

The crowds meet Jesus * Luke 9:23-26, 57-62
February 21, 2021 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

We've got a really interesting question to think about today -

Is there such a thing as casual Christianity? Is it possible to have an occasional relationship with Jesus?

There are certainly people who think so – *I* used to think so. I have this very vivid memory from high school thinking, 'well, I can pop in to church every once in a while and call on God when I get into trouble, but that's all I really want out of being a Christian.'

Is that truly Christianity though? Is that really what Jesus anticipated when He laid down His life for us?

Well, to answer that question, we're going to look at Jesus' encounters with a handful of people in Luke 9. Luke 9:22, Jesus is talking to His followers about His impending trial, death and resurrection on our behalf and then He says in verse 23 -

23 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.

What do you think? Is it possible to have a casual relationship with Jesus? Pop in every once in a while, pray when you feel like it?

No.

Jesus says – 'I am about to lay down my life to restore people to God, to give them a hope and a future; if anyone would take hold of that, 'he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.'

None of this 'occasional' stuff. If you're going to be a follower of Jesus, then you need to deny yourself. You need to stop thinking that the world revolves around you and instead put Jesus at the centre of your life. You need to set aside self-interest and self-indulgence and turn your back on any habit or excess or thing that would distract you from your relationship with Jesus. You need to deny yourself...

And you need to take up your cross, daily. You need to put to death your old way of living and work to make selflessness and sacrifice the norm in your daily life. And notice, this is a daily choice. Not a once in a lifetime confession but a daily decision to die to self and live for Christ.

You gotta deny yourself, take up your cross...

And follow Jesus. You gotta make your number one priority walking in Jesus' footsteps. Everyday becoming more like Him.

That's what it takes to be a follower of Jesus. Total commitment. Deny self, take up your cross, follow Him.

Now, why. Why on earth would you do that? Why would you lay down your own will, your own self-interest, your own pleasures and your own desires? From the world's point of view, that's absolutely ridiculous. From Jesus' point of view though it's not.

Because – verse 24 – it’s only in losing your life that you will save it. That’s a paraphrase – here’s what Jesus said –

24 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.
25 What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?

We human beings, we tend to live for ourselves, don’t we? We tend to pursue our own goals, to justify our own existence and tell God to mind His own business. And yet Jesus says here – when we do that, we are actually losing our lives. When we are trying to ‘save our own lives – to hold onto it for dear life – make ourselves popular and successful’ we are actually losing. ‘Whoever wants to save his life will lose it.’ Why? Because when we try to do it ourselves, we are moving farther and farther from God.

God created each of us – every day He gives us life and health and strength whether we trust Him or not – and when we ignore Him, we turn our backs on our Creator. And when we live for ourselves, we just keep walking farther away from Him – we get ‘lost.’ But Jesus came to seek and save the lost. We lose ourselves when we try to make something of ourselves, but when we acknowledge our sin and our need for God – when we ‘lose our life’ from this world’s point of view - we actually save it.

I remember really having to think about that before I knew Jesus. It seemed utterly absurd to me to ‘throw away my life’ to follow someone you can’t really see, but when I started to think about it, it made a lot of sense. I sensed that God was real and I knew that I was ignoring Him; I tried to be a good person, but I was never sure that I was good enough; I was trying to save my life and yet sensed that I was losing it... and then here’s Jesus saying – ‘Come to me; find rest in Me and I will give meaning to the rest of your life.’ And that’s when I realized I was losing my life by trying to save it and that if I just let it go to Jesus, I would actually save it.

And so that’s when I decided to ‘deny myself, take up my cross and follow Jesus.’

And let’s not forget what started all this. Remember verse 22? Jesus says – “[I am about to]... suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and ... be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (Luke 9:22 NIV).

Jesus was freely choosing to lay down His life for my benefit. The Cross didn’t happen by accident; Jesus actively chose to lay down His life to forgive my sin and restore me to God. How could I not respond to this extravagant love without extravagant commitment myself?

That’s why I ‘deny myself, take up my Cross and follow Jesus.’ Because He denied Himself, took up His Cross and died and rose for me. And for you.

Now, knowing how that works in real life can be a little tricky, so I want to go a little further ahead in the chapter because I think that there are some case studies of what this looks like in real life. So slide down the page to verse 57 and we’re going to encounter three people who learn what following Jesus in their lives will look like.

So verse 57, Jesus is walking along the road and as usual, he’s got a crowd of people around him and they’re all interested in becoming disciples. They’ve seen Him heal the sick and raise the dead and feed

thousands with a little food and they want ready access to that power for themselves. And so Jesus here lays out for them what it actually means to follow Him.

And I'll just say in advance – Jesus is using very hyperbolic language here. He's exaggerating to make a point and to emphasize just how big a commitment following Him really is. There's no such thing as 'casual Christianity' and Jesus is making that clear.

That being said, when you read this within the flow of Scripture, it's clear that there are nuances in how this works in the details, but that shouldn't take away from the radical picture that Jesus is painting of what it means to deny yourself and follow Him.

So, case study 1 – verse 57 –

57 As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."

58 Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Luke 9:57-58 NIV).

Case study 1 – Jesus calls us to put Him before material possessions. This man has seen Jesus' power and he says he'll go wherever Jesus does – but Jesus sees his heart and realizes what he's looking for. This guy's looking for a wealth. This guy's looking for prosperity. He's seen Jesus turn a little lunch into a gigantic feast and he thinks 'that's the kind of power I'd like to tap into.' And so Jesus says – 'if you're looking to me for material gain, you're looking in the wrong place. Even the birds have homes, but I have nothing. If you're going to follow me, you need to be willing to give it all up.'

Following Jesus means putting Him before material possessions. This can be a tough one, can't it? We live in a culture that values having more and more stuff and yet Jesus says 'it's all pointless without me.' It reminds me of Denzel Washington – Oscar winning actor – *Remember the Titans, Philadelphia, Malcolm X* – once said 'You never see a U-Haul behind a hearse.'ⁱ I think that that's a powerful image. You can't take it with you and it all means nothing in the end. So rather than spending our lives accumulating stuff, Jesus calls us to put Him first and then to put our material possessions at His disposal.

See, that's the thing about our possessions – Jesus calls us to lay it all down at His feet – to put Him first – and then He says – 'well, I can't use this – you take it back and do something good with it.' When we put Jesus first, He then calls us to use our wealth not just for our own self-interest but for the interest of others, in light of the Kingdom.

So, case study 1 – Jesus calls us to put Him first before material possessions.

Case study 2 – Verse 59 -

59 He said to another man, "Follow me." But the man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."

60 Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:59-60 NIV).

Case study 2 – Jesus is calling us to put Him before family.

Jesus is really calling this man to do something unheard of in His culture. If you're a good son, if you go and bury your father – you demonstrate family loyalty by honouring your father – but Jesus says – 'No, your Heavenly Father comes first.' He calls us to put spiritual matters ahead of earthly ones, even if those earthly ones involve your family. (That's the 'dead bury their own dead' part – let the spiritually dead deal with earthly matters like burying people – you, who are spiritually alive, you focus on spiritual things).

Now admittedly, this is one of those verses that really requires nuance. I mean, even on the Cross, Jesus is making sure that His disciple John will take care of His mother Mary, so clearly Jesus is not telling us neglect our families.ⁱⁱ But He is telling us in a very vivid way the order in which they should come. Commitment to Jesus first, family second.

Now for some people, that's not going to be an issue. If the household is all following Jesus – and again, I mean denying themselves, taking their cross and following Jesus – then it won't be hard for them to follow Him together. But for households where only one is a follower, it can be tough. Drew, who came to faith in the hospice the first year I was here – his family wouldn't attend the funeral because it was 'Christian.'

There are some times when you may need to say to family 'I know you want me to do this, but God is calling me in a different direction, and He's got to come first.'

Case study #2 – Jesus is calling us to put Him before family.

And case study #3 – Jesus is calling us to put Him before our old way of life. Verse 61 –

61 Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family."
62 Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:61-62 NIV).

Case study 3 – Jesus is calling us to put Him before our old way of life.

I think that's what Jesus is saying with this talk about a plow. The translation here is good but I think we can nuance it a little. There's a bunch of participles in there and so Jesus is really saying something like – 'the one who puts his hand to the plow and keeps on looking back is not fit for the Kingdom of God.' It's the 'constantly looking back' that's important here.

I mean, who here has ploughed a field before? Or driven a tractor or a combine? Or even driven a car? How straight are you gonna go if you keep looking behind you instead of in front?

Not very, right? Same with the Christian life. If you're following Jesus, but still looking back longingly, dabbling in the things that belong to your old way of life, you're going to run into all sorts of obstacles in your spiritual life. I think that Jesus senses that family is going to be that for this guy and so He says 'if you're going to start ploughing, then you gotta face forward' and that goes for all of us too.

It's really like last week – before/after picture – if we say we're denying ourselves and following Jesus and yet acting like our before picture, then that really calls into question whether or not we're denying ourselves and following Jesus, doesn't it? But if we take up our Cross and live like our after picture, it's then that we flourish in the Kingdom of God.

Case study 3 – Jesus is calling us to put Him before our old way of life.

So, is there such a thing as casual Christianity? No. Can you have a casual, on-again/off-again relationship with Jesus? No.

Following Jesus means total commitment. Walking with Him takes priority over all other commitments. Jesus is calling us to put Him first.

I like what David Garland says in his commentary on Luke - “Discipleship ‘is not merely another commitment which we add to the long list of our other commitments, but it *the* commitment – demanding a reordering of our lives from the bottom up’ (quoting Robert Tannehill). These astonishing pronouncements confront each disciple with a choice, one that is focused exclusively on Jesus himself: follow him at high cost or do not follow him at all.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Following Jesus means total commitment – means putting Him before material possessions, before family, before career, before hobbies. There should be nothing that takes priority over your relationship with Him.

But here’s the thing – once you’ve put Jesus in first place, then you are able to bring peace and joy and patience and selflessness into those areas of your life. You’re not bound by them; they don’t define you; instead, you engage with them as a follower of Jesus, as a representative of the Kingdom, bringing the love of Christ into your every situation. Make Jesus your primary commitment and He will bring meaning to all your other commitments.

Jesus calls us to put Him first.

As we close here, I want to share with you an image from A. W. Tozer that captures this well. He writes –

“In every Christian’s heart there is a cross and a throne, and every Christian is on the throne till he puts himself on the cross. If he refuses the cross, he remains on the throne. Perhaps this is at the bottom of the backsliding and worldliness among gospel believers today. We want to be saved but we insist that Christ do all the dying. No cross for us, no dethronement, no dying. We remain king within the little kingdom of Man’s soul and wear our tinsel crown with all the pride of a Caesar; but we doom ourselves to shadows and weakness and spiritual sterility.”^{iv}

I like that image of the Cross and the throne. We naturally put ourselves first, we put ourselves on the throne of our lives, telling our Creator He ain’t worth much. But in His great mercy, Jesus took our place on a literal Cross, to forgive our sin and restore us to God; when we turn to Him, we gotta get up off the throne, let Jesus take our place again, and die to self to live for Him. And what the world can’t see is that when we lose our lives like this, we actually gain it. As J. C. Ryle used to say ‘There is a daily cross upon the way but a crown of glory at the end’ (quoted in Garland, 419).

Get up off the throne of your life. Let Jesus, who died on a Cross for you, take up the throne. And you, take up your Cross and follow Him to a Crown of Glory.

There’s no room for dabbling here; no such thing as ‘casual Christianity.’ Jesus calls us to put Him first.

Communion

As we come to the Lord's Table today, I want to revisit the passage that opened this message - Luke 9:22. Remember? Before He said anything about discipleship, about denying yourself and taking up your cross, Jesus said this:

22 And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."

Jesus knew what awaited Him in Jerusalem. Jesus knew what He would suffer - the rejection, the pain, the abandonment – and yet He chose to go anyway. He actively chose to suffer and die on that Cross for you and for me.

There's always the danger when we talk about discipleship, about denying yourself and taking up your Cross and following Jesus, there's always the danger that we get so caught up in what we're doing that we forget to talk about what Jesus did. Same with Lent. We get so caught up thinking about what we're giving up that we forget to consider what Jesus gave up.

And so it's fitting that we are gathered around the Lord's Table today because it reminds us that this is all because of Jesus. We deny ourselves and take up our Cross and follow Him because He did it first. Because He actively chose to lay down His life to forgive my sin and free me from death and give me real and abundant life. We are celebrating Jesus' incredible love for us, a love so great that He laid down His life – not just for a friend – but for people who wanted nothing to do with Him. When I was a sinner, Christ Jesus died for me. And that's true for you too.

There were so many opportunities in Jesus' life where He could have said – 'You know what – I like this life thing. I like olives and flatbread and sunsets by the lake. I'm not going to die for these goofballs.' But He actively chose to lay down His life to give us life. What are you choosing to do in response to His mercy?

Communion is an opportunity for us to embrace it, to say 'we receive Your grace Lord. We need your forgiveness.' If you have chosen to follow Jesus, to make Him the centre of your life in response to His grace, then you are welcome at the Table.

Now since we are spread out from each other, we're going to do things a little differently today. In many traditions, there is a 'passing of the peace' to one another where we would greet one another with handshakes and hugs. That's not going to work today, so what we're going to do instead is this. I want you all to unmute yourself and if you have the grid pattern up in front of you, I want to you say to the person to you right – 'Grace and peace to you ____.' 'Grace and peace to you (person's name).' You don't have to take turns, we'll say it all at once, but in this way, we can welcome each other to the Table. Everybody ready? Unmuted and everything? Let's do it. 'Grace and peace to you ____.'

Grace and peace to us all.

Let's pray. Lord we gather at Your Table to say all at once – Thank You. Thank You for choosing to die for us. Thank You for choosing us to come to You. We pray that you would renew us now as we remember your death and resurrection on our behalf. Amen.

I've asked a couple of people to read Scripture for us. Please have your bread and cup ready. They'll read, then I'll pray and then we'll receive Communion together.

Bread - Ralph – Romans 5

6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die.

8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!

10 For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

(Rom 5:6-10 NIV).

Prayer

Words of institution - 19 And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." (Luk 22:19 NIV).

Cup - Shannon -

31 "The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.

32 It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD.

33 "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

34 No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

(Jer 31:31-34 NIV).

Prayer

Words of Institution - 20 In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. (Luk 22:20 NIV).

BENEDICTION - 2 Th. 2:16-17 - Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

ⁱ <https://youtu.be/ESa45s7R4R8?t=168> (I'm not sure if he coined the phrase, but he's the one I've seen it attributed to most frequently. By the way, take the time to watch this whole video. It's steeped in biblical thought and really valuable).

ⁱⁱ *26 When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," 27 and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home* (John 19:26-27).

ⁱⁱⁱ David Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 418.

^{iv} A. W. Tozer, *The Root of Righteousness*, pg. 36. Tozer was an American farm boy turned evangelist, pastor and prophet. A prolific writer on worship, prayer and holiness, Tozer's final pastorate was in Toronto.

<https://www.cmalliance.org/about/history/tozer> You can hear him preach here:

<https://www.sermonindex.net/modules/mydownloads/viewcat.php?cid=6>