

All In: Deny Yourself

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[0 : 0 0] Well, Michelle said to me late last week, early this week, oh we're starting Romans.! And I said, not yet! She said, what? Wait, no, not fair. And I said, well, I did say two short series and then Romans. And she went, all right, rats. So we're getting there, but I think this is important as well. So welcome here for this Sunday, February 22nd, 2026. My name is Kent Dixon. It's my joy to be the pastor here. So in that last series that we looked at, we spent the past four weeks considering some of the foundational things that we need to remember to focus on as followers of Jesus. And I hope that was impactful for you. And as we've considered, the journey of following Jesus is a focus of our lives for the rest of our lives. It's about changing our focus and our priorities and letting Jesus shape those things into what he wants them to be.

So this morning we're starting a new sermon series called All In. So maybe you've been watching, speaking of the Olympics, maybe you've been watching them the past two weeks. Michelle and I have watched lots of different events, more figure skating than I would have liked. But it's something you do when you love another person. Sometimes I've even had two things on the go at once. Last Saturday, I had curling on my phone and hockey on TV. And it's amazed me many times to learn about the athletes and their stories. Maybe you've heard some of the stories. Some of these folks have competed despite injuries. Marie-Philippe Poulin, the captain of the women's hockey team, played injured in their last game.

These folks are all committed and dedicated to their sport and their pursuit of personal excellence. So there's no question to me and to all of us, I hope, that these folks, Olympic athletes, are all in when it comes to their dedication and their commitment. Seeking to be all in. I believe this is a critical perspective that we need to apply to our relationship with Jesus Christ. And we need to recognize and be reminded that the Bible gives us everything we need as a blueprint for following Jesus, for living a godly life in this world. It's all in Scripture. Living our lives this way is what Jesus referred to as an abundant life. Some translations say a full life. So let's hear the words of John 10, verse 10. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that they may have life and have it to the full. And as I said, some translations say an abundant life. So if we want to experience abundant life and ultimately even eternal life, which we'll talk about through this series, we have to commit our lives to Jesus Christ. We have to be willing to be guided and directed by the Holy

Spirit along the way. And so this, my friends, means that we have to go all in for Jesus. If we want to live like him and for him, and that's the essential focus of this series. So let's dig into this together.

Oh, I missed a slide. Look at that. Okay. Our sermon this week is deny yourself. And you saw that at the end of the video. I lost my place in my slides. That's okay. Okay. So to begin with, let's hear one of the main verses we'll be using throughout the next few weeks. Matthew 16, 24. Just ignore this slide for now. Matthew 16, 24 will be the focus of this series. So this is going to be a core passage for this next four weeks. It includes a three-step command. There it is. A three-step command from Jesus. Now, why don't you read this with me? Matthew 16, verse 24 says, Then Jesus said to his disciples, whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. So here Jesus is speaking to his disciples, his earliest followers. So that may sound like a lot, right? It's only one verse, but there's quite a lot in there actually. So over the next few weeks, we're going to use this main verse, Matthew 16, 24, as both our foundation and a launching point for what I believe God says about following Jesus as best we can. So for today, we're going to focus on that first part, deny yourself. So this may seem hard or even an impossible thing to do. But if we're able to live it out, this can and will change everything for us.

[5 : 16] So what does it mean to deny ourselves? And I'm not talking about keeping that last sleeve of Oreos sealed in the box. But what does it mean to really deny ourselves in a fundamental way as followers of Jesus? And that's the question we're going to look at answering today. And I think that denying ourselves really begins by taking a look in the mirror, spending some time in self-reflection, and really being honest with ourselves. So as we've considered, and you likely know, the Old Testament is the story of God and his people before Jesus came to the earth. And it's in the Old Testament that we read about all that happened before Jesus' entry into humanity. So a common thing that we see in the Old Testament is that God communicates with certain people rather than everyone as a whole, right?

God doesn't generally in the Old Testament say, I want everybody to gather around and hear this. God speaks to a particular person who then communicates his message. So for instance, God raises up leaders that he talks with, and then they represent or speak on behalf of God's people. One of these people that we meet in the Old Testament is David. David is a man of God who seeks to do things God's way as much as possible. And at one point, David was actually, you know this, Israel's king. So when we look at the Old Testament, however, we don't just read about David and his story, we can actually read some of the things that David wrote, which can be found in the book of Psalms. Excellent. So speaking to God in Psalm 139 verses 23 and 24, it's on the screen there and you can look it up. Psalm 139 verses 23 and 24.

David says, search me God and know my heart. Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting. So really this could be considered a prayer from David. That's what it sounds like, right? And he says very simply, God search me and know my heart.

That's pretty vulnerable request. So David is doing something that I believe God is actually calling all of us to do. If we're genuinely going to seek to deny ourselves, as Jesus said, we need to look in the mirror. We need to take time for personal inspection and reflection. And maybe this is something you've done before. Maybe this is something you regularly do. This is a process of being vulnerable and honest about our lives. Maybe even asking ourselves some hard questions. You've heard me mention that I'm using a devotional app. It's a prayer and devotional app that I use. And it leads me into prayer three times a day. And the nighttime ones are really great. But there are a lot about reflection.

There are a lot about saying, what happened in my day? What do I need to confess? What do I need to recognize and celebrate? It's a good way to end your day, for sure. And maybe what you need to do is ask yourself questions like, where is my life heading? What are my priorities in my life? If someone observed me from the outside, what would they say are priorities for me? And the answers to those kinds of questions really do reveal a great deal about our hearts, where our allegiance lies. But we can also see this wasn't just a selfish exercise for David, right? He wasn't saying, Lord, look inside me and then tell me how great I am. He genuinely wanted God involved in a process. A process of inspection and evaluation and humility in the end.

[9 : 32] And just as David wanted God involved in this process of self-reflection, we, this side of Jesus, this side of the story, we have the Holy Spirit to help us, to guide us as we seek God's will for our lives.

Here's what the Bible says, one of many things the Bible says about the Holy Spirit in John 16, verse 13. John 16, 13. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own. He will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. Friends, God wants to lead us, to lead you and me, to truth. Not just any truth. You can do a Google search and find various truths online. But this is God's truth. The kind of truth that we find only in the Bible. And so if we submit to God and are truly open to it, the Holy Spirit will direct and guide us towards God's will for our lives. So that's why it's so important that we let God have control in this process of reflection and introspection. What is it that God wants to reveal to you about what's going on in your life right now? Maybe specifically in your mind or specifically in your heart? Friends, God won't force you to seek him. God won't force you to follow him. He won't force you to ask his advice on your life. God will give you advice and guidance and direction when you ask him for it.

He will show you, good or bad, the truth of what's going on in your mind and your heart. But then you need to be willing to give that up. You need to be willing to let him direct you from that point. Because if he points out to you what you need to change and you ignore that advice, not a good

decision. So that's a really critical step in denying ourselves, what scripture is telling us, is asking God, engaging him in the process. Now, I haven't done this in a while. Audience participation, everyone. I want everyone to clench your hands. Clench your hands into fists. If you want to put them on your legs, that's fine. Hold them there like that. Clench them as hard as you can. If you end up with nail marks in your palms when you open them, that's totally fine. Clench your hands. Everybody clenched? Now, slowly relax them and open them. See, I can't see everyone's hands on their laps, so I'm trusting you all.

[12:42] So this is a symbolic exercise, and I hope it makes an important point. This is what God wants us to do when we deny ourselves. Huh? It's hard for us to let go of something that we have a firm grip on.

When we're holding on to something, it can begin to feel like a necessity, an entitlement. I need to hold on to this, or I'll lose it.

And often, I think we forget that the things that we're holding on to maybe just be, in the end, something that we personally want. So maybe you've had some experience with this in the past. Gripping something tightly and not being willing to let it go. I know that's happened to me. And it's something that people around Jesus knew a ton about. So you're likely familiar with the story of the rich young ruler. Do you know that story? Basically, a rich man comes to Jesus one day and wants to follow him. Good start, right?

When he gets to Jesus, the rich man asks what he has to do to receive eternal life. I've often found this to be an interesting story because he's not even looking for the process.

He's looking for the answer to his end goal. So to answer the question, here's what Jesus has to say. It's in Mark 10, 17 to 22.

[14:17] Mark 10, 17 to 22. As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. Good teacher, he said. What must I do to inherit eternal life?

Why do you call me good? Jesus answered. No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony. You shall not defraud. Honor your father and mother. Teacher, he declared. All these I have kept since I was a boy.

Jesus looked at him and loved him. One thing you lack, he said. Go sell everything you have and give it to the poor.

And you will have treasure in heaven. Then, come, follow me. At this, the man's face fell. He went away sad because he had great wealth.

[15:22] This is such a powerful interaction and a powerful statement Jesus makes. He tells the rich man to sell everything he has and give the money to the poor.

But the response by the rich man tells us that the most about him. The Bible says he went away sad. Right? The cost was too high for him.

He had many possessions, it tells us. So ultimately, the young man wanted to hold on to his stuff. Right? He wanted to hold on to his priorities rather than letting go and releasing control to Jesus.

Jesus. I wonder if we also have many possessions of our own. Maybe these possessions aren't material items like the rich man probably had to his name.

Maybe you don't have a big bank account. Maybe you don't have a fancy car or a huge house. Maybe things of the past are things we have held on to far too long that actually don't fulfill us.

[16:33] Maybe they're habits that create more and more unhealthy rhythms and ultimately keep us from God. Think about our open hand exercise again.

The only way we can be truly free of things that are getting in the way of a relationship with Jesus, stepping into God's will for our lives, is being able to open our hands and let them go.

It's about releasing the control of a thing. Or an idea even. Or an attitude that we may have in our lives.

And trusting God to take full control. Friends, a life of true and deep richness in Jesus is only possible when we release control.

It's so counter to the message of the world, right? The message of the world is, get what you can, hold on to it, and then you die. Right? Variations thereof.

[17:42] But it's when we let go of things that we want and deny ourselves from trying to grab them again in favor of trusting Jesus.

That's when he has true control of our lives and our lives will change. So that brings us to our final point this morning.

Don't look back. This is a simple statement that can be a real game changer for you. Once you've let go, don't look back.

Don't look back at the things or perspectives that you've chosen through God's strength and guidance to leave behind. Just like our other points today, surprisingly enough, there's a story from the Bible that illustrates this so beautifully.

There was a man in the Old Testament in the book of Genesis named Lot. Lot. Maybe you know where I'm going. It's a story for all seasons.

[18 : 55] When they were fleeing a city facing total destruction, Lot and his family, despite God's clear instructions, Lot's wife, what did she do? She turned back.

Genesis 19:26, very simple, not a lot of words, says, but Lot's wife looked back.

So the but there is, in spite of everything that was going on, in spite of God sparing them, in spite of this opportunity to walk away from the past, Lot's wife looked back and she became a pillar of salt. Did you read that too? She was turned into a pillar of salt. So the question we need to ask here isn't, why'd she get turned into a pillar of salt?

I mean, that's fair. The question we need to ask there is, why did she look back? She knew she wasn't to do that, but why'd she look back?

[20 : 01] I think the answer is revealed to us when we take a deeper look at a Hebrew word that's used in this verse. In verse 26, Genesis 19 verse 26, that we just read, the meaning of the original Hebrew word that is translated as looked in English means, hear this, to regard something with favor, pleasure, or care.

She didn't just look back and go, huh, well, that was my town, I'm leaving, I'm moving on. She looked back at what was behind and it gave her pleasure.

And she looked at it and longed for what was behind. So Lot's wife wasn't just looking backwards, she was reflecting back on what she knew, what was comfortable, what was familiar to her.

Her comfortable home was in a place that God would destroy for its hard hearts and selfish disobedience. Lot's wife refused to let go of what God had called them, called her, to turn away from.

When we spend time in reflection, when we ask God to show us what's going on in our hearts, in our minds, in our attitudes, when the Lord points out something that must be left behind, we must be willing to let it go and not never look back.

[21 : 37] Friends, God does not want us focused on what's behind us. You've heard me say this before and I believe it with all my heart and all my soul. Our God is not a God of the past.

Our God waits for us in the future and says, my children walk towards me. God does not want us focused on what's behind us, but on what lies ahead.

So there's definitely no doubt that God will always remind us just how far we've come. But his ultimate desire is that we focus our attention and our energy on what lies ahead and his plans for us that are yet to come.

So as we prepare to close, I want to share a verse from the book of Philippians that highlights the importance of looking ahead. Philippians 3, verses 13 and 14 says, Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it, but one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

The Apostle Paul, you know this, because we spent a lot of time with Paul in our study of Acts. The Apostle Paul had quite a past.

[23 : 12] He could have looked back on that fondly and even with pride in lots of circles, lots of circumstances. He was held in high honor and esteem among the Pharisees.

He was an extremely gifted leader. He was celebrated for his masterful persecution of the early church.

But Paul had to learn, just as we do, to answer God's call, to deny ourselves and move forward with the life and blessings God has given.

My friends, God has an abundant life waiting for you, for me, for all of us. What's holding you back today?

What part of your past are you holding on to with clenched fists? What are you afraid to let go of? Ask God to show you.

[24 : 19] Trust that he will. And ask him to help you to trust him and let go. Have the worship team come.

I see them looking at me. So take some time this coming week. Here's your homework. Take some time this week to think introspectively, look in the mirror, about what it means for you personally to live all in for Jesus.

What is God calling you as you ask him to let go of? Or the things in him he is calling you to reach for? If you need counsel, you can talk to me.

If you need insight or a trusted friend, ask someone that you know who you already share your faith journey with. Because we are in this together.

Amen. Amen.