

## Luke 9.23

# Your Ministry

## Frankton – 7/26/15

Scripture: Luke 9.23 deny yourself, take up your cross daily, follow me

Proposition: We must take up our ministry daily for the cause of Christ.

Today, we're continuing 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. We started last week by talking about denying ourselves. To be a Christian is to give all of yourself to Christ and not be a [SLIDE] Flexitarian by taking what parts of your life to give to Christ and what parts to keep.

Once we deny ourselves then Christ says to [SLIDE] take up our cross. I want to tell you right up front that a lot of people tend to misinterpret what Christ means with these words. People often get the idea of taking up your cross confused with the idea of bearing your burden. Here's the difference. A burden that we bear may be that we get struck down with cancer. That we have to live through a divorce. That we must suffer through the demon of alcohol or Alzheimer's. That we must suffer the uncertainty that downsizing brings. These are all burdens. However, none of these are a cross that we are to take up. These types of things are not what Jesus meant when he said to shoulder your cross.

Taking up cross is a voluntary act. Jesus doesn't say to take up the cross that someone else put on your shoulder. Taking up your cross means to carry the ministry that God has equipped you to do. Rather than your affliction, your cross is your ministry for God, much like the cross was Christ's ministry. Your cross is the work you do for Christ to further the work of God's kingdom here on earth. Just about every Sunday, when I give the offering prayer, I pray that we give ourselves to God for the work of his kingdom. In effect, I'm praying that we take up our cross. We take up the cross of Sunday school teacher or mission committee chair. We take up the cross of sharing with others the story of Jesus Christ's effect on our lives and sharing food with those who need it. We take up the cross of being one who other people seek out for help and being the one who sets up tables and chairs for a special church dinner. Our ministry for Christ and his kingdom is our cross and we are to shoulder that cross.

Now here is where Luke separates his gospel from those of Matthew and Mark, which also have similar passages in them. Luke adds one little word to this phrase that the others don't. Luke adds the word: daily. *Take up your cross* [SLIDE] *daily*. Taking up your cross is not a one-time thing; it's not a one and done thing. Taking up your cross is not something you do on Sunday morning and then forget about it until the next Sunday morning. Taking up your cross is taking up that cross of ministry EVERY DAY. It's taking one more step carrying that cross EVERY DAY. It's doing ministry for Jesus Christ EVERY DAY. It's getting out of your comfort zone to do the work that Christ called you to do EVERY DAY.

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Now we're going to have some fun as we talk about your ministry and how it fits into God's kingdom and his church. I need three volunteers. (*Get three volunteers and position them as so: two of them side by side and looking sad; the third is set apart a little bit and has their back to them looking away and is holding an open Bible.*) These two people represent the world outside the church doors. They are out here together coping with the world's problems. This person represents the church. Notice that he has his back turned so that he can't even see what these two, the outside world, are doing. This scene accurately represents the church that sets itself apart from the world. It's a church that doesn't reach out to the world to connect the world. It's a church that wants to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to everyone who enters the door of the church but isn't willing to get off its duff and go out into the world. They have set up an "us vs. them" scenario. "We're Christians, they aren't. Therefore, we're better than them and we don't want to associate with them because their non-Christian attitudes may rub off on us. God loves us more than he loves them. Let them come to church and change, then we'll like them." It's a church that has no outreach ministry. That's a church that is in the process of dying.

The problems with this attitude are numerous, but, mostly this attitude has forgotten one very important fact – everyone is valuable to God. Whether a person is a Christian or not, OR whether they are following Christ or actively rebelling against Christ, each person has worth before God. To illustrate, I need to remind you of the parable of the prodigal son. Do you remember that story? One son is faithful to his father and never leaves his side. One son actually rebels against his father's wishes, moves away and then realizes the mistake he made. Do you remember how he is treated when he gets home? The prodigal's father welcomes him with open arms, while the prodigal's brother throws a hissy-fit. Most of the time, we want to think that we are like the prodigal son – we have strayed but came home to God. The problem is that sometimes we are more like the prodigal's brother – the one who doesn't want to see the fatted calf slain for a son who hasn't been as good as we have been. We have trouble reaching out to the wayward people of today's world – to the people that we don't think have been as good as we have been.

Everyone in the world gets firehosed every day – they get beat up by all the world's temptations, they get beat up by other people's attitude toward them, and they just plain get whipped by the daily pressures of the marketplace, the home, the school, whatever their surroundings. In 1 John, the author writes that you can't have a big heart for God and closed arms for others – my paraphrase. This morning's scripture reminds us that we need to equip people to turn around and face the world, (*Turn the Christian around and have him move closer to the others and put the Bible by his side and extend his hand.*) even get into the world with our ministry and embrace those of the world around us. We, as Christians, have as one of our ministries a duty to help these people grow and find a place where they are loved, not because they are perfect, but because everyone desperately needs and deserves to be loved.

Now I want you to notice something. I closed his Bible and put it at his side as I turned him around to join the world. I did that for a reason. Most often, not always but most often, it's best for us to forget about sharing the faith with someone that we have just met. When we do that, we tend to turn more people off than reach them. When you do that, people generally tend to feel like you are only there to browbeat them with religiosity – and they probably aren't ready for that. We need to develop a relationship with them because influence travels through relationships. (*Re-open the Bible.*) Once we have a relationship built with them, it is usually easier to talk with someone about our faith and how our faith is so integral in our lives. (*Dismiss the cast.*)

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Now I need a few more volunteers. (*Get a whole section. Position the cast standing as far apart as they can be.*) In the first scene, both inside and outside the church were represented. In this picture, only inside the church is depicted. In this scene all these people are inside the church, but notice that they aren't next to each other; they are standing apart from one another, not touching. I call this "the ME church." This is a church that is a collection of individuals that don't really relate to one another. They hardly know anything about one another. They may not even care for one another. When they come to church they are on their best behavior. They are as polite as they can be toward one another, but there really isn't any caring fellowship, no Radical Hospitality, with one another. The church represented here is not a place of safety and security.

People don't feel comfortable talking about their lives, their faith, their problems at this kind of church. As an example, Rev. Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Church near Chicago tells about the church that he grew up in. It was a lot like this church in that every Sunday, people sat in the very same pew - Sunday after Sunday. You know who is there and who isn't there by whether or not they are in "their" pew. Rev. Hybels remembered the family that always sat in the pew in front of his own family. Sunday after Sunday, they sat in their pew and Sunday after Sunday, young Bill family sat in their pew directly behind this other family. Then one day, the family that sat in front of the Hybels' wasn't there. The young Bill leaned over to his father and asked why that family wasn't there. His father answered, "They had a little problem." This family didn't feel comfortable enough to go to that church with their little problem. What's more, this family never came back. Hybels said that the lesson he learned as a little boy was that you if your family has a little problem, you don't take it to that church.

Now I'm going to say something and before any of you start looking for the Bishop's telephone number listen to the explanation first. I promise that if you still want the bishop's number after my explanation, I'll get it for you. I think churches need to become more like bars and taverns. I don't mean that we need to serve real wine at Communion. I don't mean that the ushers need to be dressed like cocktail waitresses in short skirts – thank goodness. Here's what I do mean. There's an old saying that goes something like this: People in a bar don't judge other people in a bar. People go in to a bar to relax and have a drink or two and forget the cares of the world. Inside the bar, everyone is on an equal basis. It reminds me of the TV show Cheers; remember everybody knows your name. Everybody loved everyone else in the bar – except of course Cliff, the mail man. And I think they secretly loved him. No one judged anyone else. They were all on equal footing.

That's the kind of church Jesus was envisioning when he gathered the disciples. In fact, at the Last Supper, at least according to John, Jesus prays for the disciples to become one – to be unified. (*Reposition the cast in a circle, one hand on the shoulder in front, one hand reaching out.*) That's the kind of church that Jesus wants us to be. The hand on a shoulder represents a place where we can take our problems and people will genuinely listen. A place where people embrace each other as friends and family rather than just acknowledging each other as acquaintances. Church needs to be a place to celebrate with each other in the joys of our lives and to mourn with each other in the sorrows that our bound to happen. We are to join together to be one in the body of Christ. The hand reaching out is inviting the world to join us in this kind of place with these kinds of relationships. (*Dismiss the cast.*)

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Many of you know the story of Nelson Mandela. He was the man who first stood up against the South African apartheid government. He was jailed for about 30 years for actively trying to change a government where the color of a person's skin meant more than the quality of their character. While in prison he was beaten to within an inch of his life, he was kept in solitary confinement for months on end, and treated as one of the worst kinds of violent criminals. He was later freed as the apartheid government of South Africa collapsed. He was interviewed one day about his activities against apartheid and asked about his suffering for the cause. Here's his answer: [SLIDE] "It is a cause for which I am willing to work toward for the rest of my life and for which I am prepared to die." What a commitment.

That should be the same level of commitment that we have for your ministry, for taking up your cross for Christ. It should be a cause for we are willing to work the rest of our lives and for which we are prepared to die. That's what Jesus modeled for us. Our lives were a cause that he was willing to work the rest of his life for, and for which he was prepared (and did) to die. My prayer is that you have the same commitment to Christ and his church, this church, and your ministry for his kingdom.