

# Self-Denial And Cross Bearing

Jesus was the most self-giving person who walked this earth. His mission was to sacrifice Himself so that we might have new life. It is surprising to me then, that He would come down to this planet to elicit followers whose primary mission was to be self-indulgent, comfort-focused, self-willed and to make the focus of their honor toward Him based mainly upon the blessings, the gifts and the benefits that they could receive. It would seem to me that His goal would be more along the lines of making us more in His selfless image and freeing us from selfish tendencies. And so, based on His words spoken to those who were considering becoming His followers, we find that that is exactly what He came to do. Here are the Lord's words:

*“And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it.”*      Luke 9:23-24

In two short sentences Jesus sets forth the standard by which all who claim Christianity may measure their commitment to Him and their dedication to His way. The Lord states clearly that in order to come after or follow Him you must take up and handle the Cross and not just talk about it. There are certain things we may surmise from His wording. The Cross is not just about what Jesus provided for us but requires our involvement; hence the words “*take up the cross*”.

If you feel you are presently following Christ, yet have little daily involvement with the Cross, then you might want to reassess your involvement in light of His words and definitions. Is your “Christian life” characterized by self-denial? If not, then you are not properly following Jesus. It is Jesus and His words that define Christianity, not modern-day preachers. Would you be willing to take the word of others over that of the Lord, knowing that you will have to stand before Him concerning what standard you lived by?

In Luke 9, Jesus' call to self-denial is immediately put to the test by those who heard Him. The disciples' response to hearing His words instantly reflected their attitude toward self-denial and taking up the Cross. Part of denying self involves denying our natural understanding and tendencies by going against our pet choices and embracing a Cross that may not sound so appealing to us.

On what basis may we assume that some people might not be as taken with a cross that calls for self-denial as much as they would a cross that saves them from hell? We may assume this based upon Jesus' own words! In verse 24 He emphasizes the fact that He is aware that some will not like His words, primarily on the basis of wanting to save their lives from such a call. Jesus' response to that is, “Then you had better enjoy life down here on earth because it is all you are going to get.” Actually, those were my words, so it would be better to hear His exact words: “*For whosoever will save his life shall lose it.*” The Lord expects that if we are going to follow Him, we must do it His way, or we are not following at all.

As Christians, we have been told many times that we are to walk by faith and not by sight (cf. II Cor. 5:7). It is possible that few of us have ever thought of that verse as it applies to Jesus' standard for "followers", but this is precisely the place to apply it. From everyone from Abraham to Paul, walking by faith involved taking God's path in spite of the unknown (cf. Heb. 11:8). For each and every one of us, following the Lord will require a denial of our reactionary thoughts that may rise against His particular way of proceeding. Walking by faith in Jesus' Word means doing what He is teaching us to do and is not primarily concerned with believing Him for such things as finances so we can lead a blessed existence.

Proverbs reiterates this theme: "*Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths*" (Prov. 3:5-6). It is plain that this verse shows what is entailed when directed into the proper path of the Lord. In many ways, this verse is like the scriptures in Luke that are presently under consideration.

In our verses in Luke chapter nine, the path into which Jesus is trying to direct us is the path of the Cross and the way of self-denial. As Lord and Master, that is His responsibility and His part, but what is our part? "*Lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him...*"

The main reason why a person would not allow Jesus to lead them into His crucified path is because they are too busy leaning to their own understanding. Romans 8:7 tells us, "*The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.*" A "carnal mind" can be had only by Christians, not by unbelievers. What sinners possess is a "natural mind" (cf. I Cor. 2:14). How sad, then, to realize that there are those who are saved and love Jesus, but they might not be aware that in His eyes they are His enemies, having minds that run contrary to His own. They are too determined to "save" their lives instead of losing them.

How do you lose your life in the manner in which Jesus spoke in Luke chapter nine? It is done by the Cross that you take up. This means that Jesus is fully cognizant that Christianity involves loss, and He promotes it. Though you have a new saved life, now you are called upon to lose it, not because of sin but because of living for Jesus. And the realm in which He asks you to apply the Cross is in your day-to-day affairs. Jesus asks us, "Are you willing to lose your life for My sake, not on some foreign mission field but by the cross I asked you to take up?"

He also shows us in Luke 9:23-24 that the way to gain life comes by just the opposite of what we might think: it comes by losing our lives. Though your mind may resist such a concept, it is the true way to proceed, so start immediately by denying any thoughts that are contrary to His concerning "loss and gain" (cf. II Cor. 10:4-5).

## **How Do We Identify the Followers of Christ?**

Jesus' words in Luke 9 have already given us the basic answer as to how we might identify the "followers" of Christ, but let us address another scripture for the moment: *"And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death"* (Rev. 12:11).

As we consider the content in this verse, it might be good to ask ourselves some questions. First of all, who did the overcoming here in this passage? The answer is, it was "they". At this point, we might assume that "they" represent the FOLLOWERS of Jesus. Next we might ask, by what means did they overcome? We are told that there are several facets to this answer. First, they overcame by the blood of the Lamb, which is based on the unselfish giving of Himself. In other words, overcoming was not simply the result of a magical substance called "blood", for blood would not have been available if selflessness had not first been the primary motivation.

The ones who overcame also did so based on not loving their own lives, even to the point of the supreme sacrifice – unto death. In both cases, the requisite for their actions was self-denial and unselfish motives. If that is the case, then the reference to "they" in this passage could not possibly be a reference to just any old Christian who has resisted self-denial, run from any daily application of the Cross, and did everything else he could to follow a Christianity that was all about comfort, blessings, and saving his life.

Clearly our ability to overcome Satan first came by One who only thought of others and gave up heaven itself for our freedom. Will we, then, turn around and live just the opposite of Him? The answer is: There are those who, just the opposite of Jesus, seek only to make sure they are saved and going to heaven, while Jesus willingly gave that up for us.

How do we know to call the "they" of this verse "followers" and not just Christians? Jesus said that those who "followed Him" live by self-denial and an application of the Cross daily to their lives. These that *"love not their lives unto the death"* clearly fit that description. They are so like Jesus in that He gave up everything for God and others unselfishly unto death.

## **The Example of Gideon and His Army**

We have a prime example of the two kinds of believers in the story of Gideon found in Judges chapters six and seven. In preparing to go to war with the oppressive Midianites, Gideon was charged with assembling the proper force. However, contrary to common military practice, this commander sought to reduce the ranks down to only those who had the proper qualifications. In other words, he was not simply looking for warm bodies to fill the ranks.

*"The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands...Now, therefore, go to, proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, Whosoever is*

*fearful and afraid, let him return and depart early from mount Gilead. And there returned of the people twenty and two thousand; and there remained ten thousand."*

Judges 7:2, 3

After this incident, the band was reduced one more time until there were only three hundred men prepared for battle. This is amazing when you consider that the Midianites came with around 165,000 men, all of them soldiers and prepared for battle. But let us consider this 22,000 who left because they were fearful and afraid. And with them, let us also consider that Israel was populated with hundreds of thousands of young men who had been trained for battle. This can be proven by Gideon's the storyline involving as it continues in Judges 8:1-21.

Were all of those thousands who did not show up for battle counted among the people of God? Yes! Had they all been circumcised according to the covenant Israel made with God? Yes! Had each of them made many trips into the Tabernacle to offer up sacrifices to God because sacrificial offering was the common way of worship for all Israel? Yes! So then, what was the problem? Where were they when the time came for self-denial and loving not their lives unto the death? We ask these questions because when the actual opportunity came, they went back. Why did they do that? They did it because in the hundreds of opportunities to exercise self-denial found in a 24 hour day, they went back. In the mundane affairs of life, they turned back against denying themselves but habitually placated their flesh instead. So few in Israel had really learned to walk in faith or learned to say "no" to self on a regular basis.

While it is easy to look back upon history and find fault with others, is it not possible that such may be the case in our time also? Could it be that the great story of self-surrender carried out by Jesus on our behalf was never transferred to the hearts of His followers as the pattern they should take as well? Maybe in their Bible reading they overlooked verses that declare, "*For ye are dead, and your life is hidden with Christ in God*" (Col. 3:3). Or maybe they read such verses but found them odious, so they skipped over to verses that were more appealing.

Whatever the problem may be, one thing is clear: such believers are not built upon the solid Rock that was smitten so that we could have Living Water (cf. I Cor. 10:4-6). Yet, is not this the same Rock upon which all Christians are to be built (cf. Matt. 7:24-27)? And is not the alternative view held by God that those who are not built upon the Rock are built upon sand? That smitten Rock is nothing short of a representation of Christ crucified. The only possible ground for self-surrender is the example of Christ at the Cross. If that is true and agreed upon, then to reject self-denial is, in fact, a denial of the very Cross upon which our salvation rests.

Now, I am not suggesting this "denial" implies that certain believers are unsaved. This cannot be so, for we are saved by grace (cf. Eph. 2:8). So then, what is being "denied"? What is being denied is that we are not seeing the Cross as the pattern for Christian existence but only in terms of personal benefits. In others words, we will gladly drink the pure waters that flow from the wounded Rock, but we have no intention of building upon

it. And though salvation is a free gift, how can we in good conscience look into the faces of the three hundred who, in the face of powerful forces and imminent danger, laid all on the altar and surrendered self for the good of the rest? And why are we, with our petty challenges, so ready to doubt God and seek our own benefit above His while remaining unaware of our own deep, inner emptiness?

*“The children of Ephraim, being armed and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle” (Psalm 78:9).*

### **Rest For Your Souls**

Resistance to both the message of the Cross and involvement with self-denial is not uncommon within Christianity. There are even those who have made it their goal in life to try and stamp out such things. But to do so means that they must stand against and stamp out the words of Jesus. Those words bear repeating here:

*“And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it.”*

Luke 9:23-24

It is natural to the flesh to desire comfort, blessings, and stress-free living. I would enjoy that, myself! However, to follow Jesus in the correct manner will circumvent much of that. *“Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution”* (II Tim. 3:12). See also, *“Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God”* (Acts 14:22).

There are some Christians who put forth much “soul force” in their efforts to save themselves from the Cross in their moment-by-moment existence. To all who are of this persuasion, Jesus calls: *“Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls”*.

(Matt. 11:28)

Notice how this rest is for the SOUL. Our souls are always striving. The striving most of us experience occurs when things do not go our way, when control is removed from us, or when we are put into situations we do not want to be in due to their demands upon us. Frustration builds because we are unwilling—or rather, strong-willed. What is the Lord’s answer for a weary, striving soul? It is REST. The soulish person would want rest in the form of getting some “me time”, but the Lord seems to think that taking on a yoke might be just the answer. At the mention of a yoke, immediately there is resistance. Such a way of life does not seem to be in line with the self-protecting, self-exalting approach held by some Christians today.

Throughout the Bible, oxen are a picture of a servant heart that steadily works for the benefit of others. Jesus has certainly fulfilled the role of the ox. He fits the bill so well that He even has His own yoke, as any ox would. His words are: Take MY YOKE upon YOU.

In other places in the scripture we are called “yokefellows” (cf. Phil. 4:3). This is exactly what Jesus’ invitation is about! In an effort to relieve us of “soul weariness”, the Lord invites us to be yoked with Him for awhile. During the process of being yoked in tandem with Him, we will *“learn of Him”*. The process of “learning of Him” may not be what some might suppose. He does not desire to be yoked with us so He may give us endless teachings; rather, He does so to be an example of self-denial in the daily affairs of life. What will we learn? We learn from His servant heart and ways. We will see that, when He is weary but asked to plow an unexpected extra mile, that He does it to the glory of God, putting the needs of others first. We will see His response when care is given to others who are less needy while He seems to be ignored. In all of this, you are not going to learn FROM Him but OF Him. So, what is it that you are going to learn? You are going to learn that He is meek and lowly. This lesson is not simply to teach you how selfless He is but that it might have an effect and bring about a change in you. *“You shall find rest for YOUR souls”*.

Hopefully, when we see how free and peaceful the Lord is in His self-giving lifestyle, we will long to be free from the selfish demands that our souls put upon us. Maybe then His words about taking up the Cross as our daily companion and living according to self-denial will not look so ominous after all.

The things we have examined in Matthew 11:28 lead us back to Luke 9:23 again, *“And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.”*

The reason Jesus would want us to come after Him is to know His Life and the way of His life. This is the very same reason why He would want us to be yoked with Him. However, one thing we will learn concerning Him is that He is not separate from the Cross. Paul said, *“I am determined not to know anything among you except Christ and HIM CRUCIFIED”* (I Cor. 2:2). For the apostle, there can be no separating Christ from the reality of the Cross.

From our scriptures in Luke chapter nine, it is clear that the Cross is what Jesus wants us to take up. To do so is HOW He wants us to follow Him. If we are not willing, then He may choose to apply the yoke as a temporary measure. The yoke holds us in place and makes us to see what it is we are supposed to be willingly following. But He does so with the intention of showing us that all is meant to lead us back to His primary emphasis: taking up the Cross. In order to take up the Cross, we must start by denying our wants and ideas by embracing the way of the Cross.

## Not Watering Down The Cross

In case we might want to make the act of taking up the Cross into something less than what Jesus actually meant it to be, it might be helpful to read the verse immediately before Luke 9:23, where He called us unto self-denial and cross bearing.

*“The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be slain, and be raised the third day” (Lk. 9:22).*

Unlike what we might assume Jesus might do, He does not focus on the “resurrection” part of that verse to motivate us. Rather, He turns to His own disciples and invites them to a life of self-denial with special emphasis on the Cross as a daily part of their lives. If we had our way, we would have Him speak more of “resurrection life” instead of a crucified life. We might even think, “Why always talk about death and dying? Can we not give more attention to love and loving one another?” I agree with putting more emphasis upon love.

## Self-Giving Love

When God addresses the subject of love, it is never in some sort of mushy, flesh-petting way. God’s love always involves self-giving and sacrifice. It is not necessary to find some obscure, unknown verse to make our point. Instead, we will take the one verse that nearly every Christian knows: *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life”* (Jn. 3:16).

When the concept found in John 3:16 are transferred so as to apply to us, we arrive at I John 3:16: *“Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”* The greatest act of love ever expressed was an act of self-denial and taking up a cross. As with the Cross of Christ, so it is to be in the way we live our lives: the length of self-giving is the proof of the depth of the love.

Jesus said, *“Greater love hath no man than this...”* (Jn. 15:13). What is going to be the act that the Lord establishes as the greatest form of love? That a man lay down his life for someone else. The greatest love is demonstrated in the degree of self-giving, which involves self-denial and cross bearing.

These words concerning “greater love” were spoken by Jesus in the gospel of John. In their fullest meaning, they were pointing to the Cross upon which He would die. The disciples’ comprehension of these words did not come simply by Jesus having spoken them but came at a later time in the midst of the mistreatment and dying which Jesus endured at Calvary. As Jesus hung there on that cruel tree. THEN they were able to SEE the words put into action and find the depth of their meaning.

At the Cross, a person is confronted with more than teaching. The events surrounding Calvary were so scripted by God that neither the priests, the Jews, nor Jesus' own disciples would recall His words spoken back then and equate them with the horrible events of the crucifixion. I am sure that when Jesus originally spoke those words concerning "greater love" to His disciples that day, they pictured some beautiful noble act of self-giving by which all would admire Him and herald Him as a hero and a very great man. But such was not the case. The Lord of Glory was cruelly treated by men who used their power for self-gain.

How was He able to endure such treatment? To answer this, we must notice that Jesus said, "Greater love hath no MAN...". Note my emphasis is upon the word "man". For man to release uncreated love such as this, he would have to be the vessel of uncreated Life. And so it was with Jesus. The selfless giving demonstrated by Christ on the Cross was a glimpse into the true nature of God. The "mystery of love" that mankind could not understand, God chose to reveal by a Cross. The method of expression reveals the nature of the One who came for crucifixion to be that of Eternal Love. Notice the word "eternal", for the Cross was not a temporary event alone but an eternal demonstration.

Why did God resort to such an extreme expression as the Cross? Beginning with creation, God gave man life, substance, shelter, light, and everything that he enjoys today. But beyond these expressions, God had no other means of communicating the divine nature to His creation. Some only saw such things as acts of kindness. Others probably felt that if God had created them, He should rightly give His creatures these things – He owed them that! In all that He gave to mankind, they never saw the heart behind it nor the nature that was the true source and supply. In other words, they never knew "God".

With the fall of mankind came a new problem. The fall of man ushered in a lack of concern for others as the emphasis was refocused on the good of self. All things would now be measured by how self was benefited. With that change came the incapacity and inability to comprehend the mind of God, which proceeded from a place of selflessness. It was for this reason that Cain, the son of Adam, could blatantly stand before the Living God and declare "*Am I my brother's keeper?*" (Gen. 4:9).

Against all these conditions, God chose crucifixion as the method for communicating to man the basis of His true nature. It is one thing for a common man to lay down his life, but God was willing to go to the extent of laying down a Life that cannot die. God was eternal and self-existent, so for that to happen, He would have to become a man.

### **The Intended Effect upon Mankind**

Obviously, one main effect that the self-giving of Christ on the Cross had on mankind was salvation. Sadly, many stop with that explanation and look no further. There are many who are saved but continue to live on the basis of "me first", just as they did before salvation. They have not found rest for their soul because "self" is always fretting over the possibility of loss. Many have quoted I John 4:18, which states that there is no fear in

love. But why is there no fear in love? It is because love is self-giving and willingly gives up and lays down, but fear “fears” loss and worries over it. Even so, because there are those who have never linked love with self-giving, they continue to fret. Their concept of love has to do with God giving them a “magical” touch that proves to them that they are loved by Him. But God has already proven His love in the greatest act of selflessness we could ever imagine. The Cross is that proof! So, what am I saying? I am saying that we should quit waiting for a touch from His love on our life but look to the Cross as proof of His love (cf. Rom. 5:5-8). The result of that should be that we become so enthralled with His love that we move from simply being a recipient of it to being a channel of it. This brings us back to our subject at hand: What was the effect on mankind that He intended by bringing about the Cross? Or said another way, what is God’s intended effect that the Cross will have on mankind?

God’s desire is that we become “after His kind”. One main purpose for the Cross was so that we might become partakers of the divine nature (cf. II Pet. 1:4). For us to have the same nature of eternal, self-giving love is the great gift we receive through regeneration. We are united to the Son of God and thereby to the Love of God. The apostle Paul is a prime example of this. He was constantly self-giving in his ways. Follow the flow of the river found in Paul, and it will lead to the Fountainhead, which is Christ crucified. Such is the source of our regeneration and such is the nature and core of what comprises regeneration. Eternal love is the foundation upon which we are laid – upon which ALL is laid.

The nature of the love of GOD was manifested by Jesus at the Cross, but by union with Him, the love of God has become the substance of what makes up spiritual life. This means that a reconciliation to “God” is a reconciliation to self-denial and cross bearing, for “God is love”. From this, we may surmise that it is not just a reconciling of our “persons” but of our hearts. As such, it also unites us to one another for love is the bond of perfectness (Col. 3:14). It is this union of love that is perfecting the body of Christ (cf. Eph. 4:16). The very nature of conversion is love winning the day over selfish tendencies. The very spirit of what Jesus had in terms of God’s love led Him to lay down His life for us. That is not meant to reside and remain in the Head of the Body only but should descend down into our hearts, like the oil on Aaron’s beard (cf. Ps. 133:1-2). \*\*\*