

Image Restored

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning again. It's lovely to be here. Sorry for my complete lack of grace in failing to congratulate anyone from South Africa. I'm going to be speaking to a very dear friend who's South African tomorrow, so I'm kind of, I'm stealing myself for his gloating. So anyway, we're going to be talking a little today then about this idea of the restoration of humanity. And that might be, it might even seem like a strange idea that when we're talking about the Christian faith then, we're not talking about something that causes us to escape from reality or escape from creation, but rather it's about the restoration of it. C.S. Lewis, the author, once said something that I find deeply moving. He said that if we met now a human person untainted by sin, an unfallen human person, they would be so glorious that we would be tempted to fall down and worship them. But of course, we're not unfallen. There are so many things that are broken and that are twisted. We are what another author referred to as glorious ruins. And as a way of thinking about who we are as human persons, it's very helpful.

We're glorious ruins. There's still so much that is beautiful that we can see in every person. The idea of every person being created in God's image confers dignity and respect. It means that there are no little or insignificant people. Everybody has value, and that's a beautiful thing.

But also that everybody is infected by this same problem that we described yesterday, this idea of being curved in upon ourselves, where we're created to love God and to love others. Instead, we curve in and use our relationships to get what we can. I'm going to say more about that in just a minute or two.

We looked at a bit of a framework for thinking about the Bible's bigger picture, creation. And we looked forward, though, to new creation as well. And the importance of that is that when you look at the creation account, do we just feel nostalgic because it's not like that now? But the Bible tells us how things conclude, how things come to their fantastic conclusion, where things are restored, where God restores things to be the way they're supposed to be. So it's not just a nostalgia for what's lost, but it's a longing for how things will be also. Things in the meantime, though, are not the way they're supposed to be. We don't need to look very hard to see that. And what God's in the business of doing in the meantime, then, is to restore and renew and to redeem, instead of being curved in on ourselves to turn us outward from ourselves. We talked a lot yesterday about the rejection of creatureliness in the account of the temptation in the Garden of Eden. The temptation is, you will take this fruit, then you will be like God. A rejection of creatureliness and the right ordering of our relationships.

But also in that original temptation, there's the doubt about God's goodness. Is God good enough that I can trust him that what he says is actually good for me?

[3 : 45] And of course, that's exactly the temptation for all of us every moment of every day. Did God really say, is he really trustworthy? Is he good? Does he want my best? Or is he somebody who just wants to constrain and restrict, to cramp us, to make us somehow less than fully human instead of fully human? And that's the reason for choosing that title today, the restoration of humanity.

Because one of the big lies out there, and many of us are tempted to believe it, I'm sure, is that God's law, God's commands, God's ways for us are in fact those which constrain, constrict, reduce us, diminish our humanity. Whereas in actual fact, the message of the Bible is good news that what God says is good for us, is best for us. So that's what we're going to be thinking about, is how then does this get reversed, this assertion of autonomy? The idea of autonomy is that I am in charge, and that life and the purpose of life, the meaning of life is that I should try to arrange all my circumstances and my relationships and my possessions and use my gifts and opportunities, and all of that stuff there exists in order to make me happy and to make me contented and to make me

secure and to fulfill my life. It puts me at the center. And of course, when it's ramped up in our current culture, it goes beyond just, if you like, the idea that I can use what's around me to make me better, to make me happier, it goes beyond that even to, and I actually get to decide what's right and wrong in the world on the basis of how I feel. I get to decide what's true and false on the basis of how I feel internally. And of course, our culture right now has perhaps promoted and normalized this more than any culture in human history. This idea of autonomy, it's almost reflexive. We think of ourselves, a good friend of mine has worked a great deal in Eastern Europe and in the East, and he asks people always a question, how do you think about yourself? And he notes, he observes that in the West, for most folks like us here, our instinctive response is to answer, I, whereas there are cultures in the world where people's responses, we, which is fascinating, very, very different. So a culture that normalizes autonomy, I'm in charge. Into that culture, directly confronting it comes the words that were read, Jesus' words. And Jesus' call to discipleship. Those words were, if anyone would come after me, let them deny themselves, take up the cross daily and follow me. That call to deny self, take up cross and follow, it confronts, it clashes head on with this idea of autonomy. And what I'm wanting to say and what I want to argue and commend to you is this, that that call to deny self, take up cross and follow, far from being a diminishment, a restriction or constraint, is a merciful call from the one who made us and knows us better than we know ourselves, who loves us more than we love ourselves, cares for us more than we care for ourselves, wants what's best and can do what's best for us. It's that one who says, deny self, take up cross and follow. And that's a liberation from the corrosive, the poisonous effects of autonomy.

That's what Jesus' call is. And that's what I want us to focus in on. And we'll just go through bit by bit. There's the text up there. One of the things that I want to just point out, and it's just a little thing for how we read the Bible for when you're reading it yourself.

This little passage that we read, of course, is in a context. And its context is it's sandwiched between the beginning of Luke chapter 9, Jesus sends out 12. Beginning of chapter 10 of Luke, Jesus sends out 72.

And he sends them out to do Jesus' stuff. To do the stuff that Jesus has been doing in the world. To go and to preach good news of kingdom. To heal people. To drive out demons. To do Jesus' stuff. [8 : 53] He sends them out, and then he sends even more out at the beginning of chapter 10. And the idea of what does it take for people to be prepared to be the kind of people who can go and do Jesus' stuff in the world is right in the middle of the chapter. Deny self, take a cross, and follow, says Jesus. And then you're going and you're doing Jesus' stuff in the world. A world that desperately needs that. To put it more technically, discipleship and mission are so intimately related and inseparable. Those who follow Jesus are those who do Jesus' stuff in the world, if you like.

Let's think about this business of denying self. Because we probably hear that as quite a negative thing. We may associate that with the sort of false asceticism, perhaps. Like, you know, give up chocolate for Lent or whatever. These rather trivial things. But much more fundamentally, this question of deny self is a question that addresses who is in charge. One of the ways that I find helpful to think about this is to imagine a throne or a seat of authority in our lives. And who's sitting on it, giving the instructions and the directions? Is it me that's sitting on that seat of authority? Or is it God who's sitting on that seat of authority? And this battle that enrages for many of us as we're constantly tempted, as we doubt whether God really is good enough to trust to sort of push aside and to get back onto that seat. So that's really the question that's being asked is, who is in charge?

Who's the one who calls the shots? Is it myself? Am I in charge and basically trying to use God to get what I want and use all my other relationships to get what I want? There's a direction that follows from this. If I put myself in charge, then I have to get very busy making life work for me. And that's going to involve making my relationships work to provide me with what I think I need. It's going to involve defending myself against things that might threaten me. It's going to involve using everything at my disposal to try to make me secure and happy and content. And Jesus says, no, that's not actually the way. And we'll come to this in a minute or two. Not only is that not the way, that guarantees that you won't get the things that you're looking for. It's actually counterproductive. [11 : 42] This question of who's in charge could also be framed in terms of ownership. Who owns us? Who's the one who actually has claim of ownership over us? That's why we started with the idea of creation yesterday.

Because actually there is one who said, I made it all and it's mine. And therefore you are accountable to me. This idea of ownership then is about rightly ordered relationships rather than disordered relationships.

Paul talks about this, the Apostle Paul talks about this in other different ways. I was reflecting on this and it was nice that it was mentioned in the kids session earlier in the service, where part of Ephesians 2, 1 to 10 was quoted, verse 8, about it's by grace you've been saved and through faith. But that passage is fascinating because Paul describes people like you and me as being dead in our sins and our transgressions.

And the idea and the picture is of helplessness, of hopelessness. He describes us as being, by nature, children of wrath.

[12 : 59] And he then says, but God, but God has done something amazing about this. That God has reached in, has come to us in our helplessness and in our hopelessness.

And Paul goes on to say, he's then made us alive together with Christ. He's raised us from the grave together with Christ and seated us together with Christ in the heavenlies.

By grace, you're saved, he says. And it's not just that he's made us alive and raised and seated us. He's done this, Paul goes on to say, so that we might walk in the good works that God's prepared for us to do in advance.

It's another way of saying the same thing. Deny self is a transfer of ownership. And here in Ephesians, Paul is talking about a transfer of ownership and actually a transfer from death to life and life that is united to Jesus Christ.

And that's the good news that he unites us by grace out of pure kindness and gift to Christ to give us the gift of new life and transformed relationships as a result.

[14 : 18] The basis for transformation, and this is so key when we're reading the Gospels, when we're reading any part of the Bible, is not go and sort yourself out and try a bit harder.

That's not good news to go and sort yourself out, try a bit harder, tidy up your act, and try and look like you're a bit better than you actually are.

The good news is that this is gift and it's a gift of new life to be united with Jesus, to deny self, the ownership to be transferred, the Christ being on the throne of the life of our lives instead of ourselves sitting on it.

All these different ways of saying the same thing. That's the basis then for receiving this gift of new life that's transformative. It leads to a whole set of new heart attitudes.

But maybe you're sitting and you're thinking, well, what about my rights? What about me? If I deny self, if someone else owns me, then what about my rights?

[15 : 27] And that's what Jesus goes on to say. It's not just deny self. He says, deny self, take up cross, take up your cross daily and follow. What does that mean?

This idea of taking up the cross and following is a pattern that's repeated all over the New Testament. The idea of this taking up the cross is to reflect on the pattern of what Jesus does in going to the cross.

And when Jesus goes to the cross, it's actually demonstrating God's love to us. It's a love then that is willing to give to others.

It's a love that doesn't defend itself but in fact gives all that it has for the blessing and the benefit of others. Even if that seems to involve suffering or pain or loss.

So to take up the cross and follow is to recognize that there's a cross-shaped pattern for life that Jesus calls people to walk in.

[16 : 39] A pattern of life that involves understanding that all we are and all we have is actually not given to us for ourselves but actually for the blessing and benefit of others.

We're designed if you like not so much to be receptacles of what God gives but channels of it to others. And that's this picture of cross-shaped living.

We've already mentioned Ephesians so we might as well mention a bit more of Ephesians but the beginning of chapter 5 in Ephesians is just one of the many places in the New Testament that gives us exactly this pattern.

Paul there says therefore be imitators of God. It's a startling statement. How do we imitate God? We can't create worlds and sustain them but Paul goes on to define exactly what imitation of God actually means.

He says as beloved children walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us. Let's think about that pattern a bit further.

[17 : 43] Deny self take up cross and here's this pattern. Paul says be imitators and first thing he says is be imitators as beloved children. You don't be imitators in order to become loved children.

That's crucial. That's the point I was making just a second or two ago. It's as beloved children who've already received love from God and received it not because we are special people who've particularly managed to clean up our act try harder or look nice or be nice but received gift from God.

This idea of gift is so fundamental to the way that the Bible speaks about God's relationship with us and part of the twisting out of shape that we see so much is that we reject gift and we want to do it ourselves in all kinds of different ways.

As beloved children though those who receive God's love with open hands this gift and that idea of open hands I think is a really helpful way of thinking about what faith is.

Earlier in Ephesians in the passage that was referred to salvation is described as being by grace and through faith. Again we hear the word faith and we think about it as an intellectual thing agreeing with certain things that are true.

[19 : 15] Much much better is to think about it as the open hands that receive and of course if hands are to be open to receive gift from God they've got to let go of all the other stuff that they're holding on to in the meantime.

All the things that I want to hold on to to make life work and as long as that's the case I can't receive this gift and I have to let them go. It's a similar picture to getting off that seat off that throne denying self and having Christ alone as the one who's in charge and calling the shots.

So as beloved children then those who've received gift how are we then to live? And Paul says our imitation of God is to imitate the pattern of Christ's love which is a loving sacrifice.

He gave himself a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God so that our imitation as loved children is to love as Christ loved to understand that all we are and have is given to love and bless others.

To recognize that there is nothing that we have that is just for ourselves. To recognize that our very purpose in life is to love and to bless others and that this pattern of being a child of God receiving from God is then to pour out from what we receive to others.

[20 : 43] That's the picture that I guess I'm trying to wrestle with. This idea then of receiving from God so that we are filled from what he gives us as gift freely and abundantly and lavishly so that we are then pouring the same out towards others.

The people we live with our workmates our schoolmates university friends our family whoever it is we are receiving from God himself in order to pour out love towards others.

It's a beautiful picture of what we are designed to do. The contrast though and it's important to point it out the contrast is that instead of receiving and being loved children instead of that it's this idea of saying I am empty and lacking and deficient and I need to get what I can.

It's the contrast in other words between receiving and giving and grasping and getting. We could say that the essence of sin because if sin is the opposite of loving people then what sin is is using people.

It's getting what we can from other people it's manipulating them it's trying to use that relationship to get something that makes me feel better about me. It's exactly the opposite of receive and give.

[22 : 10] it's grasping and keeping and think about the number of relationships maybe you're smarting from the pain of that of being treated that way.

Maybe you can think of ways that you do that yourself but that's the fundamental contrast deny self take up cross is to receive as a loved child and give rather than grasping to get what I can or desperately defending myself against perceived threat.

And right at the heart of that then if that's to change from grasping and getting to receiving and giving is being a beloved child of God someone who's denied self takes up cross and follows.

This then creates and sets out for us a pattern for restored image. This is what the restored image looks like because Christ is the one who supremely images God who shows us what God is like and to be restored in that image is to become more like Jesus to do Jesus stuff if you like in Jesus ways and that is to love as Jesus loved.

It's about a revolution in relationships. I've totally lost track of time. What time do you want me just to stop right now? Keep going. Stop.

[23 : 43] Stop. Stop. Soon. Alright. Okay. I totally have a very distant relationship to the concept of time and I'm encouraged by the fact that punctuality is not really a biblical concept that I can find.

My wife doesn't buy this one at all. Right. Okay. Now, some of you are going to be thinking, okay, that sounds great in theory, receiving, giving, not protecting myself, not using others to get what I need, but what about me?

What's going to happen to me? Am I just going to be trampled all over? Am I going to be a doormat in every relationship that I'm in? Is this a charter for abusers? And the answer to that is absolutely and categorically no, that is not a charter for abusers.

Not least because each of us is responsible to deny self, take up cross, to love people in this kind of way. And of course, one of those ways of loving people is at times going to mean saying no to those who would abuse and misuse.

But more fundamentally, what's going to happen if I'm just giving myself? Do I just empty out and burn out? And the key really is not just in this idea of receiving, obviously, as beloved children, but the key is in these words that Jesus gives us, this paradox at the heart of reality.

[25 : 10] Jesus says, deny self, take up cross and follow, for whoever would save his life will lose it. And whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.

And he goes on, whoever is ashamed of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes. This is this amazing paradox at the heart of reality. This paradox that if you try to look after number one, look after self, then what Jesus says is you actually lose your life.

This is the word soul or tsuke there. You lose your very self. If you try and protect yourself by living differently, by avoiding this pattern, then actually it is inherently counterproductive and self-destructive.

It will never work. And think about, I mean that's so obviously true, isn't it? Think about the people you know who are self-centered, who arrange life entirely around their own pleasures or their own fulfillment.

I have, I can think of numbers of people who swim across my eyes as I think about that. Family members, for example.

[26 : 35] And they're the most miserable people. They're proof of what Jesus says. That when you put yourself first in this kind of way, it's counterproductive. It doesn't work anyway.

And Jesus says, and whoever loses his life, that is, denies self and takes up cross, lives this pattern. That's how you save. That's how you gain. That's actually the good life.

That's fullness of life. So that inherent to this call of Jesus is also this promise grounded in the very nature of reality itself that as human persons, this is the way to life as we long for it to be.

And it starts with getting off that throne at the center. You are not God. You're a creature. And you need to be reconciled to that God. And that means he needs to be the one in charge. And he needs to be the one whose gift of new life we have received with open hands having let go of all the rest of it.

And unless and until we do that, we are simply destroying ourselves as we go about trying to make life work.

[27 : 47] What does a society look like that puts self at the center in this kind of way? Just look outside. Just look around us. It's not turning out well.

It really isn't. There's a warning in here as well though just to close with. Whoever is ashamed of me and my words.

Now remember that's the context is deny self, take up cross and follow. And Jesus it seems to me is saying this. If you try to avoid this, if you are too ashamed of humbling yourself enough to just give yourself to others the way that I am demonstrating to you, if you try and do it any other way, says Jesus, I'll be ashamed of you.

You're turning your back on me, says Jesus. It's a very, very sobering warning. We might put it this way and it was on a slide earlier on.

We can't do Jesus work in non-Jesus ways. We can't go about following Jesus. In ways that aren't prescribed and demonstrated by Jesus. That seems dead obvious, doesn't it?

[29 : 06] But one of the things we see over and over again, and it's what gives the church a really bad name. It's given the church a really bad name, is that instead of following this example of Jesus, deny self, take up, cross, and follow, we thought we can surely do it better than that.

There's a parallel passage in Mark chapter 8 that recounts exactly the same words. The difference in Mark 8 is that Jesus has just revealed his identity, who he really is, and the apostle Peter then confesses Jesus' identity.

And Jesus says, this means my identity, my power, everything about that, that means I'm going to go and be rejected, suffer, and die in Jerusalem. and Peter says, there's got to be an easier way of doing things.

I've just seen you have the power to calm a storm and to heal the sick and to cleanse lepers and to do all these amazing things. How does that fit with suffering and death?

No, no, no. Use your power differently. Use it to get what you want and to do what you want. And Jesus responds to that, that temptation to say, there's got to be an easier way than deny self, take up cross and follow.

[30 : 28] There's got to be a more efficient way of getting the work done. Jesus' response to Peter is, get behind me, Satan. And that's still Jesus' response when you and I come to him and say, there's got to be an easier way, a more efficient way.

We can do this work much better than the way of the cross. There's much easier ways of doing it, there's much more pleasant, less painful ways of doing it, and Jesus says, get behind me.

Because this is the way. If you try to save your life by avoiding this cross-shaped living, you will lose it, you will destroy everything, and you'll destroy those around you as well.

Deny self, take up cross and follow, and there is life, there is beauty. C.S. Lewis puts it like this, and I think it's a really helpful way of putting it.

When God talks of their losing themselves, he means only abandoning the clamor of self-will. Once they've done that, he really gives them back all their personality and boasts that when they are wholly his, they will be more themselves than ever.

[31 : 43] self-fulfillment come through self-denial or through self-indulgence. It comes through self-giving with Christ on the throne of our lives.

I had some questions. I'm just going to leave them up there. You can look at them if you want. But one of the things I'd love you to do is a little imaginative exercise as I just go and sit down.

Imagine, just think about your own life, your own relationships, perhaps your family, your workplace. Think maybe more broadly, your community, your neighbourhood, this country.

What would it look like with Jesus' will, with Jesus' pattern of living? What would it look like for Jesus to have his way in your family?

For fathers to take seriously what it means to deny self, take up cross and follow, and to seek to serve their children and their wives instead of dominate and use them?

[32 : 55] What would that look like? Wouldn't that be great? What would it look like in the workplace for people to understand that what they've been given is for the blessing and benefit of others and not a means of exploiting and dominating others?

What might society more widely look like? And how would that happen unless people like you and me say, yes, Lord, I receive this gift of being a beloved child and let me just show that same love to others in every interaction.

God will love to God let's pray together as we pray that the Lord would have mercy on us, enable us to be channels of this blessing to those around us.

Our Father, thank you. Thank you. None of this depends upon us being clever people who sort ourselves out and try ever harder to fix things for ourselves.

Thank you, Lord, for that liberating call to abandon the throne, to joyfully welcome Jesus as our Lord, as the one who's in charge.

[34 : 11] Lord, please would for each one of us sitting here today, would we have either for the first time or a renewed sense that we are loved children of the living God, and Lord, might we then pour out that love in all of our relationships with those around about us.

Let it be so, Lord. Have mercy on us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.