

Following Jesus

A phrase by phrase study on Luke 9:23-26, a life-changing “hard saying” of Jesus.

And He was saying to *them* all, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. ²⁴ For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it. ²⁵ For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself? ²⁶ For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His glory, and *the glory* of the Father and of the holy angels. Luke 9:23-26 nasb

V23a: “And He was saying to them all, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me - -.’”

“If” communicates that it is our choice, but that these are the requirements for those who chose to follow Him.

To “come after” simply means to come behind or to follow. A disciple is one who follows his master and is becoming like him. Fulfilling the purposes of the Father was the motivation in everything that Jesus did. It is what He was about. See [John 4:34](#) and [6:38](#). What then, does it mean for us to follow Him? Ask Him, as we do this study.

Don’t the Great Commission ([Mt. 28:18-20](#)), and [Acts 1:8](#), instruct us to carry on the work that Jesus began? And John 17:18, “As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world?” (nasb) And [John 20:21](#)?

We all have something that “pushes” us in life. A desire to “be” something, or to accomplish something. Right?

I know that some of you are very poor and would be satisfied to have enough food, and adequate shelter for your families, and to provide them with an education. And I know that you faithfully serve God even in your poverty, and you desire that others would come to know Him. I honor you.

But to others I ask, “What is it for you?” What do you most want from life? Fame? Money? Comfort? Pleasure? Security? Approval from others? “Success” in some worldly way?

Simply put, to follow Jesus means that the thing that pushes us in life will be the desire to fulfill the Father’s purposes in the way that He calls and equips us for. Our life revolves around that, as it did for Jesus. Every gift and opportunity that he entrusts to us is viewed in that light. We live to make the Gospel known, whether we are a farmer, business person, doctor, mother, pastor or truck driver.

Nothing that we are, or have, or say, or do, is exempt from the claims of Christ. If we say, “I will,” when He says “If any will come after Me,” we are His. Bondservants. Slaves. I feel apologetic for writing like this but I don’t see any other way to be faithful to Jesus’ words. We keep nothing for our “self.”

He knew that there would be roadblocks in this journey, so in the next phrase He tells us how to get through them.

V23b, “he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

Jesus knew that we would have trouble following Him. It’s like there’s a roadblock that needs to be cleared out, and now He’s telling us how to do it. To deny ([Strong’s 720 arnéomai](#)), means “to say ‘no’ to,” or to refuse, contradict or disown. But what do we deny or disown?

Well, we are to deny our “self.” But what is that? Okay, [www.vocabulary.com](#) says, “Your self is your sense of who you are, deep down — your identity. Self comes from the Old English, in which it means ‘one’s own

person.” It is our deep, inner person. But what is it about *that*, that we are to deny?

This is how it works. By creation design, humans are not whole or complete in ourselves. There is a place inside of us that must be filled with something that comes from a spirit source outside of us, who gives us our identity. That is, we need a god who tells us who we are. We know that God and Satan are the two spirit sources.

God designed us to find our identity in relationship with Him, as Adam and Eve did in the Garden. Fellowship with God is an essential ingredient of human wholeness just as flour is to bread. But that relationship was cut off after they sinned, leaving an empty space inside of them that needed to be filled. Now it was Satan’s turn.

Adam and Eve switched from finding their identity in God, by doing things His way, to doing things their own way under Satan’s rule. Satan had told them that they could be like God ([Gen 3:5](#)), knowing good and evil. They liked that idea, so they denied/disowned God as their source, thinking that they would become their own god. They didn’t realize that man can never be his own god, and that Satan, liar that he is, would now become their god and the spirit source that proposed to meet that deep inner need. You see, God had ordained that only He could meet that inner need, so their “self” was never satisfied and was always seeking something more.

Can you feel that insistent “something” inside of you that begs for significance? For purpose, affirmation, approval, and meaning in life? For identity? Oh, yes you can!!

Do you feel something rising up inside of you when you don’t get your way, or when someone insults you? Why do we get angry or moody? Sorry, it’s because our “self” isn’t being satisfied. We are insecure. Why do we overeat at the buffet? Sorry, it’s because our “self” is telling us that we can be our own god and can do whatever we want, and that another plate full is just fine if that’s what we want to do.

You know what I mean, don’t you? Think about that.

Satan’s lie in the Garden of Eden is that we can be our own god. That we can decide for ourselves how to fill that emptiness within us. Since Adam, all have inherited the human nature whose default setting is to believe that lie and to act upon it.

That belief and action are what we must deny/disown in order to follow Jesus. We must surrender to His rule instead. Oswald Chambers refers to it as “giving up our right to our self.” Today’s church preaches cheap grace. Easy “go to heaven” salvation. We call people to confess their sins, but do not call them to repent, that is, to turn from their sin of rebellion.

We are born again when we believe in Jesus, repent of our rebellion, and receive Him as our Savior. He gives us a new nature and a new identity, and we let Him tell us who we are instead of looking to people, stuff, and self-rule for it.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus fought and won the ultimate contest between the flesh and the Spirit. The battle inside of Him was so intense that His sweat became as drops of blood. He says in our text that in order to follow Him, we too must renounce the lie, and surrender to the will of the Father. It causes us pain too - it’s like ripping a very sticky duct tape off of a very hairy arm.

What do YOU feel inside of you, when He tells you to forgive? Or to ask forgiveness? Or to love the unlovely? Or to sell some precious possession and give the money to missions? Or to live more modestly in ways that now give you identity? Or to love your wife or respect your husband? Or to fast. Or to pray. Or simply to “wait?” Don’t we like to think that we can make our own rules?

You can feel the battle inside of you, right? Yielding. Denying/disowning what your “self” wants to do, in obedience to Him. THAT is taking up your cross to follow Jesus. We only share in the glory of His victory if we join Him in the inner pain of the struggle

to obey ([Rom 8:17](#)), and it's a life-long practice. It is daily, and even multiple times daily.

24) For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.

First, we must understand that the word "life" isn't speaking of saving your life physically, as in the opposite of dying. It is [Strong's 5590. psuché](#), "the root of the English word 'psyche,' which becomes our word 'psychology,' meaning soul; a person's distinct identity (unique personhood), our individual personality."

So there we humans are, struggling to save our "life." Our identity. Our deep sense of who we are, which has been corrupted by our inherited sinful nature which tells us that we can be our own god and can figure things out for ourselves and make things go our way so we can feel good about ourselves. Wow!

We've been fighting to hold on to, or get more of, whatever it is that we think can give us identity, and it's a futile, unending battle. More, or bigger, or faster or more powerful is just never enough. Never ever. Satan lies. "Stuff" mocks our stupidity. The word "lose" in v24 means "to destroy, destroy utterly." Read it that way both times it is used there!

But then one day we, in desperation, look to Jesus. He smiles and says, "It's not going to work that way child. Let me tell you how." He continues, "Give up your fight and I will tell you how to save (heal, preserve, rescue) your life. Come to Me, and I will forgive your rebellion and the sins it produced. I will clean you up and give you a new and fully satisfying source for your soul-life. I love you and will make you all that you were created to be." Oh, I loooove that!

This new "life" then, includes the righteousness, peace and joy of [Rom. 14:17](#), the Fruit of the Spirit of [Gal. 5:22-23](#), the fruit-bearing of [John 15:1-5](#), the rivers of living water of [John 7:38](#), the peace of [John 16:33](#) and more. It is what we were created for but

which had been stolen from us by the thief. We get all of that, and "forever" in heaven, by saying "Yes" to Jesus. What a deal!

We cannot receive God's gift of real life - life that we were created for and which comes from His Presence in our soul - until we give up trying to find it in the fake stuff that Satan offers.

v25) For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself?

"Lose" is the same Greek word as in v24, meaning, "to destroy, destroy utterly," and forfeit means "to damage, suffer loss." Both probably apply to this life and to eternity.

Humans can be so captured by our corrupted self that we keep trying to fulfill its need according to Satan's plan even if God has predetermined that it will fail. That many Christians attempt to gain much of "the world" indicates the level of Satan's deception and our vanity.

The one who "loses or utterly destroys himself" (v25) is probably not saved, and the one who "forfeits, or suffers loss" will, at the least, miss the richness of the Kingdom of God himself and won't influence others toward Christ. Are they "saved?" God knows, and I'll let it at that.

Aren't there many in our churches who profess to have prayed the sinner's prayer, but who don't exhibit the fruit of having taken up their cross to follow Jesus? The are living for "self" and for the world.

This makes the church ineffective and it brings shame to God's name. But something is stirring. Saints are starting to hear the whisper of His call to sincere faith. Obedient faith. Faith that will be spiritually rich, and fruitful for His Names' sake.

Their identity will be in Christ and their citizenship in the Kingdom of God, and little else will matter to them. They will be neither rich, famous nor powerful, but will quietly and humbly go about our Father's business.

Yes, Jesus is actively building the Church as He said in [Mt. 16:18](#).

The present organized church will become less and less strategic as God raises up the Body of Christ that finds life in Him. I'm not sure just how all this will happen but I am seeing that it will be more informal than formal. More spontaneous than organized. More "of the Spirit" than directed by men, and coming from within the Body more than top down in the church structure.

It's time to search our hearts. And to pray, together and privately, seeking God about our own spiritual journey and for each other and our pastors. As leaders they have a weight upon them from God, but they have their own pilgrimage to deal with even as they try to interpret the various responses of the church members. Many have a bent to please the people and need discernment and courage to see what God is doing and to partner with Him.

I suspect that He will use America's growing chaos to draw us together to pray and to encourage each other. Maybe the prayer of Jabez ([I Chron. 4:10](#)) will become ours. There's still time for many, both leaders and members, to repent of our "religion" and to seek life in Him and become part of His initiative, but be prepared for some separation in the church as we have known it. It is "Game on" in the spirit realm and there will be hard choices to be made.

26 For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His glory, and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.

Okay, what comes to mind first here? Is it whether you are ashamed to bow your head and pray for your meal in a restaurant? Or to tell others the Four Spiritual Laws or some memorized formula for how to get to heaven when they die? That's all fine but this is much deeper. Remember, this is in the context of taking up our cross to follow Jesus.

"Words" here, is from the [Greek "logos," Strongs 3056](#). It means, "a word, as embodying an idea; a word, being the expression of a thought." (If I say "McDonalds," is there a logos, a message, that goes beyond simply naming a place?)

[John 1:1-4](#) says that Jesus IS the word. The logos. There is a "message" from God the Father, implicit in Jesus Himself, and it is communicated both in words that he spoke and in the life He modeled for us.

His life portrayed what it means to live in union with the Father – as we are called to. His dedication to prayer is an example for us. And he modeled the life that was set apart from the world's pursuits and given to the Father's purposes, as we are called to. How about the life of holiness, which is also our calling? ([II Cor. 6:14-7:1](#))

The life of [John 5:19](#) can be ours too. And the power that He spoke of in [Acts 1:8](#) and implemented at Pentecost, which is expressed in the spiritual gifts in [I Cor. 12:1-11](#). Obviously, He was never handicapped by sin because He chose obedience – as we are called to, and the more we obey God the less compromised we will be too!

All of this is implicit in HIM. In Jesus, the "Word" of [John 1:1-4](#), the logos-message of God to man. Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, our Savior, Lord and soon-returning King! He used words, then, to tell us who He is and how to live as His followers. [Luke 9:26](#) is to be taken seriously.

Are we ashamed of HIM and the message that His life shouts about what it means to serve God? Ashamed to embrace a worldview like His and to teach what He taught?

Are we ready to stand close to Him, and to embrace and declare the life of the purpose-driven Church, the Body of Christ, a living organism which exemplifies the life that He modeled and which separates us from both the world and the religious masses who have not taken up their cross to follow Him? This is a good time to declare, "Yes, Lord Jesus, I am yours and I will follow you at any cost."

Note: Of course we will never be fully like Jesus, but His true followers are being transformed to become increasingly so. ([II Cor. 3:18](#)) If you are serious about this, see Lesson 1, MORE AND MORE, and Lesson 2, JESUS OUR EXAMPLE, in the free Bible Study MORE LIKE JESUS, at www.john2031.com/books/mlj/main.html)

So, V26 is about whether or not we are ashamed to live according to the life He modeled, and the message that is embodied in the words He spoke, like our Luke 9:23-26 text. And [Mt. 6:19-34](#). Those are not just words as we think of them, they contain a message that he is imparting to those who profess to follow Him. One that demands a yes or no response. See John 3:16-21.

Remember the Parables of the hidden treasure, and of the fine pearl, in [Mt. 13:44-46](#)? And what about [Luke 14:25-34](#) where Jesus said that “In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.”

And His many strong words about counting the cost, and leaving our plow and not looking back, and being rejected by family members – and even selling all we have and giving it to the poor if that’s what it takes to break us free from our fake identity source? Consider [John 6:47-67](#), which concluded with “From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed Him. ‘You do not want to leave too, do you?’ Jesus asked the Twelve.” How about us?

There’s much emphasis today on reading the Bible. And there’s some good preaching in a certain way, but it’s not faithful to Jesus and the message of His life and His words unless it presents the hard Truth. Could the Church in America be so ineffective if we were actually hearing and receiving the logos - the message that would make us America’s [Mt. 5:13-16](#) preserving salt and guiding light?

Jesus spoke to that in [John 5:39-40](#) where He said, “You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that

testify about Me, yet you refuse to come to Me to have life.” (niv) Wow, that hurts!

Consider [Heb. 4:12](#). “Word” there is logos!

Mt. 11:28-30

Jesus says: “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.²⁹ Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS.³⁰ For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”
nasb

Think about this. What is it that makes so many of us “weary and heavy-laden?” Isn’t it our constant but futile effort to satisfy our self? To feel fulfilled by having the approval of others, or having the things of the world, or proving ourselves right? But it’s all in vain. There’s never enough. It’s all a bag of lies. Or a freight train full of lies.

However, when we come to Jesus and are “born again” ([John 3:3-7](#)), our spirit is “made alive.” He restores the spirit-to-spirit relationship that we were created for, which satisfies our soul-hunger. He imparts to us a new nature, one that loves what He loves and is inclined to obey Him.

In a way that few Christians understand, the most essential aspect of Life in the Garden, that is, spirit-to-spirit communion between God and man, was restored to man through Christ!

We can now love others as He loved us. ([John 13:34-35](#)) To love is to give, and we can now give because His Life flows into us to make us complete, and then flows through us to others! ([John 7:38](#)) This new nature is so radical that it will convince others that we are followers of Jesus!

Our new life begins when we confess our sins, receive His forgiveness, and He becomes “Savior,” but in that event we must also repent of trying to be our own god and make Him “Lord.”

When we surrender to Him as Lord, we enter the narrow gate of [Mt. 7:13-14](#), which

opens into the abundant life of [John 10:10](#), the fruit-bearing of [John 15:1-8](#), the righteousness, peace and joy of [Rom. 14:17](#) and so much more. It is like giving up moldy leftover rice so we can enjoy the banquet feast of the King. Sounds to me like a pretty good trade-off!

We will then hear His “Come to Me” invitation many times through life as we get sidetracked by temptations and life’s challenges, and find ourselves weary of walking in the swamp again. If we come, He will graciously meet us and get our feet back on the Rock.

QUESTIONS

Some of us talk about certain segments of our society as feeling entitled. But how about us American Christians, even if we do work to earn what we have? Why do we feel entitled to rich living when most of our brothers and sisters around the world have the bare minimum, or less?

How have we come to think that the abundance that we enjoy as Americans is to be spent on ourselves rather than invested in taking the Good News to the ends of the earth? Do we forget that we will, literally, give account to God for our use of our resources? Consider [Luke 19:12-26](#).

How short-sighted are we, to act as though this life is all there is, when our few years here are actually preparation for what comes next? A million-billion years are only the first day of eternity and if we have any sense at all we’ll “store up treasure in heaven,” as Jesus spoke of.

Why do many church leaders fear to present these truths, which in effect curses us to live mundane, impotent lives in bondage to the old nature because we haven’t been led into repentance?

THOUGHT & QUESTION

A condemned man was very aware of the cross (or crossbeam) that he carried to the place of his crucifixion. A weight upon his

back that he was conscious of every step of the way.

Likewise, those who take up their cross to follow Jesus will be aware of the “weight” of regularly “denying themselves” as they are increasingly transformed into the image of Christ where it becomes more and more natural.

The wonderful difference between us and the condemned man, is that as we deny the “voice” of self which comes because of Adam’s sin, we enter into the Eternal Life that is ours because of Jesus’ obedience to the Father. Could it be, that those who are not aware of that denial process, and of taking up their cross, are not actually following Jesus?

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