

A NEGLECTED CHALLENGE

By

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When Jesus called people to follow Him, He did not always mean for them to follow Him geographically, as did the apostles, from village to village. Rather He called them to follow His example and His teaching in daily life, wherever they happen to be.

But His invitation was not sugar-coated and doctored up with subtle psychological appeal, as is usually done in today's preaching. Rather He threw out a hard challenge: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."¹

Self-denial is unappealing, and therefore is seldom mentioned in evangelism. In fact, all of society inveighs against it. Success, according to modern concepts, cannot be attained by denying self. From every quarter — schools, television, the arts, the news media — we are conditioned to demand rights for ourselves. Children are taught to have high self-esteem, and to expect every possible comfort and luxury. Churches compete with the world to entertain them, and they grow up to pursue the American dream: have more things and more time for more pleasure. Self-denial is not in their vocabulary.

In His command to deny self, Jesus asks nothing of us that He has not been willing to do, and in every sense He denied Himself in order that He might do the Father's will and accomplish His purpose.

He said, "I seek not my own will, but the will of Him that sent me."² In this He indicated that He had a will of His own, and could have made other choices, but in everything He denied such choices in order to please the Father and do His will. By His unique wisdom and power He could have attained great glory in the world, and could have had every luxury and pleasure. All of this He denied to Himself in order that He might obey the Father and become our Savior and High Priest.

Much of the appeal in modern religion is in that which can stir the crowd to a collective response. In a large church a multitude may be stampeded down the aisle through emotional hysteria, but to deny one's self is an individual act of the will, in spite of — not because of — one's emotions. It is one thing to confess Jesus before the approving crowd of Christians. It is something else to confess Him out in the world before those who hate His rule.

It is in the will where pride takes hold and produces stubborn disobedience. This is **my** desire, my will, **my** decision! The temptation of Eve was not merely the desire to eat the fruit; it was not here fleshly appetite that caused the sin. What she couldn't resist was the prospect of rising up to a level with God, "knowing good and evil,"³ which meant establishing for herself what would be good or evil. She would not deny her own will to obey the will of God.

This scenario is being repeated throughout society. In fact, society is disintegrating because man has denied God and has made of himself a thousand monstrous gods, all warring for supremacy. For example, it was decided (Who decided it?) that children could not be taught morals in public schools, for this would be teaching

them God's will. Instead, they are taught "values clarification", which tells them to invent their own morals. Like Satan told Eve, they could "know good and evil."

Today a great many of these children, now grown, are clamoring for "gay rights" and "abortion rights", the right to defy the will of God and make their own moral laws. We who hold to the truth that such things are against God's will are labeled as bigots and hate mongers!

Denying self for Christ's sake is usually seen as fanaticism. Even the friends of Jesus said, "He is beside himself",⁴ and the scribes said that He had a demon.⁵ But Jesus denied Himself all the way, saying "Not as I will, but as you will",⁶ denying Himself even unto death. For this, "God highly exalted him, and gave unto him the name which is above every name..."⁷ "and made him to sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule, and authority, and power, and dominion..."⁸

To deny ourselves in this self-seeking, pleasure-loving and arrogant age, firm belief is required in two categories.

First it requires that we believe that Jesus really meant it. Did He mean that every person who becomes a Christian, rich or poor, regardless of his position in society, is to daily deny himself and take up his cross to follow Him? Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor,⁹ but it is reasoned, and rightly so, that this does not apply to everyone. Jesus was addressing a specific person with a special command for a specific purpose, and so far as we know, He never gave such an order to anyone else.

But when He spoke of self denial, He said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself."¹ I can think of no way to limit this to a certain person or group, or to place it in a certain time frame. It must mean me! It must mean every Christian, not just those who accept a special role or who feel they have a special "calling". He wasn't talking just to missionaries.

Yet, it is almost unthinkable. Take a teenage Christian girl, longing for recognition and popularity, surrounded with peer pressure to join the partying crowd — is Jesus talking to her? The college graduate going out into the world of dog-eat-dog competition — does Jesus really expect him to deny self and daily take up his cross? What of the senator or governor who professes to be a Christian? Did Jesus mean for him to deny himself and do only the will of God? In every circumstance? Without a doubt that is exactly what Jesus meant. But where are the officials who believe this?

Just as hard to accept, and just as rare, is the faith that if one obeys this command without reservation, all will turn out well. We have all seen what sometimes happens to people who take a stand for Christ against the company's immoral policies. They may be passed over for promotion, or fired. Others may be identified as religious fanatics who deserve only scorn and condemnation.

From a worldly view it doesn't seem to pay to deny self and take up your cross. But Jesus is addressing those who love not the world, but God and His purpose. Self-denial is the acknowledgment that God's purpose is the highest and best. It is faith that God knows what He is doing, even if we don't. It is to believe Jesus' promise: "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these (whatever we truly need) will be added unto you".¹⁰ It is to believe that as we daily look to Jesus, we will be transformed into His image."¹¹

That also involves risk. Do we want God to disrupt our lives, to tear away the image we have so carefully designed over the years, that we might look more like His humble Son? Do we want Him to replace the personal qualities of which we are proud because they are so prominently us, with qualities which are much less attractive to the world — like humility, patience, compassion, godliness?

The answer is yes. The goal is the life designed by the Creator, and it cannot be attained by anyone with other desires. Whosoever would save his life shall lose it, but whosoever would lose his life for Christ's sake, shall save it.¹² What Jesus shows us is that this life is temporal and worldly values are temporal. If in the process of denying self to follow Jesus one loses that which is temporal, it is no true loss, for what is gained is eternal.

In this day of instant communication, with every major event anywhere on the earth immediately brought to our eyes in living color, we are apt to think of these events as the most important things taking place in the world. But all the noise and change do not necessarily demonstrate the work of God. "It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure."¹³ His work is not that which gets the headlines, like the activities of some celebrity. Rather, He works quietly in giving a mother patience and wisdom, in sustaining a man in labor and trials, and in keeping the young person from falling into temptation. His is the silent work of giving grace to the humble and transforming believers into people ready to be received by Jesus when He appears at the great day of resurrection.¹⁴

When people think of Christ, they think of One who sought nothing for Himself, but humbled Himself as a servant, and denied Himself even to the point of dying for the ungodly.¹⁵ But they often look in vain for the same qualities in modern Christians.

As we confront the critical problems of our nation, we must remember that we will labor in vain unless, first of all, we deny self, take up our cross, and follow Jesus.

REFERENCES

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| 5. Mark 3:22 | 13. Philippians 2:13 |
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