

Luke 9:23-27 - The Followers of the Messiah Must

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

But if you'll turn with me to Luke chapter 9. Luke 9 is on page 867 of the Bible in the pew in front of you. Luke chapter 9.

Kids, have you ever played follow the leader before? You played that game? It's kind of a fun to those of us who are wondering about that and what it would mean for them if they were to follow Jesus.

So first question Jesus addresses in this passage. What is required of followers of Jesus? Look at verse 23. He said to all, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

Here's what it means, Jesus says. Here's what it looks like. Self-denial. Carrying your cross. It's been called the essence of Christian discipleship by theologians as respected as John Calvin and Matthew Henry.

[1 : 16] But what does it really mean to deny myself and take up my cross daily? What is Jesus talking about when he says that's required for his followers?

Let him deny himself. First of all, notice that it's active. It's a requirement not just to endure suffering passively when it comes upon you, but actively to reshape your life.

Intentional self-denial. Self-denial. And we think a lot about self-words, don't we? Some of my favorite, self-esteem, self-respect, self-worth, self-image, self-confidence, self-help.

We like to talk about self-words. We know a lot of them, but self-denial. Really? Self-denial? Y'all, to say it nicely, just to be honest about the situation, we have a tendency to focus on ourselves all of our lives, don't we?

In infancy, we cry for what we want. And then as toddlers, we turn into little me monsters who everything is mine, mine, mine, right?

[2 : 38] Crying for that all the time. As grade school children, we begin to think that we know what's best for me more than my parents do, and I know better what I want.

Then we become teenagers. And we're actually told by seemingly everyone around us that life is all about us, and we should go and enjoy four years of just the fullness of experiencing life, and it's all about me and what I want.

As soon as we can get there, if you can just make it to those four years. And then we graduate, and we get a job, and we start focusing on making enough money so that we can do what we want to do, so that we can go on vacation.

So that we can retire early and do what we really want to do with our lives. Self-focus looks different at every age, but it rarely looks like self-denial, which is where Jesus starts.

It's the beginning, the minimum requirement, as it were, for being His follower. This is what His followers must do. If anyone comes after me, let him deny himself.

[3 : 53] That word for deny really means to say no to, which sounds easy enough. But it's bigger than we often think. We often think about self-denial as saying no to a second donut, or saying no to sleeping in when you really want to, and instead waking up early to get ready for VBS.

Four days in a row. That's self-denial. What that really is, is that's denying my desires. And these things may well happen as we deny self, but denying self is actually denying a person, not a desire. Think, for instance, of Peter denying Jesus. So when Jesus says, deny yourself, He means over and over in your life, saying no to self-definition, to allegiance to myself, to setting my own agenda

for my life.

And that may involve some of those other things, but think of it this way. Just as Jesus zealously insisted on following His Father's plan for His life, so He calls us to say yes to His plan, and no to our own agendas.

No to self-rule and self-determination. In other words, denying self is not first about changing practices, but rather about changing priorities.

[5 : 26] Let me give you an example of what I mean in my own life. I drive an old, blue Honda Accord. And when I say old, I mean that it recently got its own driver's license, that it voted in the last election.

I won't say for whom, but it's old. Very old. And I've had it for a while. Driving an older car, for you, may sound like self-denial, right?

I've thought that. But recently, several of my friends have loved me enough to actually challenge me on my attitude towards the old car.

As that car has begun having some mechanical issues and they've seen me respond, they have said to me, some of them more gently than others, I think you have a problem. You want people to think of you as a pastor with an old, cheap car.

Humble. Sacrificial. Super spiritual. But they were not joking. And I've realized they're really right.

[6 : 35] And see, that's actually the opposite of self-denial. That's actually self-definition and self-promotion in the guise of spirituality.

Do you see that the thing may have seemed like it was denying self, but what was going on in the heart was actually quite the opposite. Self-denial may eventually mean that some of us drive cheaper cars than we can afford.

But it begins by calling us to find our identity in what God says about us, not what others think about us, no matter what car we drive. That's the bigger picture.

That's at the heart of self-denial. So denying self means not finding my security in my money, but in Christ.

It means not finding my pleasure in my pet sin, but in Christ. It means not finding my identity in my success, however I define it, but in Christ.

[7 : 39] And yes, when those priorities shift, if you stop and think about that for a minute, if those priorities genuinely changed in your life, our practices will follow, perhaps even more radically than you've imagined so far this morning, what it may mean to deny yourself.

We're actually called to a daily life that is modeled every single day on the way that Jesus died.

That's what he says next, right?

What does self-denial look like? Carrying your cross daily. Now, Jesus died on the cross, certainly. But this command for us focuses on taking up our cross daily. There's a difference for us. This is about how we are to live. And that the taking up of the cross in this culture, that moment of taking it up was when you hoisted the cross across your back and began your long walk to the place where you would be crucified on it.

It was designed to be an excruciating physical, emotional, and social experience. Imagine it as you put that cross beam on your back and you're dragging it along in front of the crowds who've gathered.

[8 : 59] You were a dishonorable failure in a culture that valued honor and success above almost anything else. You'd seen people come back triumphant from victory to a parade and march through the city, celebrated and rejoiced over, and this is exactly the opposite.

You're not the conquering hero. You're the failure being spit upon and mocked and humiliated as you drag the cross through the street.

It was the ultimate in social rejection. Your reputation is shattered entirely. You're mocked by the world as you walk to your death. And I hate that part because I love for people to praise me, not mock me.

To think well of me, not poorly of me. To accept me, not reject me. And Jesus says this is what it means to take up your cross.

This painful rejection is required of anyone who would follow him. In fact, it's required repeatedly for us to live as he died. Remember last week, his suffering and rejection and then his death.

[10 : 19] So what does that look like for us? Here are just some categorical ideas that I hope will prompt specific ideas in your hearts.

It may mean that in a culture that prizes image, we willingly look bad, even on Facebook. We live below our means or find ourselves called foolish because we hold to the things of Christ.

It may mean that in a culture that prizes independent strength and autonomy of the individual, we willingly declare and demonstrate our dependence on God and on others.

We admit our needs. We boast in our weaknesses because we see our strength is in Christ. It may mean that in a culture that prizes comfort and safety, we willingly suffer physically in ways that we think are beneath us.

We risk our physical well-being for the sake of another or alter our beloved schedules in order to love someone in need because we have a security, a safety in Christ that no one can steal.

[11 : 41] It may be that just in the midst of those types of things, we would meet Jesus since that's the path our Savior walked. It may be, in fact, that if we never seem to find ourselves on that path at all, that we need to admit we're not really following Jesus at all, but rather following self and sprinkling some good Jesus stuff in it so that we feel better about ourselves as we go towards reaching our goals.

Self-fulfillment, self-promotion is actually what we're following. This is the point in the sermon where you begin to wish that I said what this means is that we all needed to downsize our homes and give the extra money to the church each month because that becomes a bit easier, a little bit more palatable, and there's actually something bigger and broader being asked of us than a box we could check even that easily.

Jesus is going to have some more specifics for us even before we get to the end of chapter 9. But y'all, he starts by saying that following him should cost us everything.

Everything. He walked the path where it cost him everything, right? When did we begin to think we should have it easier? The wonderful cross, the one he went to, bids me come and die and find that I may truly live.

That's the path he's called us to follow and sometimes we think it should be easier than that. My pastor in Clemson, who was also a professor of mine at Covenant in St. Louis, his name is Jimmy Agin, has studied and written about Jesus' downward path to glory and it's helped me so much with this particular passage that in a couple of places I'll just quote him directly.

[13 : 43] So anyway, that's who he is. Here he says, those who carry a cross define themselves not by greatness and glory but by their nearness to Jesus.

Now that's what self-denial and cross-bearing is all about. I'm about proactively shaping my life around his priorities, defining myself by being near Jesus.

You want to know something that's a little bit scary? When we talk about core commitments as a church, last week I mentioned those a little bit, you can read about them in branches. When we talk about what we're committed to, we start at saying we're committed to being Christ-centered and that sounds nice, doesn't it?

Yes, we're about Jesus. Yes, you preach about Jesus but you know what being Christ-centered means for us? It's not only about the pastor preaching about Jesus. It's about all of us following Jesus.

And there's only one path that Christ, the Messiah, takes. There's only one Christ-centered path and it's the one that goes down first. down to places where we give up the right to determine our own priorities, the right to demand our own preferences, the right to determine our own identities.

[15 : 07] The path we're on calls us to give those things up. We begin to define ourselves instead by being near Jesus on that downward path with him. Y'all, it's not easy.

It's hard for me. It's hard for you. It's hard for all of us who've been called to follow Jesus. That's part of the point. If we're going to go on that path, we need the Holy Spirit working in each of us.

And we need each other to make the painfulness and the loneliness of that path seem just even a little less lonely and painful because we're walking it together.

It's a counter-cultural, painful, marked-by-rejection path. And if we're to walk it as Jesus did, we're going to need to walk it together as he intends.

Amen? We need him. We need each other for that. I think our brothers and sisters in Egypt have modeled this beautifully for us recently.

[16 : 11] You've probably heard in the news there have been many attacks on Christians in Egypt in recent weeks. Dozens of them losing their lives in attacks because of their following Jesus.

And in spite of their deep grief, in spite of living in a culture marked by honor and revenge, where what would be expected and promoted as noble and worthy is attempts at retaliation and revenge. In spite of that, they're striving together to forgive. One woman whose husband was killed by a suicide bomber stood with her children on national television and said this, I'm not angry at the one who did this.

I'm telling him, may God forgive you and we also forgive you. Believe me, we forgive you. You put my husband in a place I couldn't have dreamed of.

And the Muslim community around them has marveled. One famous Muslim talk show host saying, how great is this forgiveness you have?

[17 : 24] If it were my father, I could never say this. But this is their faith and religious conviction. Yes. And even more than that, it is the countercultural way of our Savior.

May God make us more and more a community where we are defined and shaped in our lives by the priorities of Jesus, His forgiveness, His sacrificial love, His glory.

As God does this among us, as He brings us together to follow Him in these ways that are painful and difficult and often unfamiliar, what's the hope offered to us?

Is Jesus just saying, we're going to be increasingly miserable and there's nothing ever for you in this? Just go lose your life, give up everything? Nothing. Actually, He's offering the promise of true life.

The life we were created to live, right? Listen to what He says, verse 24. Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will actually save it.

[18 : 38] For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? It's that seemingly upside down path again, isn't it? How do you save your life?

Lose it. Give up your sovereignty over yourself. And Jesus says here, I know the path appears and even feels to be headed downward, but I'm promising you a destination of true life, eternal glory.

He understands that it's not in the places we often think to look for it. But remember last week how Jesus insisted on His gospel being a cross-centered gospel, that He must go there, that it must be about the cross, not merely a prosperity gospel or social gospel or an American gospel.

Now in light of that, the cross says to us, loud and clear, your great need and God's great goal for you is not material prosperity, moral reformation or temporal security.

Did you hear that? That's not God's greatest goal for you. Material prosperity, moral reformation, temporal security. Jesus came to suffer and die for you.

[20 : 04] His great goal for you in that is not that you would make a few more thousand dollars on your salary next year or that you would have a more comfortable life for a few more years on this earth.

It's just not His goal for you. It's not the greatest thing He can imagine you having. His goal for you is a restored relationship with Him. The true life that comes from that that's so fulfilling, you can give it away to everybody else because you have everything you need in Him.

That's His heart for you. That's where life is truly found. Jesus is telling us we can get all the world has to offer and still end up empty in the end.

It's why we sang I'd rather have Jesus than anything this world affords today. That He is no fool who gives what He cannot keep, the things of this world to gain what He cannot lose.

An eternal relationship with His Father, the fullness of life that He created us for. And we sing it because it's true and because we struggle to believe it. And we need to help each other believe it and so we sing about it.

[21 : 14] Young people, following Jesus is not easy. Sometimes it hurts. Sometimes it costs you things that you really care about a lot.

And we want to be honest with you about that. It's joyful. We love coming to church. We love being together. We'll have a great barbecue in a couple of weeks. There's a lot of joy in it but it's hard.

The life that Jesus promises you is so much more fulfilling and so much more beautiful than what the world offers. And I want you to know that because it's going to be difficult to see that sometimes.

God's greatest goal for you, the good life He sets out for you that you look forward to is not just getting into a good college. It's not just being known as a good kid.

It's not just to stay safe so you can live to be 100 or something like that because that's awesome. He actually has something so much more significant for you. He defines what's really good.

[22 : 19] Those are the types of goals we set for ourselves. God says, let me tell you what's good. where life really is. It's in knowing Him and trusting Him and being valuable because you're His child.

And when you get filled up by that kind of value and significance, you can give away your life. You don't have to be in control of it. You don't have to have everything go your way.

Some of you are going to find yourselves in places where you have to say no to your own instincts about what to do with your body, about how to treat your classmates.

And when you do that, when you say no to those things in order to follow Jesus and what He calls you to, you'll get made fun of. You won't like it.

It'll hurt. And you're going to have to believe that Jesus is worth it. That what He's calling you to is a life more beautiful than what you thought you were going after.

[23 : 27] You might be left out and you won't feel like you're living the good life and Jesus says, that's what it means to follow me. You're actually not alone. I'm there and you can find me infinitely valuable.

It's what Moses found out. Hebrews chapter 11 tells us about the value Moses found. By faith when he was grown up, he refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

He considered the reproach, that means having a bad name, having bad things said about you and feeling bad. The reproach of Christ of following Jesus.

Greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt. All that the world had to offer for him. For he was looking to the reward. I use these verses a lot.

I'm aware of that. It's because he considered the reproach of Christ greater value, of greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt. And I think we need the reminder of the choice that we face in following Jesus.

[24 : 35] And we also need to know that others have followed him at great cost and found him worth it. Found Jesus more valuable than all the world could offer.

Have you seen the emptiness of worldly things? Honestly, ask yourself, when you run the profit sheet, when you put on one side all the things that the world has to offer and on the other side, Jesus, true life in Jesus, which one's more valuable to you?

Jesus asks us that question. Have you grasped the hope of true life in Jesus? Jesus points us to that eternal perspective in the last two verses of this passage.

Whoever's 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 the holy angels. But I tell you, truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.

The hope of a God who is not ashamed of us on that day but who delights in us as he delights in his Son of an eternal kingdom that we look forward to, the reward.

[25 : 49] It's worth it even when you follow Jesus out of a stable job into a scary, unpredictable calling. It's worth it even when you follow Jesus to stay in an unfulfilling marriage and show love and forgiveness.

It's worth it even when you let your kids take the gospel to a place you're not sure they'll be safe. Why is it worth it? It's worth it because you meet Jesus in those places and he's worth it because he's that valuable.

In the places where you deny yourself and take up your cross, you meet Jesus and find him to be worth it. Jimmy Agin says the call to deny ourselves rests on the assumption that we value Jesus enough to lose our lives for his sake.

In fact, that we would rather have the kind of life he gives than the kind of life that would enable us to gain the whole world. Everything in our culture tells us to promote self and protect self and protect self not deny self.

Most of the inclinations of our hearts do the same thing. So why deny self? What is the inspiration for followers of Jesus?

[27 : 19] It has to be him, right? The cost of following Jesus is certainly high. Let's not be unclear. But he doesn't ask you to give anything he hasn't already given.

And he doesn't call you to go anywhere he hasn't already gone. See, when we play follow the leader with Jesus, it's not a game. It's not child's play.

When we play follow the leader with Jesus, the image I have in mind is rather one of a battle scene where before they march into battle in the hand-to-hand combat, you see the leader, the king, the general, William Wallace, whoever it is in your mind, he calls them to go and march but then he does what?

He rides right in front of them out at the head of the pack into almost certain death in that battle.

Why do they follow him?

Because he made such a great speech? Because he told them they had to? That they must follow?

They follow him because he willingly rides in front of them into that battle.

[28 : 31] Remember, before calling us to self-denial and cross-bearing, Jesus has just said what? That he must suffer and be rejected and be killed.

Verse 22. And this morning, he calls us to follow him there. Dr. Agin says the new priority of the follower of Jesus is this.

I believe it is safer to follow Jesus to the place of death than to run away. Safer to follow Jesus to the place of death than to run away.

this table reminds us that the Savior we follow denied himself the glories and comforts of heaven way more than we've been asked to deny ourselves.

That he became nothing and humbled himself to the point of death on the cross for us because he loves us. This table reminds us that the Savior we follow is the one who has ridden before us into the battle not just with the possibility that he might die but with the intent that he would die for us in our place.

[29 : 54] Remember how Paul recounts it for us. The Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread and when he had given thanks he broke it and said this is my body which is for you do this in remembrance of me.

In the same way also he took the cup after supper saying this cup is the new covenant in my blood do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me. Jesus came and said this is what I'm doing I'm going to give my life for you and so this table where we celebrate that is not the table of Southwood or the Presbyterian church it's his table that he sets before us to remind us of his great love for us and giving his life for us his body broken his blood shed for us if you know him and trust him if you're a part of his church the people who are imperfectly and with great failures following after him come here eat be refreshed remember and celebrate his love for you the one you're following after has already died and suffered the worst you could imagine so that you could know him forever if you don't know Jesus I'd encourage you don't come to this table this morning but come to Jesus come and talk with us about who he is and what it is that he would call you to it's a kind of life you didn't show up this morning wanting to sign up for it's beautiful it's glorious because he's there with you pray with me and we'll come to this table together father for the gift of your son we give you great thanks we ask that this bread and this juice that remind us of his body and blood would be set apart this morning for you to do great things in our hearts she would teach us again of your love she would show us again that we would taste the path that our savior has walked and calls us to follow him in would you encourage and strengthen our faith through it we ask in his name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org