

Denying the Idol Self

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[0 : 00] In St. Luke chapter 9, we read at verse 23, And he said unto them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it. But whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it. Now this is obviously a well-known verse. It's a famous verse of Jesus and similar equivalent verses in some of the other gospel accounts.

We know this term of Jesus. Any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. And we think, yep, okay, that's what we've got to do. But what do we understand by that?

And why might this cause us to hesitate? Well, one reason it will cause us to hesitate is because we fear the idea of taking up a cross. We fear the idea of denying of ourselves.

But what does it mean to deny ourselves? Well, let's look at what it doesn't mean, first of all. It doesn't mean to deny who you are and what you are.

[1 : 06] To deny yourself. The man denying himself or the man denying herself doesn't mean, Oh, well, I've got to completely change my personality. I've got to completely do everything differently in my life.

Clearly what I am isn't acceptable to God. I have to be somebody completely different. God does not expect you to do that. He does not expect you to be somebody you're not.

It doesn't mean to deny who you are and what you are. It doesn't even simply mean to stop being or doing various things that you might enjoy, assuming they're innocent pleasures anyway.

God isn't necessarily going to say, Stop doing this. Stop doing that. Thou shalt not do this. Don't do that. Don't do that. Don't do the next thing. This is, surely that's what it means by denying yourself. All the things you like doing, well, you have to stop doing them.

And you have to become a real devout holy Christian. So you're not allowed to do all these things. That's not what it means either. God has given us, as Paul likes to Peter, all things in this world, you know, to enjoy, and humbly and truly and thankfully to enjoy.

[2 : 07] If they're good and wholesome things, the Lord wants you to have them. If they are harmful things, He doesn't want you to have them. In the same way as no loving parent wants their child to be damaged by the things they may engage in, what are the things that they will do.

The Lord wants to direct us away from the things that will harm us and to ward the things that will bless us. But even that is not the homeless of what is meant here.

If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. Well, I would suggest to you that the first thing that we have to do where this verse is concerned is to recognize the self as, in spiritual terms, the ultimate idol, which of course it is.

And that's one reason why it is such a barrier to people to give themselves wholly to Christ because the self is there. The self is the thing we cling to most.

The self is the thing, well, we want to make sure that I'll be okay in this respect. I want to make sure that I'll still have this, I'll still have that, I'll still have the next thing. I want to make sure that I'll still be me and I'll still have my identity and my self-expression and my self-identity and my self-fulfillment.

[3 : 27] And then, if it's okay, I might give God what's left over. And we see what happens so readily. The self is the ultimate idol. And whatever form of expression it may take in other religions, which are basically just man-made inventions or philosophies or ideologies of the world, they're all ultimately about man furthering himself.

self. And they're about man seeking to be the ultimate in his life. And even the sort of so-called self-help ideas will be self-assertive and self-expressive and make sure you push yourself forward and don't hang back in the crowd.

It's all about the self. It is all about putting that idol on the throne, the same idol that at the very beginning, Adam and Eve were tempted to put self onto the throne. They gave in to it. Oh, as God said, don't eat the fruit of the garden. Oh, well, we can't eat any food. Well, I can not this. Oh, you surely won't die. Your eyes will be opened. You will become as gods, which was true in a sense. They understood the difference then between good and evil, but painfully so because then they knew what evil was because they were guilty of it. [4 : 43] They didn't become gods. They may have become as gods, small g, but what are gods, small g, except idols? And the self is the ultimate idol.

And to recognize this ultimate idol in spiritual terms, the unholy treaty of me, myself, I, the putting of that first, which is what we do in our lives until we know Christ, this the devil presents to you as the ultimate fulfillment.

Me, and the fun. I, I want to do what I want to do. I want to have the life that I want to have. I want to gain the things I want to gain. Yes, I want to maybe help other people and be nice, but even that is just part of everybody thinking I'm a good guy, that I'm the one that everyone would look up to as well as and take my place in the world.

And yes, there'll be other people who have achieved this, that, and the next thing. And look at me and they'll think, what a great guy that person is. I want to be that guy. I want to be there.

This, the devil presents to you as the ultimate fulfillment. When in reality, it is the ultimate destruction. To put the self on the throne is the ultimate destruction.

[6 : 03] The truth is that denying the idol and recognizing our human, earthbound limitations and embracing the truth of Christ is the ultimate affirmation of our true God-given identity.

You see what the devil does? He can't completely deny our reality that God has made. He can only twist it and turn it and make it into something bad.

God has created men and women in his image. He has given them all things in this world. He wants them to be blessed in relationship with him.

But the devil comes in and says, oh, wait a minute. You don't need this guy. You can be all yourself. You can be the one that sits on the throne. You can be the one that is self-fulfilled.

As somebody has mentioned in this past month's record, of course, talking about atheism and science and so on, and says that, you know, science hasn't made God irrelevant, but rather, atheism makes science irrelevant.

[7 : 11] The not believing in God, the denial of God, is what makes all the facts, all the truths, everything that points to God, makes it irrelevant because we just won't see it.

We just refuse to see it if we won't put our trust in the Lord. We want self on the throne. Now, of course, everybody wants their life to mean something.

Everybody naturally wants to mean something. To have meant something as it draws towards its end. You know, if we were going to be in our deathbeds tomorrow and we had a bit of time to reflect in our lives, you might think, well, my life didn't amount to very much, did it?

I didn't sort of change the world. I didn't become a millionaire in rural countries. I didn't head up a big corporation. I didn't have people employed under me or whatever. I wasn't a big splash in the world.

What did I amount to? And you know, no matter what you achieve in this world, that is always going to be the sense of incompleteness and unfulfillment. But by then, for most people, it will be too late because they'll have spent all the years of their lives chasing the wind.

[8 : 22] And the reality is that the fulfillment and the meaning that we seek, we find ultimately not in ourselves, not in the idol.

To deny the self is not a hardship when you realize that that self as the ultimate idol is what denies you fulfillment. Everybody wants their life to have meant something when it draws near its end.

You know, we all want to have been worth something. Everybody wants to feel that they were worth something. And the Lord understands that.

And he recognizes it. He wants people to say, look, I know what you're worth. I know how much you are valued. And if you're in Christ, then, if you're believing and trusting in Christ, the ultimate price that has ever been paid for anything has been paid for your soul, for your salvation.

That's how much you are worth. God wants individual souls to know how much he, of all people, values them. Because the Lord understands and recognizes our need to feel that we are worth something.

[9 : 34] That we, that we meant something. We so often try to gain self-worth or fulfillment by pushing or promoting the self.

We, we want to, we want to fit in, we want to be cool, we want to belong, but we want to be better than everybody else as well. You know, and this, I think, is what is behind what Christ says at verse 26, whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him shall the Son of Man be ashamed when he shall come in his glory and his fathers and of the holy angels.

Why would anybody be ashamed of Christ's words? Well, because they would be embarrassed because they might be the only one that thinks it and it's not cool and it's not, you know, it doesn't flow where the world's going.

It doesn't make you special. It doesn't give you sort of a flashy kind of appearance and sweet cred of everybody else. So, you know, leave it sort of embarrassed and ashamed and maybe keep quiet and don't say anything about the fact that maybe you are a Christian and so, it's not that we're ashamed of Jesus, it's just that we're not keen to let anybody know about it and so, we hide it away a bit because it's not going to make us look good.

We are a wee bit ashamed in that sense because we want to fit in with the world and we'll fit in better if we're more like them and we'll be more like them if we just minimise the effect of Jesus in our lives.

[11 : 03] But as Jesus said, you know, he understands that wanting to belong. He understands that wanting to be part and says, I'm not wanting to stick out like a sword and I'm not wanting to be awkward, not wanting to be, you know, denied by everybody but he says, but, you know, the wheel is going to turn and all the people that you want to fit in with just now, the day will come where the wheel will turn and then Christ comes back and his holy angels and all his power and then that's the thing everybody wants to be part of.

Suddenly, that glory, oh, I wish I was in with them. I wish I belonged there, oh, but we spent all of our lives denying it, so oops, oh dear, and we were ashamed of it then, so what's he going to do when he comes back?

He's going to deal with us exactly as we dealt with him. There is no vindictiveness in the Lord, there is no injustice in the Lord, how we have behaved is by definition how we think it is alright to behave, how we have responded to him or to others is by definition how we think it's okay to respond.

And so this is one reason why Jesus, with great perceptiveness, says, even from a point of view of self-preservation, do unto others as you would want them to do to you, do to God as you would want him to do to you.

If you want to make sure that the Lord doesn't deny you when he comes back with all his power and glory and his holy angels, we don't deny him now. And when it's not trendy and when it's not cool, we don't pretend we don't belong to Christ or just terribly quiet about it because the day will come when he comes with all his power and glory.

[12 : 42] And then that's what everybody will want to belong to. That will be the best show in time. That will be the one that's the last thing that's going to be eternal and all the, all the cool fitting in trendiness of this world will just fade away.

And yes, if we wanted to belong to it, then yeah, that's fine, that's what you wanted, that's what you get, you fade away with it. Say, but Lord, Lord, I belong to you. Yeah, and that's what you said when?

That's when you didn't want to belong to me, that's when you denied, so I'm just doing what you did. I'm just responding how you wanted to respond. What we do is a definition of how we consider it's acceptable to behave, and if we consider it's acceptable for us to behave that way, it must be okay for everybody else to behave that way, it must be okay for God to behave that way.

We can't expect God to have a different standard of right from what we have. He does, he's got a better standard than we have it, but we can't say, oh God, don't deal with me as I deal with you, I want to have my cake and eat it as well.

But this is what the Lord says, whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him shall the Son of Man be ashamed when he shall come in his own glory and in his fathers and of the holy angels.

[13 : 57] you see there's going to be a date when it's completely the opposite of what it is now. If you think of the world spinning on its axis and going around the sun, while the world is turning on its axis, it turns away from the sun, that half of the world is dark, that's night time to us.

The other half of the world is that part of the globe is turned towards the sun, it's bright, it's daylight, but as the world, it's going to come back to night again, and then that which was in sunshine is going to be in darkness, and what is in darkness is going to be in sunshine.

The world is going to turn, it's going to happen, because it happens every 24 hours, we don't think it's a surprise, but the turning of this particular circle, when the Son of Man comes back in his power and with his glory, that's only going to happen at once, but we know it's going to happen because he's told us, and the Lord understands we want to fit in, we want to belong, we don't want to stick out like a sword, but you got to belong to somebody, and sooner or later there's always going to be people that will disagree with you, it doesn't matter how powerful you become, how popular you become, how much you win, there will be people who are against you, there's always going to be people who are against you, so whose side are you going to be on regardless of who's against you, the Lord understands, and he recognises it better than he could ever imagine your need to belong, to fit in, to be affirmed, and we try to do this by promoting self, we try to do this by getting what we think is the best for me, myself,

I, what we want so often is not worth or value or virtue itself, but it's rather to look good or to be thought of as good in the eyes of others, we want to feel like we're as good as anybody else, and we're better than a whole lot of other people as well, self-comparison, or putting other folk down, is often the other side of that, you know, if we can't build ourselves up, well, if we put somebody else down, then we'll look better by comparison, so often, we fear that denying self will mean that suddenly we'll have nothing at all left in life, if I deny myself, I'm going to have any money, won't have any house, I won't have anyone to live, won't have any of the good things that I enjoy, I have no food, no friends, we fear that of course, we need money for the necessities of life, of course, we have to live somewhere, we have to have a roof over our heads somehow, but with all the money in the world, we'd all like more money, why?

Because what goods or comfort or luxury perhaps we want, probably the biggest single thing, what is greater security, we want to feel safe, and if we have more money we'll feel more safe, without having to worry, you know what Ecclesiastes of course says, chapter 7, verse 12, it says, wisdom is a defence and money is a defence, but the excellency of knowledge is that wisdom giveth life to them that have it, in other words it says wisdom is a defence, money is a defence, excellency of knowledge, wisdom gives life to them that have it, in other words money does it, money doesn't give life to them that have it, wisdom does, what's wisdom's beginning?

[17:22] The fear of the Lord, it's the beginning of wisdom, denying self, doesn't mean ceasing to be who you are, it means taking the idol off the throne, and putting Christ there, Christ becomes then your ultimate identity, Christ becomes your ultimate identity, identity, so that you wouldn't be you anymore without him, we've got to get that into our heads, if Christ is our ultimate identity, then you wouldn't be you anymore without him, so if somebody came along and said, well why don't you convert to Hinduism or Islam or whatever, or just forget about the Lord and become an atheist, then you're like, yeah, okay, I'll do that, and you do that, and the thing is that you cease to be who you are, you cease to be who you're meant to be, because who you're meant to be is who you are in Christ, and this is our ultimate identity, denying self means taking the idol off the throne and putting

Christ there, Christ becomes your ultimate identity, Christ wants you to discover that, to learn that, that you are who you are only in him, and that without him you cease to have the identity that you thought was so precious, that meant so much, the self that was so important, doesn't really exist as the entity you think it is outside of Christ, it's a shell, it's a shadow, it's not the reality that we were designed to be in Christ, in a nutshell, Christ wants to free you to become the real you, the ultimate you, the person you were designed and born to be and intended to be, the real product if you like, rather than just the packaging on the outside, the cardboard box with a one dimensional picture on the outside, it's as though you buy a product or something off the shop shelf and it's in a box or whatever and there's a picture of it with some smiley person using it on the outside or whatever it happens to be, but it's just a flat one dimensional picture, the real product you bought, you're going to take it out of the packaging and start using it and that's like the packaging is like what so often we think of as the real us in this world, but that's just the other packaging, it's not the reality, the reality is what's inside and you're going to take it out of the packaging and start using it, start putting it to work and that is the ultimate, the real you what is meant to be fulfilled in Christ, the real product, not just a cardboard packaging one dimensional picture on the flight, deny the idol, don't deny the truth, so when it says that if any man will come after me, let him deny himself, it doesn't mean cease to be

who he is, it means cease to have the idol on the throne, that self which the devil wants you to put on the throne instead of

Christ, because as long as you're doing that, you haven't discovered the reality of who you are, deny that old self, deny that idol, and you'll discover who you really are meant to be, and who you're designed to be, 1 Peter 5, we read verses 6 and 7, humble yourselves therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon him, for he careth for you, God's desire is that you be all you can be, but you're not going to be able to be as an idol, you're not going to be able to be with yourself on the throne, your identity does not really exist in any meaningful sense until it exists in Christ, so after denying the services, well take up the cross, well that would be a bit scary, wouldn't it, yeah, by the time if we think

Jesus was well familiar with all the Jews of his day, being well familiar with the reality of crucifixion, they would have seen it many times, it would just be part of daily life, the Romans crucified people at the drop of a hat, they would regularly see crosses by the roadside or the latest victim, but whoever was taking up his cross and carrying it to his place of execution, would already have been scourged, and we've talked about scourging in the past, and when we looked at the crucifixion of our Lord, it's a brutal business, he would already have suffered much, and he would be about to suffer still more, and he would have to face death, death, but isn't that going to be the case anyway, I mean, unless the Lord comes back first, we're all going to have to face death, oh yeah, but we don't have to face that good again, that brutality, and that cruelty, and that suffering, I mean, you've already said the person takes up the cross, they've already suffered, well, okay, here we are at this stage of our lives, here you are at this stage of your life, you're saying, oh,

I've never suffered, never suffered in my life, it's always been sunny, it's always been brilliant, it's always been beautiful, everything's gone right all the time, and no, it hasn't, you and I both know that, we've all suffered in different ways, we've suffered internally in ways that people would never know about on the outside, we've suffered whether broken hearts, or broken disappointments, or failed attempts, whether in terms of jobs, or hopes, or plans, or investments, or whatever it might be, we've suffered disappointments, we've suffered knockbacks, we've had so many things in our lives that have been bitter memories or difficulties, you've suffered, just to get here, you've suffered, because that is the nature of this fallen world, is suffering, so whether you're taking up that cross, or whether you're in the crowd watching it going past, one way or another, you've still suffered to get here, suffering up until this point is unavoidable, non-negotiable, you can't escape it in this world, so either it meant something and it's for some purpose, or it's just water down the drain, but we've all suffered to get to where we are, that's what the case is anyway, so the cross, well the cross represents, oh hideous agonising there, now the cross represents the ultimate in a life and death and ultimately resurrection, that counts for something, you think of the cross, what do you think of, you think of the cross, you see an image of a cross, you think Christ, you think Christianity, it's all about Jesus, who died on the cross and rose again, in other words, the cross represents the ultimate life that ultimately counted for more than any other life that is ever done in this world, and if we would have our life really can't, really mean something, then yes the cross is something that has to be taken up, it has to be gone through, yes it's a fearful, hideous death, but as somebody once said perhaps somewhat cynically we're all going to die of something, so we might as well die for something which is worth what, and it might not be as bad as you fear, we're not going to have to go through physical bodily crucifixion, in all likelihood, some missionaries in all parts of the world yes they did get physically crucified by those they tried to convert, and it has happened in the past, but to most people it doesn't happen, you're not looking at physical crucifixion, but you will be looking at difficulties and sufferings and pain, that's going to be your law anyway in this fallen world, is it going to mean something, is it going to count for something, there is no symbol now, regardless of what it originally meant as an instrument of torture and execution, there is no symbol now that stands for more power and life in all its fullness than the cross of Jesus Christ, and it is because of that cross that it points us to the life that meant more than any other life, to the death that purchased more than any other death, to the resurrection which overcame that death in the cross, is life and death and resurrection and power in all its fulfillment, that's what you're called to take up, take up your cross and follow him, not only to take up your cross, but to do it daily,

[26 : 25] I think to do something every day means it is renewed every day, you recognize it's necessary every day, now we have this a wee bit with gadgets, I've unusually today brought a couple of gadgets into the pool, but with me, I've got an iPad here, this is my iPad, and I understand the iPad because I see how it works because you've got all various things you can do with it

electronically, and what I like about the iPad is that I know that if I use it, it runs down, and so if it runs down, I have to plug it in, I have to charge it up, I can relate to that, even my simple technological understanding can relate to that, but I've also got here a phone, now the phone can do many of the things that the iPad can do, in fact, it can probably do more of them, but here's the phone, and a lot of stuff, and apps, and what have you on the phone, and smartphone, or whatever it might be, now the difficulty I have with this phone is that I think of it as like the iPad, it should be a case of I'm using it, using it, using it, using it, okay, it's going to run down,

I have to plug it in, I have to charge it up, otherwise it's going to die in me, but the thing with this phone is that actually so many computer chips, and so many apps, and goodness knows all what in it, that are soaking out the juice out of it the whole time, soaking out all the power source, that for this to run down, and to need plugged in, all they have to do with it is nothing, it's not a case of if I'm using it, constantly talking, constantly texting, constantly going on different apps, or whatever, then that's going to run it down, yeah, okay, that might run it down, but if I leave it on my desk, and this is something that caught me yesterday, because I hadn't used it for a day or two, it was sitting on my desk in the study, and there was emails and other things came through me, but they didn't ping on the phone, and because they didn't ping, I didn't know to look on the computer and find out what they were, the reason they didn't ping on the phone is because the phone was dead, and the reason the phone was dead was simply because the battery had gone down to zero, and the battery had gone down to zero simply because I hadn't done anything with it, and it hadn't been charged up, so I had to charge up, plug it in, took quite a while, get it back up to 100%, but it was totally, completely empty, it had been a perfectly good functioning phone, but it was totally dead simply because

I didn't charge it up, because I hadn't been using it, and I thought as long as I'm not using it, it'll be okay, but it's not, it's got to be fed every single day, because the stuff that's in it, all the computer chips, all the apps are there, it's soaking out its energy just to stay alive, now that's like you and me, we use up so much just to stay alive, that if we are not plugged into the Lord every day, we're going to die spiritually, we're going to go dead, and it's not a case that, oh my faithful, as long as I exercise it, I use it, if I'm using it, that'll use it up, and then, like Jesus, I have to go out alone and pray, and maybe, like he went out to the mountain, I have to take time to recharge up my batteries, but that's only if there's a big spiritual battle coming up, I mean, everyday life is okay, I don't need to be plugged in for that, do I?

Yes you do, because you and I, to use these technological terms, we're phones, not iPads, unless we are charged up, unless we are plugged in, our relationship, our spiritual path's going to die, it's just going to go flat dead, and this is part of what Jesus means about take out your cross daily, doesn't mean you're going to be crucified every day in life, it means you're going to take it up every day, that which symbolizes life in its fullness, that's worth something, the power of his cross, the power of a death, that actually means something, and purchases something, and which is guaranteed to rise victorious over death, that's what the cross means there, you're going to take that up every day, and taking that up every day, means you're going to be plugged in with the Lord every day, you're going to be drawing on his power source every day, you're going to keep all the gifts, and abilities, the equivalent of the apps, and all the things that, all the different bits of technology that might be in a phone or iPad or whatever nowadays, you're going to keep that charged up, and you're going to keep that sharp and fresh, whoever will come after me, let him deny himself, take the idol of the throne, take up his cross daily, and follow me, might think okay, follow me, that means believe in me, you know, adhere to my teachings, do what I say, and my teaching, and my example, yes, but ultimately, if you are following somebody, you're going somewhere, aren't you, if you follow somebody, then it means that they are moving and you are following, you must be going somewhere, you're on a journey, this Christian life is not static, it is moving, it is a journey, it is a progression, and therefore, if we are following Jesus, it means we are going somewhere, we are going to where he is, and where he is going to be with us, for all eternity, you know, if we think about, that being the ultimate,

I suppose, it's not just, going from A to B, we're doing that as well, going from earth to heaven, going from death to life, but we are following Jesus, yes, it means we have to believe in him, yes, it means we have to follow his teaching, and his example, and adhere to it, but when he says follow me, it means follow where I am leading, he goes in front, we follow behind, and ultimately, it is to be where he is, because that's really, if you think about it, when he's walking by the Sea of Galilee, and

he says to Peter and Andrew, follow me, and they leave their nets, and they follow me, and he says to James and John, follow me, and they leave their father, with the higher servants in the boat, and they follow him immediately, and they can say, where are we going, they can say, are we going up the hills of Galilee, are we going to Nazareth, are we going to Caesarea Philippi, are we going to Jerusalem, and the answer, yes, in all these things, going to all these different places, but that's not what Jesus meant, when he said follow me, he said, hey, I've got a great idea guys, let's go to Caesarea Philippi, let's go to Nazareth, let's go to, let's go to the Jordan, let's go to Jerusalem, that's not, he didn't mean, let's go to these geographical places, they did in fact, go to these geographical places, what he meant was, come with me, follow me, and be wherever I am, isn't that what the disciples, ended up doing, all the three and a half years, of Jesus ministry, when they followed him, didn't matter, where actually the journey led, the point was, that where Jesus was, they were there, and whenever he was, that's where the crowd wanted to be, yes, and sometimes he wanted to be alone, but his disciples, were there with them, it's the definition, of being Jesus disciples, surely, that when we follow him, where Jesus is, that's where we are, he says follow me, and that's where we go, wherever Christ is, you cannot be without him, it's part of being his disciple, and it doesn't matter, where the journey takes you, just as it didn't matter, where Peter, and Andrew, and James, and John went, all over Galilee, or Judea, the point is, they went where Jesus went, the point is, they were where he was, and the point is, that here in this world, if we're to follow Christ, we're to be, always where he is, we're to be, always with him, charged up, with his strength, plugged into him, daily taking up his cross, so that ultimately, when this, all too brief journey, here is over, then where will we be, at the destination, we will be, where he is, and that is the desire, every true lover of Christ, to be where he is, if any man, will follow me, if any man, will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, daily, and follow me, take the idol, off the throne, take up that cross, that speaks, of a meaningful life, and meaningful death, that counts for something, take it up daily, be plugged in, day by day, to that power source, and wherever the journey, takes you, it doesn't ultimately, matter in this world, because the destination, is where Jesus is, that's what he means, when he says, follow me, that's why it is so much, worth our while, denying the old, shadow shell, of the so called self, taking the idol, off the floor, and putting Christ, there, where he ought to be, following where he leads, that where he is, there we may be, also, let us pray.