

Deciding to Follow Jesus

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[0 : 00] Folks, let me pray before we dive into that wonderful passage. Let's pray together. Father, we come before you this morning and we come before this passage and we have questions and maybe we have other thoughts and worries. Lord, we ask that you would still our hearts and that the words of my mouth and the reflection of all of our hearts would be pleasing to you.

We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. Do you know the story behind the well-known older hymn, I have decided to follow Jesus?

Well, it came about like this. A family in a small town in India became Christians years ago. And when the village found out that they had become Christians, they were outraged.

And they pulled them into the town square. The chief of that town told the father to renounce Jesus or his whole family would be killed.

And the words that came out of his mouth that day were, I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back. And with those words, his children were killed.

[1 : 19] Again, he was commanded to renounce his faith in Jesus. But instead he said, Though none go with me, still I will follow.

No turning back. And with that, his wife was killed. And then for the final time, this time with his own life in the balance, the man was given the opportunity to renounce Jesus and live.

And yet what did he say? The cross before me, the world behind me. No turning back. I have decided to follow Jesus.

And those were his last words. Now the witness of that man and of his entire family as they suffered was the turning point for that entire village.

They saw that he was willing to suffer and die for his faith in Jesus. And because of his devotion and love for Christ, and his dying witness, and that of his entire family, the people who killed him became Christians.

[2 : 33] The only reason that man could stand in the face of such terrible suffering and persecution was because he knew that he was not alone. He knew that he was called by Jesus to deny himself, to take up his cross and follow him.

But it's so easy for us to sing words like, I have decided to follow Jesus, isn't it? Words that are jam-packed with a desire to serve God and to give our all to him.

But do we really mean it? Can we genuinely confess that our desire is to give everything to God? See friends, the Christian life is costly.

Ask anyone who's been a Christian for any number of years, and they will have stories of the cost of following Jesus. Being a Christian is costly, but it is totally worth it.

This morning I want us to spend a few minutes in Luke 9, particularly verses 23 to 26. So it would be great if you have that passage open in front of you.

[3 : 47] And I've chosen this because I want us to see that the life Christians are called to, the life we're called to live, is costly but glorious. And as we go into this new year, this is a time where people often reflect on the year gone by, and they plan to do things maybe a little bit differently in the coming year.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if in this new year we as a whole church family, as individuals as well, decided to submit fully to Christ in every area of our lives and count the cost of following him.

This morning I want us to see that this message of hope and salvation, that is the gospel of Jesus in the world, is also a call to come and die.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian from a number of years ago, put it this way, when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.

We might think of death as only a negative thing. But I hope that as we spend time in Luke 9, we'll see that the death Jesus calls us to is one that leads to glorious life, true and lasting hope, and an eternity that is beyond our wildest dreams.

[5 : 13] Maybe this is your first time in church. And you're investigating what this whole Christianity thing is all about. Maybe you're a discouraged Christian who is weary of the daily battle.

Or maybe you're listening to this and you're just really struggling to find hope and meaning in this life. As we look to the call to follow Jesus, my prayer is that we would all be encouraged encouraged and challenged at the same time.

So we'll look at these few verses by thinking about three commands and two reasons. So the first thing we see in this passage are three commands. In verse 23, three commands.

So the three commands are to deny self, to take up your cross, and to follow Jesus. Now in Luke 9, Jesus asked his disciples who they think he is.

Peter confesses in verse 20 that Jesus is God's Messiah, the sent one from God who would save God's people. Peter is right, even if he doesn't fully grasp what he has just said.

[6 : 22] And after that wonderful declaration of truth that Jesus is God's Messiah, Jesus says that he will be killed by the chief priests and the teachers of the law.

But on the third day, he will rise again. So the truth of who Jesus is goes hand in hand with his death, which is the means by which he saves people and therefore is fulfilling his role as God's Messiah.

It's also a bit more than that, isn't it? Because Jesus, after speaking of his own death, turns to his disciples and calls them to die too. Read verse 23 with me.

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me. And normally when you're trying to entuse people about something, you start with the benefits first, don't you?

For example, if you're trying to convince family members to go on a holiday abroad, you start by talking about the lovely beaches, about the warm weather, the sunshine. You don't talk about the long flight.

[7 : 30] You don't talk about all the COVID tests you've got to do. You don't talk about the quarantine on return because you want people to see the benefits before they see the cost, right?

Well, Jesus doesn't do that. See, in the eyes of the world, this is probably one of the worst recruitment strategies that exists. Because Jesus says, if you want to be his disciple, if you want to follow him, you need to take up your cross daily.

Now, to our modern minds, that might not sound like much. We don't have the same idea of crosses today as the first listeners did. Today, a cross has become a stylish accessory, a nice necklace, a bracelet, or something like that.

But for these first listeners, the cross meant only one thing, death. The cross was a means of execution, of punishment, a sign of public humiliation, and a visible reminder never ever to cross the Roman authorities.

All Christians are to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Jesus. All Christians are to renounce our own plans, renounce our own purposes instead, and follow Jesus, to live for him.

[8 : 56] And this isn't meaningless. Jesus doesn't tell us to do this just for fun, or for some form of asceticism, which is where we think that this world or this life don't matter at all.

No, Jesus tells us to deny ourselves so that we are enabled and can follow him. So the call of the Christian life is to deny self, take up your cross, to die to yourself, and instead to live for and follow Jesus.

To deny self means to renounce all the things that would distract you from Jesus, to turn away from everything that would cause you to stumble, and reject anything that would demand your worship that is not Jesus.

It means that you are not in charge of your life any longer. It means that you love Jesus more than you love the approval of others, more than you love comfort, more than you love life itself.

for some people that means leaving their home country and comfort that they've known their whole lives to go to a new place and tell people about Jesus.

[10 : 10] For most of us it means refusing to go along with our natural tendency to sin. It might mean not engaging in gossip at work, pulling the boss down when he's not looking.

It might mean denying ourselves time in front of the TV because we maybe haven't read our Bible that day or prayed with the kids before they go to bed. Denying self is hard.

It is going to be a struggle but as we'll see in a moment it is totally worth it. To take up your cross means to be ready and willing to be opposed for your Christian faith.

To be shamed for holding biblical views that run contrary to what our current culture says. to suffer because you're a follower of Jesus and maybe to die because of your allegiance to him.

To deny self and take up your cross means that Jesus is more precious to you than anything else. For the disciples originally hearing this it meant that they would literally die for their faith.

[11:17] Church history tells us how most of them were killed for following Jesus. for many Christians in the world today taking up their cross really does mean that they will be executed for their faith in Christ.

And we need to consider that cost and really be willing to carry it. A few years ago my wife and I spent some time in the Middle East and we were speaking with a young missionary family there and he was asked the husband was asked by a group aren't you afraid to share the gospel aren't you afraid for your own life that you might be killed because you're here and you're a missionary where you're not allowed to be.

And with dead seriousness on his face he looked at the group and said no I consider the cost of dying for Jesus when I became a Christian and nothing has changed.

carrying your cross is a cost that could lead to death and we must be aware of that. And the final command is to follow Jesus.

This means to follow his example to walk in his footsteps to live as he lives brothers and sisters you cannot separate Jesus from the rest of the Bible.

[12:41] To be a follower of Jesus means to submit to God's word to live according to it in every area of your life. Following Jesus means that you intentionally live out your faith for him.

You need to be active in your pursuit of Christ. Being a Christian is not just about coming to church on a Sunday to the Sunday services. It means that your entire life the way you think about things the way you interact with the ideas of the world and who you are the way you live is completely different.

You cannot coast through the Christian life but instead we must intentionally be becoming more like Jesus every single day. So the call of Jesus is to die to yourself and to live for him and to be like him.

Now maybe you're sitting there and thinking well this all sounds just a bit too much for me. This whole Christianity thing is asking quite a lot. Maybe you're tired and you're weary and you're questioning whether or not Jesus really knows what he's asking of you.

Well brothers and sisters Jesus knows more than anyone what it means to carry a cross. Jesus is the only one who can call people to deny themselves and to carry their cross because he carried a cross to his own execution.

[14:16] The place where he bore the weight of sin and God's wrath so that sinners like you and like me could be made right with God and have life in all of its fullness so that we could live the life we were created to live.

Jesus went through agony and death so that we could serve God and out of our devotion to him have life. There is great cost in following Jesus.

There is no denying that and as Christians we need to be upfront about that. But there is also great blessing. There is true hope. There is eternal life spent in harmony with God forever.

All of the suffering we endure in this life as we follow these three commands to deny ourselves to take up our cross and follow him are completely worth it. But maybe you are still asking well why? Why should I do that? Why should I give up everything to follow Jesus? What is in it for me? That is exactly what Jesus goes on to explain. And the second thing we see in our passage the two reasons why we should follow Jesus' commands in verses 24 to 26.

[15:32] Two reasons. Read those verses with me. Verse 24. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it but whoever loses their life for me will save it.

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world and yet lose or forfeit their very self? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.

So the two reasons to follow Jesus' commands are one by losing your life it will be saved in verse 24 and two Jesus will not be ashamed of you in the end verse 26.

Now let's look at those in turn and see how these are great reasons and motives to deny ourselves to carry our cross and follow Christ. So verse 24 says whoever wants to save their life will lose it but whoever loses their life for me will save it.

That's the first reason. Now here we get a wake up call which tells us the reality of how we respond to Jesus really matters.

[16:46] Maybe you've been flirting around with Christianity for a little while now coming along to church saying and doing the right things but actually sitting on the fence not following Jesus as you should and as the Bible says or maybe you are considering Christianity but you're putting it off for a more convenient time.

Choosing Jesus isn't something you put off. Too often people reason that they want to live a little before they become Christians. They want to go out partying have a few sexual partners and only after that do they maybe want to become Christians.

There is no time to delay. It is not smart or wise it is simply deceiving yourself and rejecting Jesus to put it off.

Jesus made it abundantly clear that a day is coming where he will judge the world. All those who call on him all those who deny themselves take up their cross and follow him will be saved.

Meaning that people, those Christians will spend eternity in the presence of God in perfect harmony. No more pain, no more suffering, no more death and no more sin.

[18:07] The place often referred to as heaven. But those who reject Jesus will lose their souls.

Meaning that they will spend their eternity under the just wrath and judgment of God in the place we call hell.

the path of denying self, the path of carrying your cross, the path of following Jesus leads to eternal peace and union with God and the path of self pleasure, of self-centeredness, of self-worship leads to separation from God and judgment.

The things that we see in this world, in this life, are temporary. They are fleeting, running after them may satisfy for a moment or maybe even a day or a week or a few months.

But one day it will all be gone. And on that day the question won't be, well how big was your house?

How much money did you have in the bank?

The question will be, how did you respond to Jesus? Did you live for him or not? The decision that Jesus gives people in verse 24 is whether they accept or reject him, which has eternal consequences.

[19:28] And the same is true today. Will you accept Christ and be saved or reject Christ and be lost? By denying yourself and carrying your cross and following Jesus, you are putting him first.

You are submitting to his will. Submitting to the word of God and following Jesus with everything you have. As Bonhoeffer said, when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.

You cannot gain resurrection life, true life, without first of all dying to yourself. And Jesus reiterates that in verse 25.

Read it with me. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world and yet lose or forfeit their very self? So you can have everything in the world, but it is all worthless if in the end you lose your soul.

Jesus isn't saying that you gain salvation by denying yourself. A person is only saved through Jesus. but he is saying there is no point gaining the world and losing your soul.

[20:37] Now Jim Kerry, an actor and comedian, has a net worth of over 180 million dollars. He is arguably someone who has gained the world.

But he said this, I think everyone should get rich and famous and do everything they have ever dreamed of so that they can see it's not the answer. See, the place to find life is not in this world.

It is only in Jesus. The one through whom we are saved. The one who calls us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. Jesus calls us to die so that we can truly live.

And the second reason Jesus gives for people to deny themselves, to take up their cross and follow him, is so that on that final day, as we all stand before God, Jesus will not be ashamed of us.

Read verse 26 with me. Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be

ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.

[21 : 49] Everyone who rejects Jesus and does not honour or put their faith in him, as they stand before God on that final day, Jesus says he will be ashamed of them. The assumption here is that those who have gained the whole world in verse 25 think that by doing so, their souls will be saved.

They think that they can do enough or be good enough to be right with God. But Jesus says that the pursuit of things in this life, at the neglect of following Jesus, will result in him being ashamed of you on that final day.

Think of it like this, when a person stands, dies and they stand before God, on that final day as all their thoughts, all their actions, everything they've ever done or thought or said in this life is displayed on a big screen in a courtroom before God.

It is very clear that they are guilty of sin, they have broken God's law and therefore deserving of God's wrath. Every single one of us has done that. But for the Christian, Jesus steps in and he says, paid for.

That person is mine. I was broken for them. I bore their punishment on the cross. And Jesus took the Christian's sin and shame on himself and gave us his righteousness, his right standing before God.

[23 : 19] But for the person who rejects Jesus, for the person who refuses to deny themselves, to take up their cross and follow him, Jesus stands there as judge.

Those who are not disciples of Jesus will lose their lives and he will be ashamed of them on that day. And there are people who have all the knowledge of the Bible and of Jesus that they need to be saved, but they are not willing to submit, to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him. They are ashamed of following Jesus. And that's the warning. If that is you, if you are ashamed of Jesus in this life, he will be ashamed of you in the end.

And why is this such an important message for us to hear this morning? Well, because Jesus is saying to each one of us, come and die with me daily.

Live for me daily. Deny yourself and I will satisfy you in ways that you cannot begin to imagine both now and forever.

[24 : 26] It's an important message for us to hear because the call to be a radical disciple of Jesus is the call to die. And through that death, we discover the fullness of life that humanity was created for.

Brothers and sisters, do not let a day go by where the world is more important to you than Jesus is. Charles Studd was a cricketer turned missionary to China from many years ago.

And he loved his wife, but taking Jesus' words in Luke 9 seriously into his marriage, he encouraged his wife to say a short prayer every day that would help her focus on Jesus.

So every day she prayed, dear Lord Jesus, you are to me dearer than Charlie ever could be. And that is how we live out our identity as radical disciples.

As men and women who put Jesus as our priority in every single day, it's how we deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. Why not start each day this week with a short, simple prayer, dear Lord Jesus, you are to me dearer than this life ever could be.

[25 : 39] I think back to that family in India who are behind the song I've decided to follow Jesus, they lay everything on the line. They gave their lives because Jesus was more precious to them than the life that they lived.

They didn't know what would come from their deaths, but that entire village was one for Christ as they willingly denied themselves, took up their cross and followed Jesus until their dying breath. following Jesus is the greatest privilege there is in this life. Do not waste time. Do not run to the fleeting things of this world, but instead listen to the Savior who calls you to die so that in him you can truly live.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you for sending your son Jesus Christ. Christ, we thank you for the salvation that he has made possible through his death on the cross.

And Lord, I pray that you would give us all strength as we reflect on this coming year to make that decision, to die to ourselves every day so that we can live and follow you with all of our strength.

[27 : 01] Lord, give us the ability to do so by your Holy Spirit and would we bring you all the glory and honor. In Jesus' name, amen.