

To Seek and To Save the Lost

Take Up Your Cross and Follow Jesus

Luke 9:23-27

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May 4, 2014

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Scripture

We have come to what one commentator called “a turning point in Luke’s Gospel.”¹ In the first part of his Gospel, Luke demonstrated the identity of Jesus. Then Peter, on behalf of the twelve disciples, confessed Jesus as the Christ (9:18-20). From this point on now Luke focused his attention on “the necessity of Jesus’ suffering, his vindication, and the resultant discipleship required of those who will follow him.”²

So, immediately after Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ, Jesus foretold his death, and then taught all those who wanted to follow him what was involved in being one of his disciples.

Let’s read about Jesus’ call to discipleship in Luke 9:23-27:

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. ²⁴ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. ²⁵ For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:23-27)

Introduction

Jesus was born in Bethlehem. He grew up seventy miles

¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, vol. 1, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 844.

² Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, vol. 1, 844.

north of Bethlehem in a village called Nazareth, in the region of Galilee. Just four miles north of Nazareth was a city called Sepphoris. Sepphoris served as the Roman capital of Galilee during Jesus' time. Jesus probably knew it well and perhaps worked there as a carpenter during the building boom of his day. Excavations have revealed Sepphoris to be a cosmopolitan Roman city with beautiful buildings, temples, an amphitheater, and other marks of sophistication.³

Commentator William Barclay describes an historical event that took place in Sepphoris during Jesus' childhood:

When [Jesus] was a young boy of about eleven years of age, Judas the Galilean led a rebellion against Rome. He raided the royal armory at Sepphoris, which was only four miles from Nazareth. The Roman vengeance was swift and sudden. Sepphoris was burned to the ground; its inhabitants were sold into slavery; and 2,000 of the rebels were crucified on crosses which were set in lines along the roadside that they might be a dreadful warning to others tempted to rebel.⁴

Jesus, like other Jews living under Roman oppression, knew what crucifixion meant. They routinely saw people publicly carrying crosses. Whenever they saw a person carrying a cross, they knew that only one fate awaited that person: death.

So, it is extremely instructive that Jesus chose crucifixion as the explanation for what is involved in discipleship.

Lesson

Jesus' teaching on discipleship in Luke 9:23-27 shows us what is involved in being a disciple of Jesus.

³ Chad Brand, Charles Draper, et al., eds., "Sepphoris," *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1462.

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, *The New Daily Study Bible* (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 144.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Terms of Discipleship (9:23)
2. The Tradeoff of Discipleship (9:24)
3. The Tragedy of Discipleship (9:25-27)

I. The Terms of Discipleship (9:23)

First, let's look at the terms of discipleship.

It is important to understand the context of Jesus' teaching on discipleship.

Peter had just made his dramatic confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Promised One sent by God to seek and to save the lost (9:18-20). Jesus affirmed that God the Father had revealed this truth to Peter (Matthew 16:17).

But knowing the true identity of Jesus was just the first step. Jesus' disciples also needed to understand the work of Jesus. So Jesus explained that he would experience suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection (9:21-22). Jesus had to experience these things because he was the Christ, and that is what the Father sent him to accomplish in order to save lost sinners.

Frankly, Jesus' explanation of suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection was difficult for the twelve disciples to understand. They thought that perhaps Jesus was going to overthrow the Roman government and set himself up as the King of the Jews. They thought that Jesus was going to free them from their political bondage. But, instead, Jesus had come to free them from their spiritual bondage to sin and to Satan.

But knowing *who* Jesus is and *what* he did is still not enough to be saved. Jesus went on to say the hardest thing of all: just as he would suffer and die, so would all of his disciples need to suffer and die as well. In these few verses, Jesus proclaimed the message of the gospel and applied it to daily life.

Commentator Philip Ryken explained it this way:

[In essence, Jesus] said, “Look, here is what is going to happen to me, and if you want to follow me, the same thing will happen to you too. You will have to follow me all the way to the cross, because that is where I am going.”

Truly this is what it means to confess Jesus as the Christ. It means much more than simply knowing who Jesus is, or what he came to do. It means that his life, in all its suffering, becomes the pattern for our lives. The only Christ that anyone can confess is Christ crucified, and the only way to confess him is to follow him all the way to cross.⁵

That is the context for Jesus’ statement in Luke 9:23 **to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”** This is Jesus’ own definition of what it means to be a disciple of his. These are his terms of discipleship.

I want you to note three points. First, Jesus’ statement is not made only to the twelve apostles. Luke notes that Jesus made his statement **to all**. Jesus wanted every would-be disciple to know up front what was involved in being a disciple. Jesus’ terms apply **to all** of his disciples: there are no exceptions.

Second, Jesus used three verbs to describe what must be true of every disciple of Jesus. Every disciple must **deny, take up, and follow**. These are three different ways of saying the same thing, but each has a slightly different emphasis.

And third, these are the terms of discipleship and not the terms of salvation. We are justified by faith alone in the work of Christ. Nevertheless, true saving faith is always seen in our denying, taking up, and following Christ daily.

A. *A Disciple Must Deny (9:23b)*

First, a disciple must deny.

⁵ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Vol. 1: Chapters 1-12, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 457.

Jesus said in Luke 9:23b, “ . . . **let him deny himself.**”
Philip Ryken explains:

The Greek verb “to deny” is a strong word of negation that in this case means to forget oneself entirely, to reject any thought of doing what will please ourselves rather than God. Instead of gratifying ourselves or indulging ourselves in all the ways our sinful nature desires, we are called to deny ourselves, rejecting anything and everything that will get in the way of offering ourselves for God’s service. This is almost exactly the opposite of the selfish way our culture is always telling us to live. We are constantly invited to get what we want out of life, to pamper our every whim and satisfy our every craving.⁶

Jesus lived a life of self-denial. When he humbled himself, he denied himself the glories of heaven. When he obeyed the Law, he denied himself the pleasures of sin. And when he died on the cross, he denied himself protection from pain.

So, when Jesus calls his disciples to self-denial, he is calling us to imitate his example. As Ryken says, “This means saying no to sin, no to ungodly attitudes, no to unhealthy relationships, no to self-indulgent acquisitions, no to things that waste our time, and no to physical pleasures that sap our spiritual strength. It also means saying no to many things that are good in themselves, but are not God’s will for us, at least at the present time.”⁷

What do you need to deny yourself to follow Jesus?

B. A Disciple Must Take Up (9:23c)

Second, a disciple must take up.

Jesus said in Luke 9:23c, “ . . . **and take up his cross daily.**”

⁶ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Vol. 1, 458.

⁷ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Vol. 1, 458.

Jews were familiar with Roman crucifixion. They had seen condemned people carrying their crosses to their own execution. To take up one's cross was to go out and die. So, this was a more radical way of talking about self-denial. Leon Morris said, "When a man from one of their villages took up a cross and went off with a little band of Roman soldiers, he was on a one-way journey. He'd not be back. Taking up the cross meant the utmost in self-denial."⁸ It meant the very death of self.

There is a serious misunderstanding of cross bearing in our day. When people encounter a difficulty, such as a tough relationship, a financial reversal, or chronic illness, they may say, "That is my cross to bear." But this is not what Jesus was talking about. He was speaking specifically of taking up our cross for his sake, the hardships we encounter because of our commitment to him. Commentator Norval Geldenhuys says:

He who desires to become His disciple and servant will every day have to be willing to put his own interests and wishes into the background and to accept voluntarily and wholeheartedly (and not fatalistically) the sacrifice and suffering that will have to be endured in His service. The "cross" is not the ordinary, human troubles and sorrows such as disappointments, disease, death, poverty and the like, but the things which have to be suffered, endured and lost in the service of Christ – vituperation, persecution, self-sacrifice, suffering, even unto death, as a result of true faith in and obedience to Him.⁹

C. *A Disciple Must Follow (9:23d)*

And third, a disciple must follow.

⁸ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 170.

⁹ Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), 276.

Jesus said in Luke 9:23b, “. . . **and follow me.**”

Jesus was calling his followers to wholehearted discipleship. Disciples of Jesus must deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow him all the way to the cross. Jesus wanted people to know that if they were not willing to die for him, then they were not worthy to be his disciples.

Becoming a disciple of Jesus is not something you do one time at the start of your Christian life. It is a moment-by-moment commitment to follow Jesus, regardless of the cost. That means that you are willing to experience suffering, rejection, and even death in your commitment to follow Jesus.

II. **The Tradeoff of Discipleship (9:24)**

Second, notice the tradeoff of discipleship.

Jesus then went on to say in verse 24, “**For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.**”

This is one of the great paradoxes of the Christian life. In order to save your life, you must lose your life. That is, you must give your life to Jesus so that he can save your life. That is the tradeoff of discipleship.

It was this tradeoff that led Jim Elliot to make his well-known statement, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” Elliot was one of five missionaries to Ecuador who were killed by the Auca Indians in 1956. The Aucas were headhunters, and Elliot knew the danger of going to reach them with the gospel. But he was willing to give up what he could not keep – life itself – in order to give them the gospel. He prayed, “Father, take my life, yea, my blood if Thou wilt, and consume it with Thine enveloping fire. I would not save it, for it is not mine to save. Have it, Lord, have it all.

Pour out my life as an oblation for the world.”¹⁰ Elliot’s prayer was answered. His lifeblood was poured out as an oblation, but he was no fool, because in losing his life for Jesus, he gained something he could never lose: the everlasting pleasure of God.

III. The Tragedy of Discipleship (9:25-27)

And third, let’s look at the tragedy of discipleship.

Jesus said in verse 25, **“For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?”**

Jesus wanted people to think carefully about the options. He said that it is possible for a person gain everything the world had to offer: power, prosperity, and prestige. But would that be worth in comparison to losing one’s soul?

This truth was dramatically illustrated about 180 years after the death of King Charlemagne (called the “Father of Europe”) in about 1000 AD. Officials of the Emperor Otho opened the great king’s tomb, where in addition to incredible treasures they saw an amazing sight. The skeleton of King Charlemagne was seated on a throne, his crown still on his skull. A copy of the Gospels was lying open in his lap with his bony finger resting on this text, **“For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?”**¹¹

Bishop J. C. Ryle once said,

The loss of the soul is the heaviest loss that can befall a man. The worst and most painful of diseases – the most distressing bankruptcy of fortune – the most disastrous shipwrecks – are a mere scratch of a pin compared to the loss of a soul. All other losses are bearable, or but for a short time, but the loss of the soul is for evermore. It is to lose God, and Christ, and heaven, and glory, and happiness, to all eternity. It is to be

¹⁰ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 341.

¹¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, 342.

cast away forever, helpless and hopeless in hell!¹²

Who will experience this great loss? Those who are ashamed of Jesus Christ, as he said in verse 26, **“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.”**

Finally, Jesus said in verse 27, **“But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.”** Commentators differ as to Jesus’ exact meaning. In view of Luke’s topical arrangement, it seems to me that Jesus is referring to the next event that Luke narrates, namely the transfiguration of Jesus. But more about that next time.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the doctrine of discipleship as set forth in Luke 9:23-27, we should give ourselves wholeheartedly to the terms of discipleship.

I want to be clear again that disciples do not earn their salvation. No. Every disciple is saved by the perfect work of Jesus, which is received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. However, it is also true that every disciple of Jesus denies himself, takes up his cross daily, and follows him.

In 1904 William Borden graduated from a Chicago high school. As heir to the Borden Dairy estate, he was already a millionaire. For his high school graduation present, his parents gave him a trip around the world. As the young man traveled through Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, he felt a growing burden for the world’s hurting people. Though converted to Christ at a young age, Borden wrote home to say, “I’m going to

¹² J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, vol. 1 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1879), 311.

give my life to prepare for the mission field.” At the same time, he wrote two words in the back of his Bible: “No reserves.”

Indeed, Borden held nothing back. During his college years at Yale University, he became a pillar in the Christian community. One entry in his personal journal that defined the source of his spiritual strength simply said: “Say no to self and yes to Jesus every time.”

During his first semester at Yale, Borden started a small prayer group that would transform campus life. This little group gave birth to a movement that spread across the campus. By the end of his first year, 150 freshmen were meeting for weekly Bible study and prayer. By Borden’s senior year, 1,000 of Yale’s 1,300 students were meeting in such groups.

Borden also strategized with his fellow Christians to make sure every student on campus heard the gospel, and he often ministered to the poor in the streets of New Haven.

But his real passion was missions. Once he narrowed his call to the Kansu people in China, Borden never wavered.

Upon graduation from Yale, Borden wrote two more words in the back of his Bible: “No retreats.” In keeping with that commitment, Borden turned down several high-paying job offers, enrolling in seminary instead.

After graduating, he immediately went to Egypt to learn Arabic because of his intent to work with Muslims in China. But while in Egypt, he contracted spinal meningitis. Within a month, 25-year-old William Borden was dead.

Prior to his death, Borden had written two more words in his Bible. Underneath the words “No reserves” and “No retreats,” he had written: “No regrets.”¹³

You can only have no regrets if you follow Jesus as a disciple with no reserves and no retreats. Amen.

¹³ See <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2008/august/4050806.html>.

Mission Statement

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and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Father, Jesus' words are sobering. Jesus does not water down the gospel. He does not make it easy to follow him.

And yet we know that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to you, Father, except through Jesus.

Thank you that Jesus perfect obedience is the only basis of acceptance with you. Nevertheless, there is still a cost involved in becoming a Christian. Help each one of us to count the cost of discipleship. And I pray that every one of us who is a disciple of Jesus will give ourselves to Jesus with no reserves, no retreats, and no regrets.

And for this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!