his majestic holiness, high and lifted up. We see his perfect standard of righteousness. We see that towering justice. We acknowledge in all that strength and power a continual and abundant goodness and kindness, at the same time, a daily outpouring of love toward us in common grace.

We've learned of God's truth. We've discovered in his Word a mind of impenetrable wisdom. We've come to realize how God has acted toward us even when we've been completely oblivious and unaware. And not only that, but even we do become aware, what are we? We're ungrateful and even wicked toward him in return. God acts toward us with mercy and compassion. Not only has he withheld his hand of judgment, but he has blessed us instead. We have, by the grace of God, we've come to see ourselves in stark contrast to this high and holy One.

And not only have we committed the most basic of sins, we haven't honored him as God or given thanks, we've also run headlong into worshiping the creature and all created things. We've been worshiping and coddling ourselves rather than bowing before the One who created all things. So with our minds so



consumed with idolatry, we have been immersed in all manner of defiling delusions, depraved passions, degrading desires. So why would we ever think of following that heart, one that is immersed in idolatry? Why would we want to follow those dreams, the dreams of a, of an unbeliever? How is that flesh and that sinful thinking going to lead us anywhere good because a "mind set on the flesh is death."

We've come to see ourselves in that light. We've come to see our old selves as not to be trusted. So self-denial, then, makes perfect sense especially when we hear what the Bible says about us, Ephesians 2:1-3. You were having some trouble with mistakes you've made. Is that what the Bible says? No! It says, "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins." Wow! That's stark. That's confrontive. You were dead! You were a corpse in your sin, in which you once walked; you followed the course of this world; you followed the prince of the power of the air. Who's that? Satan. We followed him. He was our god. He was our ruler. He was our, our champion and our leader. Why? Because he is the original, I will...I am, not God, I am. I am the center of all reality, and the center of my world, and the center of the universe.

And we said, you know I kind of like that. We kind of like Satan's mantra. Put yourself first. Feed yourself. Service yourself. We really liked that. That was, "the spirit that is at work in the sons of disobedience, among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, we carried out the desires of the body and mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." That's what we were. That kind of thing called the sin nature still lives in us, and it stills insinuates its thoughts into our minds. Why would we want to listen to any of that? That's the self, Jesus is saying to deny. Deny; say no to.

With Paul we've come to realize, Romans 7:18, "Nothing good dwells in us, that is in our flesh." The problem with us, with our flesh, that's a hostile principle within us. It's opposed to the very goodness of God that we love. And that is why we are so eager to deny ourselves. Now that the Spirit of God has awakened us, we do not trust ourselves. It's self that led me away from God in the first place. We see a principle of sin within us, and we find ourselves easily led astray by it, so easily deceived. So we want to starve that sinful desire. We want to choke it out. We want to mortify it, kill it. We want to silence its voice. We want to choke out its life.

Paul says, Romans 8:5, "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." That's a first reason, that's a negative reason for us to be eager, really, really eager, to deny ourselves. We want to say, no, to ourselves because we no longer want for ourselves what we naturally wanted for ourselves. We don't want that anymore; no longer want the flesh to prevail because it leads us to death.

So second reason, a positive reason, that we also want to deny ourselves, that we desire to say, no, to ourselves, because we want for ourselves, not what we wanted, we want for ourselves, whatever God wants for us, and we as ourselves keep getting in the way. This we look to our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus, as you know, did not suffer from the same malady as we do. He was not born in sin. Jesus was not born a sinner. He's conceived by the Holy Spirit miraculously in the womb of the virgin Mary. He didn't have a sin nature. He didn't have that

hostile, rebellious principle within him against God. He never sinned.

Therefore, he is the only human being, 2 Corinthians 5:21, "who knew no sin." Peter said it this way, "Jesus committed no sin; neither was deceit found in his mouth." Writer to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus "was tested in every respect as we are. But to the greatest degree", to a degree that you and I can never understand. Why? Because if a full force of temptation comes on us, at some point we'll break. Jesus, the full force of all temptation came upon him. He never broke. So if temptation comes upon you, eventually, if the pressure is strong enough, you're going to break. Why? Because you're human; because you're peccable. Because you, you have a sin nature, you'll eventually give in unless God is gracious, right?

Take Jesus Christ, temptation pressure came, pressure came, temptation, testing, testing, testing, and what did he have? An impeccable nature, a divine nature that would not allow him to fall. So he outlasted every temptation. I had a professor once describe it to me like, we in our human nature, like a broomstick, wooden broomstick handle. You put enough pressure and force on that broomstick handle, it's going to break, right? It's going to snap. Well, Jesus had that human nature, that

wooden handle, but his divine nature was like a titanium bar. And the wood was tied to the titanium bar and so the pressure, the same force came upon the wood, he felt it all; he never broke. Put through the greatest trials and temptations by the devil himself, never sinned once.

So can we agree that Jesus found in himself no negative reason, as we do, for self-denial? Absolutely. But did he deny himself as he's calling us to do? Yes, he did, John 5:30, he said, "I seek not my own will, but the will of him who sent me." Next chapter, John 6:38, "I have come down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me." From the earliest days, just 12 years of age, Jesus is in the Temple, he's learning what he could from the rabbis. He's not like other twelve-year-old boys, I've known a few in my lifetime; pursuing their own interests, like me as a twelve-year-old boy. What was he doing? He wants to know and understand his Father's will. It set his course to do the Father's will, and he needed to know it.

Remember how Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane? "My Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from me. But nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." Why did Jesus deny himself when there was no sin to deny, no sinful nature to

fight, no sinful desires to mortify, because he so dearly loved, and took pleasure in the wisdom of God, in the perfect plan of the sovereign father. He wanted nothing in his life but the will of God. Psalm 40 verse 7, “Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me: I delight to do your will, O God, your law is within my heart.”

We, too, beloved, we desire to say, no, to ourselves because we want for ourselves whatever God wants for us. He’s the all-knowing, all-wise, all-good God. Why would we not want for our lives what he wants for our lives? When we resist his will, we just see that sinful impulse in us, don’t we? We delight to do the will of God because it’s so infinitely superior to whatever we could come up with. Again, Romans 8:6, “The mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit,” though, “is life and peace.”

Command, there, Luke 9:23, is in the aorist tense. In this case, it stresses the urgent summary nature of that command. In other words, you must do this, and you must do it now. Self-denial, it’s the most basic, most fundamental pre-commitment of the Christian life. It is the defining mark of discipleship. Listen, do you see evidence of that in your life, or have you subtly, imperceptively maybe to yourself, have you dethroned

God? Have you crawled back up onto the throne in your life, taken an underserved place of self-importance?

Perhaps it's worth some self-reflection today, maybe some repentance over your lack of self-denial, your self-indulgence, maybe even a religious form of self-indulgence, where you fulfill yourself in the church and become full of yourself and proud and self-righteous, rather than meek and humble. Again, self-denial is distrusting our natural impulses. It's always examining ourselves to see what our sin nature is insinuating into our minds and our thoughts, how our flesh is tempting us, how our, our motives can be corrupted by sinful desire, going to that all-pervasive and fundamental sin of pride and saying, where is it? Where is it, and how do I get rid of it? We treat ourselves, our desires, our wills, our preferences, our rights, all of that is negligible. All of that is unworthy of consideration.

Self-denial means we crucify all self-centeredness. We mortify the flesh. We set aside every supposed claim that we think we have to self-importance, every self-perceived right. It means we let go of every, every perceived slight by someone against us, every petty grievance. And in light of eternity, isn't every grievance, every offense against us, petty? All

offense, all, we let it go for the sake of Christ. Self-denial is the starvation of the flesh. It's the end of you, that God's will might be done in us. It's the end of our perverted wills. It's the end of our ignorant and misguided ambitions, the end of self being at, at the center and we rejoice in that!

We rejoice in that, beloved, because this is the end of fleshly tyranny. It is the end from our base instincts of food and self-preservation, and sexual desire, and every other thing in our life having its sway. It's the end of that. It's deliverance from worldly desires that are tainted by sin. It's the end of you. It's the end of your old self. And more than that, deliverance from the flesh through self-denial means deliverance to the loving Lordship of a good and wise father. That is what Jesus rejoiced in.