

September 23, 1994
NAU-IVCF

Daily Christianity
Luke 9:23-24

Melody Beattie dedicates her best-selling book, *Codependent No More* [Harper/Hazelden] to "me," that is, to herself! She suggests that God's commandment to love your neighbor as yourself is the problem; the solution is the title of her chapter 11: "Have a Love Affair With Yourself" (p. 109). The entire book is about loving yourself, affirming yourself, accepting yourself, asserting yourself, forgiving yourself, and believing in yourself.

Popular recovery guru, John Bradshaw, offers a similar message. This former Roman Catholic priest tells his audiences that Kierkegaard teaches us that "I came into this world for ME!" He tells his followers, "You are wonderful! You are unique! Be You!" And, "If you have something you call God, give him or her thanks for being you!" He declares, "I love me because I am so eminently lovable!" (Cited by Richard John Neuhaus, "Singing the Song of Myself," *SCP Journal* [18:3:94], pp. 13, 14.) He says that we should say loud and often, "I love myself. I will accept myself unconditionally" (*Healing the Shame that Binds You* [Health Communications, Inc.], p. 158).

It is not surprising that such messages are gobbled up by our narcissistic culture. The amazing thing is that both Beattie and Bradshaw have sold widely among Christians and that there is an entire Christian "recovery" movement promoting essentially the same message with a few Bible verses thrown in for support! This movement promotes Jesus as the means to self-fulfillment, self-love, and self-esteem.

This emphasis on self is not only prevalent among the average Christian churchgoer. It is also dominant among the upcoming crop of Christian leaders, which means that you're likely to hear it more and more in whatever church you attend in the years to come. James Davison Hunter (in 1982) and David Wells (in 1993) surveyed students studying for the ministry in a number of conservative evangelical seminaries. They both found that these students

"are oriented toward self-fulfillment, self-expression, and personal freedom to a degree that often exceeds that of the" general population (Wells, *God in the Wasteland* [Eerdmans], p. 201).

Wells reports, "In our 1993 survey, 40.2 % of the respondents affirmed that 'realizing my full potential as a human being is just as important as putting others before myself.'" Wells goes on to observe, "Had Christ held this belief, ... it would have ended all prospects of the incarnation."

The reason that the American evangelical emphasis on self-affirmation is so astounding is that Jesus plainly taught just the opposite! A. B. Bruce, in his classic, *The Training of the Twelve* (Kregel, p. 180) observed, "For the whole aim of Satanic policy is to get self-interest recognized as the chief end of man." He was quite right! In fact, the very core of what it means to become a Christian and to live daily as a Christian is 180 degrees counter to the message being promoted in many evangelical books and pulpits today. I can sum up the biblical truth this way:

If you're living for self, you're not following Jesus.

To follow Jesus as spelled out by the Lord Himself requires three things: To deny self as a basic attitude toward life; to die to self daily; and, to obey Jesus daily.

1. To follow Jesus requires denying self as Savior and Lord.

"And He was saying to them all, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, ...'" (Luke 9:23a). The first thing to note is that in the immediately preceding verses Jesus was speaking privately to the disciples. But here He speaks to all (Mark 8:34 makes this distinction even more plainly). This is not some secret requirement for the committed core only; this is an essential basic message for everyone: Following Jesus is precisely the opposite of affirming self and living for self. From start to finish, following Jesus means denying self as a basic attitude toward life.

A. Following Jesus means denying self as Savior.

The biggest lie that Satan has foisted on the human race is that we are capable of saving ourselves from God's judgment by our own efforts, our own goodness, and our own worth. Millions of Americans who have a general knowledge of Christianity mis-

takenly think that if we are sincere, if we try our best to be good, to love others, and to keep the Ten Commandments, to follow the Sermon on the Mount, etc., then we will go to heaven when we die.

Most of these people can't quote more than two or three of the Ten Commandments and they have no idea of the impossibly high standard Jesus set forth in the Sermon on the Mount. They may congratulate themselves because they have never murdered anyone, but Jesus rips off their mask of self-righteousness by asserting that if we've even been angry with another person, we have committed murder by God's holy standard. They may think they're good enough for heaven because they have never committed adultery, but Jesus again unmasks their hypocrisy by declaring that to look on a woman with lust is to commit adultery in God's sight.

In his great theological treatise to the Romans, the Apostle Paul charges every person as guilty before the bar of God's holiness when he writes,

There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one (Rom. 3:10-12).

So the first step in becoming a follower of Jesus is to renounce yourself as your savior from God's righteous judgment and to put your trust in Jesus Christ, whose death on the cross is the only means of satisfying God's justice. As Paul puts it (2 Cor. 5:21), "[God] made [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." The way that God's righteousness is applied to any person is not by self-effort, self-righteousness, self-improvement, or anything else based on self. It is by renouncing self and believing in what Jesus did when He died in our place. "But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness" (Rom. 4:5). Following Jesus means denying self as Savior.

B. Following Jesus means denying self as Lord.

Colossians 2:6 states, "As you therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him." We receive Christ by denying self and trusting in all that Christ is on our behalf. We walk with Christ by

denying self and trusting in all that Christ is on our behalf. When Jesus tells us to deny ourselves, He doesn't mean that we should deny ourselves some little pleasure, such as giving up chocolate for Lent. He is talking about a basic attitude in which we renounce self-exaltation (pride) and instead live to exalt God. We renounce self-will (directing our own lives, calling the shots according to what we want in life) and instead live to do God's will. We renounce self-seeking (living for my goals, my pleasure, to fulfill my wants apart from God) and live instead to seek God, His kingdom, and His righteousness.

Many people who sit in church week after week and who would identify themselves as Christians are not truly Christian according to Jesus' words here because they are not submitting their lives to His lordship. Rather, they are using God, Jesus, the Bible, church, etc. to fulfill what they perceive to be their own needs. In other words, at the hub of their lives is self. God just happens to be one spoke in the wheel of a happy life. Career, family, recreation, health, and many other spokes round out the picture. But the hub isn't God; it's self. But to live for self is not to follow Jesus! Following Jesus requires denying self as Savior and as Lord.

2. To follow Jesus requires daily death to self.

"If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him ... take up his cross daily" (9:23b). To understand what Jesus meant here, we must remember that the cross in His day was not an ornament that graced the top of steeples on church buildings. Nor was it a piece of jewelry you wore on a necklace. Many Christians think that to bear their cross means putting up with a difficult mate or with a painful malady, such as arthritis. But the cross wasn't an implement of irritation, inconvenience, or even suffering. The cross was an instrument of tortuous, slow execution. Jesus' hearers knew that a man who took up his cross was, for all practical purposes, a dead man. A man bearing his cross gave up all hope and interest in the things of this world, including self-fulfillment. He knew he would be leaving this world in a very short time. He was dead to self.

Jesus says that this death to self must be a daily thing. In other words, it's not something you accomplish in an emotional moment of spiritual ecstasy or dedication. You never arrive on a spiritual mountaintop where you can sigh with relief, "I'm finally there! No

more death to self!" Nor are there any shortcuts or quick fixes to this painful process. The need for dying to self is never finished in this life; it must be a daily thing. A Christian writer from the past century, A. T. Pierson said, "Getting rid of the 'self-life' is like peeling an onion: layer upon layer--and a tearful process!"

One of the main problems I have encountered in my 17+ years of shepherding God's people is that we are spiritually lazy and so we're susceptible to anybody who comes along selling spiritual snake oil to cure our problems. Someone says, "Have this spiritual experience and you'll be transported beyond all your problems and live a happy life." So we buy it and try to tell ourselves that we really are much better. But we're playing games with ourselves. We're still just as enslaved to sin and self as we were before. Why? Because we're looking for miraculous, instant deliverance from a problem that Jesus said requires a daily, painful solution, namely, daily death to self.

What we lack and don't want to develop (because it's not easy) is spiritual discipline. Paul told Timothy, "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness" (1 Tim. 4:7). Discipline isn't miraculous or instantaneous and it's not easy. The problem with discipline is, the minute you stop working at it, you start getting flabby. No top athlete gets in shape by eating a dose of some miraculous natural food. Nor does he work out for a few days and declare, "I'm in shape now!" It takes weeks, months, and even years. Neither does he finally get in shape and then kick back and say, "I've arrived! I'm in shape now, so I don't need to work out any more." It's no different spiritually. Just as flabby muscles set in the day an athlete stops working out, so self asserts itself the day the Christian stops putting it to death.

In Titus 2:11-12 Paul wrote, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing (lit., training) us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age." Please note that this process of self-denial is not opposed to God's grace, but right in line with it. I say this because some might accuse me of being legalistic when I say that you must daily die to self through disciplined spiritual living. But that is not so. God's unmerited favor (grace) shown to me, condemned, hopeless sinner that I was, should motivate me

now to train myself to say no to all ungodliness and worldly desires and to replace that kind of life with sensible, righteous, godly living.

It starts on the thought level, denying and forsaking sinful thoughts and attitudes, and replacing them with godly thoughts and attitudes as revealed in Scripture. If you deal with sin on the thought level, then it never gets any further. When greedy thoughts invade your mind, you instantly judge them and pray, "Lord, I don't want to desire the things of this world that is passing away, but to seek first Your kingdom." When sexual lust wells up within you, you yank out your eye (to use Jesus' words, Matt. 5:27-29) and pray, "O God, fill my vision with the purity of Jesus and His righteousness!"

When selfish thoughts crowd your mind, such as, "I have my rights!" or "I don't have to take this!" you nail them to the cross by praying, "Lord Jesus, You gave up all Your rights and took on the form of a servant and became obedient to death on the cross for me. Help me right now to display that same attitude" (Phil. 2:5-8). That's how daily Christianity works, not living for self, but daily dying to self in order to follow Jesus.

3. To follow Jesus requires continual submission to Jesus personally as Master.

"If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him ... follow Me." It's a present imperative, pointing to a continual process of walking behind Jesus, going where He goes, doing what He does. It means not calling our own shots or doing our own thing, but submitting to Jesus' commands and doing His thing. As Godet remarks, "The chart of the true disciple directs him to renounce every path of his own choosing, that he may put his feet into the print of his leader's footsteps" (*A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* [I. K. Funk & Co.], p. 267).

We've already noted the daily, ongoing nature of this process, so I won't comment further on that. We've also noted Jesus' Lordship, that we must submit to Him and obey Him and His Word if we would follow Him. But we need to notice the personal aspect of the process: "Follow Me." Jesus didn't mean simply, "Follow My commands," although that is vital and cannot be dismissed. If someone claims to be following Jesus, but at the same time is living

in disregard of His commands, the person is deceiving himself and will someday hear those awful words, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matt. 7:23). So obedience is not optional.

But we need to remember that obedience ought always to be connected to the personal relationship we enjoy with our Savior and Lord. He says to the disobedient who outwardly did all sorts of things in His name, "I never knew you." They lacked the personal relationship. But to the obedient Jesus promised,

"He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him.... If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him" (John 14:21, 23).

Suppose a young woman takes a job as housekeeper and cook for a young bachelor. He gives her a list of the tasks which he expects her to do: cleaning the house, fixing his meals at certain times, etc. She performs those tasks in a satisfactory manner as his employee. But then the two fall in love and get married. She may now have to do many of the same tasks, but she does them out of a relationship of love, not out of performance. That's the difference between mere outward obedience and obedience from a personal relationship. To follow Jesus means continual obedience to Him as Lord, but obedience in the context of an intimate personal relationship with Him as our Bridegroom and Savior, who gave His life so that we could be with Him, both now and in eternity.

Conclusion

I read of a young nurse named Sheila who summed up her personal philosophy as "Sheilism," explaining, "It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself." I'm afraid that a lot of American Christians are deceiving themselves, thinking that they're following Jesus when really, they, like Sheila, are just into themselves.

Maybe you're thinking, "Everything you've said sounds so negative--denying self, taking up your cross!" Let me remind you, I didn't come up with those requirements. Jesus did! But there's a

blessed irony when you take Him at His word. He gives it in verse 24: "For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it." When you die to self to follow Jesus, He graciously gives you the ultimate in fulfillment as the by-product: the joy of eternal life and of being affirmed by Jesus before the Father when He comes in glory (9:26)! That's something the world can't ever give!