

Why We Follow, Part 1

Luke 9:24-25

Turn to Luke chapter 9, and we are in verses 23-27. This is Jesus' call to anyone who will listen, really, anyone who is listening and willing to listen, calling them to follow him in permanent discipleship. let's look at it there, Luke 9:23-27, "He said to all, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.'"

As we move from verse 23 into verses 24-27, notice how these verses, 24-27, expand on verse 23. They provide reasons for listening to and heeding Christ's call to discipleship.

Notice in these verses, 24-27, the repetition of the word, for, at the beginning of verse 24, verse 25, and there again at the beginning of verse 26. The word, for, in each verse introduces an explanation of verse 23. Each verse providing a separate reason or motivation for following after Jesus Christ. So the question could be, why obey Christ's call to discipleship, in verse 23, which seems very severe, stark. Three reasons. First reason, verse 24, it will save your life. Second reason, verse 25, you'll gain your soul and the third reason, verse 26, you will see the glory of God.

These verses provide reasons, motivations for heeding the call to Christian discipleship. These are the reasons for following Jesus as Lord of your life. If you talk to any professing Christian, and they don't give you some form of these kind of reasons for being a Christian, you might want to press them further: Why are you really following Jesus Christ? Is it for, as we've been talking about, health, wealth, prosperity? Is it because following Christ leads to your riches in your bank account? Better relationships? Is it to improve your standing? Is it to get exposed to more people in a community setting, so that you can make, coninctions, connections for your business? People have all kind of reasons for professing faith in Christ. But these are the reasons why we follow.

Notice more specifically that each of these three verses connects with each of the three imperatives in verse 23. So notice, for example, when Jesus says, "If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself." Why is that? Answer, verse 24, "For whoever would save his life," that is, himself, he "will lose it, and whoever loses his life," or his self, "for my sake will save it." So verse 24 expands on that first verb, deny self. Jesus says in verse 23, "If anyone wants to come after me, let him take up his cross daily," which has to do with embracing the rejection, the scorn, the condemnation of the world. Why should we do that?

Well, the answer comes in verse 25, "For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world," gains the whole world's acclaim, the whole world's money, the whole world's land, and holdings, and property, and fame, and fortune, and admiration, "what does it matter if he gains the whole world and he loses or forfeits himself?" "So let the world be crucified to you, just as you are to the world," Galatians 6:14. Verse 25 answers that second imperative in verse 23.

Finally, Jesus says in verse 23, "If anyone wants to come after me, let him...follow me." Why is following after Jesus Christ so important? He answers the question in verse 26,

"Whoever is ashamed of me," now, doesn't want to follow me now, doesn't want to identify with me now, he's ashamed of me and my words, if he's ashamed to talk about my actual teaching in the public square, in the universities, in the workplace, around the, over the backyard fence, in the community, if he is ashamed of me and my words, "of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and the glory of the holy angels." Each of these verses answers an imperative in verse 23.

And as we've been saying, this is Jesus' way of evangelism. This is his initial, out-of-the-gate, meeting, pees, some of these people for the first time, he's evangelizing them. He is calling sinners, here, to turn from sin and follow him. Yes, his disciples who've been following after him are among this crowd. His twelve Apostles are also among this crowd. But he called out to all. Many of these people up in the region that they're in, Caesarea Philippi, many of these people are actual pagans. Not, they're Gentiles, not Jews. So he calls sinner to turn from sin, follow him, this is how he does it.

But this is also describing discipleship. This is also describing the way of the cross that we follow when we walk and follow after Christ. So if you are living this way, if this is a

present reality of your life, if this is the trajectory of your life, then you are very likely a Christian. I mean, I could say without any fear of contradiction that if you are living this way, you are a Christian. This is how Christians live. But listen, if you do not live this way, you'd better examine yourself to see truly whether you are in the faith. Because if you're not living this way, you may not be a Christian at all.

That puts us Christians in an interesting position, doesn't it? As we follow our Lord's pattern for evangelism, when we explain the call to discipleship, the call to follow Jesus as a Christian, we call people to do what is completely counter-intuitive to them. We call them against all their natural inclinations and impulses. We call them to deny that. People like to be liked. We tell them, you gotta stop wanting that. This call to discipleship here as you see there in verses 24-26, there, is really a series of paradoxes.

You say, what's a, what's a paradox? A paradox is a statement that seems, on the surface, to be self-contradictory, but it's really not. Still, it sounds like that on the surface. "To save your life you've got to lose it." How does that make sense? Got to dig deeper, right? To gain, you need to give it all up; to see glory, you need to embrace what is counted to be

utterly inglorious, what is viewed with universal scorn and contempt and shame, that is, like the rejection, suffering, and condemnation of the cross of Jesus Christ.”

Listen, these, these paradoxes are not just intellectual hurdles that we jump over to become a Christian, and once we’ve landed, well then, it’s back to the same old, health, wealth, prosperity, message. Be good to get good; be good to feel good. God is our cosmic genie, there to, to respond every time we rub the lamp of prayer, and he pops out and says, three wishes. No, this isn’t just what we hurdle over to become a Christian. These paradoxes are how we actually live as Christians. This how we follow Christ.

So the question is, especially for some outsider, some observer, someone who’s listening in to the conversation, the question for them is, why? Why? Why in the world would you follow Jesus as a disciple if it means forfeiting, losing, if it means shame? Why would you do that? Well, you can consider everything that follows from this point forward, you can consider everything here, what we’re going to cover next week as well, consider this as an apologetic for Christianity. This is a defense of true Christianity; genuine, biblical, apostolic, God-

centered, Christ-commanded, Spirit-generated Christianity. This is what it looks like right here.

Here are the reasons we follow. Here are our motives for obeying that stark command and call in Luke 9:23, for abandoning the self, taking up the cross daily, and following Jesus as Lord. So why do we follow? Because Jesus said, number one, "Lose your life to save your life. Lose your life to save your life." Jesus said that. That's why we follow. He called out to all in verse 23, "If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself," why? Verse 24, "whoever would save his life will lose it, whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."

Jesus wants us to see clearly, at the center of concern is this issue of life. Life, it raises the questions like, what does our life consist of? What does it mean to lose a life? Or, oppositely, to save a life? Preserve life? What is life? The word rendered, *life*, by most of our translations, it's the word *psuche*, which literally means soul. But, *life*, is actually a very good translation. It kind of captures the idea. It's a word that stands for a broad and profoundly important concept because we're talking here about the whole of one's perceived existence. It's what makes me, me. It's what's important to me. It's what I

spend my time on, my energy on; it's what I spend my money on.
Life.

So if we consider that thing as a person's life, and we put that in theological terms, what are we talking about? We're talking about worship, aren't we? That which occupies all my heart's affections, that which dominates my thinking, what determines my willing and my planning and my acting, that thing that I'm anxious and concerned about, that is the thing that I worship. We know, biblically speaking, theologically speaking, that God created us to be worshipers. That's part of the design.

We're always worshiping something by virtue of the way God made us. He put it in our hearts to always bow before him. Sin took us away from him, perverted that. So we worship all manner of other things that are not God; they cannot satisfy and fill that place. We're always worshiping something, and our worship is either pure and righteous, or it's unholy and unrighteous. We're either worshiping the one and true and living God, transfixed on the pursuit of the divine glory; or else we're worshiping some kind of an idol, "having exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image," just a worthless idol. Idols come in many, many, many forms. In fact, John Calvin said,

"The heart is an idol factory," just pumping out idol after idol off the conveyor belt.

So when Jesus says in that first part, "Whoever would save his life will lose it," he directs that warning to a fallen humanity that is full of idolaters. Yes, idols take different forms, family, money, career, but ultimately, here, he's, he's identifying the heart of idolatry, which places the self at the center. Jesus is warning us against a man-centered religion, which is by nature idolatrous.

Again, notice how Jesus is speaking to the energy and the impulse, here, of idolatry, which is desire. It's the word that's translated in the ESV as, would, in that verse, "Whoever would save his life." It's the word, would, in the NAS; It's in the New American Translation it's the word, wish, "Whoever wishes to save his life." In the King James Version, it's, will, "Whoever will save." In the NIV it's, want, "Whoever wants to save."

All those translations are really trying to capture the sense of that Greek verb *theló*, pointing to desire, to the will, revealing the heart of what somebody wants. The verb *theló* is in the present tense, here, which means that Jesus is talking about something that's animating, something that's a motivating

principle of a person's life and worship. He is driven along by an abiding, internal desire that is continuous and habitual. It's, it's always wanting, longing, that comes to actually define the person. He becomes characterized by that desire. It's the age-old principle: You become like what you worship.

You find that all over Scripture, but very clear in Psalm 115, if you write that down, Psalm 115. That's repeated again in Psalm 135:15-18. Listen to these verses, "The idols of the nations," Wait a minute, we're the nations, right, we're in America. We're not here in this country. We're the nations. So the idols of the nations like us, like America, "are silver and gold," We're paper of green. The idols of the nations are money; they are, "the work of human hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; they have eyes, but they don't see; they have ears, but don't hear, nor is there any breath in their mouths." And get this, here's the principle. "Those who make them become like them, so do all who trust in them."

That's what Jesus is confronting right here: the heart of idolatry that people so want to protect, and preserve, and save. They want to save their life; they want to preserve self-interest. Philip Ryken describes them this way, "People who want to save their lives in this sense believe their satisfaction

security are up to them. Thus they pursue their careers with blind ambition, working so hard that there is little time left for anything else, even the people they claim to care about. Or they organize their lives around entertainments, the pleasures they like to pursue.

"They want to get what they want to get out of life, and so they keep their lives pretty much to themselves. They're not willing to make any costly, interpersonal investments in the Kingdom of God. They call themselves Christians, but they are not willing to suffer for the cause of Christ. They never go anywhere difficult or dangerous with the Gospel. They rarely, if ever, have conversations with people that might expose their own spiritual commitments. Then, at the first sign of hardship or persecution, their instinct for self-preservation takes over, and they pull back inside their comfort zone." End quote.

That's spoken like a pastor who knows people. We'd do well to pay attention, here, to Jesus' warning, "Whoever would save his life," whoever wants to hold on to, and preserve, and keep his precious idols, that one will lose it. When it says, "Whoever wants to save his life," you know the word that's used for, save? It's the same word that's used for salvation: *sozo*. I mean, they are so interested in saving, in rescuing, preserving

what they want, it's like salvation to them. And it's self-salvation. It's works-righteousness, just perverted in the wrong direction.

That person who wants to save his precious idols, preserve his self-interest, that person's going to lose it. He's going to lose, he's gonna lose what is so precious to him. A very strong verb, here, *apollymi*. It means, to lose by ruination, to lose because of destruction. Asaph pictures a people who live this way, enamored with idolatry as usual, and coming into sudden destruction. Psalm 73:19 says, "How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors!"

Jesus described the same thing when he warned about the return of the Son of Man, how people are content in their lives, they're pursuing self-interest. And it's just like those who scoffed at Noah when he was building an ark to prepare for coming judgment. Jesus said, "For as in the days of Noah, before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage until the day when Noah entered the ark," and then what? "And they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away." And he says this, "So will be the coming of the Son of Man."

So many people hear this verse preached and they understand the meaning of it. It's very plain. They understand the implications. But they don't heed the warning. They just continue on as if they can hold both things in their hands, God and mammon, God and wealth, God and ambition, God and family, God and career, God and anything else that drives their hearts. They think they can hold on to their idols and worship God, too. This is tragic! Keep on living as they've always lived, ignoring what Jesus says. Those who do that, they're gonna suffer loss of the very thing that they so valued as precious.

And I've got to wonder, do these people, many of them professing Christians, sadly, maybe some people here, do they not believe Jesus? Because that's the issue. It's an issue of faith; it's an issue of trust. Do you believe the one speaking to you? Do we not take him seriously? I'm afraid many, many fail to examine themselves carefully in light of Jesus' warning. They reflect on their lives and their hearts far too superficially. They think that God just approves of them just as they are. You've heard that, right? Come as you are. God demands no changes of your life. Just come as you are!

No, God demands the end of you. Come as you are, but when you get there and you gotta go through the gate, it's the end of

you. It's the end of your life. The other side of the gate, it's, oh, pick up a cross beam, put that on your shoulders while the world scoffs, and scorns, and laughs, and mocks, and taunts, and rejects, and condemns. You take that to your place of death every single day. People here think, we think too superficially about these things, don't we? We hear it, we walk out, we forget it.

We think that, I'm fine the way I am. God likes me just as I am, and it really helps my self-esteem to believe that. It's the indictment God gives in Psalm 50 verse 21, "You thought that I was just like you." And God says, I am not like you. I am not at all like you. I am a holy and jealous God. Let such a one heed Jesus' warning. If anyone wants, if anyone desires, insists upon saving his own life, preserving his own way, his own desire, protecting his own interests, doing what he wants to do anyway, regardless of Jesus' words, listen, Jesus says he will lose what he so cherishes, namely his life, his soul, his treasured independence, his self-will, gone!

Okay, well, that's the warning. Jesus intends, here, to stop us in our tracks, to get us to consider, reflect deeply on our very, very short lives. He wants to motivate us, here, to self-denial. But let's keep reading and look at the second half

of the verse because here he's motivating us more positively, with a promise, "Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."

Notice the contrast between the first and second part of the verse, between the one who merely wants to save his life, but he's not able to. That guy's chasing the wind; he's pursuing a mirage. His desires are never fulfilled because idolatry is empty and futile and without weight and meaning. By contrast, though, there's the other guy, who not just wants to lose his life, that keeps in the ethereal, that keeps it in the, in the mystical. He doesn't just want it; he does it. He loses his life, that's the contrast. It's not just in his head. It's not just a set of desires. It's not something he procrastinates in.

It's something he actually does. He lives this way. He lives denying self. He lives as a matter of course, losing his life. Why does he set self aside? Why does he deny himself, to say, no, to his own desires, and ambitions and pursuits? One reason, and it's right there in the verse, "on account of me." For the sake of Jesus. There it is! Self-denied, self-crucified, self-set-aside—to make room in the heart, all room in the heart, for the all-surpassing glory, the divine beauty of God's only Son, Jesus Christ our Savior.

So listen carefully to this: If we, like Jesus did, if we lose our life for God's sake, for Christ's sake, then we also will, like Jesus did, even though he died upon that cross, and even though he was buried in that tomb for three day, we too, will live like Jesus lives. And likewise, we, too, will save our lives. That logic is bomb-proof. It's bullet-proof. Here's the kind of life that lives in the soul, that's fixed on Christ, that's inflame with the love of God.

Look, remember the principle of worship? We mentioned it earlier in connection with idolatry. When the heart, though, is not fixed on idols, worthless idol, empty idols, but when the heart is fixed on devotion to God, loving him and worshiping him, then, too, the worshipper becomes like what he worships. Same principle applies. When the life and the love of God is alive in the soul of man, his heart is enlarged because the object of his worship is large. God is infinite and immense and eternal. This is the reason Solomon noted in Ecclesiastes 3:11 that "God has put eternity into the heart of man." Why? So that he will not be satisfied with anything that is not eternal, be satisfied in nothing less than God himself.

Having heard that and going back to Luke 9:23, doesn't Jesus' call to discipleship now make perfect sense? "If anyone

would come after me," if anyone wants that, "let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me." Why? Because the end of you means all of him.

Why do we follow? Why are we so willing to lose ourselves, to refuse to consider ourselves? On account of him. It's because of Christ. It's because he's precious to us. Because we're satisfied in him. We care for nothing else except to know and love Jesus Christ, and to please God the Father, and to walk in lock-step obedience with the Holy Spirit, who dwells within us. That's all we want. That's all we want.