

Near the Cross 2: DENYING OURSELVES

Luke 9:23-27 (2/21/16)

As we continue our journey to the cross, we consider a topic that, while unpopular, is absolutely essential to following Christ. I'm talking about "Denying Ourselves."

Jesus made it clear that this is what we sign up for when we choose to follow Him. With that, let's take a look at our text for this morning--**Luke 9:23-26:**

²³Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. ²⁵What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? ²⁶If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels."

Does any part of this sound easy to you? We live in a world where we're told that we shouldn't have to deny ourselves anything; so Jesus' invitation to do this very thing—to place some limits on ourselves--is challenging.

The dominant message we hear is that we aren't responsible for anyone but ourselves, and we should do only what makes us happy; so we face some stiff headwinds when it comes to Jesus' invitation to take up our crosses and follow Him.

At first, taking up a cross doesn't seem relevant to our lives. Crosses go all the way back to a time when Caesars ruled and they were the preferred means of eliminating "undesirables."

Yet, Jesus' words won't go away: **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me."** Six times we encounter this phrase in the Gospels, so we can't just...sweep it under the rug.

It's not that we're unfamiliar with crosses. We have one hanging in our baptistery. We often see them being worn as jewelry. And these days, of course, there's the ever-present cross tattoo.

I don't know how you feel about this. If each sighting of the cross causes us to ponder its meaning and be moved to adoration and praise, then we do well to have so many crosses about.

Lord help us, though, if we allow the cross to become a mere trinket. If we're serious about our commitment to Christ, we cannot help but be disturbed by those who wear crosses while advocating a lifestyle that is contrary to anything Christian.

But then, that's about them and their responsibility before God. What really matters for us is whether we have seriously considered what Christ's command means for our lives.

Perhaps the thing we find most confusing about this is trying to figure out what our crosses are today? Just what is it that Jesus wants you and me to "take up" in order to follow Him?

We know what His cross was. Some of Jesus' early followers also knew about that kind of cross--two slabs of wood erected for the purpose of putting people to death. That was Jesus' cross.

But those crosses no longer exist--at least, not around here. So that's not our cross. What is? What form does our cross take?

I believe we should think of the cross, not so much in a literal sense, but as representing anything that requires us to deny ourselves in order to be obedient to Christ. What this is for me may not be the same as what it is for you.

But for all of us, this is a requirement of Christian discipleship. We all have some cross to bear, and it may be a cross that no one in this world can carry but us.

Since there's so much confusion about this, let's begin by talking about some things that are *not* crosses. There are many mistaken ideas about crosses. I'll give you a few examples.

1. Here's one: the Christians' cross is not **poverty**. There are religious orders that take "vows of poverty." Jesus and his followers were not wealthy people. Many of them were poor.

It's also true that Jesus had stern words concerning wealth, especially if it's only stored up for oneself. We're still trying to find a "needle's eye" that's big enough for a camel to get through.

We don't know what to make of our own wealth. The poorest among us is wealthy by the standards of this world—and even more so by the standards of Jesus' world.

I heard a Christian leader speaking about poverty and world hunger. He said the most vulgar phrase he sees on a daily basis is this: "All you can eat buffet."

Jesus knew about the dangers of wealth--this tendency we have to depend on money and other resources instead of God. Still, Jesus never really required vows of poverty from his followers.

He didn't ask this of the prosperous Joseph of Arimathea, who would later provide a tomb in which Jesus was laid to rest. Nor did he ask this of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, who were also rather well off. Following God's will for our lives may have economic consequences, but the Christian's cross is not poverty.

2. It's also not **persecution**. That's not every Christian's cross either. Jesus' cross was a terrifying instrument of death. It was a horrible way to die--a "stumbling block" to Jews and "foolishness" to Greeks, because it was inconceivable to them that God's Son would die like that.

But Christian history is full of crosses, and burnings at the stake, maulings by wild animals, drownings for some of the early Baptists, and all the other awful forms that martyrdom has taken.

There have been chapters in our history when being a Christian subjected one to persecution—as it still does in some parts of the world even now. Yet the Christian’s cross is not persecution.

3. Nor is our cross to be identified with every instance of **pain** and hardship we face. The death of a spouse, for example, or falling victim to some awful disease, the breakup of a marriage, or maybe a tragic accident.

These things happen and people say, “That’s just the cross I have to bear.” When we hear this, I don’t think we should try to correct anyone--that would seem cruel under the circumstances.

These are all terrible burdens, and they cause much heartbreak; yet...they’re not what Jesus is talking about when He invites us to take up our own crosses and follow Him.

4. The Christian’s cross is not poverty, or persecution, or pain. And just in case you’re wondering, religious acts aren’t crosses either. Listening to this sermon, for example—I’m not saying it’s easy, but hey, it’s not a cross to bear either.

So what is this cross that we must carry? We’ve already said our crosses are not the same. My cross is not yours, nor yours mine.

If we go back to our text, I believe it gives us some guidelines. There are **three tests that must be applied for something to count as a cross.**

1. First, a cross must be the result of **a free choice**--a decision that we make freely without any coercion.

2. Second, it must be a choice **resulting from a relationship or a conviction**. In other words, it's a decision based on what we believe, and who we love and believe in.

3. And third, the choice must involve **assuming someone else's burden**—in the sense of helping or benefiting another person.

Do you see why so many things that we call crosses don't really qualify? Calamities, sorrows, tragedies, losses of all kinds--these are burdens; but they're not crosses.

There are many difficult things that happen to us in life, but we don't choose them. They choose us. We would avoid them if possible, but we can't. They happen, often in spite of our best efforts to prevent them.

1. Jesus, on the other hand, **invites us to take up our cross as a free act**, an intentional act. The cross doesn't fall on us—we take it up! We make our decision with full knowledge of what we're doing. It's a deliberate act. We choose to take up the cross!

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." The "if" in Jesus' words looms large. Nothing is forced upon us. He puts the decision in our hands. If it gets done, we must choose to do it.

This is how it was for Jesus. He could have avoided the cross. He had the freedom to say "no" to the Father's will.

We're wrong if we think the decision was easy. In the garden, Jesus prayed "Father, let this cup pass." His sweat was like great drops of blood. He agonized over His decision.

But once Jesus was convinced that the cross was the Father's will for his life, He chose to take it up. For Jesus, this meant laying down His life for us—and He did so, knowingly, willingly, lovingly. He denied Himself, and took up the cross that only He could carry.

So taking up the cross is a deliberate choice of something that we could avoid. It is the taking on of a burden, a task, a mission or ministry that we're not forced to accept, but choose to accept. It's never have-to, but want-to and choose-to.

There's no draft in God's Kingdom. It's an all-volunteer army. It may not always work well, but it's how God does it. We volunteer for the cross. We choose to carry it. That's the first test.

2. The second test is that **our crosses must be the result of a relationship and/or conviction.** For us to choose to take up a cross, these relationships must be strong, and convictions solid!

For Jesus, the cross was the result of two powerful relationships: His relationship with God, and His relationship with us. These led Him to the conviction: "Not my will, but Thine be done."

Crosses don't get taken up in a lackadaisical way. We choose to deny ourselves and take up our crosses only when our relationship with Christ is strong and our faith is filled with conviction.

We live in a day of "casual Christianity." The average church could drop half its members without the congregation or those former members noticing any difference. Other churches actually do that. If we were more honest about this relationship, we would too.

Casual Christians want the forgiveness the cross offers, but they never intend to take up any kind of cross personally. So the relationship with Christ and His church has no substance to it.

3. Finally, if we deny ourselves and take up the cross, there's one more test to apply. **Carrying a cross always involves a decision to assume someone else's burden,** to make their burden ours.

This is precisely what Jesus did. It was our sin He took upon Himself. The cross He carried was rightfully ours, but Jesus chose to take it upon Himself.

We've sung it a thousand times: "Upon the cross of Jesus, mine eyes at times can see, the very dying form of one who suffered there for me." MY sin. My burden. My cross, and yours.

To take up our cross and follow Christ means we choose to deny selfish interests in order to take on someone else's burden. Only then does it become a truly Christ-like act.

There's nothing uniquely Christian about bearing one's own burdens—everyone does that. It's only when we choose to carry one another's burdens that we are truly following Jesus and beginning to understand what discipleship means.

Because of our relationship with Jesus Christ and our conviction that He is the Way we want to follow in, the Truth we want to live by, and the Life we want to experience--this is why we say "no" to self-interest and "yes" to the crosses He calls us to bear.

Bow your heads, please. I want us to take a moment and consider our own relationship with the Lord.

What are the crosses we've already taken up: by choice; a choice we made because of our relationship with Christ; a choice that meant we assumed someone else's burden?

It may be something we do around here, or a ministry we provide out in the community. It may be a friend or relative we're caring for, doing for them what they can no longer do for themselves.

There are so many possibilities—so many needs that require us to sacrifice to meet them. What cross did we bear yesterday? What about today? And what cross will we choose to carry tomorrow?

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."