

Title: The call to being a Christian
Text: Luke 9.23-27
Theme: Die to live
Series: Luke
Prop Stmtnt: Everything about Christ is counterintuitive, so is the call to following him.

Dietrich was a promising theological student from Germany, was educated in the States and returned to Germany during Hitler's rise to power. The country was looking for someone with a strong hand who could lead them out of their mess. Hitler fit the bill. His policies demanded more and more control over the country's manufacturing, education, media and religious influences. Bonhoeffer saw what most did not want to admit and he spoke out against it. He was particularly grieved at the church who through a series of compromises chose to be silent about Hitler's atrocities instead of standing up and speaking out. He saw that the church had abandoned the clarity and the call of the gospel in order to be accepted by the political forces. The German church wrapped itself in the German flag, and when following the flag meant abandoning the gospel, the leaders chose the flag. To follow Christ and his gospel, cost too much and they were not willing to pay that price. I want you prepared. By God's grace we will be a gracious, humble, yet convictional people who do not surrender the gospel for anything. If that is the kind of people we are going to be, then we have to be willing to take the call of following Christ to heart. But here is the problem and it is a big one.

Following Christ means to embrace about everything that we naturally want to avoid. While Jesus has given some hints of it, he now starts to clearly define his mission and the terms of what following him looks like. Several themes begin to emerge and they are so difficult for the disciples and for us to grasp. 1) Humility is the means to glory. 2) Death is the means to life. 3) Rejection is the means to acceptance. 4) Suffering is the path to joy. What kind of a life is this? Who would ever follow a leader who champions these things? Following Christ makes no sense except this. Following Christ is the only means by which you can ever know what it means to really live! Following Christ is the only means by which you can be declared righteous. Following Christ is the only means by which you can enjoy God for ever. And since eternal life sounds attractive, there is at least something in the message of Christ that has some appeal.

1. The call sounds radical. (23)

Why did he ask them who they thought he was, and then (v.21), why did he warn them not to tell anyone? The reasons are now clear. Christ had to completely change their perception of the Messiah. He was saying that yes, I am the Messiah, but no, I am not what you think the Messiah is. We are used to people, organizations or causes, where the leaders and some of the followers create myths to make themselves or their movement look better and suppress or threaten anything that would expose it. Jesus is different and therefore, following Jesus is different. That means that his church, the real church is different. We do not hunt for things to make our cause look better. We simply seek the truth, embrace the truth and champion the truth. This is what Jesus did. He is telling his disciples and us, the truth. The truths are hard to hear, but necessary to know what you are signing up for. Here it is.

The Messiah must suffer many things, is going to be rejected, and will be killed. This was not what they expected or wanted. We are no different. We want a Messiah who makes life better, not worse! I've got enough problems; I don't need more. As you listen to Christ, you realize that he is promising a better life, in fact a perfect life – later. Suffering now, glory later. He already planted the seeds of this thinking in his sermon on the mount. Humility is the means to exaltation. He is building on this theme. Death is the means to life. Rejection is the means to acceptance. Suffering is the means to joy. Down is the way to up. Serving is the path to leadership. Everything about Christ seems counter-intuitive. Our world screams at us and demands that we embrace its sin because sin is the pursuit of pleasure. Jesus says that holiness is actually the path to pleasure. It makes no sense to our world. The call sounds radical. It is the call, as Jesus says, to deny yourself. That is not just a big ask, that is a big demand.

A. Deny yourself.

How should we understand this command to deny ourselves? If we just let our minds and values travel unhindered and unchallenged, we will create a world in our imagination with a life that we think will bring us the greatest happiness. When we cannot cause that world to exist, then we are tempted to go to God and say, "Here is my life, my plan and my dream. I want you God to make it happen." Jesus is saying, No! Wrong dream! We don't come to Christ so that he will make cause our imagination to come alive. That would be Jesus following us and doing our bidding. The call to being a Christian is the call to follow Christ. Coming after Christ means that I lay down my dream for his. I set aside my imaginary world for his real one. I embrace his plan and trust him that it is way better than mine. Following Christ is not about you, it is about Christ. God's job is not to give you everything on your want list. Your dreams, your goals, your desires, your wants – if you want to pursue them, go for it, but do not call yourself a follower of Christ. "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself." God's dream is more important than your dream. In your dream, you have rights and expectations. When you deny yourself, you give up those rights. You let them go. You let go of your expectations and plans. I deserve fairness. I deserve respect. I deserve health, I deserve comfort, I deserve, etc. These are the things that we are told to demand and we try to clench them. Following Christ means that I live with an open hand, not a clenched fist. To deny yourself means to die to self. How exactly do I do this?

Bonhoeffer said, *"To deny oneself is to be aware only of Christ and no more of self, to see only him who goes before and no more the road which is too hard for us. Once more, all that self-denial can say is" "He leads the way, keep close to him."*¹

That sounds good, but exactly how do you do that? Paul said in 12 Corinthians 15.31, "I die daily." This means that every day, we begin our day with a funeral in which we put our impulses to rule our lives, to have things our way, to be made much of, into a casket and we bury it. We do this by asking God to help us live responsive to the Spirit and unresponsive to our own agenda and impulses. Romans 6.12 is helpful where we are told not to let sin reign in our bodies

¹ The Cost of Discipleship, p. 88

“to make you obey its passions.” Your impulses are not in charge, Christ is. You do not present the parts of your body as an offering to sin to be available for evil. You bury that. You consider yourself to be dead to that. Instead, you offer your members to God to be used as instruments for righteousness. God, show me how I can use my body, my hands, voice, feet, arms, back, mind, opportunities, conversations, etc. to make much of you? 2 examples from this week. A little boy from our congregation had surgery on his brain this week. The parents wanted to be an encouragement to the neurologist. I.e., how can I bless others? Denying ourselves is like reversing the flow from wanting things to come our way, to turning on the spigot so we give life to others. So, they kindly expressed to the neurologist their sweet and utter dependence on God, which means that the outcome of the surgery was ultimately not on the neurologist. This was not her burden to bear. Their son was ultimately in the hands of God and that was the best place for him to be and they trust God to use her as his instrument, no matter the outcome. Example 2. There is a pastor who serves a small congregation in the 6 Mile/Gratiot area. There is a lot of need there and they are doing a service project to provide some practical helps for people in their region. A couple from our church heard about this and decided to help by doing some shopping, and delivering supplies. Denying yourself is a means to rest and to joy.

B. Take up your cross.

What do you think of when you hear, “this is the cross that I have to carry”? Do you think of a physical ailment, a challenging family situation, or perhaps one of life’s disappointments? Let me help you think clearly about this. Notice that Christ is referring only to those who follow him. I point this out is because often times, what we call “our cross to bear” is not really a cross to bear. If what we bear is no different than what other people endure who are not followers of Christ, then we really cannot call it a cross. For example, if I were diagnosed with cancer, that would not be my cross to bear. Cancer comes to believers and non-believers alike. However, if what I am suffering is directly related to my following Christ – then that would be my cross to carry. But we are called to suffer what Christ suffered. But here is where the call of Christ is different. If all that Christ did was suffer, then we would be drawn by the example of his selflessness. When we honor our military, we talk about bravery and sacrifice. We’ve seen phrases like, “all gave some, some gave all.” We applaud and admire the act of giving one’s life to save another. That is the highest humanitarian act we can think of. If all that Christ did was suffer in our place, we could understand aspiring to that example. But, carrying the cross is more than dying for someone as a humanitarian act of self-sacrifice.

What does it mean to carry the cross? And how do I relate this seemingly heavy command to carry the cross to the statement that Christ made that his yoke is easy and his burden is light? I want you to see that these statements are not in conflict with each other, but actually relate perfectly together. In order for you to understand what it means to carry the cross, you need to understand what happened at the cross. The cross is the supreme statement made by God about how serious my sin is, and how magnificent his grace is. The cross magnifies the glory of God because in the death of His Son, God put his infinite righteousness on display. He ordained that his Son would die because our sin is that serious. Our sin is that hideous. Our sin is that repulsive and despicable and offensive and liable for such intense judgment that only an infinite

Savior could absorb the infinite wrath of God which was aroused because his infinite holiness was so horrifically offended. There on the cross in the death of Christ is the righteousness of God, the holiness of God, the justice of God is set on display. The cross displays the seriousness of our sin and the intensity of God's wrath against it. The holiness, righteousness, and justice of God are all part of the character of God. When God's character is made known, God is being glorified. So, what does it mean to carry the cross? It means to identify with, to accept and embrace God's attitude toward sin. When you say what Christ says about sin, then expect to be treated as Christ was treated. People may respect you if you sacrifice for others, but they will hate you if you speak out against their sin. Will you carry the cross?

I believe the day will come when the leaders and members of this church will be ostracized socially because we dare to hold to the Scriptures. I also believe that the leaders and members of this church will face arrest and fines and jail for the same reasons. There are sins that God condemns that our culture tries to champion and they want to demand that we do the same. I want you ready for that day.

But there is another aspect of what it means to carry the cross. At the cross, God not only displayed his righteousness, he displayed his grace and mercy. Instead of judging me with his infinite wrath, he chose to judge his Son in my place. Colossians 2.14 says that God canceled the record of our debt by nailing it to the cross. Imagine that every sinful thought and deed that you have ever done and will ever do, was written down. That record stands as a testimony to your shame and condemns you as one guilty and liable for punishment. That record, ever seen by others, ever made public would make it evident to all that you belong in a jail cell of the world's most diabolical and evil wretches. But, instead of reading this account of your sins, and justly using it as a warrant to send you to hell God took that account and placed it into the hand of his own Son, and then he drove a nail through them both into the cross. And in so doing, he considered the death of his Son as payment, in full. Your sin, is no match for his grace!

Therefore, to carry the cross, not only means to embrace what God says about sin, it also means to pronounce what God says about his mercy. The mercy of God, the grace of God, and the love of God are all part of the character of God. Your world may hate you because of your agreement with God about sin, and when they see grace under fire and mercy refined in trial, it may embolden them to mock you without fear of retaliation.

"The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. ...the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise God-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." (p. 89)

Are you willing to stand with God and with the true people of God with what he says about your sin and his Son? Are you willing to stand with God and with the true people of God with what he says about mercy? Anything that helps me see and savor his righteousness, anything that helps me magnify his mercy and grace is a gift and a joy. This is why dying is the only way to live.

“Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.” Lk 14.27

2. **The explanation of the call** – 24-27

These verses are not generally heard in our churches. Our idea of struggle is trying to fit into our designer jeans after too much dessert the week before. We don't think that soft Americans can handle these things, so we don't talk about this. But Christ is so infinitely precious and so gloriously magnificent that to follow him with mediocre dreams and offer him a mediocre life, and mediocre worship and half-hearted obedience, and tell him that he ought to be thankful that you give him about 2 hours a week in church, when something else doesn't come up and crowd your schedule, is offensive. But Christ does not demand from you your life, your soul and your all because he is against you, but because he is infinitely zealous for your joy. He commands you to find your joy in him through total abandonment, faith-driven obedience and risk-taking sacrifice because he alone is where your joy is. It would be a terrible travesty for God not to demand you to find your joy in him, when he alone is your joy! That is why if you try to save your life, you will end up losing it every time. Jesus gives us a warning and a promise.

a. **Warning and promise** – 24

The warning is for those who live for themselves, that is who try to save their lives. You will lose it. The promise is for those who give away their lives for the sake of Christ. They will save it. Christ calls you to deny yourself, because what you want is too little and will not work and will not save. Christ calls you to deny yourself because left to yourself you will waste your one, short and precious life looking for satisfaction in food, drink, sex, money, and approval, while God offers you infinite pleasure and eternal joy in Himself. The invitation to deny yourself is more than matched by Christ's promises of reward. Look at what you get if you try to save your life. You lose it. Look at what you get if you lose your life for Christ's sake. You get it and you get it all! Abandoning your motives of self-preservation, and self-promotion in order to live for the purpose of making God famous is the means that God has designed to thrill you. The losing of your life, the denying of your life, the setting aside of your rights, goals, dreams and demands is not an easy road, but it is the only means of saving your life. That is the means that God has chosen to satisfy you with joy because Jesus is way better than anything else you could get. And anything that you get, you can't keep. Your greatest treasures will be sold at yard sale or wiped out. So, here is the pattern. Christ humbled himself (set aside his rights) and died as a means to glorify the Father and as a means to enjoy Him.

Christ calls us to do the same. Just as Christ, who for the joy set before him, endured the cross and is now set down at the right hand of God (humiliation, sacrifice, exaltation). We are called to follow him. We take our stand with Christ. We accept the misunderstanding of others, the scorn of the world, the rejection and persecution, knowing that if they killed the King because he spoke the truth, we should expect the same. But if you lose your life for Christ and the gospel, you will save it.

You can't play it safe with following Christ. Jesus plays for keeps. If you want to play it safe, if you want to save your life, you will lose it. If you want to save your life and live with your defenses up, protecting your heart from disappointment, your schedule from inconveniences, your physical being from discomforts and live only for the next cooking series, or fantasy football season, have had it. But do not call yourself a follower of Christ. The most dull and bitter people I know are those who live and think only for themselves. The most delightful, magnetic, attractive, and engaging people I know are those who live abandoned to Christ and it has absolutely nothing to do with circumstances.

b. Reasoning – 25

If you live for the pleasures of this world, you are going to lose. You are guaranteed to lose it all. What fool tries to hold on to what he cannot keep? But, if you let them go; if you give up what you could not keep, in order to gain what you could not lose, now you are free. (I suggested to Derek that we conclude the service by singing, "Let it go" but he didn't think that was such a good idea.) When you give the keys of your life to Christ you are free to live considering the most important truth; how can I advance the kingdom and glory of Christ?

c. Warning and promise – 26-27

Verses 26 and 27 are further explanations of what denying yourself and losing your life look like. Being ashamed to be identified with Christ and with his words is evidence that you do not belong to him. When you do not live according to the expectations of your world, you will not be understood. Worse yet, you can expect to be ridiculed, persecuted, and rejected. At times it seems like a lonely road. If you are an educator in a public setting, you can expect to be passed over for promotions, when you are suspected to be one who believes in creation, or you do not champion the LGBTQ demands. If you do not party with the cool people, you can expect to be given the junk hours, and dirty jobs that no one wants. If you do not approve of sin in the name of toleration, you can expect social ostracism and even family disapproval. Do not be surprised when that happens. Don't ask for it, but realize it comes with the turf. If you are not willing to sign away your life for him, then do not claim to be his follower. If you are ashamed of him now, he will be ashamed of you when he comes in his Father's glory. Playing it safe is a certain way to lose. Risk it all for Christ is a guarantee of saving your life.

Laura Edwards retired as a medical doctor. She had led a demanding life, and with her husband having died, no one could blame her if she did some socializing and took it easy as she wound down now in her sunset years. But Laura teamed up with Ruby Eliason a single gal who had never married. Together, Ruby and Laura worked in Cameroon, West Africa for the sake of the gospel. Laura was over 80 years old and Ruby was getting close when on that April day, the brakes failed in the car they were driving and they went with it over a cliff to their death. Tragedy? Are you kidding me?! Tragedy is living for your next visit to the casino, or a trip to the flea market, or the next sale at Walmart, or for a 225-bowling average.