

Three Requirements for Following Jesus

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Sermon Purpose

To encourage listeners to follow Jesus through denial of self, taking up our crosses and dying for Him.¹

Text

Summoning the crowd along with His disciples, He said to them, “If anyone wants to be My follower, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me” (Mark 8:34, HCSB).

Introduction

Americans love life. We grab for all the gusto we can get. We lavish extravagances upon ourselves. We want it all and we will not stop until we get it. What is the American dream? What does it have to do with the abundant life? Turn to a neighbor sitting near you and talk about your answers to these questions:²

What does it mean to live the American dream?

What does it mean to live the abundant life?

Will you be happy in two years if a new convert today becomes like your typical church member?

Why?

Whatever your answer, you will likely admit that American believers get confused with these issues. About twenty-seven years ago, when I was about the wise old age of twenty-three, I had the opportunity to meet

¹ This sermon, based on a reference from the gospel of Mark, was preached in a Midwestern Seminary chapel service during the fall semester, 2002. The sermon was somewhat interactive as students were asked to discuss among themselves the opening questions. The sermon was further supported with a PowerPoint presentation and a scene from the *Jesus* movie. The text of this sermon has been altered slightly to update it for this publication.

² Time was allowed for chapel attendees to discuss the answers to these questions with one another.

and hear Dr. Helen Roseveare. Dr. Roseveare was a British medical doctor who served as a missionary in what was then the Belgium Congo in Africa in the early 1960s. While serving there she and her mission found themselves in a terrible Congolese civil war. She was captured, beaten, brutalized, gang-raped by her captors and held as a hostage by the Simba warriors. Her biography was written in *Daylight Must Come*. She never lost hope in her Savior. Later she wrote autobiographical books, *Give Me This Mountain* and *He Gave Us a Valley*. After Dr. Roseveare had given her testimony in our worship service, I was invited to have lunch with her, other guests, and our pastor. Polite conversation turned to what the pastor was doing in fostering maturity in the Christians in our church. As we talked about all we were doing to disciple people to maturity in Christ, Dr. Roseveare quietly sat down her fork. That simple motion called every eye at the table to her and when she knew she had every eye on her, she quietly said, "American Christians make me sick." Well, you could have heard that proverbial pin drop. Several mouths fell open, exposing large chunks of partially chewed gospel bird. After a few long, silent moments, a few heads nodded in agreement and someone swiftly changed the subject.

I sat there enraged. How dare this foreigner speak in our worship service, receive our love offering, eat our fried chicken, and say such a thing?

I had not thought much of Dr. Roseveare in many years until the fourth Sunday in June just past. I heard a sermon on the verse we will consider today and that verse will not let me go. In fact, in the last three weeks, this verse has been referenced two times in this chapel already. After the first time I thought God would let this verse rest but that speaker did not say what was on my heart. After the second time, I thought I could relinquish my burden with this verse, but God would not give me peace. It is not a verse I would have chosen to speak on. But I do so now, depending completely on him. So, I ask you to turn to a common verse, so common most everyone in this room can quote it. Yet, this verse, rightly understood, is one of the hardest sayings Jesus gave us. Please open your Bibles to Mark 8.

Jesus had just quizzed the disciples about what people were saying about him and what they thought about him. Peter proclaimed him to be the Christ and Jesus commended his insight. But from that time on, Jesus began to tell them about the suffering and death that lay ahead of him in Jerusalem. But Peter ruined the moment by pulling Jesus aside and tried to quiet him of such talk. Jesus rebuked him, even calling him Satan, because Peter was only seeing things from a worldly perspective.

Please stand in honor of God's word as I read aloud verses 34-38.

Summoning the crowd along with His disciples, He said to them, "If anyone wants to be My follower, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of Me and the gospel will save it. For what does it benefit a man to gain the whole world yet lose his life? What can a man give in exchange for his life? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels" (Mark 8:34-38, HCSB).

Let us pray. God, give us insight into the cost of discipleship. Give us the will and desire to follow Jesus fully. Amen.

In verse 34, Jesus gives us three requirements necessary to be his disciples. This verse is so straightforward in grammar and structure that there is really little to comment about; that is, until you consider the meaning of these words as they fell on the ears of Peter and the others.

I. Deny Yourself

Jesus' first requirement is to deny oneself. Now there's a concept foreign to our American culture. We don't deny ourselves much of anything. Thirty minutes worth of TV on any channel you choose, including the religious ones, will prove how skilled we are at indulging ourselves. A casual glance around the buildings of most American churches will bear it out as well. "Deny" means to separate. It is to forget one's self, or lose sight of one's self and one's own interests. The meaning is that we must separate from ourselves, our desires, and our independence. When we deny ourselves, we become objective enough to see ourselves as we really are. We must admit we have nothing beyond ourselves to give Jesus. Pink said that growth in grace has a downward dimension. Until we see our nothingness, completely and utterly unworthy of mercy, we cannot understand and receive the full mercy God offers us.

God didn't save me because he needs a few more good ideas. He didn't save me because no one else could do what I can do. He did not save me because I was worth saving. I am not. He saved me solely to show his mercy. And that's why he saved you as well.

We have some misconceptions about what is going on in our world. We think God's will is about us. It isn't. It's about Jesus. It's not about my contribution to the kingdom. It's about Jesus. It's not about my ambitions. It's about Jesus. It's not about my plans. It's about Jesus. It's not about my giftedness and talents. It's about Jesus. It's not about my church. It's about Jesus. It's not about my place in the association. It's about Jesus. It's not about people respecting my standing in theological education. It's about Jesus. It's not about whom I can control. It's about Jesus. It's not about being in charge. It's about Jesus. It's not about my

position in the SBC. It's about Jesus. It's not about what I want. It's about Jesus. It's not about me. It's about Jesus.

II. Take Up Your Cross

Because we are not living in first century Palestine, we lose the impact of the words, "Take up your cross." When Jesus said "cross," his hearers had a different mental picture than what we might get today. Crosses today are glittery and clean. They are small, lightweight and manageable. They are artwork and architectural. They are fashion statements. Not one of those images sprang into the thoughts of the disciples that day. The best historical definition I came across is this:

Cross: a well known instrument of most cruel and ignominious punishment, borrowed by the Greeks and Romans from the Phoenicians; to it were affixed among the Romans, down to the time of Constantine the Great, the guiltiest criminals, particularly the basest slaves, robbers, the authors and abettors of insurrections, and occasionally in the provinces, at the arbitrary pleasure of the governors, upright and peaceable men also, and even Roman citizens themselves.³

Jesus had just told the disciples what he would suffer and how he would die. Peter challenged it, but Jesus rebuked him and maintained his course. He might as well have said, "I am going to take up a Roman cross and I will die on a Roman cross. So pick up your cross and follow me."

Because we do not understand the historical setting of these words we ask what Jesus meant with the term "cross." A cross is not tough times. It is not the problems you face in life. It's not an infirmity that you may have. It is not your individualized set of disadvantages life has given you. It is not the difficulties of human existence. The cross means death. To follow Jesus, one must die.

These Jewish disciples knew it. No telling how many times they had seen the Romans wield the cross to execute their Jewish countrymen. Not only did they loathe the cross of Rome because of the oppression it represented, their own law told how loathsome the cross was.

If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, *because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse*. You must not desecrate the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance (Deut 21:22-23, NIV; emphasis mine).

³ Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 586.

To be hung on a tree was confirmation that God's curse, his utter rejection, was upon you. What Jew would willingly take up a cross?

The meaning of the cross has really not changed. The cross means you will pay any price, endure any suffering, and face any shame and humiliation for the sake of Jesus. The cross means you will die, if need be, for Jesus' sake. Jesus' death on the cross paid the debt of sin and God's justice was satisfied. That is a payment none of us is worthy to make. Only Jesus could do that. But we must pay the price of discipleship. While most of us will not likely pay the ultimate cost of discipleship, we must reckon ourselves crucified. I don't have the time to trace Paul's concept of the crucified life, but hear a summary in Paul's words:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal 2:20, NIV).

The cross is the greatest paradox in human history. The cross was his cross, but it was my cross. He died on my cross. My sin put him there. I deserved that cross but he took my place on it. The cross was a tool of death, yet it is the means to life. The cross calls me to die, but in that dying I find union with the Savior and he lives his life through me. Jesus commanded us to take up our cross, but our obedience to that command is voluntary.

In John 6 followers of Jesus began to understand what he was calling them to do. They began to grumble and complain. Finally, many no longer followed him. Jesus let them go. You see, death to self is no easy death. Death to self is always terrible. If you expect dying to self to be a pleasant experience, you are wrong. We fight death to self like a drowning man fights for another gasp of air. Death to self is the radical command of the Christian life. To take up your cross meant one thing: you were going to a certain death and your only hope was in the resurrection power of Jesus Christ.

Are you God-centered or self-centered? Jesus presents quite a "grown-up" gospel to us here, one that does not merely pander to our desires, but challenges us in our deepest being.

III. Follow Christ

Finally, Jesus gives us the third requirement to be a disciple: follow him. Follow him in obedience to the Father. Follow him through suffering and pain. Follow him in proclamation. Follow him to Calvary and to die.

This verb "follow" occurs 93 times in the New Testament, most of those occurrences in the Gospels. Almost all the occurrences in the

Gospels carry this same meaning: to follow one who proceeds, join him as his attendant, accompany him, to join one as a disciple, become or be his disciple.

Sometimes we think fellowship is easy. Yet there are costs. Five years ago in July of 1999, the pastor of our church (we belonged to Wedgwood Baptist Church, Fort Worth, Texas) began to share with us that he sensed that God wanted to give our church a greater platform from which to proclaim his gospel. He challenged us to pray for that end. We did. We asked God to do whatever he wanted to do with us, to give us greater opportunity to witness for him. We have various things in mind: plant a new church, start a TV broadcast, expand our apartment ministries. But God had a different plan entirely. It would cost a little more than buying airtime on a local TV channel. It would cost a little more than planting a new church. In fact, it would cost dearly. In less than three months, a crazed gunman would walk into our church, fire off about a hundred rounds of ammunition, set off a pipe bomb, kill seven saints, wound seven others, and terrorize hundreds. In less than ten minutes, God gave us a greater platform.

Nothing I can say in the time allotted here will allow me to communicate effectively the terror of those moments as my family and I were eye-witnesses to those events. The aftermath was gut-wrenching and life-changing. Yet, as we begin to process that event and heal, we began to see God's hand at work all around us. Yes, God gave the church there an unprecedented platform to testify of God's sustaining love and grace in our lives. Through that testimony we saw dozens upon dozens come to know Jesus. We saw families reunited. We saw lives changed. But the price of discipleship was costly.

Just a few weeks ago, our campus gathered for a day of prayer. I heard my colleagues and our students praying for revival. I left those meetings scared. We pray for God to work but are we willing to do what he wants done? Will we join Jesus in the fellowship of his suffering? Are you willing to die so revival might come?

In C.S. Lewis' wonderful children's book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, four human children are transported to the mythical land of Narnia. It was under siege by the wicked white witch, but ancient prophecies foretold that two sons of Adam and two daughters of Eve would come, and Aslan, the character representing Jesus, would then set Narnia free. When all four children arrive in Narnia, they are greeted by talking beavers and hidden from the white witch. The beavers told them how Narnia was awaiting deliverance by Aslan, son of the Great Emperor. One of the girls asked, "What kind of man is Aslan?" Mrs. Beaver replied, "Goodness, child. Aslan is no man. He is the King, the king of beasts." "You mean he's a lion?" "Yes, dears, he is the lion."

Another child asked, "But, is he safe?" Mr. Beaver answered, "No, he is not safe. But he is good."

I do not follow Jesus because he is safe. I follow Jesus because he is right. I do not follow Jesus because he will bless me. I follow Jesus because he is the blessing. I don't follow Jesus because I know what his plan is. I follow Jesus because he knows what his plan is.

I've been listening since June as people have talked about living their lives, about the state of their churches. I hear someone say, "Oh, I'm surviving." I hear a pastor say, "The church is getting by." Maybe we don't need to be surviving. Maybe we don't need to be getting by. Maybe we need to understand the cross of Jesus. (At this point the congregation viewed the crucifixion scene from the *Jesus* movie).

The only way to follow Christ is to deny and die. If a church wants to follow Christ, they must be led to deny and die. Church leaders must model denying and dying. A church leader's job is to lead people to die. Jesus did not call to us, "Follow me and survive." He said, "Follow me and die." Martyred missionary Martin Burnham said, "God did not call me to be a missionary. God did not call me to the Philippines. God called me to follow Him." Southern Baptist missionary Jan Johnsonius, who lost her husband in a terrible accident in Argentina said, "When a missionary goes on the field, they have already died." Are you that kind of missionary, that kind of disciple?

Our banner is a cross.

Our expression is water burial.

Our memorial is a supper of sacrifice.

Our calling is to die.

Go lead people to die.