

The Call to Discipleship

Spilman Memorial Baptist Church, Kinston NC

Dr. H. Powell Dew, Jr.

November 12, 2023

Text: Mark 8:34-38

Purpose: When Jesus calls us, He is issuing a call to surrender and obedience. Those sincerely wishing to follow Christ must be willing to deny themselves, take up his cross, and follow as Christ leads.

Introduction

Once upon a time ... three men were traveling through rough terrain. Suddenly they came to a wide, fast-moving stream. They consulted their compass and they were certain that they needed to cross this river in order to get to their destination.



All of a sudden, one of them got down on his knees and prayed, “God give me the strength to make it across this river.” Instantly this man’s arm muscles and leg muscles became large and bulky. He jumped into the water and began to swim furiously. After about two hours, the man finally made it across. The two remaining men were amazed and stunned how God answered that man’s prayer.

The second one decided to pray just a little differently than the first. He prayed, “Lord, give me strength AND tools to make this journey safely across this river.” Almost instantly, the man’s arms and legs increased in size.

Also, a kayak, paddle, and life jacket appeared. This second man got in the boat and in about an hour made it across this large swift river. He almost capsized several times, but he did make it.

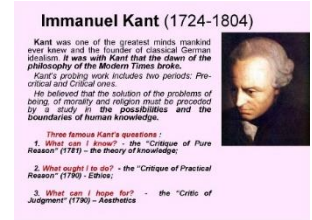


The third person decided that his prayer needed to be a little more specific if he was to make it across safely. He prayed, "Lord, give me strength for the journey, tools to aid my way, and wisdom and knowledge to do it right." Just like the other two, God answered instantly. The man was transformed into a woman. In this woman's hands was a map and a compass. She looked at the map and realized that there was a bridge 100 yards upstream, she walked up there and crossed safely. God does not always answer in ways we ever expect.

- Maybe you have prayed for God to do something wonderful and miraculous and all of a sudden you realize that God didn't answer how you wanted.
- Maybe you prayed for a better job, but before you got that, you had to lose the one you had.
- Maybe you prayed for God to give you wisdom about the person you are dating and instead they break up with you.
- Maybe you are in the midst of a critical medical condition and you have prayed and prayed for God to heal you and God is silent and the pain continues.
- Maybe your work situation is good, but it could be better.
- Maybe you are asking yourself what you should do with the rest of your life.



German philosopher Immanuel Kant loved to take long walks on summer evenings to meditate and think. On one occasion he was sitting in a park when a policeman noticed that he had been there for several hours. The policeman came up to him and said, "What are you doing?" Kant answered, "I'm thinking." The policeman said, "Well, who are you?" Kant replied, "That's precisely the problem I've been thinking about."



The question we all struggle with is, "Who are we?"

Who are we?

Men tend to answer that question in context of what they do. I am a fireman. I am a policeman. I am a teacher. I run my own business. I am a farmer. I am a maintenance supervisor. When a man's vocation is changed, it is often a very traumatic change in their life because they have found identity in the midst of their activity. If I was honest, I too find the answer to that question in the context of being a pastor. Over the years, God has opened doors and He has closed doors in my life.

So, this morning, as I am bringing this message to you, I am also working out the same question for myself, "Who am I?"

Just as men answer this question by what we do, I have found women tend to answer that question in the context of relationships in their life.

I am the daughter of _____.
My brother is _____.
My husband is _____.
My parents are _____.
My sister lives in Raleigh and her name is _____.
My children are _____ and they go to _____ school.

I don't know exactly why God wired men and women that way, but He did. Men tend to derive worth and satisfaction out of "WHAT" they do and women derive satisfaction out of "WHO" they are in relationship with.

What is wrong with finding our inward satisfaction in these two areas?

Men, what happens to us when we lose our jobs, or our business fails, or budget cuts force a reassignment of tasks? We lose our identity. Women, what happens when we lose a close friend because of a betrayal, or relocation, or maybe even death? We become disoriented and disillusioned. We do not know where to turn to or what to do.

Over the years serving as a pastor, I have met people at the crossroads of life. One man's health was miraculously restored while at Duke. His question to me was, "What do I do now?" The answer for a Christian is found in Jesus' call to discipleship.

Jesus' Call to Discipleship

Jesus said to the multitudes and to His closest disciples, "*Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.*"

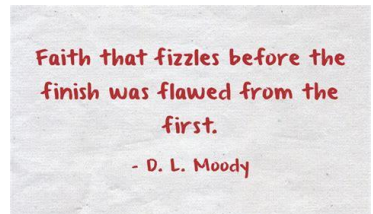


We in Christian circle have made salvation so easy to obtain. We say "*all you have to do is ask Jesus to forgive you of your sins and then you are in the family of God.*" Many people walking the streets of this town have a false sense of assurance because they were once baptized. There may be some in this church that feel the same way. Some think that by simply being dunked under the water they have received the inoculation or vaccine against going to hell.

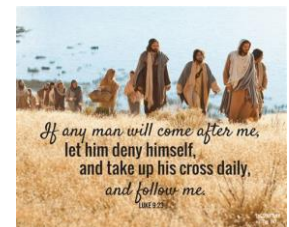
Many continue to walk in sin just as they did before they were baptized. I have even heard one person flippantly say, "*well, we are all sinners saved by grace.*" They make a mockery of what God has given to them freely. Do you think that someone that denies their relationship with God by their actions continually will receive their reward? Do you think that God is mocked? I would sincerely question if they were sincerely saved the first time.

Whoever Desires to Come After Me ...

One of my professors from Campbell once said, "The faith that fizzles at the finish was faulty at the first." This was a requote from the great evangelist, D.L. Moody. If we do not have a faith that carries us through good times as well as the bad times, then maybe we didn't have genuine faith to begin with.



Jesus' call to genuine discipleship begins with a sincere "desire" to become one with Christ. I am sure Jesus would rather have one person



come forward and say, “I want to commit to becoming a disciple (follower) of Jesus” and sincerely mean it. Instead of having ten, or even a thousand, “half hearted” lukewarm wan-a-bees.

Once you begin to really examine your life, you begin to realize that the things of this world will not satisfy. Men and women, we need to understand our homes, our jobs, our possessions will not save us or satisfy that God shaped void in our life. The relationships we value so much will often lead to disappointment. If we value the wrong things in life, then when our foundations crumble, we too will crumble.



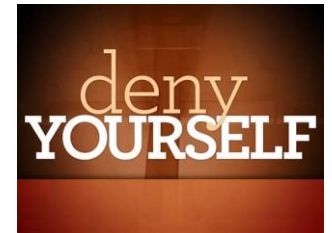
We need to reorient our lives to place Jesus Christ at the center of who we are. When we do that, we fix ourselves onto a foundation that will not crumble or fail us. We need

to help others see that the only lasting thing in all of eternity is God. We can find eternity when we have put our faith, hope and trust in Christ. When we give all we are to a God that will satisfy our deepest longing, then we will not be disappointed. Life may be difficult. Our friends may fail us. Our jobs may not continue forever. Our health may deteriorate. Our loved ones may die. But our one true foundation in Jesus Christ will never fail. He should be the center of our lives.

Jesus’ invitation is to those that want to “*come after Me.*” It is my prayer that you have that deep desire in your heart to seek the things of God. To grow in your knowledge of who Jesus is - to begin to share God’s love with others. Coming after and following God - involves determination.

... Let Him Deny Himself ...

This determination only comes after a period of thoughtful consideration of **who we are** and **what God is asking us to do.**



Over the centuries, people have struggled with how to answer this “*denying*” command. Martin Luther, the great German Reformer, once served as a monk in a monastery. Martin Luther’s understanding of this passage implied that the body must be severely punished in order to bring it into subjection. On several occasions he would take a whip and beat himself unconscious.



The Amish have taken this passage to mean that they must deny themselves of any modern conveniences that would improve their life. They still travel by horse and buggy. They do not use electricity in their homes. They heat their homes and some still cook with wood. They have determined that denying themselves involves rejecting some modern conveniences.

As Baptists, we traditionally do not observe the season of Lent. But across America during the season of Lent we may hear the question, “What are you giving up for Lent?”



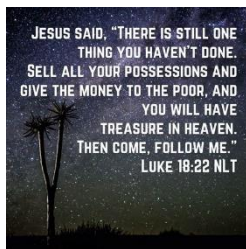
“The true gospel is a call to self-denial. It is not a call to self-fulfillment.”

But in Mark 8:34 the word means “to resist,” “to reject,” or “to refuse,” in short, say “no.” To deny yourself is to say, “I do not know the person.” Denying yourself may involve denying things, but

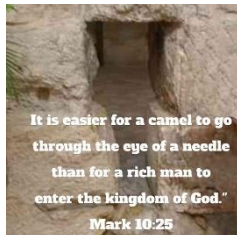
I don't think this is not what Jesus is talking about. It does not mean you should deny your self worth. It does not mean you should deny your feelings. It does not mean you should deny your brains.

To deny yourself means to deny your self-lordship. It means saying NO to the god who is me, to reject the demands of the god who is me, to refuse to obey the claims of the god who is me. When you deny yourself, it means that we make decisions about life based upon what Jesus would do instead of what is always best for me. Jesus is calling us to say no to me, and say “yes” to Jesus.¹

We find in Luke 18:18-27 the story of a rich man that came to Jesus and asked what he needed to do in order to inherit eternal life. Jesus replied with a list of several of the Ten Commandments. The man said that he had kept those since his youth. Jesus knew this man's heart and told him, “*Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow Me.*”



The man was not willing to deny himself and follow Jesus. He was more concerned about the abundance of riches and the comfort and protection it offers. Jesus warned those listening that “*it is hard for those who have riches to enter into the kingdom of God!*”



For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

Jesus wants us to put Him and His kingdom so high on our priority list that we forget who we are and focus solely on Him. You may be sitting here saying “that is impossible!” You are right. Jesus admitted that “*with men this is impossible, but with God it is possible.*” (Luke 18:27)

In our own strength we cannot fully follow God and be selfless in our actions. But as we yield our lives to God, allow His Holy Spirit take control of our life, then we may be able to deny ourselves. I am still struggling in this area of my life. Am I fully yielded to what God would have me to do? Am I being a good steward of what God has entrusted we with? But as I listen to Him calling me to action, I pray that I have denied myself and put His kingdom first.

... Take Up His Cross ...

Another phrase in this difficult saying of Jesus is “take up His Cross.” In one of the gospels, it is phrased as “*take up your cross daily.*” I like the imagery that word “*daily*” adds to this call of discipleship.



Over the years some people have said in the midst of a difficult relationship or negative experience, “Oh, this is the cross I must bear.” Maybe they are married to an awful person and they have thought that they must live under this misery because it is “their cross.” Or maybe they have a bad job and think that this is God's plan and this is the burden they have been allocated by the Lord. Or maybe

they have terrible in-laws and have shifted this bad situation into the sovereignty of God and said, “God has given me this cross and I will bear it.”

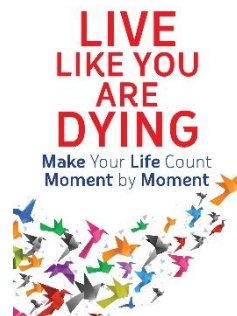


But when Jesus was standing before this crowd of people and said “*Take up His Cross,*” they all understood the word picture of a condemned man walking through town carrying a cross.

This man was a condemned man and was facing death in just a few days. Jesus is asking us to consider the things of this life as nothing. He is calling us to consider ourselves dead to this world.

Aubrey Jones, who was the Pastor of First Baptist Church here in Kinston when I was a member there almost 30 years ago, often described the Christian as a “*dead man on furlough.*” Furlough is the time that is given to a soldier to take a break from their service. Maybe they have a few days before they are to return back and face battle. They know that while in battle they may die. Aubrey encouraged the congregation to recognize that our life has already passed. Once we acknowledge our life as dead, then we can begin to live because of Christ living in us. Our will is now under subjection to God when we take up our cross.

The purpose of taking up the cross is to see we are dead to ourselves. This is a hard saying, but a liberating saying as well. Human bondage in all its forms is the result of being our own god. Freedom comes when we lay down the ill-gotten, false crown, when we say no, when we live as if we are already dead.² There is a country song



that encourages us to “live like we are dying.” That is what Christ is calling us to do - take up our cross.

... Follow Me...

The essence of “*following Christ*” is losing our life and exchanging it for one that God is now directing. In losing our life, we find that we have exchanged it for one more glorious and satisfying.

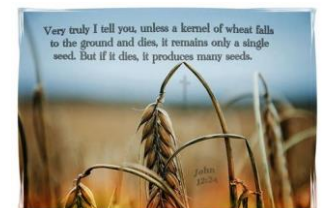


When we hold on to our old life, we lose so much.

- We do not have forgiveness from our heavenly Father
- We do not obtain the saving power of Jesus Christ
- We do not have the comforting presence of the Holy Spirit
- We do not have the assuring promises found in God’s Holy Word
- We do not have the Joy of Service in Jesus’ name
- We do not have the Hope of seeing Jesus and our loved ones again
- We will miss the glories and riches of God's everlasting Kingdom and Presence

I do not want to lose all of that. The only way to eternal life is through counting this life as nothing and pressing towards the goal of Christ-likeness.

In John 12:24 we are reminded of a fact known all too well by farmers. But “*unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only*



a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” Jesus is calling us today.

If we want to become true followers and disciples of Him, we are to heed Jesus' words to *“deny ourselves, take up that cross of death to self, and follow Him.”*

The road to new life goes through the death of the old life. The road to resurrection goes right through the crucifixion. Jesus calls us to walk the road he walked.

“Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.”

Have you answered the call of discipleship?

LET US PRAY

Notes:

¹ Several quotes and thoughts from “Discipleship Essentials” by Greg Ogden, pages 27-30

² Discipleship Essentials