

Cause of God & Truth

DYING TO SELF

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

"Then He said to them all, 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me'" (Luke 9:23).¹

In the context of this verse, we find the Lord Jesus questioning the disciples as to what others thought He might be (vv. 18-21). He had previously fed the five thousand miraculously with five buns and two small fish.

John's Gospel records that afterward many sought Him out on the other side of the lake. Jesus rebuked them, understanding that they sought Him, not because they understood the spiritual significance of the miracle of the feeding, but because they got a free lunch (John 6:26). Many in Christ's day followed Him hoping to gain something for themselves. Jesus warned them (and us) not to labor for the perishing things of this world but for the eternal gift of the Son of God (John 6:27).

Luke stresses the same message but focuses on what we must do to labor for the eternal prize. Here I must be careful to assure the reader that eternal salvation is the gift of God and wholly of grace, not the reward of any works on our part (Eph. 2:8, 9). Yet, those who have received the gift of God will experience a change of direction in which they will strive to leave the path of sin in order to pursue holiness. Jesus admonished us to *"strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able"* (Luke 13:24). It is the Lord Himself who here sets the condition for those who would profess to follow Him. Some will have the grace and power to do so; others will not. But at no point is salvation ever the reward of human effort.

Continuing in the context, the Lord repeated His prophecy concerning His own earthly destiny: *"The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day"* (Luke 9:22). The path to glory was a cross for our Lord. Should His followers think that it should be less for them? Thus, in the text Christ sets forth the conditions that those who desire to come after Him must meet. These conditions are not merely required to attain a higher level of devotion to Christ (discipleship) but mark one who would be a Christian at all. Here, then, are three things, each following the previous as a necessary precondition to the next.

1. Self-denial

The would-be disciple must deny himself. This is an act against one's very nature, for every fiber of our being is designed to serve self-preservation. Pain, fear,

discomfort, appetites, and all other natural instincts work to safeguard our lives. But here Christ makes it clear that self-life must go.

To *deny oneself* is used in two senses in Scripture: (1) to disregard one's own interests (Luke 9:23), or (2) to prove false to oneself (2 Tim. 2:13). It is the first sense that Christ insists on for those who would follow Him—to disregard one's own interests. The second sense demonstrates apostasy, a condition which may be temporary (as in Peter's case) or the revelation of a permanent condition (as 2 Tim. 2:12 warns).

It was the natural instinct to preserve their own lives that caused the disciples to flee from Christ at His arrest. This is the expected impulse for all Adam's fallen race, but self-preservation results in spiritual loss: "*For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost?*" (Luke 9:24, 25). It was only by grace and the intervention of Christ that these men were restored. True salvation sees the real loss that results from the natural self-life, and grace gives the power to forget one's self and one's own interests in view of following the will of God.

It is only those who do the will of God who will enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 7:21). Adversity and threatening situations reveal the true condition of the heart of those who would enter the kingdom. In Paul's last letter to Timothy, the Roman persecution was a cause of real concern to Paul regarding Timothy. He reminds him, "*This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, We shall also live with Him. If we endure, We shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us. If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself*" (2 Tim 2:11-13). How Timothy would face this danger would evidence the genuineness of his salvation. Therefore, self-denial is not merely a higher optional rung on the spiritual ladder but the first necessary evidence of a genuine believer. Will one who desires to follow Christ disregard his own personal safety to advance the cause of the gospel in the face of trials and difficulties?

2. Bearing the daily cross

As we pointed out in Luke 9:22, the Lord knew that the instrument by which He would be killed was the cross. It was used by the Romans to strike fear in the hearts of all who would dare threaten the Roman rule by loyalty to another kingdom. Of those guilty of treason, Roman citizens alone were spared the cruel and lingering fate of crucifixion, which explains Paul's death by be-heading.

Crucifixion was humiliating because it required the victim to hang naked in public view for hours while being mocked and derided. It was an agonizingly slow and excruciatingly painful way to die. However, no other form of execution could possibly suit itself to God's design for the sacrifice of His own Son. And if Christ was will-

ing to submit Himself to the Father's will and go to the cross (Luke 22:42), Jesus makes it clear that He expects no less of those who would come after Him.

In our text (Luke 9:23) the cross is used as a figure of speech for what a self-denying disciples should suffer in his following Christ. So, what is a daily cross? G. D. Watson (1845-1923) writes in his book, *Soul Food*:

What is our daily cross? It is that one or more things which are unavoidable in our lives, and which produce suffering of body or mind or heart. It is that thing which in our poor judgment seems to hinder the easy flow of our religious life. Sometimes our cross may be composed of a combination of things, but as a general rule, it is someone instrument or cause of suffering to the soul. Were there no suffering of some kind involved, then there could be no cross at all, for the only thing in a cross is its pain.

While this personal suffering is something that believers should expect in this sin-cursed world, personally, I believe that Jesus reference is that His followers are to take up His cross—His rejection and suffering. We are to identify with Christ in His life and purpose.

Observe that the daily cross for a believer is (1) *unavoidable*; the cross is not a choice for believers. Paul found this to be so in the ordinary course of His life and ministry (Gal. 2:20). The providence of the Almighty dictates what form or forms our cross will take and when and how they will come to us. It is only for us to "*take up the cross*"—to willingly and joyfully embrace it as God's gift to us in conforming us to the image of Christ. The cross is the instrument of holiness (Hebrews 12:10). God's whole purpose for us is that we might be conformed to the image of His Son, and He is the best Judge of how this work shall proceed.

Observe that the cross is (2) *daily*. Paul said, "*I die daily*" (1 Cor. 15:31). Conformity to Christ and holiness is a continual and constant process throughout the believer's walk of sanctification. Our Lord described the path as a "*narrow way*" (Matt. 7:14). This term, *narrow*, means tightly hedged in or compressed. It is used metaphorically in Scripture to describe troubles, tribulations, afflictions, and stresses (2 Cor. 1:6). For this we need endurance, for Christ taught that "*he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved*" (Matt. 24:13).

Patient endurance (James 1:4) will have done its perfect work in us when our suffering yields a calm state of mind that can face the cross with a smiling countenance and stop asking for the Lord to ease the pain. The soul can bless God with the realization that because we suffer our cross, we are having more of Christ and less of our own sinful way.

Observe that the cross is (3) *essential*. John Piper has observed, "God designs that the suffering of His ministers and missionaries is one essential means in the joyful triumphant spread of gospel among all the peoples of the world." This remark

was made in a sermon on pioneer missionary, Adoniram Judson, "How Few There Are Who Die So Hard."

Any failure on our part to joyfully embrace the cross will result in His chastening hand. If we are without chastening, then the Scripture gives us to understand that the many ease-loving professors, who do not suffer with Christ, are only religious bastards and not kingdom-born sons (Heb. 12:8).

Again, Watson writes:

It is your daily cross that makes you weep more than any other thing; that sends you to frequent prayer; that leads you to ransack the promises; that makes you cry out, like Jesus, "Father why is this?"; that causes you to put both arms around the neck of your Savior in yearning love; that makes you sick of earth and self; that gives you wistful longings for heaven. Oh, precious old homely, daily cross, what deep, tender, far-reaching effects thou hast wrought through all these prayer-paved years!

3. A constant walk and fellowship with Christ

The goal of death to self and daily cross-bearing is fellowship with Christ. Our motive for following Christ can never be some advantage to ourselves; otherwise, we have not died to self. "The goal," in the words of Watson (in his book, *Pure Gold*),

must be the seeking of God as our all and in all, our last end, our exceeding great reward, so that it will be for His glory, His beauty, and praise, through us, and by us, and that we have no desire to exist except as a channel for His outflow, a chosen vessel for the embodiment of His life, and the outbeaming of His glorious attributes through us.

I would like to conclude by suggesting some steps from Watson by which we may joyfully embrace the cross.

- *Humiliation*. This is the very quintessence of the Christ-life. Here God uses reproaches, unkind treatment, poverty, loneliness, persecution, distress, seeming failures, disappointments, and such like. They succeed when they cause us to lose our own will and let God take charge.
- *Rejecting the praise of men*. Self thrives on approbation and exaltation. Self-esteem is the hotbed of the self-life.
- *Embracing simplicity and child-likeness*. Self feeds on complexity and things grand and glorious. Christ-likeness is child-likeness.
- *Living by pure faith*. Self depends on phenomena to reassure it. To live by pure faith is to trust the Word of God when there seems to be no indication of God's presence or blessing.

- *Seeking our nothingness and His all-ness.* We must make it our daily habit to distrust ourselves, our wisdom, our strength, and to look to Christ alone for what we need.

The man-centered gospel of many modern evangelicals gives the false impression that salvation ends human suffering. It is true that God will, ultimately, wipe away all tears, but suffering is part of the Christian life in the here and now (Phil. 1:29). Neither did Christ come for us to pursue our own course free of the debilitating consequences of sin's consequences. Christ died to save us from ourselves, and that salvation can happen only if we have died in Him. *"How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?"* (Rom 6:2). To be crucified with Christ means that we must now live as self-effacing *"slaves to God,"* having our *"fruit unto holiness,"* the end of which is everlasting life (Rom. 6:22). On the other hand, we suffer with Him in order *"that we may be also glorified together."* *"For,"* as Paul continues, *"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us"* (Rom. 8:17, 18).