

Luke 9.23

Flexetarians

Frankton – 7/19/15

Scripture: Luke 9.23 NIV to follow: deny self, pick up cross and follow

Proposition: Christians should be all in, denying them own desires for Christ's mission.

Today, we're starting an interesting and short series of sermons on only one verse, Luke 9.23. [SLIDE] *Then [Jesus] said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."* This is kind of Jesus' marching orders for us followers of Jesus. However, as we're going to find out, it's more than just Sergeant Jesus' marching orders to his platoon of privates. Rather, to follow Jesus' saying in our lives is to unleash Jesus' love and power in our lives. When we do what this verse says, we unleash Jesus in our life. And we're going to start today with the hardest of the three phrases in today's verse: deny yourself. This will be the hardest sermon of the three for you to hear, because it is the most difficult for us to do. So let's get started.

Picture this: a guy my size pulls into the parking lot of a local fitness center. He's going to go in for his work-out to try and get in better shape. He gets out of the car dressed in his work clothes. He reaches into the back seat, pulls out his gym bag and slings it over his shoulder. Then he reaches into the front seat and pulls out his Dairy Queen Heath Bar Blizzard, size: large. He stands outside and finishes off his Blizzard before entering the gym to get fit. He wanted to get into shape, but he didn't want to make all the personal sacrifices to get there.

That's how some people try to follow Jesus; they accept his invitation to follow, but they don't say no to themselves. In our scripture this morning, Jesus makes it very clear that if we are going to follow him, a casual, no-strings-attached arrangement isn't a possibility: [SLIDE] *Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves....* You can't be Jesus' follower' without denying yourself. We talk a lot about the truth that being a Christian means believing in Jesus, but we don't say so much about denying ourselves. That is such an un-appealing message. How can we deny ourselves in a culture that says it's all about you?

In Matthew 19, we meet a man whose name we are never told. He is referred to as the [SLIDE] 'Rich Young Ruler.' He's followed a path that has led to wealth and power. That's the path that most of us are trying to find. He comes to Jesus with a question, "What must I do to get eternal life?" We have to give him credit for asking the right question, but the way he asks it reveals his heart. He says, "What must I do...." He thinks it's is going to be his own impressive resume that will get him in. Later in the conversation, Jesus tells him what he needs to do, "Sell all your possessions, give the money to the poor. Then follow me." Jesus invites the man to become his follower, but the man is faced with the choice of following Jesus or keeping his stuff. He couldn't do both. There is no way to follow Jesus without denying himself. Many people want to make that story about money, but it's not as much about money as it is about following Jesus. Jesus puts the man at a crossroads. He can follow the path that leads to money (the one he's been following), or he can follow Jesus. BUT, he can't do both.

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So what does this mean for you and me? Is selling everything a requirement for following Jesus? It might be. This one instance seems to say so, but there are other people that Jesus didn't ask to sell everything to follow him. I would say that the more defensive you are of Jesus' words to the man, the more likely it is that Jesus might just be saying them to you. What is true is that everyone who follows Jesus will find himself or herself at a similar crossroads as this man in Matthew 19. [SLIDE] You won't be able to take the path of following Jesus without walking away from the path you are already on. The man wanted to follow Jesus, but when forced to choose between Jesus and his stuff, he chose his stuff. He wouldn't deny himself.

One way folks try to follow Jesus without denying themselves is by compartmentalizing the areas of their lives they don't want Jesus to have access to. They try and negotiate the terms of the deal. "I'll follow Jesus, but I'm not going to sell my possessions. Don't ask me to forgive the people who have hurt me; they don't deserve that. Don't ask me to save sex for marriage; I can't help my desires. Don't ask me to give a tithe; I worked hard for that cash." And instead of following Jesus with their financial life, they follow Money magazine. In their relationships, instead of following Jesus they follow Oprah. In their sex lives, instead of following Jesus, they follow Cosmo.

They follow Jesus, just not with every area of their lives. In George Barna's book titled "Christian," he reported that 65% of the 18-42 year olds in America have "made a personal commitment to Jesus that is still important." On the surface that seems really great. But he also noted that only 23% of those people believed sex outside of marriage is wrong. Only 13% said getting drunk is a sin. In other words, 65% say they are committed to Jesus, but most of them aren't committed to Jesus in every area of their life. Yet Jesus never left open the option of selective commitment. There are no exception clauses. You don't get to say, "I follow Jesus – but when it come to this particular area of my life, I do things my way." [SLIDE] If you call yourself a Christian, then by definition you are committing to following Christ with every area of your life. It doesn't mean that you will follow perfectly, but you can't say, "I'm a Christian," and then refuse to follow Christ when it comes to certain people, places, or practices.

There was a report on MSNBC about a group of new vegetarians. They interviewed one of them and her quote captures the viewpoint of this group. She said, "I usually eat vegetarian. But I really like bacon." She represents a growing number of people who eat vegetarian but make some exceptions. They don't eat meat, unless they really like it. As you can imagine, strict vegetarians aren't real happy about these new vegetarians. They put pressure on the new vegetarians to change their name. And so here's the name these new vegetarians are being called: [SLIDE] flexetarians. The young lady went on to say, "I really like vegetarian food, but I'm just not 100% committed."

"Flexetarian" is a good way to describe how many people approach their commitment to Jesus. "I really like Jesus; but I don't really like serving the poor. I'm not real big into the idea of going to church. My resources are spoken for. I love Jesus but don't ask me to save sex for marriage. I love Jesus but don't ask me to forgive the person who hurt me. I love Jesus, but I'm not 100% committed." They call themselves Christians. They follow Jesus, but they've made some exceptions. So when bacon is on the menu, their commitments can be adjusted. Following Jesus requires a complete and total commitment. What the rich young ruler is really committed to is revealed when he refuses to deny himself. He wanted to say yes to following Jesus without saying no to himself. **He wanted to be close enough to Jesus to have eternal life, but not so close that it required personal sacrifice.**

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For many Christians, the concept of denying themselves was not a part of the deal to become a Christian, or if it was it was somewhere in the fine print where it was easily overlooked. So, they believed the message that such a radical decision really isn't necessary. I think Christians in America are especially susceptible to this. In part, this is due to the collision of American capitalism and Christianity. That collision has created a culture of consumers in our churches. Instead of approaching their faith with a spirit of denial that says, "What can I do for Jesus?" they have a consumer mentality that says, "What can Jesus do for me?"

Churches haven't helped that scenario. Some churches measure success purely by the numbers (Sidebar: that's only one aspect of church success.). And how do we get more numbers? By trying to make people feel comfortable, important, and happy. We want the product, following Jesus, to come off as appealing and as comfortable as possible. So when someone comes in "church shopping," we try and show them what we have to offer. Can you see why this undermines the invitation of Jesus to deny ourselves? The church sends the message, "Whatever you want you can get here." The invitation Jesus gives in our scripture is, "deny yourself; give up everything." The church doesn't proclaim, "Deny yourself." The Church proclaims the old Burger King slogan, "Have it your way."

Contrast the image of consumer with a much different biblical image of Christ's followers. The Bible would describe them as a [SLIDE] "slave". That is the exact opposite of a consumer. The image of a slave provides a picture of what "deny yourself" looks like. A slave has no rights. A slave has no possessions. A slave in Jesus' day didn't get time off or get to clock out at the end of the day. A slave doesn't get to negotiate. But "slave" is the way many of Christ's followers introduced themselves. When Peter began his second letter, he didn't start of, "Peter, a best friend of Jesus...." Instead he simply said: *Peter, a slave....* [2P 1.1] James didn't begin his letter by saying, "James the half-brother of Jesus." He began by writing: *James, a slave...of Jesus Christ.* [J 1.1] Finally, Paul begins his letter to the Romans with these words: *Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ....* [R 1.1]

One of the reasons it is so hard for us to deny ourselves is because the whole idea of slavery goes against our greatest desire in life. Most everyone would say what they want more than anything else is to be happy. We're convinced that the path to happiness means saying yes to ourselves. Indulgence is the path to happiness, so to deny ourselves seems to go in the opposite direction of what makes us happy. The right to pursue happiness seems to be in direct conflict with the call of Jesus to deny ourselves. Most of us grew up in homes where we were taught to study hard in school so we could get a good job and make lots of money so we could live in big houses, drive nice cars, and enjoy great vacations. When you ask your child what they want to be when they grow up, the answers generally reflect that influence. But no child ever says, "When I grow up I want to be a slave." But that's what the Bible calls us to do, be a slave to Jesus.

[SLIDE] We call Jesus "our Lord." Sometimes we use the word 'master.' Either way then, by definition, we are slaves. For obvious reasons, we prefer to think of ourselves as servants, not slaves. But there is a huge difference between a servant and a slave. A servant works for someone, a slave is owned by someone. With that in mind, what I'm about to say seems like it should be pretty obvious but may come as a surprise to a few of you: You can't call Jesus Lord without declaring yourself his slave. Think of it this way, if you hear my daughter call me "Dad," then she

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is identifying herself as my daughter. Similarly, when you call Jesus “Lord,” you are saying, “He is the master, I am the slave.” That’s what it means to deny yourself.

We think that by denying ourselves we will miss out, but just the opposite is true. Let’s go back to the rich young ruler. Jesus invited the man to sell everything and follow him. The ruler’s response was: [SLIDE] *He went away sad, because he had great wealth.* [MT 19.25] That seems like such a strange statement. He went away sad because he was rich. But he should be sad because he chose to follow the wrong path. He thought denying himself of all of his stuff would make him sad, but the truth is it’s only when we deny ourselves that we truly discover the joy of following Christ.

Jesus invites you to deny yourself. He invites you to be his slave. But as one of his slaves, may I tell you about my master, Jesus. My master will provide for you. He owns everything you can see and can’t see; so he can take care of your needs. My master will protect you. He speaks and even the wind and waves obey him. My master has the power to forgive sins. If being a slave to sin has left you broken and bruised and you find yourself in pieces, he can take the pieces of your life and turn them into a beautiful mosaic. If you are worn out and exhausted, my master gives rest to those who are weary and heavy burdened. One more thing. When you become a slave to my master, he makes you his son or his daughter. He calls you his friend.