

Our Own Cross

As we continue with our study of these precious words of scripture given to us here in Luke chapter 9, you'll recall in our message last week that Jesus asked His disciples an all important question. He asked them, "Who do **you** say that I am?" Who do **you** really believe that I am? And Peter, answering for the others said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God".

But curiously, there in those moments when Jesus asked His disciples if they knew who He truly was, it was not yet time for that special truth about who He was to be revealed to the rest of the world. That time would come sometime later on. But until then, in verse 21 of Luke chapter 9, Jesus

²¹ . . . strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one,
²² saying, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." (Luke 9:21-22)

And folks, those were special words of truth that not even the disciples themselves were yet ready to hear and to understand, words about His soon coming suffering and death. They were most likely thinking that Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ of God, had come to set up His eternal kingdom here on earth and that He would do that within those days that soon lay in front of them.

It seems that none of them, neither the scribes nor the pharisees, nor the disciples had fully understood those words of prophecy that told them that their Messiah would first have to suffer and die in order to deliver them from their sins.

Although those truths were clearly revealed in many of the Old Testament scriptures like those in Psalm 22 and in Isaiah 53, and probably taught to them on many occasions in their synagogue bible classes, none of them seems to have been able to fully grasp the meaning of those words.

And so, though the disciples believed Jesus to be the Messiah, the Christ of God, when He began to speak about His coming suffering, none of them quite yet comprehended what He was telling them.

And then also, here in these next words, we find that Jesus had even more to say about the matter of "suffering". Here, we find that the need for suffering would not only be required of the Lord Jesus but would also be required of His

disciples. And then also, not only just those disciples then, but suffering would also be required of anyone and everyone who would dare follow after and believe in the Lord Jesus later on, even you and me.

Listen carefully to these words, beginning in verse 23 of Luke chapter 9,

²³ And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. ²⁵ For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and yet forfeits his own soul? ²⁶ For whoever is 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 of the holy angels. (Luke 9:23-26)

Interwoven within these words are deep spiritual truths, truths that faithfully reach out to each of us, to you and to me, to beckon us to come up closer to the person and to the purposes of the Lord Jesus. But in our coming to Him, these words clearly tell us that there will be more ahead of us than the sweet promises of peace and joy and abundant life that we are hoping for. That as we begin to walk carefully along that special narrow pathway that Jesus has laid out for us, there will also be many difficulties, sorrows, and sufferings at every turn. Those words again,

"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. ²⁴For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. (Luke 9:23-24)

I must confess to you that as I have attempted to comprehend the full intent and impact of these precious words, the ability of my mind to reach very deeply into their meaning has been ever so difficult for me, especially when Jesus speaks here of my "taking up my own cross daily and following Him."

I have read and studied about His sufferings on the cross many times. And I have tried to imagine the sufferings He endured, both physically and spiritually. But I confess to you that I still have no comprehension of the miseries He suffered.

Over these many centuries since our Lord's death there on that cross, we have somehow managed to diminish, to even take away much of the real horrors that was suffered there on that cross. We have reduced the cross down to being only a vague symbol of something that we would rather not think too

deeply about. And even to some, the cross is little more than a trinket that is to be worn around our necks as a good luck charm.

But folks, we must be careful. The sufferings of the cross were not the vague symbol we have reduced it to being. The cross was instead a horrible place of the most intense of wretched suffering, with its certain and eventual end being death.

And as I consider what Jesus is commanding you and me to do here in these words, again I confess, I am at a loss to fully comprehend what we must do.

I know that His command is not requiring that I take up a literal wooden cross and carry it each day. And I know that even if I did, my sacrifice, my literal death on my cross could not save anyone's soul as His sacrifice did. He and He alone is the acceptable sacrifice for sin. He and He alone is the acceptable propitiation for sin.

So then, with that being my plight, how am I, how are you to obey this very demanding command to "take up our cross daily and follow Him"?

From these words, we can know how we need to begin. Listen!

"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. ²⁴For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. (Luke 9:23-24)

Here, Jesus speaks first of our denying of our "self". That is what Jesus did and that is the first thing He requires of you and me. As He came to this earth, He denied Himself of all of His glory, His majesty, and His honor. As the Almighty God, He humbled Himself, became a man, a man of the lowliest of means. And He tells us to be of the same mind. Listen to these words in Philippians chapter 2. He tells us to

² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human

form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:3-8)

And then again, this beckoning call that He has given to you and to me here in Luke chapter 9,

“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. (Luke 9:23)

The Lord Jesus is here telling us that we must not draw back from His beckoning call, but instead to willingly reach forward and join with Him in the work that He has begun in us and throughout this world. And as we willingly join with Him, it is then that His Spirit will lead us on down a further step in that pathway where we will begin to cry out as the Apostle Paul did in Philippians chapter 3 saying,

¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:10-11)

Folks, as we know, these are all very strange words, especially when compared to the common mindset within most of us today. It does not naturally occur to us to willingly choose a pathway of suffering. Our normal desires are usually very secular in nature, to pursue “happiness” at all costs, in every venue of daily life, our home life, our work life, our social life.

But if we are to deny our “self”, what does that mean. These scriptures seem to describe our “self” as being that place within us where desires and “lusts of the flesh” come out from, that place where the remnants of our sin nature are still able to tempt and influence our behaviors. And I would suggest that it is there where we need to begin.

For most of us, it seems that one of the greatest “lusts of the flesh” within our souls is “our prideful claim to our right to our self”, our rights, our place in this world. And if that be so for you or for me, then that is where we need to join with the Holy Spirit to deny our “self”.

If we perhaps have a natural craving for money and the things money can buy, then it is there in our desires for money that we must join with the Holy Spirit within us to deny those lusts.

For many, their “lust of the flesh” involves inordinate sexual desires, most for the common heterosexual practices. But for many within our modern culture, those inordinate sexual desires are for the homosexual perversions spoken about in Romans chapter 1. And again, our freedom from those lustful behaviors can come only through absolute surrender to Christ and the indwelling presence of God’s Holy Spirit.

Again, for each of us our desires will be different, but in many ways the same, and we need to join with the Holy Spirit to deny them.

And fortunately for us, the Holy Spirit is ever and always present to minister God’s truth and guidance to us. And it is by His guidance that we realize that the happiness we have so fervently chased after all the days of our lives is not something that should be pursued at all, but rather that happiness is simply a natural result of our having pursued another far more important and more significant course, the “ways of righteousness”?

Folks, these words are a beckoning call to each of us, and they are a forewarning that we should carefully examine all the many and senseless pursuits that have consumed our lives for so long. And in our examination, to be brutally honest with ourselves about the real value that’s within it all. Our pursuits are described for us in Matthew chapter 6 where Jesus tells us to

¹⁹ . . . not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

Jim Elliott, a revered missionary who gave his life serving in the jungles of Ecuador, is credited with having said,

He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose.

So often, we find that our most sought after goals and ambitions have gained us very little. After we have worked a lifetime and sacrificed so much to achieve them, we find that our hearts and our hands are empty and lonely. Our pursuits have been little more than a “chasing after the wind”.

I know that that has been so in my life. And perhaps the same has been true for some of you. For me, misplaced priorities throughout my life have taken their toll on me and my family. And the pursuit of some perceived kind of happiness has been at the forefront of my failures.

And realizing that, then I now really ought to be different in these remaining years. Each of us ought to be. We each ought to carefully examine our priorities and be far more intentional in our choices of the pursuits that fill our lives.

Yes, each of us does want happiness; it is a basic human need. But how do we really go about finding it. What is real happiness?

Is it really found in the secular enjoyments that our entertainment media tells us about, a lifestyle filled with continual gaiety and partying, culminating in a more-than-adequate retirement life provided by a well-funded retirement plan?

Again, as we carefully examine these scriptures, we quickly find that real happiness is found somewhere else entirely. It is to be found ever and only as we embrace this very special beckoning call of Christ.

Listen to the deeply spirit-filled words of the "Sermon on the Mount". And yes, most of us find that these words are very strange sounding to our secular ears, but as strange as they might sound, they are truly the only pathway that will lead us to real "blessed" happiness. There in Matthew chapter 5, Jesus tells us that,

- 3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- 4 Blessed are those who mourn,
For they shall be comforted.
- 5 Blessed are the meek,
For they shall inherit the earth.
- 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
For they shall be filled.
- 7 Blessed are the merciful,
For they shall obtain mercy.
- 8 Blessed are the pure in heart,
For they shall see God.
- 9 Blessed are the peacemakers,

For they shall be called sons of God.

¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. (Matthew 5:3-11)

Folks, did you note the stark difference between these words and all the many secular words we hear spoken into our ears each day.

This word "blessed" that's given in this passage has within its meaning the concept of "happiness". And no, it's not the kind of happiness that the secular world offers to us, but is instead real and true abiding "happiness", the kind of happiness that brings comfort within our souls. And so, it can be said that,

"Happy" are the poor in spirit.

"Happy" are those who mourn.

"Happy" are the merciful.

"Happy" are the pure in heart.

And on and on . . . but folks, again as we can clearly see, these precious words speak about a very different form and pathway to happiness, so very different from the usual course that our secular world demands, so very different that there are few who will ever find it.

Why would that be so? It is because of the "self-sacrifice" that it demands. The pathway that the Sermon on the Mount demands is very similar to the "Villa Dolorosa", the way of suffering that Jesus walked as He carried His cross to His crucifixion. And here, He invites you and me to take up our own cross and walk that same path.

In these words, Jesus tells us that real and true happiness comes only through the denial of self, the giving up of our own personal desires and the humility of following after Christ. Our scripture text again,

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? (Mark 8:34-36)

Self-denial is at the center of these words, but again, it is not an easy path for us to walk. In our success oriented mentality, we find it difficult to intentionally deny

ourselves anything. We have more money than most all the other peoples on the earth. And even when we don't have the money, if our credit score is high enough, we simply borrow to have it, again seldom ever denying ourselves the things we crave.

But also, self-denial runs along an even deeper path than just giving up or abstaining from physical enjoyments. Self-denial meets a far greater opponent when we are required to give up our self to meet the needs of others, especially those who bring difficulty into our lives.

We are a "rights oriented" people. We have our rights. They are inalienable rights, rights that cannot be denied to us, and we hang onto that premise with all the strength we have within us.

But the mention here of the cross immediately declares that there is a different, far more important demand confronting us. Yes, the cross that Jesus bore was in obedience to God His Father and for the fulfilment of His holiness, but beyond that, His cross was ultimately for the benefit of others.

And so, it must also be with the cross that we must bear. And yes, bearing our own cross will often bring great suffering to us personally, but its ultimate benefit will be that we might join with the Lord Jesus in bringing many other souls to glory.

And again, no! We cannot do as Christ did and save another person's soul. Only Christ can save a person's soul. But we can join with Him in His call to us to reach into the lives of other people that they too might give their hearts to Him. Folks, Jesus only walked this earth for a little while. And when He left, He put the remaining portion of His ministry into our hands. He passed His baton on to us and has commanded that we deny our self and eagerly join with Him by taking up His baton and finishing that race. Those words in Hebrews 12,

let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ²looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2)

This Christian religion that we profess truly is a very serious involvement. It makes demands of us, demands that are often painful to endure. The question before

us today and every day is, “are we, are you, am I willing to deny our self and to join with Christ in those demands?”

Jesus willingly denied Himself and suffered the sufferings of the cross so that you and I might be saved. And in our scripture text for today, He is asking, yea even demanding that we do the same. Listen as we close.

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? (Mark 8:34-36)

Let's pray!