

# Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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## Discipleship is simple!: What does it mean to deny yourself?

This morning we start a series that considers a very important statement that the Lord Jesus made. The statement was so important that it's actually recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke. We'll take the text for this series from Luke 9:23. This is what Jesus said: *"Then He said to them all, 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me'"* (Luke 9:23).

Luke 9:23 is so important because it tells us, from the mouth of the Lord Himself, how we should follow Him. Jesus answers for us what it means, or what it looks like, to be one of His disciples. The series has a title that is only sort of true. We've called the series "Discipleship is simple!". Of course, as we'll see over the next few weeks, this is true in the sense that knowing what the Lord has said is simple. None of the words of the Lord that I just read out are difficult to understand. Most people know what the sentence means. But we'll also see that, when it comes to living out the application of the verse, discipleship is anything but easy. It involves self-denial. It involves "taking up a cross", and it involves following not our own desires, but after Jesus. I'm sure you're already beginning to see that this is certainly not an easy sounding task.

So over the coming weeks we'll take each of the three instructions in Luke 9:23, and explore what it means to be Jesus' disciple. Today we're going to focus on the phrase *"let him deny himself"*, and ask the question, "What does it mean to deny yourself?" Then in the succeeding weeks we'll think about what it means to "take up your cross" and "follow Jesus".

To help us start off this series we need to notice two key statements that occur in the run up to the Lord's challenge to His disciples. We can read the first of them in Luke 9:18-20. Listen to what Luke records: *"And it happened, as He was alone praying, that His disciples joined Him, and He asked them, saying, 'Who do the crowds say that I am?' So they answered and said, 'John the Baptist, but some say Elijah; and others say that one of the old prophets has risen again.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered and said, 'The Christ of God.'"*

In the run up to Luke 9:23, the verse that forms the basis of our current series, where we find the instruction to deny ourselves, the Lord asks Peter a crucial question, *"Who do you say that I am?"* Although the Lord had asked about who everyone else thought He was, this wasn't His main concern. He wanted to know who Peter thought He was. Perhaps even more pointedly, He wanted Peter to be sure about who Jesus truly was!

Discipleship starts with right thinking about Jesus. If you want to follow Jesus, you need to know who He is. If I asked people today who Jesus was, I suspect I'd get different answers to the one Peter gave. I don't hear of anyone today claiming that Jesus was John the Baptist or Elijah. I might sometimes hear people claiming that Jesus was a prophet. Or I might hear some claim He was a good man and a great teacher. Some people even strangely claim that Jesus is a mythical figure. I don't really understand this since if you want to discount Jesus as a historical figure, then you will have a hard time justifying the existence of any historical person since there is so much non-biblical evidence that Jesus existed. Leaving that to one side, the crucial question remains: Who do you think Jesus is?

Peter had come to the truth so he answers, *"The Christ of God"* (Luke 9:20). Peter had realised that Jesus was the Messiah sent by God to save His people. Peter now knew that Jesus was not just a great teacher, but the promised Saviour. He wasn't just a prophet who would tell about someone who would come in the future to deliver people from the consequences of their sin. Instead, Jesus was the great promised deliverer.

When Matthew records the same incident in Matthew 16, he adds the detail that Peter says, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God"* (Matthew 16:16). Peter had come to realise that Jesus was not just an ordinary man. He was the Son of God. He was *"Immanuel - God with us"* (see Matthew 1:23).

That's how the Bible describes who Jesus is. We're left in no doubt as we read through the New Testament that Jesus was no ordinary man. Instead He was the Son of God, come to save people from their sins and offer to us forgiveness and new life through Him. Peter came to realise this. Do you?

At the start of our series on discipleship, we need to ask ourselves this important question. Who do you think Jesus is? Unless we answer like Peter, all our attempts to follow Jesus will fail. Unless we believe that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God, we'll fail in our attempts to follow Him.

The next important statement we read in Luke 9 comes in Luke 9:21-22. Listen to what Luke records: *"And He strictly warned and commanded them to tell this to no one, saying, 'The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.'"*

Straight after Peter's confession that Jesus was the Christ, the Lord tells Peter not to tell anyone (Luke 9:21). He then goes on to say that He was going to suffer many things. He was going to die and then rise from the dead (Luke 9:22).

Surely this is significant as we start to think about what it means to follow Jesus. In Luke 9:23, Jesus describes to His disciples what would be necessary if they wanted to follow after Him. It would be a life of denying themselves. It would be a life characterised by taking up a cross and following Jesus. But in that sense they were only following the path that Jesus Himself took. The Lord was facing a path of suffering, and of self-denial, the same two features that Jesus says will characterise the lives of any who follow Him.

So we learn something more that is important about being a disciple of the Lord Jesus. If we want to follow Jesus, first of all we need to be sure about who He is, and then we need to realise that Jesus' life was a life of suffering and self-denial, and that's the kind of life that we will be called to.

This is all about counting the cost of following Christ. Luke says as much a few chapters later in Luke 14 when he records the Lord saying something very similar. Listen to Luke 14:27-33: *"And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it - lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish' Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple."*

These words of the Lord Jesus come immediately after He has told the parable of the great supper in which He describes in picture form the grace of God in reaching mankind with salvation (Luke 14:15-24). Everyone at that feast was there only at the grace of the rich man. None of them had earned the right to be there. They simply had to accept the invitation. And so it is with us. None of us can earn our salvation. None of us can become a Christian by denying ourselves or taking up our cross. Salvation is a free gift of God. But in Luke 14, it's as if the Lord is saying, "If you want to follow Me, here's what you're letting yourself in for. You'll have to count the cost. You'll have to bear a cross, i.e. suffer, and you'll have to be prepared to forsake all to be My disciple."

That's the context for our verse for this series from Luke 9:23. We don't deny ourselves or take up a cross in order to earn salvation. Rather self-denial and enduring suffering are normal parts of following the Lord after our salvation.

Perhaps you're listening to me today and you're not a Christian and you're thinking "Wow, this guy is doing a really awful job of selling Christianity to me!" Become a Christian and you'll have to deny yourself and endure suffering. If that was all Jesus said, you'd be right to be put off by that message. But even the next verses in Luke 9 give some reasons why we should deny ourselves and take up our crosses. Listen to Luke 9:24-26: *"For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father's, and of the holy angels."*

First, Jesus says that failure to follow Christ will ultimately lead to our losing our lives. There's the irony. If you think that you'll reject Christ because the cost sounds too high and you'd rather protect your life, you'll end up losing it in eternity. Jesus puts it like this to the unbelieving Pharisees who rejected His claims in John 8:21: *"Then Jesus said to them again, 'I am going away, and you will seek Me, and will die in your sin. Where I go you cannot come.'"*

Without Jesus we'll face the consequences for our sins ourselves. We might make an easier life for ourselves now, but ultimately we'll face God's judgment. We'll die in our sins and not be able to go to heaven to be with Christ. But according to Jesus, if we *"lose our lives"* (Luke 9:24) now for His sake, i.e. we deny ourselves, we'll gain life. Trusting in Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection to bear the judgment we deserve and provide for us forgiveness, will lead to life.

That's why Jesus went on to say, *"What profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost?"* (Luke 9:25). Jesus says that even if you have all the success you can dream of in this life, if you're not right with God, and you face the judgment your sins deserve, what have you really gained? Nothing! But if you follow

Jesus, whether you have success in life or not, you've gained the things that really matter, forgiveness of sins, eternal life, a place in heaven. May the Lord change our perspective so that we see how truly better these things are than a passing success in this world!

So, if we're clear in our minds about who Jesus is, and we're aware of the cost of following the Lord, what does it mean to *"deny ourselves"* (Luke 9:23)? Perhaps we can think about a few aspects of this command from the Lord.

First, part of denying ourselves must surely involve denying ourselves the freedom to sin. No matter how tempting or appealing it may be to turn a blind eye to some command of Scripture and disobey God's commands, we should steer clear of this route. Moses is a great example of this for us. Hebrews 11 records of him: *"By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward"* (Hebrews 11:24-26).

There is so much that is useful for us to learn in this short summary of Moses' attitude. It is right to acknowledge that sin has an appeal. There is something about some sins that is pleasurable. That's what makes sin desirable. The writer to the Hebrews acknowledges as much when he writes about the *"passing pleasures of sin."* But the crucial word here is *"passing"*. Sin may seem to be pleasurable for a while, but the pleasure won't last. Perhaps the guilt of knowing we shouldn't have done something will start to trouble us. Or perhaps someone else is hurt by my indulgence in some wrong action. The pleasures of sin are passing. But they don't seem that way when we're in the heat of the moment. Part of denying ourselves must be to deny ourselves the opportunity to gain the temporary quick fix pleasures of sin.

But the verses in Hebrews tell us something more. We won't be short changed if we deny ourselves the temporary pleasures of sin. Instead we'll gain a greater treasure and reward with Christ. Moses truly counted the cost. He denied himself the pleasures of sin. He took up his cross in choosing to *"suffer affliction with the people of God"* (Hebrews 11:25). And he viewed it all as better than all the riches Egypt had to offer. May we have a similar outlook as we deny ourselves all the riches and pleasurable but sinful experiences the world has to offer, choosing instead the riches that are to be found in Christ.

The call of the Lord Jesus to deny ourselves in order to follow Him is not just a case of denying ourselves the opportunity to indulge in sinful pleasures. Sometimes we'll need to deny ourselves things that are perfectly good and legitimate in their own right. Here's how Paul puts it in Philippians 3:7-11: *"But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead."*

I think there are some similarities between Paul in the passage we've just read from Philippians, and Moses in the Hebrews 11 passage. Both of them deny themselves something. For Moses it was the passing pleasures of sin. For Paul it was the things he once thought gain. If we'd read a few verses earlier in Philippians 3, we'd have seen that for Paul it was all of his religious heritage and moral religious zeal. These were all good enough things in themselves, but Paul counts them as nothing. He treats them as if they were rubbish in order to gain Christ and be found in Him.

If I painted a gloomy picture before of being a Christian, Paul would never have thought like that. He was desperate to know Christ. Paul knew he needed the righteousness that is only found in Christ. He wanted to know the resurrection power of that new life that comes through faith in Christ. Both Paul and Moses denied themselves.

But Paul and Moses were also similar in that they both took up their cross. For Moses, it was choosing to suffer with the people of Israel. For Paul, he said that he wanted to know the fellowship of Christ's suffering, and be conformed to His death. Paul wanted to know Christ even if it meant suffering like Christ had to suffer.

This is exactly what Jesus says in Luke 9. If you want to follow Jesus, you'll suffer like Jesus did. Well, not really like Jesus did, as none of us will ever suffer like Jesus did when He bore our sins. But the point is that if the Lord suffered, then so will all who follow Him. Moses and Paul were glad to deny themselves, and take up their cross to follow Christ. Both Paul and Moses counted this a cost worth paying to follow Christ and to know Him. Do you?

In order to do any kind of service for the Lord, we'll have to deny ourselves other legitimate things. If we take seriously our privilege of reading the Bible to discover more about God, we'll inevitably have to deny ourselves something else in order to give ourselves time to read God's word seriously. Visiting a friend in hospital, or preparing a meal for a neighbour in need might mean denying ourselves the opportunity to watch the latest series on the TV. Serving in some church ministry might mean denying ourselves the opportunity to rest after a hard day.

Supporting the Lord's work financially, in whatever way is relevant to your situation will mean denying yourselves the things you might have bought for yourself with the money. In that respect, it's good for us to have attitudes like the Christians in Macedonia, about whom Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5: *"Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. And not only as we had hoped, but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God."*

These fine believers gave what they could afford and then gave some more. They denied themselves because they had first given themselves to God. It's always dangerous for preachers to talk about giving money as sadly some seem only to want to gain wealth for themselves. So let me take the opportunity as an outsider to ask you to consider whether there is some ministry at your church, or some missionary or Christian worker your church supports that could benefit from your support as you deny yourself some of the legitimate things money can buy.

There are so many ways in which self-denial could be lived out in our everyday circumstances. We deny ourselves when it comes to our spouses, putting their needs and wellbeing before our own. When we want rest after a hard day and our spouses need our help, will we deny ourselves? Will we deny ourselves when it comes to our children? Will we lay aside our own ambitions for the sake of others in our churches? Will we deny ourselves in order to serve the Lord in our place of work?

So we've seen that the call of the Lord Jesus to deny ourselves in order to follow Him involves both denying ourselves the opportunity to enjoy the pleasures of sin, and it involves denying ourselves things that are of themselves perfectly legitimate. But I'm sure there is more to the Lord's instruction to deny ourselves than just denying ourselves things. You see the instruction is to *"deny himself"*. I think that runs deeper than just things. We're to deny everything in us that yearns for anything that isn't Christ honouring. Paul captures something of the thought of this when he writes in Galatians 2:20: *"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."*

Paul says the same kind of thing to the Corinthians also in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15: *"For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again."*

People who follow Christ don't live for themselves any longer. They live for Christ. Sometimes we might think of self-denial as a limited period of time. People deny themselves chocolate for Lent, or they deny themselves alcohol in "Dry January". These are all good things I suppose, but the kind of self denial that the Lord is calling His followers to here is not a temporary state. We're not called to give up a few things we don't really need for a short period and then pat ourselves on the back and admire what a good job we've done. Instead we're called to deny ourselves entirely. To live no longer for ourselves. Not just for January or for Lent, but for our whole lives!

An old writer puts it like this: "The denial of self is not simply denying ourselves certain things, but the denial of the man that lusts after these. The denial of self is the ignoring of self altogether in order to serve others in love." (Hamilton Smith, *Suffering and Glory*). I think that captures something of the meaning of the Lord's command. Are we willing not just to deny ourselves particular things, but to deny ourselves the longing for those things! Will we put the will of Christ before our own wills?

It's the best thing in the world to be a follower of the Lord Jesus. It's not an easy life. As we've seen today and will see over the coming weeks, it involves denying ourselves and enduring hardship as we take up our cross. But it's worth it all as we're following the Christ, the Son of the living God. It's worth losing our lives so far as this world goes in order to gain our lives with Christ. Jim Elliot, the missionary who died taking the gospel to tribes in Ecuador said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose". There's something in that!

May the Lord help us all as we seek to follow Him. May He give us strength to deny ourselves and lay aside everything in us that seeks to please ourselves. May He help us willingly to give it all up for His glory! The Lord be with you this week as you follow Him.

Thank you for listening to this *Truth for Today* talk on "What does it mean to deny yourself?", talk number T1094.

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