

## **“Die to Self and Live for God”**

### **Luke 9:23-27**

This text is very closely connected to the passage we studied last week. In verse 20 we saw Peter’s confession that Jesus was the Christ. In verse 21 Jesus commanded the disciples to not share this revelation with anyone. And then in verse 22 Jesus revealed His coming rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection to the disciples.

If we were to read these two texts separately, we might not immediately see their connection. Thankfully, the context shows us that they are vitally connected. The disciples had just been told by Jesus that He must suffer, be rejected, and put to death. They believed that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah. They could not imagine that the Messiah would suffer, be rejected, and be killed.

We saw how Peter responded to this revelation in Matthew 16:22: “Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee.”

When Jesus revealed that He must suffer, be rejected, and be killed the immediate response from the disciples was: How do we stop this?

In these verses Jesus corrected this wrong response from the disciples. Instead of trying to stop Christ’s suffering, the disciples were to prepare for their own suffering as they followed Jesus.

We are 2000 years removed from the events in this text, but the truth taught in these verses is just as applicable today. All who are disciples of Jesus Christ must prepare to follow His example in suffering. The way of Christ is not the way of the world. It is not a way to have an easy and peaceful life. To follow Christ is to follow Him in His suffering. If we will be faithful disciples, we must count the cost, pick up our cross, and follow Jesus in the way of suffering.

From our text this morning we will look at the cost of discipleship, compelling reasons why disciples of Jesus pay this cost, and the reward of discipleship.

## **I. The Cost of Discipleship**

First, this applies to all disciples. Jesus began in verse 23: “If any man will come after me.” Though this was first taught to the twelve, it is not limited to them. This is the call of Jesus Christ to all those who would be His disciples. Jesus didn’t teach a tier system.

That’s often how we look at Christianity. Maybe there were some lofty ideals required of the apostles. And below the apostles there are some exceptionally devout and committed Christians who are used in mighty ways for the Lord. And maybe below them there are committed Christian workers: missionaries, pastors, preachers, that sort of thing. And on and on we could go with this imaginary hierarchy among Christians, and what we think is required at each level.

Jesus didn’t give levels. He said, “If any man will come after me.” “If any . . . will follow me.” We are all one in Christ (Galatians 3:28). All who are a part of His body have the same calling. What is that calling?

Jesus summarizes the calling of all disciples with two statements. First, “Let him deny himself.” Self-denial. This is all-encompassing. No part of a believer’s life is left untouched. In every area, self must be challenged and must be denied.

This is the direct opposite of the wisdom of this world. II Timothy 3:2 and 4 warn that men are lovers of self and lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God.

The world tells you: “Fulfill yourself.” Jesus says, “Deny yourself.”

The world says, “Follow your heart.” The Bible says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.” (Jeremiah 17:9)

The world says: “Look out for yourself. Get all you can, can all you get, then sit on the can.” Jesus says, “Whosoever will save his life shall lose it.”

This addresses one of the most fundamental problems we have: the idolatry of self, putting ourself above God. This was the first temptation in the garden. The serpent said to Eve, “Ye shall be as gods.” (Genesis 3:5) This is addressed in the first commandment: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:3) And in our text Jesus told His disciples: “Deny yourself.”

What all is involved in self denial? In the history of the church, some have taken this to mean the denial of any and all creature comforts. Is that what God expects of us? Are we to renounce our earthly possessions and go live out in the woods somewhere?

No. We know that’s not what Jesus meant here because that is not the example Jesus set. John the Baptist may have lived that way, but not Jesus. In Luke 7:34 Jesus addressed accusations brought against Him by some who were critical of Him because he came “eating and drinking.” Jesus went to feasts and parties. Jesus wore good-quality clothing. There were many creature comforts that Jesus did not have, but there are many creature comforts that Jesus did partake of and so it cannot be that he was instructing His disciples to deny all creature comforts.

Rather, to deny ourselves is to deny our sinful lusts, whatever form they take. We must give up our natural inclination to sin. We must willingly part with all the affections of our sinful flesh. All that appeals to us in this fallen world we must deny if we would have Christ.

“Deny yourself.” Again, this leaves no part of the Christian’s life untouched. In your family life, deny yourself. How many families are broken by selfish ambition? Do you put your career before your family? Do you put your pleasure, your leisure (pronunciation?), your hobbies above your family?

In your work, you are to deny yourself. The way of the world is to get ahead at any cost. That is not the way of Christ. In our labor we are to be diligent, hard-working, honest, and fair. If that comes at the cost of making less money or being passed over for advancement, so be it. Our Lord has told us to deny ourselves.

In ministry, we are to deny ourselves. To the shame of the name of Christ, there are many churches and ministries where people are trampled for the sake of the leadership's goals or vision. That's not self denial. That's the opposite. We must guard against the tyranny of self, even in work that is done in the name of Christ.

In every area of our lives we need to carefully examine ourselves and ask the Lord to reveal any areas where we allow self to rule. Where the Holy Spirit bring conviction, we must repent. Jesus said, "If anyone would be my disciple, let him deny himself."

Next, Jesus said, "[Let him] take up his cross daily." This would have probably been a shocking to the disciples who first heard it. The cross was an instrument of shame, torture, and execution. It was also a symbol of oppression. Crucifixion was so terrible a method of execution that it was illegal for Roman citizens to be crucified. The Romans used the terror of crucifixion to try to keep people in line.

Josephus tells of how, during the siege of Jerusalem around 70 AD, any Jews who were caught outside the city were crucified within view of the walls. Sometimes as many as 500 a day. So many were crucified that there was a shortage of suitable wood from which to make crosses. The goal of these mass crucifixions was to crush the will of the defenders to resist. This is how the Romans used the cross. The cross represented Roman oppression.

Why would Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, make reference to such a terrible device? Was he going to turn this upon the Romans? Was he going to use it upon

them like they had used it upon the Jews? No. Jesus told His disciples to take up their cross.

This teaches us several things. First, that every disciple has a cross. Troubles are common in this world. A great deal of the suffering we face is just suffering, that is, suffering we bring upon ourselves because of our particular sin. If we suffer under our legal system as a murderer because we murdered someone, that is just suffering. If we suffer being called a liar because we are habitually dishonest, that is just suffering. If we suffer poor health because we have recklessly indulged the flesh, that is just suffering. But both the wicked and the righteous face suffering in this life that is not the direct result of some particular sin. Sometimes we suffer as a result of the sins of others. Sometimes we suffer as a result of the sin-cursed world. This suffering is the result of sin in the broadest sense, but it is not the direct result of particular sin. All people suffer in this way, but to each person belongs a particular part of the whole. The Christian's particular portion of trials are referred to as a cross.

And remember, nothing in this world simply happens. God rules and overrules in all things. Whatever cross is ours has been given to us in the infinite wisdom of God. When we consider our trials we can appropriately call them "our cross."

We are often tempted to look at the crosses of others and think of how well we would bear them. "If I only had his cross, I could bear it for the glory of God." "If I had her cross, I would bear it so much better."

God has given you that which is best for you. God's strength is made perfect in weakness (II Corinthians 12:9). Honor God by faithfully bearing your cross.

And don't think of your cross as simply your trials themselves. Everyone has trials, but the Christian has a cross. Your trials are your cross because they are where you die to self and live for God. Again, your trials are your cross because in

your trials you die to self and live for God Your sickness is your cross as you die to self and live for God. Your heartbreak is your cross as you die to self and live for God. Your trouble at work or at home is your cross was you die to self and live for God. Jesus calls upon us as His disciples to take up our cross: to die to self and live for God.

All of His disciples must take up their cross. It was the Roman custom that those who were condemned to be crucified were forced to carry their cross to the place of execution. So we, as disciples of Jesus Christ, are told to take up our cross. The cross that is before us has been prepared for us and we are to bear it. We should not go out of our way to find crosses to bear. We don't need to make crosses for ourselves. This world has trouble enough. But we must not leave the way of duty to avoid our cross. Where our cross is laid on our way, we must take it up.

May we echo the testimony of Paul in Acts 20:23-24, "Bonds and afflictions abide me. But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God."

Whatever cross you are called to take up, remember, you are not to simply bear it as an unavoidable evil. Rather, it is a tool in the hands of God for your sanctification. The attitude of a true disciple of Jesus Christ is not, "I must bear this cross because I cannot avoid it." But rather, "I will bear this cross because it will work for God's glory and my good."

Notice that this call to take up our cross comes after the call to deny ourselves. There is a progression here. If we will not deny ourselves for the sake of Christ, we will not bear our cross for Him either. A pastor from years ago rightly observed, "He that cannot take up the resolution to live a saint, has a demonstration within himself, that he is never likely to die a martyr."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from Archbishop Tillotson found in Matthew Henry's commentary on Matthew 16.

Jesus instructed us to take up our cross daily. The Christian warfare is not once-and-done. It is a life-long struggle. Every day we must take up our cross. Every day we must die to self and live for God.

So far from this text we have seen the cost of discipleship. All who would be disciples of Jesus Christ must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Jesus. Next, we see why disciples of Jesus gladly pay this cost.

## **II. Why Disciples of Jesus Gladly Pay this Cost**

First: because it is the way of life. Verse 24 gives a paradox. He who saves his life will lose it, but he who loses his life, for Christ's sake, will save it.

What is the ultimate good? If you were to go out and ask 1000 people that question, I wonder how many different answers you would get? And people would answer that question differently in different circumstances.

What if your life was on the line? What would you be willing to do to preserve your life? Many people are willing to go to extreme lengths and do terrible things to preserve their life. And if this world is all there is, then that is logical and consistent. If you believe your existence ends when your body dies, then you should desperately work to preserve your life. And as you go through life, your concern should be to enjoy it as much as possible. If this is all there is, then you must get all you can while you can. You must live your life to the fullest, and preserve that life at all costs. But in this verse, Jesus says that is the way of death: "Whosoever shall save his life, shall lose it."

What alternative does Jesus present? "But whosoever will lose his life for my sake, shall save it."

Think of the 12 to whom Jesus first said these words. Other than Judas Iscariot, all of them would be faithful to Jesus into death. It is believed that 10 of them suffered martyrdom for the sake of Jesus Christ. As far as we know, of the 12

apostles, only John died of natural causes. But even for John there were several times when it seemed likely that he would also suffer martyrdom and he willingly submitted to that fate.

Did they throw their lives away? Did they waste their lives? Jesus says, “No. Whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall save it.”

When we look at church history, we see many, many people who were called upon to give their lives for the sake of Jesus Christ. An early Christian martyr, Polycarp, was told to deny Christ and he would be spared death by burning. Polycarp answered, “For eighty and six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. And how can I now blaspheme my king who saved me?”

A 4th century martyr named Phileas wrote of his fellow Christians martyrs: “These [who had endured terrible torture] became much stronger in the faith than they had been before, and when it was left to the free choice of each of them, either to touch the shameful heathen sacrifices, and thereby be delivered from all trouble, yea, from death itself, and be invested with the former freedom; or to refuse to sacrifice, and receive sentence of death, they without the least deliberation chose the latter, and boldly went unto death, knowing full well, that it is written in the Word of God: . . . 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me.'”

During a period of persecution in the early 10th century a king in southern Spain tried to tempt a 13 year old Christian boy with all manner of earthly pleasure. If he would partake in these sinful activities, he would be spared. If he refused, he would be tortured to death. He answered the king, “I am a Christian, and will remain a Christian, and obey only Christ's commands all the days of my life.”<sup>2</sup> In short order he lost his life for the sake of Christ.

A more recent Christian martyr we might be more familiar with is Jim Eliot. He was just 28 years old when he was killed trying to bring the gospel to an

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<sup>2</sup> These two accounts come from *Martyrs Mirror*, which can be found online with a google search.



isolated tribe in Ecuador. He and his fellow missionaries knew that this was an incredibly dangerous undertaking, yet they all went, and they all were killed. Did they waste their lives? Did they throw their lives away? Jim Eliot wrote in his journal: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.”

In the eyes of the world, all these martyrs were fools. Why would so many give their lives for the sake of Jesus Christ? Pliny the Younger, a Roman governor in Asia Minor in the early second century, after he tortured and killed several Christians he wrote to the Emperor Trajan: “I could discover nothing more than depraved and excessive superstition.”<sup>3</sup> “What fools these Christians are to give their lives for the sake of Christ.” In the eyes of the world, this is foolishness, yet this is true discipleship. Jesus said, “He who loses his life for my sake, shall save it.”

You and I don’t face this sort of persecution. It seems unlikely that anytime soon we will be called upon to choose between denying Christ or a terrible death. That day may come for us. It is faced even now by our brothers and sisters in Christ in other parts of the world. But we live in relative peace. Does that mean we don’t need to take seriously the call of discipleship found in this verse? We might not be called to give our lives in martyrdom for Christ, but we are all called to give up our lives for Christ.

Remember the words of Jesus in the previous verse: “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.” That is a call to give up your life.

Philippians 1:21 says, “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

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<sup>3</sup> This quote is from a well-known letter from Pliny to Trajan about Christians and can be found in multiple places online with a google search.

Galatians 2:20 says, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me."

If you are a disciple of Jesus Christ, your life is not your own. It belongs to Christ. And this will lead us to do things that the world looks considers foolish.

Why are you here this morning? Why have you gathered to fellowship with the church? You could have slept in. You could spend this time relaxing or enjoying a hobby. Yet you are here. There are many biblical reasons for this. You desire fellowship with other believers. You want to be strengthened and encouraged as we worship God together around His Word. You want carry out the "one anothers" as laid out for us in the Bible. All of this according to Christ's command.

The world says, "You are wasting your life. It's foolishness."

The Christian says, "I have no greater pleasure than to give my life for the sake of Christ."

Why do we give to the Lord's work? We spend money here. We send money all over the world. Why do we do this? Think of all the things you could do and have and enjoy with the money that you give away.

The world looks at this and says, "You are wasting your life. It's foolishness."

The Christian says, "I have no greater pleasure than to give my life for the sake of Christ."

Take warning: there are many ways to deny the Lord your life. We don't need to face the extreme case of martyrdom for us to choose our temporal life over Christ. In any one of thousands of small, every-day decisions we our life over Christ. But if we choose our life over Jesus, we have already lost. "For whosoever

will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it.”

May this also move us with compassion toward those around us who are laboring desperately to save their lives: to get the most enjoyment they can out of this life, to make the life last as long as possible, to serve self above all else. They are laboring on the path of death. They cannot succeed. All they do and all they try will be to no avail. In the end, they will lose their life.

You, Christian, know the way of life, true life, eternal life. Eternal life doesn't begin at some distant point in the future. Eternal life begins when we lose our life for Christ's sake. When we die to self and live for Him. Have compassion on those who are walking on the path of death, and show them the path of life.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus, first, because it is the way of life. Second, it is the way of profit. In verse 25 we have another powerful statement from Jesus: “For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or be cast away?”

I think I can safely say that all of us have dreams, goals, some ambition, something that we want. Maybe it's a new car, or a better job, or a bigger retirement account, or a certain relationship, or a million other things. What if you could have that desire met, right now, but there's one catch: you die. How many of you are taking that deal?

What if that deal was even better? Forget your little dreams, what if you were offered everything? The whole world. Nothing was kept from you. Anything that you could possibly desire in this world was yours. But with the same terms: you die. How many are taking that deal? No sane person would take that deal when it's presented like that.

Yet every day people take a similar deal, but at far worse terms. Every day people labor and strive to get what they desire in this life. No matter what they get,

they are never satisfied. No matter how much pleasure they extract from life, they find it to be vanity. And then they die and they have nothing.

Jesus challenges us in verse 25. What advantage have you gained living like this? Even if you could gain the whole world, what good is that if at the end you lose yourself? The disciple of Jesus realizes that the value system of this world is bankrupt. That there is no hope, not future, no life apart from Jesus Christ. If we would save our life, we must give it away. We must die to self and live for Christ.

And what we receive through Christ is everything that this world promises, but can't deliver. In Christ we have life. In Christ we have hope. In Christ we have purpose. In Christ we have meaning. In Christ we have all that is good. Christ has given Himself for us (Ephesians 5:2). And when we are joined to the body of Christ in salvation we are made joint-heirs with Him (Romans 8:17). All the goodness of God is ours through Christ.

The world says, "Give me your life and I will promise you everything, but deliver you nothing but death.

Jesus says, "Die to yourself, pick up your cross, follow me, and I will give you life, eternal life, and make you joint heirs with Me."

The cost of discipleship is tremendous. Jesus demands everything. He demands our lives. But who would not pay such a cost in view of the reward?

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus, because it is the way of life, the way of profit, and finally: It is the way of acceptance.

Verse 26 says, "For whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he shall come in his own glory, and in his Father's, and of the holy angels."

One of the things people desire most is to be accepted. People want to be wanted. They want to be loved. They want to belong.

The world demands a terrible price for this. You can have the approval of the world, at the cost of your soul. Would you deny the Lord before the world? Are you ashamed of Jesus before the world? In this verse Jesus warned that those who are ashamed of Him, he will be ashamed of when He returns in glory.

James 4:4 states it very strongly, “Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.”

As we are out in the world, we face temptation to be ashamed of Jesus and His words. If someone asks you, “Are you a Christian?” What do you say? If someone asks, “Do you believe the Bible when it says this or that?” How do you respond? The temptation in those moments can be strong to be ashamed of Jesus and His Words.

But when faced with such temptation, remember the words of Jesus here in Luke 9:26, “For whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed.” Be strengthened and encouraged. Die to self and live for Christ. It is better to endure the world’s ridicule than to have Christ be ashamed of us.

So far from our text this morning we have seen the cost of discipleship. We have seen why disciples of Jesus gladly pay this cost: it is the way of life, the way of profit, and the way of approval. And finally, we will consider the reward of discipleship.

### **III. The Reward of Discipleship**

Verse 27 is interesting. It almost seems out of place. How does verse 27 connect with the verses that came before? This is a verse of hope and assurance. Our Lord’s instruction in this text has been rigorous, severe, extreme. Deny

yourself. Take up your cross. Lose your life. But the severity of our calling as disciples is tempered with this assurance: the kingdom of God is at hand.

There is some debate about what specific event is referred to in this verse. Some think it is in reference to the next event we see in the gospel narrative: the transfiguration. And certainly that was an incredible event which Peter, James, and John were privileged to witness. To see Jesus Christ exalted by the Father in glory was certainly to glimpse the kingdom of God. And so it may very well be that this verse refers to the transfiguration.

Others believe that this verse refers to the the disciples who saw Christ ascend into heaven and then the Holy Spirit descend upon men. Christ came to establish his kingdom in the hearts of men. The disciples saw that work begin in their lifetime. They saw the kingdom of God as we see the kingdom of God: when we see men, women and children brought to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, delivered from the power of darkness and brought into the kingdom of God's Son (Colossians 1:13). But whatever specific reference this verse makes, the point for us is the same.

First, this verse encourages us because the reward of discipleship is secure. Jesus assured His disciples that they would see the kingdom of God in their lifetime. Whatever they would suffer, whatever they would be called upon to give up in their self-denial, whatever their cross they were assured that it would not be in vain. Christ would triumph. His kingdom would be established.

All disciples of Jesus Christ have the same assurance. Whatever we suffer, whatever we must give up in self-denial, whatever our cross we have assurance that our labor for the Lord is not in vain. The kingdom of Jesus Christ is on the march, advancing in the hearts of men and women all over the world. Not only does this work go on in spite of our suffering, but God works in and through our suffering to advance the kingdom of God. With assurance in the kingdom of God

and of our part in His kingdom, we cheerfully endure as His disciples. I Corinthians 15:58, “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.”

This verse also encourages us as we consider the imminence of God’s work. Jesus told the 12 that some of them would not die before they saw the kingdom of God. From the disciples’ perspective, whatever Jesus promised here must shortly come to pass. For generations the people of God had been waiting for the Messiah. The Old Testament believers had looked for the salvation that God would accomplish, but they did not see the fulfillment of those promises in their lifetimes (I Peter 1:10-11). But Jesus told the disciples that they would see these things. Some of them would live to see the kingdom of God.

What an encouragement to faithfulness for the first disciples! The kingdom of God is at hand. Press on. Be faithful. Some of you will see it in your lifetime.

We have the same encouragement. We live in the spiritual fulfillment of the kingdom. We see the kingdom of God invade the kingdom of Satan and bring forgiveness, life, and righteousness where there had only been guilt, death, and sin. And we look forward to the ultimate fulfillment of God’s kingdom promises. Jesus Christ will return in glory (Luke 9:26) Satan will be destroyed. (Revelation 20:10) The dead in Christ will be raised incorruptible. This mortal will put on immortality (I Corinthians 15:52-54) There will be a new heavens and a new earth where righteousness dwells (II Peter 3:13).

When will this happen? The Bible teaches that it will happen imminently. It is ready to take place. I Peter 4:7 begins, “The end of all things is at hand.” Revelation 22:20, the second to last verse in the Bible, says, “He which testifieth these things saith, **Surely I come quickly**. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.”

And make no mistake, I'm not talking about eschatological opinions. No matter what position you take on prophecy, our hope as Christians is the same: Jesus Christ will return. And the Bible tells us to watch carefully, because He will return soon. That soon may be relative. Christians in the first century believed Jesus would return soon. Christians in the second century believed Jesus would return soon. And in the third century, and fourth, and fifth, and on down the line to today. Jesus may return before we are finished with this meeting. Or He may not return for another 1000 years. But as disciples of Jesus Christ we have this blessed hope, and it encourages us to be faithful.

The return of our Lord is at hand. It is assured. Press on. Be faithful. Though we suffer, though we must daily die to self and live for Christ our reward is near and it is assured.

In verse 22 Jesus told His disciples, "The Son of man must suffer." Their immediate response was to try to stop Christ's suffering. Jesus rebuked that response and instead taught on the tremendous cost of discipleship. Anyone who would be His disciple must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Jesus. The true disciple gladly pays this cost for it is the way of life, the way of profit, and the way of approval. And finally, disciples are encouraged that their reward is secure and imminent.

Are you a disciple of Jesus Christ? Such a thing should not be taken lightly. The cost of discipleship is high. Jesus demands your life. Everything. You must daily die to self and live for Him.

But consider the alternative. If you try to save your life, you will lose it. Even if you could gain the whole world, you would lose yourself. Those who are ashamed of Jesus now, He will not receive in the day of judgment.



If you are not a Christian, count the cost of discipleship. Weigh it carefully. And choose to suffer affliction with Christ rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season.

And as believers, may we be humbled and obedient as we consider again these words of Jesus and our calling as His disciples: “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.”