

Take Up Your Cross and Follow Me

November 18th, 2012

Luke 9:23-27

²³And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. ²⁵For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? ²⁶For 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. ²⁷But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God."

It's coming up on thirteen years since I gave my life to Jesus, and many of you know some of my story, that I didn't have a church background, but grew up in Jewish family and so I never had exposure to the Bible's teaching on Jesus until my senior year of college. And I can remember those first few months of pouring over the Bible, "making up for lost time", and I'd sometimes get very perplexed and wonder how in the world so many people got off calling themselves Christians in light of what I was reading.

Now a lot of that probably flowed from arrogance. I was a very critical, judgmental, condescending person when I first came to Christ...I didn't really get the gospel. But I think -- in the midst of a lot of arrogance -- there were some biblical convictions undergirding this angst I was feeling as I looked around at the church, like in Matthew's gospel, many call Him Lord, only to find on the last day they were self-deceived, and have Jesus banish them eternally from His presence. From the beginning of my walk with Christ (I think this may be a special gift for those who are converted later in life), I just never wanted to dabble with this whole Christianity thing, and I never could understand (and I still don't really understand) people who did.

I say all this because here is one of those passages that I would come across in the winter of 1999-00 that I'd read and just say, "What's up with the Church? Has anyone else read these words?" Remember the context: for eight chapters Luke has been building his readers to the

point where we could answer the question: who is this Man? And we saw Jesus ask that question of His apostles, and Peter confessed that He was the Christ. And I said it is a big turning point in Luke, because immediately Jesus begins to teach about His suffering, and about what it means to actually follow Jesus as Christ. And when it comes to that question, it doesn't get any more foundational than this text.

We're going to focus our attention on verse 23, which is the main point here; the other verses explain and support verse 23 ("For..." 3x). So I want to dig into verse 23 and pick apart the words and phrases here, so that we can get a picture of what it really means to be a disciple of Jesus. And I hope that you'll all listen to Jesus' words with a humble heart of self-examination. It's an urgent passage for our culture.

"Anyone"

So let's look at verse 23, "And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." Jesus says, "If anyone..." and we can stop right there. *Anyone*. What Jesus describes in this passage is not a picture of the "really committed" Christian, the "on fire" Christian. This is not super-size discipleship, but if you're not wanting to go that deep you can just go regular-size. This is what it means to belong to Christ.

So as we would move on through this verse, and as you examine yourselves in its light, keep in mind that that this is what it means to be one of Christ's people. There's no difference between a Christian and a disciple; they're one and the same. I think most of you know that, but it's unwise to assume. If you're coming from a position of, "Sure, I'm a Christian, I believe Jesus died for my sins, I'm thankful for that, heaven for me and not hell, but I'm not sure about this kind of commitment, it sounds pretty extreme."

If that's you, you're not His. It's crazy to call yourself a follower of Jesus if you don't actually intend to *follow* Him. He didn't call people

to receive a ticket to heaven, but to follow Him. As you dig into the "For's" of this text, Jesus makes clear what the fate is for those who don't come to Jesus in this way: "²⁶For 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." We get a picture of that shame in Matthew 7: "And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" So no one is exempt from heeding this call. "If anyone..."

"Would Come After Me"

"²³If anyone *would come after me...*" I'll be very brief on this phrase, but I want to mention it at least because it highlights that what Jesus is looking for are *disciples*. The only other place where Jesus uses these words, "come after Me" are in 14:27, "²⁷Whoever does not bear his own cross and *come after me* cannot be my disciple." Being a Christian means being a disciple. It's not about praying a prayer, accepting Jesus into your heart, coming to church, saying grace before meals. It's being a disciple. So what is a disciple?

"Let Him Deny Himself..."

"²³If anyone would come after me, *let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.*" I don't think we need to (though we could) dwell on each of the three individual phrases here; they all work together to help us understand what it means to be a disciple: A disciple of Jesus is someone who denies himself, takes up his cross and follows Jesus. What do you think Jesus is getting at when He says this?

A good explanation is found in the very next verse: "²⁴**For** whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." So here denying yourself and taking up a cross and following Jesus is parallel to losing your life for Jesus' sake. Now it might seem at first like Jesus is saying that to be His disciple you have

to be a martyr, to be physically killed for Jesus' sake. But I don't think that's what Jesus means.

The word "life" here can mean physical life, but it frequently has the connotation of "soul" or "self" (cf. 1:46, 10:27). He's talking about your identity, your personhood, where you get your sense of self from. Every culture points to certain things and says, "If you gain this, if you acquire this or achieve this, then you'll know you're somebody, you'll know you're valuable." What are some of those things in our culture? However different they look, they are all based on and terminate on you, your achievement or performance.

To be a disciple of Jesus means to renounce those things (to lose your life) and to find your "self" in Him. It's to renounce "you", to die to self-determination and self-actualization and self-reliance and self-absorption, to die to having control over your life, to die to using Jesus for your agenda, and to give yourself wholly to His agenda. To deny yourself and take up your cross means control of your life no longer belongs to you, but it belongs to Him, come what may.

To follow Jesus means the end of "me and mine": my money, my rights, my gifts, my body, my convictions, my preferences, my time, my home, my career, my kids, my family, my life. No, that's done. That attitude is dead, and everything belongs to Jesus, and to His mission of reaching the lost and making disciples, people who obey everything that Jesus commanded.

I was at conference last weekend where I heard about how God was using so many ordinary people to see lost people saved, and growing into the image of Jesus, and I started crying, because I so desperately want to see that here! But it won't happen apart from a group of people counting themselves dead for Jesus' sake.

And notice, this is the way to life: "²⁴For whoever would save his life will lose it, *but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.*" With

all this talk about self-denial, don't lose sight that underneath this call to deny yourself is an appeal to desire. You want life, don't you? Then lose it! Deny yourself pop-tarts and lunchables on Thursday morning, so you can enjoy the Thanksgiving feast that is waiting on Thursday afternoon! Everyone in this room will live for something, you will build your "self" on something, but unless that something conquered death, it cannot save your soul: "²⁵For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?" So in calling you to die to you and to this world, Jesus is calling you to the greatest imaginable good.

"Daily"

"²³If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross *daily* and follow me." What do you hear in the word daily? I hear constancy, regularity, frequency, perseverance. The call to deny yourselves, take up your cross and follow Jesus isn't a one-time decision, it's not something you can compartmentalize. It's a daily commitment. I remember a couple of years ago hearing Paul Tripp say that the character of a life is not set in two or three dramatic moments, but in 10,000 little moments. That is true for discipleship as well: the character of a disciple is not shaped in two or three dramatic moments, but in 10,000 little moments:

- 10,000 moments of personal insight and conviction
- 10,000 moments of humble submission
- 10,000 moments of foolishness exposed and wisdom gained
- 10,000 moments of sin confessed and sin forsaken
- 10,000 moments of courageous faith
- 10,000 choice points of obedience
- 10,000 times of forsaking the kingdom of self and running toward the kingdom of God

- 10,000 moments where we abandon worship of the creation and give ourselves to worship of the Creator.

Living the Christian life, living as a disciple of Jesus, is not something you can just settle once for all, and then move on to other things. Every new morning is a new day of dying to self-determination, self-worship and self-preservation.

"Me"

Now maybe this all seems like a bunch of hard work. Maybe it doesn't feel like good news. So let's make sure we see this one little word that's so important but so easy to overlook: "²³If anyone would come after *me*, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow *me*." Does all this talk about denying yourself and taking up your cross sound burdensome? Don't forget who it is who bids you to die to you and follow *Him*.

This is the Creator of the universe. The King of kings and Lord of lords. The One who upholds all things by the word of his power. The one who is from everlasting to everlasting. The One before whom all God's angels bow and worship. The One who numbers the stars, and calls them all by name. The One whose Kingdom of peace will have no end. The One whose mercies are new every morning. The One who walked on water and healed disease and raised the dead and calmed the sea and cast out demons. The One in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. The One in whose presence is fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore. The One who is so tender and gentle that He will not break a bruised reed or quench a faintly burning wick. The One who is the same yesterday and today and forever.

The One who set aside all this glory and became a helpless baby, born in a feeding trough, and went through life without a place to rest His head, all so that hell-deserving sinners like you and me could enjoy His glory forever. The One who suffered the agony and shame of Calvary

though He had committed no sin, so that sinners like us could be clothed with His very own righteousness. The One who rose from the dead on the third day to show that the payment for your sin was finished, and ascended to the right hand of His Father where He even now reigns over all rulers and authorities and powers. The One who will one day come again and set every wrong right, make all things new, and allow you to share in His glory. The One who rejoices over you with singing.

Do you see, being commanded by this Jesus to deny yourself and die to you and follow Him is not bad news! In light of all that He is (and His greatness is unsearchable!), would it really be a burden to follow *Him*? To see a King come and carry a cross for you, your cross, and take your place, who then summons you to follow Him, would it really make sense for you to hold on to your life and agenda? Would it not be the height of folly to hear this Jesus call you to radically reorient your whole life around Him and respond, "Well, I don't know, my plate is pretty full right now. You know the kids' schedule..." Would you really stand before the Son of God and tell Him that?

After coming from heaven to earth to suffer and die for you, would His reign over you really be anything but the best possible life for you? Would you not be able to confidently say to Him, "Lord, whatever you command I will do, and whatever you send I will accept"? If He gave His life for you, would He fail to give you any good thing?

So in hearing this word, "Follow Me!", don't get so absorbed with FOLLOW that you forget to marvel at and cherish the wonder of ME. Only when you see the beauty of this Man will you get to a place where you can say, "Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee." You will surrender all only when you see Him surrendering all for you.

"If"

Finally, let's conclude by reflecting briefly on one final word here: "²³**If** anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." Everyone here has a decision to make. I believe wholly in the sovereignty of God, but as you sit here, you still face a decision this morning. Will you follow Jesus? Will you deny yourself? Will you take up your cross today? I can't make that commitment for you, your family can't make that commitment for you, you must look to Jesus, and hear His call, count the cost and choose to lay down your life for Him. You cannot be neutral on this subject. Either you are for Him, or you are against Him.

Some of you have been living a lie. You want fire insurance, you want to feel ok about yourself, but you've not heeded Jesus' call to deny yourself and follow Him. You may have fooled others, but Jesus knows your heart. Repent, and come to Jesus for mercy and grace.

Some of you started out 20 years ago with a fire of passion for Jesus, and over the years you've settled into a comfortable brand of Christianity which costs you nothing but a couple of hours on Sunday morning. That's not what Jesus gave His life for. Repent, and give yourself anew to the King who went to the cross for you.

Some of you are truly committed to Jesus, but maybe there's an area of your life that the Spirit is putting His finger on and showing you, "That's not yielded to Me." You'll find life, not death, in relinquishing that thing and submitting it to Jesus' lordship.

Some of you have never heard anything like this, and don't know what to think right now. Talk through your uncertainties with someone, ask God to show you if He is real. You will build your life on something, and if that something isn't Jesus, it will ultimately fail you. Would you gain the whole world, and forfeit your soul? That's a horrible trade.

For all: "Follow Me!" is a hard call. The death of you is never a pleasant thing to deal with. But because the call is "Follow ME!", the

pain is worth it. You'll never go wrong submitting yourself to the King who carried a cross for you.