

CGYG/LIFE Friday Program, October 26, 2007: Self Denial

“Then He said to them all: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?” (Luke 9:23-25)

In groups of 3-4, discuss the following 2 questions:

- What does it mean to ‘deny yourself’?
- Can you think of examples where following Christ involves self-denial?

We’re thinking this evening about a subject that is central to the Christian life, but that is pretty unpopular in our society today, and unfortunately, that is unpopular even in some Christian circles. The topic is self-denial. Our society is, of course, fixated not on self-denial, but on self-indulgence. The prevailing mentality seems to be, “Always look out for number one. Whatever you want, go for it, and go for it now. Assert yourself, and don’t let anything or anyone stand in the way of getting what you want.”

That our humanistic society thinks this way shouldn’t surprise us; but unfortunately, this mentality is often prevalent even among those who profess to follow Christ. But as we see in Luke 9:23, it shouldn’t be so. Jesus says, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” I want to spend some time this evening unpacking this verse a little and thinking about ways that this applies to us in our daily lives and in our lives together as a fellowship.

Jesus says that those who come after Him must deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow Him. I think the first thing to notice here is who Jesus’ command applies to. He says, “If *anyone* would come after me...” So the command he gives here is for anyone and everyone who would seek after Him. It’s not optional, and it’s not meant just for the apostles, or for leaders in the church, or for ‘super-Christians’ ... no, *anyone* who wants to follow Christ *must* do this – deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Christ. There are no exceptions. In fact, if you go a few verses down in Luke 9, to v. 57-62, you see Jesus rebuking and in some cases actually *turning away* would-be disciples who try to get around this command. In Luke 9:58, He tells a would-be follower that is perhaps clinging to a comfortable lifestyle, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head.” To another who is clinging to his family, he says, “No one

who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.” Later, in Luke 14:33, Jesus says, “...any of you who does not give up everything he has *cannot* be my disciple.” So Christ’s command to deny ourselves and take up our crosses applies to every one of us who would follow Him. As we’ll see later, He may call different followers to deny themselves in different ways, but that doesn’t change the fact that all followers of Christ are called fundamentally to a life of self-denial.

So what exactly does this mean, to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Him? First, what does it mean to deny ourselves? Simply put, it means saying ‘No’ to ourselves; that is, laying aside our own desires, our own will, even our own needs. It means saying no to the thoughts and desires of our sinful nature, but also saying no to things that might under different circumstances be totally legitimate. We’ll think more about this later, but Jesus takes it even one step further. Not only are we to deny ourselves, but we are to take up our cross daily. The cross was an instrument of execution. Those in Jesus’ day who were carrying crosses were on their way to their deaths. So when Jesus says that we must take up our crosses, it means that we must be willing to suffer and even die. We must be willing to deny ourselves to the degree that we are dying to ourselves every day of our lives. But before you think this is all rather morbid, we don’t do these things just for the sake of depriving ourselves and making ourselves suffer... that would be asceticism; there’s nothing spiritual in that. Rather, we do it so that we might follow Christ unhindered. As Jesus says, “he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and *follow me*.” So to put it another way, following Christ must be the top priority in our lives, to the extent that we say no to everything else in our life that gets in the way of obeying Him, and to the extent that we are willing to face suffering, persecution, and even death for the sake of following Him. He must be not only our Savior, but also our Master and our Lord. As we read in Luke 14:33, those who would have it any other way cannot be His disciples.

I want to say more about Jesus Christ as the focus of our lives, but before I do, I want to spend some time thinking on a practical level about how Christ’s command in Luke 9:23 plays out. What areas does this command to deny ourselves and take up our cross apply to? In a nutshell, it applies to every area of our lives... but to break things down a little more, I’d like to spend a little time thinking how this applies to some specific areas of our lives.

First, we who would follow Christ must deny our own righteousness and ability to save ourselves. This really is the starting point of following Christ... to realize that in ourselves, there is

nothing good, nothing that can please God. We come before Him impoverished and destitute, as sinners deserving of nothing but wrath at the hands of our Holy Creator. So if we are to follow Christ, Jesus tells us in Matthew 5 that we must be poor in spirit. If we are to follow Him, we must empty ourselves of all self-righteousness and come before him humbly to ask His forgiveness. This is where it all starts.

Next, those who would follow Christ must deny their own understanding – of God, of themselves, of the world. As Proverbs 3:5 says, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and *lean not on your own understanding.*” We are to put no trust in our own understanding that is fallen and tainted by sin, but instead, we must trust only in the Lord’s understanding, as revealed in His Word. We must learn to see everything as God sees it. We need to let our understanding be informed and shaped by His Word. When our understanding of things conflicts with what He has revealed, we need to deny ourselves and submit to His Word, rather than cling proudly to our own understanding and deny His Word. We need to learn to take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ; to put off our old ways of thinking and take on the mind of Christ. We may seem to others to be foolish or backwards for doing so; some may ridicule or even persecute us for doing so, but that’s a cross we need to bear if we are to follow Christ faithfully.

Beyond our own understanding, we who would follow Christ must deny our own wills and instead submit our will to God’s. Jesus Himself, provided the best example of this when He prayed to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Not my will, but Yours be done.” That is to be the attitude each one of us has as we follow Christ. We all have goals, plans and ambitions for our lives; but these must be left behind if Christ calls us to something different. It might be something as simple as having to cancel dinner plans for the sake of spending time encouraging a brother through a time of need. Denying yourself means doing it without grumbling at the inconvenience. That’s pretty small stuff. But what if Christ is calling you to leave a secure and well-paying job to serve him as a pastor or as a missionary? Those of you who are single, what if Christ is calling you to be single for the rest of your life so that you can better serve Him? Will you humble yourself in glad submission to His will for your life? Will you deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Him, even if that’s what He calls you to?

Next, those who would follow Christ must deny themselves in the area of their desires and emotions. This includes not only sinful emotions and desires, but also those that are not sinful. In

terms of sinful desires and emotions, there's obviously no question that we must deny these. Titus 2:12 says that God's grace "teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions." We just heard in our sermon series in Colossians that we are to put to death whatever belongs to our sinful nature – sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed, anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, lying and the like (Colossians 3:5-10). That means when these passions of the sinful nature well up in us, we are not to entertain them and nurture them but instead, we are to deny ourselves by putting an end to them and not giving in to them, so that we might obey Christ. So when lustful desires arise, we need to deny them rather than let them grow, so that we might follow Christ. When road rage grips us, we need to deny it, because man's anger does not result in the righteous life that God desires. So we need to deny sinful desires in our lives.

But what about desires that are not necessarily sinful, but that are legitimate desires? Even these must be denied if they take a higher place in our lives than following Christ. These might include desire for things like:

- ***Material possessions or financial security*** – there's nothing necessarily wrong with desiring to have certain things, or desiring to have a measure of financial security; these things can be blessings from the Lord. But we need to be careful that the desire for such things does not govern our lives or hinder our following Jesus Christ. Jesus may not ask us, as He did the rich young ruler, to sell everything we have and give it to the poor; but then again, He may. Or He may call on you to deny yourself in less dramatic ways. For example, it might mean living a simpler lifestyle and spending less money on things you might want, so that you have more to give to the Lord's work and to others. Or it might mean turning down a higher paying job because the demands of that job might potentially be detrimental to your walk with Christ... or spending less of your free time researching stocks and more time with Christ in His Word and in prayer.
- ***Companionship*** – the desire for companionship is legitimate and God-given, be it for a close friend or for a spouse. But there may be times when God for His good purposes brings us through seasons of loneliness. Through such times, we need to be careful that our legitimate desires for companionship do not take an illegitimate place of priority in our lives and lead us to sin, for example, by harboring bitterness or resentment, or by choosing to marry an unbeliever, contrary to the Lord's command. Jerry Bridges writes, "Resentment, bitterness, and self-pity build up inside our hearts and eat away at our spiritual lives like a slowly

spreading cancer. All of these sinful inner emotions have in common a focus on self. They put our disappointments, our wounded pride, or our shattered dreams on the thrones of our hearts, where they become idols to us. We nurture resentment and bitterness, and we wallow in self-pity. Intellectually we know that in all things God works for our good, that nothing can separate us from His love. But in defiance of those God-given promises, we **choose** to think about that which is dishonoring to God and destructive to our own spiritual health.” So, a special word to those who are single or who struggle with loneliness, whether you’re single or married: Christ calls us to deny ourselves in the way we respond to loneliness and to our desire for companionship. Struggling with feelings of loneliness may be legitimate, but that does not give us license to think or act in ways that are disobedient to Christ or that dishonor Him – be it by slipping into bitterness, or by slandering others, or by entering into forbidden relationships. No, in the midst of the struggle, we must continue to deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and follow Christ.

- **Comfort** – we all desire to be comfortable; that’s a good thing that comes from the Lord. But when the desire for comfort keeps us from following and obeying Christ, we need to deny ourselves of it. For example, we may sometimes resist God’s calling because we don’t want to leave what is familiar and do something that might potentially make us feel uncomfortable or embarrassed. Many Christians, particularly as they get older, get so comfortable in their lifestyle that their walk with Christ grows complacent and cold. They get so busy with hobbies or sports or other activities that they have no time to use their God-given spiritual gifts to benefit the Body of Christ, and little or no time or energy for personal Bible study or prayer.

I just spoke to the singles about denying self in the midst of loneliness, so I want to say a word especially to the married couples here about the desire for comfort. I think this can be a struggle especially for those of us who are married. It’s good and right that a husband and wife should spend time together, or that a family should want to spend time together or with other families. But it can be so easy – and I’ve seen it over and over again – for a husband and wife or a family to get so absorbed with themselves and their own interests, and so comfortable in life together that everyone and everything else falls by the wayside. It seems to be a sad tradition at CGC that once people get married, they drop out of sight, stop serving in the church, and in many cases, stop sharing their lives with the wider body of believers. This withdrawal often becomes even more pronounced once children enter the picture. So we need to be really careful here... Is your desire for comfort eroding your desire to follow Christ? We see throughout Scripture that when God’s people get too comfortable, the tendency is to stop

relying on God and to start drifting away from Him. So we need to be constantly on our guard that our desire for comfort does not lead us to resist his callings in our lives, and ultimately cause us to become complacent in our walk with Him or in our concern toward others. We need to consciously and constantly be choosing obedience to Christ over personal comfort, particularly as we get older.

So we need to deny our own righteousness, our own understanding, our will, and our desires and emotions. Much or most of this is done just in the context of our personal relationships with God. But self-denial is also an important part of life in relationship to other people, particularly where it comes to life in the Body of Christ. In our interactions with others, those who would follow Christ must deny themselves and put others ahead of themselves. Again, the Scriptures are absolutely clear on this point. Philippians 2:3-8 says, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!” Just as Jesus Christ humbled Himself to serve our needs before His own, so also we must deny ourselves, in humility considering others better, that is more worthy, than ourselves. We must look not only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Many other verses speak of this same attitude of self-denial in our relationships with others. Romans 12:10 says, “Honor one another above yourselves.” Romans 15:1-3: “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please Himself...” 1 Corinthians 10:24 says, “Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.” Let me read that again: “Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.” (!) 1 John 3:16 says, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” Do you see the pattern here? Jesus Christ denied Himself and took up the Cross for us; so we also must deny ourselves and take up our cross for one another. We must honor one another above ourselves; we must please others for their good, not to please ourselves; we must seek the good of others, not our own; we ought to lay our lives down for one another. This is the call of Christ on the

life of each one of us who would confess Him as Savior and Lord. He Himself has gone before us, and we must follow in His steps.

This call comes out most clearly in the relationship between a strong and a weak Christian, that is, between one that is spiritually more mature and one that is less mature. In this case, the stronger Christian is called clearly to deny himself when necessary for the good of the weaker Christian. As Romans 15:1 says, “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.” That means not doing things that might cause a brother to stumble, even if it might be perfectly legitimate to do those things in a different setting. In the early church, it meant sometimes not eating meat sacrificed to idols, which raised questions of conscience in younger believers who had come out of a background of idolatry. In our day, it might mean not drinking wine, not playing video games, or not watching movies, if it causes a brother to stumble. Our attitude needs to be the same as that of the apostle Paul, who said, “if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.” Would you be willing never to eat meat again, just so your brother wouldn’t stumble and fall into sin? That’s the extent to which we must be willing to deny ourselves in our relationships with one another. So when relating to a believer who is less mature than you, you need to deny yourself for his good, rather than insist on your own.

But of course, Christ’s call to lay down our lives for one another goes well beyond these kinds of situations and touches all of our relationships, whether to Christians or non-Christians, friends or enemies. This comes out in so many different ways. For students, it might mean being willing to take the least desirable assignments in your group projects, or taking time out of your studies to help a classmate who is struggling. For married couples, it might mean doing what your spouse likes to do, instead of what you like to do... or spending less time with other couples or families so you can spend more time encouraging singles in their walk. For singles, it might mean giving up time with friends to help families or others who are in need. For those who are working, it might mean giving up certain things so that you can have more to share with those who are in need.

The list can go on, but I think you get the idea. We all need to reflect seriously tonight, are we doing this? Are we denying ourselves so that others might be built up? Are we laying our lives down for our brothers? We all admire the pastor who rolls up his sleeves to unclog the toilet and clean up the bathroom so everyone else can use it... but how many of us would actually be willing to be that person who has to do the dirty work? When sacrifices have to be made, are you willing to be the one

paying the price so that others might have a smoother road? Are you willing to be inconvenienced, or not to have your own way, so others might benefit? Unfortunately, too often, truth be told, we would rather inconvenience others so that we might benefit instead of the other way around. Our sinful natures wish for others to serve us, rather than for us to serve others... and we get upset and angry when they don't do for us what we think they should be doing for us. Brothers and sisters, it shouldn't be so. That's self-centeredness and self-exaltation, not self-denial. That is not seeking the good of others, but your own good. But Christ came not to be served, but to serve, and as those who would follow Christ, we must do the same.

So, as followers of Christ, we must deny our own righteousness, our own understanding, our own wills, and our own desires and emotions. We must also deny ourselves in our relationships with one another, seeking not our own good, but the good of others. I'd like to conclude the evening by thinking about why we should be doing this, and how we can do this.

So, why should we deny ourselves? At the most basic level, we must deny ourselves because Christ commands it. Once again, in Luke 9:23 He says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." If we want to follow Him, we must deny ourselves and take up our cross. As we saw earlier this evening, those who refuse to do so cannot be His disciples. But why follow Christ? Is He worth it? I hope you will say with me that the answer is yes, because as He goes on to promise, those who lose their lives for Him will find true life. In Him alone do we find forgiveness of sin, reconciliation with God, and eternal life. In Him are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. In Him, we have new birth into a living hope through His resurrection from the dead, and an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. He's worth any sacrifice we might have to make, and so we deny ourselves because we must do so to follow Him.

On another level, though, we do so because Christ Himself did so for us. He didn't just tell us to do this, but then never do it Himself. Rather, He Himself serves as our pattern and our guide. He showed the way, and we only follow in His steps. Philippians 2 says that Jesus, though He is God, did not cling to His rights as God, but made Himself nothing, dying on the cross for us. Paul in 2 Corinthians 8:9 says, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich." If Jesus did all this for our sakes, can we then do any less than deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Him? And if Jesus laid down His life for us, sinful though we were, can do any less than lay down our lives

for our brothers? So we deny ourselves not just because it is Christ's command, but also because He Himself has done the same for us.

Finally, how can we ever hope to be able to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Him? We've talked about some things that are really hard to do... indeed, impossible in our natural selves. So how can we do this? Let me close our time with a few thoughts.

First, we need to stand firm in our faith. As we've seen in Genesis, this is how Abraham was able to live a life of self-denial. Hebrews 11:8-9 says, "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith, he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise." In other words, Abraham was able to deny himself the security and comforts of his family home to wander like a stranger in a foreign land because he trusted in God and in the promises of God to bless him, and to give him a land and an heir. We saw last week that he could deny himself by letting Lot choose the best of the land and by refusing to take any plunder from the king of Sodom, because He trusted in God to provide for him and to fulfill all the promises that He had made.

In the same way, we like Abram must believe and cling tenaciously to the person and the promises of God, if we are to deny ourselves and take up our cross to follow Christ. We will be able to deny sinful desires and remain faithful to Christ, if we trust His promise that He will provide a way out so we can stand up under temptation. We will be able to deny temptations to self-pity because of hardships we're facing, and instead face our circumstances with renewed joy and hope, if we trust His promise that He works *all* things for the good of those who love Him. It's only as we trust Him to provide for all of our needs as we seek Him first, that we will be able to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Christ as we ought.

Second, practice personal discipline and self-control, especially in the small things of life. Luke 16:10 (NKJV) reads, "He who is faithful in what is least, is faithful also in much". We need to be disciplining ourselves to be faithful in the little things of life. If we can't even turn off the TV long enough to spend a few moments each day in the Scriptures and in prayer, how can we expect to be faithful to Christ when He calls us to deny ourselves in greater things?

Third, concentrate on what you're supposed to be doing, not on what you think others should be doing. This is not to say that we don't correct and encourage one another. But it does mean that we need to focus more on how we are following Christ in our own lives than on what we think others are or aren't doing. As Lord of us all, Christ has the right to call different believers to different things. The cross He calls you to bear might not be the same cross that He calls your brother to bear. In John 21, when Jesus tells Peter that he will be martyred and calls Peter to follow Him, Peter looks back and sees John. He asks Jesus, 'Lord, what about him?' (i.e., 'what about John?') to which Jesus replies, 'If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.' In other words, 'That's none of your business what I have in store for him. Just follow me.' In the same way, what Christ calls others to is none of our business; we need to focus His call to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Him. If He calls us to a heavier or lighter burden than our neighbor, what is that to us? We must follow Him.

Finally, keep Christ central. The extent to which we succeed in denying ourselves and taking up our cross and following Him is the extent to which we keep our lives centered on Him. He is the Vine, we are the branches. Apart from Him, we truly can do nothing. But as we abide in Him, and He in us, He sustains us by His power and enables us to bear much fruit. He must have first place and first priority in our lives. As we were reminded this past Sunday, He must be first in our homes, first in our choices for entertainment, first in the way we use money, first in our careers, first in our thoughts, first in our decisions, first in our marriages, first in our singleness, first in our relationships, first in our dreams for the future... We must say with John the Baptist, "He must increase, I must decrease." But as we were also reminded on Sunday, we find our greatest joy when He is in His proper place in our lives – first. Yes, we must deny ourselves and take up our crosses, but we do it to gain Christ. Paul writes in Philippians 3:7-8, "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ." When we keep Christ central in our lives, everything else seems like rubbish in comparison to His surpassing greatness. We need to lose all things that we might gain Him; we need to deny ourselves and take up our crosses so that we might follow Christ. And when we have Him, we have everything.