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FOLLOWING SELF OR JESUS?

Luke 9:23

By

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November 22, 1998

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Luke Lesson 43

Following Self or Jesus? Luke 9:23

Thirty years ago, the teaching that Christians should love themselves and have proper self-esteem was virtually unheard of in evangelical circles. One of the first books to popularize the concept was James Dobson's *Hide or Seek* [Revell, 1974], subtitled "Self-Esteem for the Child." He began that book with the story of Lee Harvey Oswald, who shot President Kennedy. Oswald had been put down, ridiculed, and unloved all his life. The one thing he could do well was shoot a rifle. Dobson implies that if Oswald had just had the proper self-esteem, he would not have committed his infamous crime. Dobson goes on to state his thesis:

... whenever the keys to self-esteem are seemingly out of reach for a large percentage of the people, ... then widespread "mental illness," neuroticism, hatred, alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, and social disorder will certainly occur. Personal worth is not something human beings are free to take or leave. We must have it and when it is unattainable, everybody suffers (pp. 12-13, italics and quotation marks in original).

Dobson opened the door and the doctrine of self-esteem has flooded into the church. It is like the thistle, which is not native to our forests, but has spread everywhere since it was introduced. You cannot pick up a popular Christian best-seller or tune into a Christian talk show without finding this teaching. A promotional brochure for the Christian Rapha Treatment Centers contains endorsements from several well-known Christian leaders. It states, "Part of Rapha's success is found in the unique ability to target and resolve problems of low self-esteem.... At the core of all emotional problems and addictive disorders is low self-worth. It is never the only problem; but it is so major an issue that, if not dealt with adequately, one is kept from experiencing lasting, positive results."

Building your self-esteem and learning to love and accept yourself unconditionally are at the heart of the recovery movement that is being promoted in many evangelical churches. A popular workbook, "The Twelve Steps—A Spiritual Journey," lists a number of milestones in recovery. Here are a few:

We have a strong identity and generally approve of ourselves.
We are recovering through loving and focusing on ourselves...
We feel comfortable standing up for ourselves when it is appropriate.
We love people who love and take care of themselves.
We have a healthy sense of self-esteem (p. 153).

A leading evangelical church uses that workbook in its support groups for adult children of alcoholics. Their orientation material states,

We learn to focus on ourselves in the here and now, and to detach from our obsession with the alcoholic. We learn to love ourselves and others, even though this may sometimes take the form of "tough love."... We learn to allow ourselves to feel our feelings, and then to express them. This builds self esteem, which is the missing ingredient in our personalities, as it was never formed in childhood ("New Hope Support Group," First Evangelical Free Church of Fullerton, p. 6).

That same orientation packet encourages people (without any warning) to read a number of books, including Melody Beattie's *Co-Dependent No More* [Harper & Row], which is sold in many Christian bookstores and catalogs. Beattie dedicates that book to "me" (her-self)! She states that God's commandment to love your neighbor as yourself is the problem; her solution is the title of chapter 11: "Have a Love Affair With Yourself."

Although I never went that far, for many years I taught that we need "proper" self-esteem. But then I came to see that the entire teaching is opposed to and condemned by Scripture. And I have grown increasingly concerned that because of the pervasiveness of this false teaching, there are many who think that they're following Jesus, when actually they are only following self. They have been taught that the Christian faith and even Christian ministry are the avenues toward self-fulfillment. They've been told that Jesus will help you learn to love yourself, when in fact Jesus taught nothing of the kind. Rather, He clearly taught that ...

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

Jesus' words follow Peter's dramatic confession that Jesus is the Christ of God, which was followed by Jesus' jarring prediction of His own death and resurrection (9:20, 22). In effect, Jesus was saying to the disciples, "I am not the kind of Christ you may think. I am not going to fulfill your desires for power and glory, at least not yet. I am not going to give you everything you want in this lifetime. I will come again in power and glory (9:26), but first comes the cross. And all who follow Me must follow in the way of the cross." So He outlines for them all (Mark 8:34 shows that the "all" includes not only the twelve, but also the multitude) what it means to be His follower or disciple.

Before we examine this important verse, let me clear up another common misconception, namely, that discipleship is an option for the super-committed, but it is not mandatory for all believers. In other words, if you're a masochist who likes hardship, deprivation, sacrifice, and perhaps even martyrdom, you can sign up for the discipleship track. You may be required to go to another culture and live in difficult or even dangerous conditions. You will probably be required to live at a poverty level, while your fellow Christians back home live in relative luxury. But, your reward in heaven will be greater. That's the discipleship track, and we all hope that a few dedicated young people will go that route.

The other track, for the rest of us "normal" people, is the more sensible plan. You can pursue your dreams for success and personal fulfillment, live in increasing levels of luxury, and generally enjoy the good life in the fellowship of a good evangelical church. Every once in a while you need to drop something in the offering plate. But don't worry about sacrifice, cross-bearing, or self-denial. Remember, we're under grace, and all that sacrifice stuff is just for those on the discipleship track.

I contend that Jesus taught that there is only one track for those who believe in Him, namely, the discipleship track. While we're all at differing levels of growth in the process of following Jesus, if you're not His disciple, you are not a Christian. Every believer is called to be completely yielded to Jesus as Lord and completely dedicated to furthering His kingdom in accordance with the various gifts He has entrusted to you. If self is at the center of your life and you're just using Jesus to fulfill self, you are not a

Christian. Christians follow Jesus, which is diametrically opposed to living for self. In Luke 9:23, Jesus sets forth three requirements for following Him:

1. To follow Jesus requires repudiating a self-centered life.

The word “deny” is the same word used of Peter’s denials of Jesus. It means to repudiate, renounce, or disown. Jesus wasn’t talking about denying yourself some little pleasure, like giving up chocolate for Lent. He was talking about a complete way of life involving a renunciation of living for your own selfish interests and an embracing of living for the sake of Christ and the gospel. The verb tenses of the three commands in 9:23 indicate that denying self and taking up one’s cross are basic decisions that result in a life of continual following of Jesus. Self-denial means “turning away from the idolatry of self-centeredness and every attempt to orient one’s life by the dictates of self-interest” (John Grassmick, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* [Victor Books], 2:141). It means to give up the right to control your life and to give that right to Jesus Christ.

When confronted with such claims, most of us want to hedge our bets: “Can’t we work out some sort of compromise, so that I can live for Jesus part of the time, but live for myself, too?” Jesus answers this objection in verse 24: If you want to save your life (preserve it from self-denial; live to fulfill your own interests), you will lose it. But if you lose your life for the sake of Christ (that is, losing it in the sense of self-denial, which may or may not include literal martyrdom), you will save it, both now and for eternity.

This is not works salvation; God saves us by grace through faith. But, as Darrel Bock explains, “The essence of saving trust in God is self-denial, a recognition that he must save because disciples cannot save themselves, . . .” (*Luke* [Baker], 1:852). In other words, we begin the Christian life with the open confession that we cannot save ourselves by our own goodness or works. We denounce ourselves as sinners deserving God’s judgment and we entrust ourselves completely to Jesus Christ to save.

Then, just as we received Christ, so we walk in Him (Col. 2:6). We renounce self-exaltation (pride) and live to exalt God. We renounce self-will (directing our own lives) and live to do God’s will. We renounce self-seeking (living for our goals and desires, apart

from God) and live instead to seek God and His kingdom and righteousness. Those who follow Jesus repudiate a self-centered life at every level. As Alexander Maclaren observes, “Flagrant vice is not needed to kill the real life. Clean, respectable selfishness does the work effectually” (*Expositions of Holy Scripture* [Baker reprint], “Mark,” p. 337).

Please note that Jesus is tacitly assuming that He is the rightful Lord of every person! He can make that claim because He is none other than the Lord God in human flesh. If He is not, He cannot demand our total allegiance; if He is, He commands nothing less.

Thus because of who Jesus is, receiving Him is not a matter of deciding that your life is lacking something and that Jesus will fill that void and give you the happy life you’ve always wanted. Jesus isn’t just one spoke in the wheel of your life. If that’s all He is, you have never dethroned self. To be a Christian is to deny self as both Savior and Lord and to enthrone Jesus in that place. This begins at the moment of salvation and continues throughout your Christian life. But if it has not begun, you have not become a Christian, since Jesus puts this requirement at the outset of a decision to follow Him.

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). Many Christians think that to bear their cross means putting up with a difficult mate or with a painful malady, such as arthritis. But taking up your cross is not an unavoidable trial that you passively submit to. Jesus says that it must be a daily thing that we actively choose to embrace. In Jesus’ day, 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.

Taking up your cross is 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 over two decades as a pastor is that we tend to be spiritually lazy and so we're susceptible to anyone 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 for a while we may feel better. But we're playing spiritual games. 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, ongoing 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. No top athlete gets in shape by eating a dose of some wonder-food, like Popeye's spinach. 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." The minute you stop working at it, you start getting flabby. 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 when I teach that you must daily die to self through disciplined spiritual living, invariably someone accuses me of being legalistic. But neither Jesus nor Paul was legalistic for teaching self-denial! Paul says that God's grace trains us to say no

to all ungodliness and worldly desires and to replace those things with sensible, righteous, godly living. This is what the Puritans called the mortification of sin. It is something we must actively do every day (see Rom. 8:13; Col. 3:5 [in KJV or NIV; the NASB mistranslates it]).

It starts on the thought level: you must deny and forsake sinful thoughts and attitudes, and replace 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 tempts 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 ("I have my rights! I don't have to take this!") crowd your mind, you nail them to the cross by praying, "Lord Jesus, You gave up all Your rights, took on the form of a servant and became obedient to death on the cross for me. Help me to display that same attitude right now" (Phil. 2:5-8). That's how Jesus' disciples live, not for self, but daily dying to self in order to follow Jesus.

Thus, following Jesus requires a basic decision to repudiate self-centered living and to put self on the cross every day. Finally,

3. To follow Jesus requires ongoing submission to Jesus as Lord.

"If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him ... follow Me" (9:23c). 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. Obedience is not optional (Matt. 7:21-23).

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" (Matt. 7:23). 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). We should always link obedience with our personal love for Jesus.

Suppose a young woman takes a job as housekeeper and cook for a young bachelor. He gives her a list of the tasks that 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 now may have to do many of the same tasks, but she does them out of a relationship of love, not out of sheer duty. 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 knowing and loving Him as our Bridegroom and Savior, who gave His life so that we could live 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." Well, at least she didn't mistake her view for Christianity! But 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.

The doctrine of self-love or self-esteem is not compatible with Jesus' teaching on self-denial. It is sad that many advocates of self-esteem cite the command to "love your neighbor as yourself"

(Matt. 22:39) as biblical justification for self-love. Some even go so far as to say that we *cannot* love God or others until we first learn to love ourselves! But Jesus said that there were only two great commands—love God and love your neighbor. He assumed that we all love ourselves quite well. In fact, if we would just love others as much as we do love ourselves, we would fulfill the law of love. John Calvin saw this clearly. He wrote,

Hence it is very clear that we keep the commandments not by loving ourselves but by loving God and neighbor; that he lives the best and holiest life who lives and strives for himself as little as he can, and that no one lives in a worse or more evil manner than he who lives and strives for himself alone, and thinks about and seeks only his own advantage. (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Westminster], 2:8:54).

Maybe you're thinking, "Self-denial sounds so negative!" Let me remind you, I didn't come up with this. Jesus did! In the short term, self-denial is difficult and not very pleasant. But there are eternal blessings in store when you follow Jesus on the path of the cross. He explains 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 and 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)!

If, like me a few years ago, you have been taken in by the self-esteem teaching, I encourage you to re-evaluate it in light of all Scripture, especially, Luke 9:23. You won't find a single verse telling you to build your self-esteem or to love yourself more. You will find many telling you to die to self and to humble yourself. It's pretty clear: Following Jesus means dying to self. Living for self means that you're not following Jesus.

Discussion Questions

1. Do we need a “proper” amount of self-esteem? Give scriptural support for your answer.
2. How do we mesh self-denial with the practical need to say no to certain people and their demands?
3. Does self-denial mean never having fun or enjoying life? If not, how do we know when it’s okay to take time for ourselves?
4. Discuss: Discipleship is a requirement for all believers versus discipleship is an option for the super-committed.

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