



## RADICAL TEACHINGS OF JESUS (DENY SELF)

Perhaps the most radical of all of Jesus' teachings is the call to **Deny Self**. I suspect it is because it is fundamentally at the root of so many of His other teachings. When He tells us to love our enemies, one of the first things we must do is deny our feelings of anger, resentment, bitterness, and our personal "right" to vengeance. When He tells us we can't serve God and money, we have to deny our greed, our desire for instant gratification, and what appears to be tangible security. The list goes on...

I find it very compelling that **Luke 9:23-25** tells us that almost immediately after Peter acknowledges that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Jesus says this: <sup>23</sup> **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me"** <sup>24</sup> **For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.** <sup>25</sup> **What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?"** Odd that so much of Christendom has watered this down to bowing your head and raising your hand or whispering a prayer. I don't mean this in a condemning way, but the expressed motive behind this has often been to make it easy, even comfortable for someone to become a follower of Jesus. That's hardly **taking up your cross**...and it sure doesn't sound much like **"denying self"**. Then, again denying self is so counter to our culture's slogan, *"You can't please everybody, so you gotta please yourself."* Sounds fair, but it is not the call of Christ.

Scripture refers to our inclination to selfishness as *"the flesh"* or in the **NIV** as *"the sinful nature."* It is more than our tendency. It is our human weakness. Most scholars say it is actually our fallen nature\_ that infected the human race when the first couple ate of the forbidden fruit. Having said that, it seems to me that there was something inherent in man even before they made that decision or they would never have made it. The serpent appealed to their flesh when he said the fruit *"looked good for food"* and it would make them *"like God."* Of course, they took the bait, hook, line, and sinker. Why? The lust of the eyes and the flesh, as well as the pride of life (**1<sup>st</sup> John 2:16**) were present in Adam and Eve from the beginning. And I'm afraid they are alive and well in human kind to this very day.

I have a simple definition for sin that you won't find in the Bible perse' – though I am confident that it is well supported by the Scripture. It is in the form of an acronym. **"Sin"** is our **"Selfish Inner Nature."** For I have found that when we break one of God's laws, that transgression usually has *"selfishness"* as the root cause. When we neglect to do what we know is the *"good"* or *"right"* thing, you will generally find *"selfishness"* to be the culprit. But according to Jesus, if we are going to be Christ followers, we have to be determined from the get-go that we are not going to operate this way.

The apostle Paul puts it this way in **Romans 8**: <sup>5</sup> **"Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires."** <sup>6</sup> **The mind of sinful man [Or mind set on the flesh] is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace;** <sup>7</sup> **the sinful mind [Or the mind set on the flesh] is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.** <sup>8</sup> **Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.** <sup>9</sup> **You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.** <sup>10</sup> **But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness.** <sup>11</sup> **And if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit, who lives in you.** <sup>12</sup> **Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation – but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it."** Paraphrase? **Deny self – find Life.**

We may think that's a slippery slope, especially when so many have problems with low self-esteem. Many children are teased and bullied at school, if not belittled at home. Young women are driven to destructive behavior in attempts to fit into the mold of the latest Hollywood model. Both men and women are dehumanized by technology that render them incompetent or nonessential in the workplace. Spouses feel inadequate compared to the romantic ideals propagated in film and television. Yet, seeking and serving self is not the solution. In fact, it actually worsens the condition, as people become obsessed with self-awareness, self-help, and self-improvement. And believe me, that's no way to live. Jesus' call here isn't to degrade or beat ourselves up. Matter of fact, if that's what we're doing, we probably think of ourselves a whole lot more than we should. If we're blaming ourselves for every bad thing that happens, we're likely giving our selves way too much credit.

Jesus says the way to find life that is fulfilling and rewarding is to **"deny self."** Rick Warren in **"The Purpose Driven Life"** paraphrased C.S. Lewis' ideas on humility by saying the key isn't *"thinking less about yourself, so much as thinking about your self less."* That's not easy. Try this exercise. For the rest of the day, determine not to express to anyone how you feel or think, or what you like. Try to avoid the words, *"I", me, my, mine"*. The Greek term most often associated with pride is *"uper-hay-phan-os"* or *"super arrogant"* - which sounds like a fair description of how many of us view ourselves.

To *"deny self"* is really about putting God first, others second, and voluntarily taking our place at the back of the line. If you think about it, isn't that what Jesus did? Listen to these words from **Philippians 2:3-8**: **<sup>3</sup> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: <sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!"** Jesus, of course, who is our example used the personal pronoun plenty of times. ***"I" am the way, truth, life, door, resurrection, etc. / Come to "Me", follow "Me", listen to "Me." / "My" sheep, voice, teaching. / Those disciples or teachings of "Mine."*** But, was Jesus selfish? Not in the least. Again, it wasn't that He lacked self-esteem, but that He humbled Himself. Rather than demand to be served, He served others. He voluntarily chose to put God the Father first, and the needs of everyone else second. It is what we are called to do as well.

In his book **"Deliver us from Me-ville,"** David Cook suggests most people, including Christians, live in the suburbs of the Kingdom of God. Though we claim to love God and insist we have placed Him on the throne, our life choices and daily conversations may indicate differently. Anyone observing from the stands could get the distinct impression that we think center stage belongs to us; that the world revolves around us for we are the center of our universe. We also tend to judge the worth of everything from that perspective. Whether something is good or bad is based upon what I like or don't like. People are scrutinized in a similar fashion. I am the standard by which everyone is judged. If they're not just like me, there is something wrong with them – unless they somehow serve me or my causes.

**Veggie Tales Clip of "The Englishman who went up the hill.."** What are your strawberries or bananas? What is it that you're so sure will bring personal satisfaction that you'd climb the highest hill to get, just so you could selfishly enjoy the fruit of your labor? What do you hold onto so tightly that you won't share for fear of losing its sweetness? We will address this more in my September Sermon series from the Book of **Ecclesiastes** that I am entitling **"Chasing the Wind."**

For now, my challenge is for you to wrestle with the simple truth that if we live our lives trying to please self, we will miss out on the abundant life that Jesus promises in **John 10:10** - and that He reiterates in our text today. ***It's only in denying self that we find life.*** It may seem like an oxymoron, but Jesus is quite clear. The selfish life serves us but for a season. The selfless life serves God for eternity, and brings lasting reward. Yet, do not miss the fact that denying self must be with the view of following Jesus. Otherwise all the self-sacrifice in the world will be for naught.

When my Father passed away early in **2004**, I found myself in deep reflection about the brevity of life - and how much different my life was going to be without my dad's presence or influence. As far as I was concerned he was a central part of my world...and it seemed to me my world was crumbling. This forced me to accept the truth that if the Lord delays His coming, my life will one day also cease. The world does not revolve around any one of us - even me. In fact, as hard as it is to imagine the world going on without me, I've come to realize that I am pretty insignificant in the scheme of things - at least by the selfish standards of this material world.

Yet, because my significance is found, not in self, but in Christ, I know that the things I do and say can truly have eternal consequence. In denying self and following Christ, I find life...forever, fulfilling life. You can, too.