

“What ‘Taking Up Your Cross’ Really Means...”
by Rom A. Pegram (11/19/17)

There’s a story of a man who was at the gym one day, working out on an elliptical machine, and looking out the front window of the gym onto the parking lot. As he worked out, sweating away, he noticed a guy pull into the parking lot right in front of the gym. After a couple of minutes, this rather large man gets out of his car ... and it takes some effort for him to even get out of his rather small sedan. He’s still in his office clothes, but he reaches back into his car to grab his gym bag. Then, he reaches back into his car one more time to get something else—a *cup ... that has a red spoon in it!* (Are you guys with me?) Here’s a man who just showed up at the gym at the end of his work day ... to work out ... supposedly to get healthier ... and he just reached back into his car to finish off his Blizzard from Dairy Queen! He stands right outside the window of the gym ... right in front of this man who’s inside working out ... and takes his final bites. The man watching was pretty sure it was ... ‘cookie dough’. He eventually throws his empty cup into the trash ... and walks into the gym for his workout. Does anyone besides me see something wrong with this picture?

He wanted to get in shape, but he didn’t want to make any personal sacrifices! And that folks is how a FAN will try and follow Jesus! A FAN will try and accept the invitation to follow Jesus, but *they don’t want to say no to themselves!* In Luke 9:23, Jesus makes it clear that if we’re going to follow him, *a casual no-strings-attached relationship isn’t going to be possible.* Listen to this scripture one more time (Luke 9:21-27, NLT)...

Jesus warned his disciples not to tell anyone who he was. ²² “The Son of Man must suffer many terrible things,” he said. “He will be rejected by the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He will be killed, but on the third day he will be raised from the dead.” ²³ Then he said to the crowd, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross daily, and follow me. ²⁴ If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. ²⁵ And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but are yourself lost or destroyed? ²⁶ If anyone is ashamed of me and my message, the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when he returns in his glory and in the glory of the Father and the holy angels. ²⁷ I tell you the truth, some standing here right now will not die before they see the Kingdom of God.”

The Life Application Notes for verse 23 tell us this:

To take up the cross meant to carry one's own cross to the place of crucifixion. Many Galileans had been killed that way by the Romans—and Jesus would face it as well. With this word picture, Christ presented a clear and challenging description of the Christian life. Being his disciple means putting aside selfish desires, shouldering one's "cross" every day, and following him. It is simple ... and yet so demanding. For the original Twelve, this meant literal suffering and death. For believers today, it means understanding that we belong to *him* and that we live to serve *his* purposes instead of our own...

So, YOU CAN'T FOLLOW ('COME AFTER') JESUS WITHOUT DENYING YOURSELF (the Apostle Paul calls it 'DYING TO SELF')! The idea here, scripturally speaking, isn't just saying 'no' to yourself or even resisting yourself. The idea here is ... *you do not even acknowledge or recognize your own existence!* That's how much you 'deny' yourself ... or 'turn from your selfish ways,' as our version for today says it. But, this kind of personal denial may seem impossible in this world we live in. So, how do you go about denying yourself—giving up selfishness—in a culture that says 'it's all about ME'?

It's been said that the best commentary on scripture ... is scripture. So, that's what we're going to do today: Here's a Bible story that should help explain what Jesus is talking about in Luke 9:23. In Matthew 19, we meet a young man whose name we don't know ... but he's referred to as THE RICH YOUNG RULER. He's followed a path in his life that's led to both wealth and power. (And, if we're honest, that's the path many of us have been on.) We see him come to Jesus in Verse 16:

Someone came to Jesus with this question: "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" – Matthew 19:16 (NLT)

We have to give him credit for asking the right question. He basically wants to know (like many of us), "How do I get to heaven?" But, *even the way he asks it reveals to us that his heart is the heart of a FAN.* He says, "What ... must I do?" The word could be translated 'acquire' or 'earn.' He's been good at that, so he thinks his fairly impressive résumé is going to get him in... Eventually, Jesus responds to this man:

Jesus told him, "If you want to be perfect, go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." – Matthew 19:21 (NLT)

Jesus invites the man to become his FOLLOWER, but first the man is told to 'let go' of everything he had (kind of like the man from last week who found the treasure). He's now faced with a choice—*either FOLLOW Jesus ... or keep his stuff ...* but he couldn't do both. THERE WAS NO WAY TO FOLLOW JESUS WITHOUT DENYING HIMSELF! In other words, *if you want to be a FOLLOWER of Jesus, he's gotta have first place in your life!*

Many people mistakenly think this story is about MONEY, but it's not! I have a little note in the margin of my Bible that reminds me, this story is really about IDOLATRY. It's really about *who or what this young man was going to put first in his life!* Would it be wealth (*past focus*) ... or Jesus (*future focus*)? One thing was for sure: *He couldn't have it both ways...*

- So, what does this mean to you and me?
- What does this have to do with 'carrying *our* cross daily?'

What's true here is everyone who follows Jesus will find themselves at a similar place sometime. And what's our choice going to be? Who are we going to follow? *One path leads to much less than God has planned for us; the other road leads to exactly what*

God has planned for us—his very best! One path will be for FANS ... and the other for true FOLLOWERS. Let me lay out *what we need to do* starting with this story:

One of my heroes in the faith is a man by the name of Bill Bright. He was the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ and the author of the now famous “Four Spiritual Laws”—a simple way of presenting the Gospel. More than 2.5 billion copies of that work have been distributed worldwide. He was a central figure in the “Jesus Film” which has been seen by more than 4 billion people in 660 languages around the world. Quite the accomplished person... But, if you were to visit his grave, you’d only find 3 words on the back of his headstone: SLAVE FOR JESUS. And folks, *if we truly want to be FOLLOWERS of Jesus, that’s where we need to begin, too!*

But, one of the reasons it’s so hard for us to deny ourselves is because the whole idea seems to go against our greatest desire in life! Most everyone would say *the one thing* happiness means saying ‘yes’ to ourselves; ***indulgence is the path to happiness*** (indulging in what we want to indulge in), so denying ourselves would logically seem to go against what we want the most! No one ever said, “When I grow up, I want to be a servant!” But, the reality is ... *that’s what the Bible calls us to!* That’s what Jesus calls us to, if we want to truly be his FOLLOWER! Our highest calling as Christians, then, is to deny ourselves and FOLLOW Jesus. *That’s what ‘taking up your cross’ really means...* So, how does that happen?

FIRST COMES ... AN INITIAL SURRENDER. Verse 23 says, again: “Then he said to the crowd, ‘If any of you wants to be my follower, you must *turn from your selfish ways*’”—deny yourself [italics mine]. That, folks, would be your old life—*your past.* We have to ‘let go’ of that old life ... if we want him to fill us with his Spirit—fully, and give us a new life in him...

What I’m going to say now might seem hard to some of you, but if it wasn’t the truth—biblically, I wouldn’t share it with you. Here it is: YOU CAN’T CALL JESUS LORD, WITHOUT DECLARING YOURSELF HIS SERVANT! “Servant/slave” is a common word used in scripture for FOLLOWERS; so it makes sense then that Jesus is often called “Lord.” When we read that word in the New Testament, we usually relate that word to Jesus’ divinity—the fact that he is God. So, Lord = God. Right? Not so fast... In the New Testament when FOLLOWERS referred to Jesus as Lord, *it was not a reference to his divine status.* The word they were using wasn’t *Yahweh* [Hebrew]; it was *Kurios* [Greek]—a word that shows up hundreds of times and is *slavery language.* *Kurios* is a word describing the master or owner of a slave...

So, if Jesus is LORD of our lives, then we are his servants ... but not just any kind of servant; let me explain further... When we surrender our lives, accepting Jesus’ invitation to follow him, we become his servants/slaves ... but it’s a completely different way to look at slavery than what we’re used to. We think of slavery as something we’re forced into. So, why would anyone ever want to be someone else’s slave?

It was rare, but in the Old Testament, we read of people who *chose* to be slaves. They were called “Bond Slaves” (Bond Servants). These were people who’d been set free after being a slave for six years, but they decided—of their own free will—they wanted to stay a slave. Deuteronomy 15:16-17 (NLT) explains:

“But suppose your servant says, ‘I will not leave you,’ because he loves you and your family, and he has done well with you. ¹⁷ In that case, take an awl and push it through his earlobe into the door. After that, he will be your servant for life....”

Folks, we were once slaves to sin. But, because of all that Jesus has done for us in the giving of his life, we have been set free! What’s our response going to be? One choice is this: We can decide of our own free will ... to be a slave, but this time—not to sin, but to the One who loves us more than any other ever could! His name is Jesus ... and he’s invited us to become a part of his family as FOLLOWERS... We have to make that initial decision for surrender; we have to let go of ourselves—*literally give up our right to ourselves* ... in order to have Jesus and all that he offers us, eternally. But *one time of surrender is not enough!* After the initial surrender...

THEN COMES ... A DAILY SURRENDER. Verse 23, again, says, “Then he said to the crowd, ‘If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross *daily* [italics mine]...’” The Apostle Paul later said this: “[I assure you] by the pride which I have in you in [your fellowship and union with] Christ Jesus our Lord, that I die daily [I face death every day and die to self]. – 1 Cor. 15:31 (AMP) And, because we are human beings, we too have need of dying to self daily!

We, as followers of Christ, are referred to sometimes as ‘living sacrifices,’ but don’t ever forget what Pastor Rick Warren says about ‘living sacrifices’: “The problem with living sacrifices is ... they have a tendency to crawl off the altar!” Unless we learn to die daily [to self], there is no way we can call Jesus ... Lord! The prayer of giving ourselves to God daily ... needs to then be a regular part of our daily routines; *if it’s not, add that prayer in!* That’s the response of a FOLLOWER...

Folks, as we finish up our time in God’s word today, consider this:

- Do you think of your relationship with God primarily in terms of what’s in it for you (which is considerable) or in terms of what you can do for him?
- Are you willing to deny yourself, take up your cross daily, and follow him?

Anything less is not discipleship; it is merely superficial lip service. Listen to Jesus’ words one more time ... and let them sink deeply into your heart and mind: ²³ Then he said to the crowd, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross daily, and follow me.” Surrender. There’s the action that needs to be considered; for it’s the only way to become a true FOLLOWER of Jesus, the only way to have the life God wants for us—his very best... Have you made your choice?