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WHY CRUCIFY SELF?

Luke 9:24-26

By

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Luke Lesson 44

Why Crucify Self? Luke 9:24-26

Motivation is the key to doing some things that you'd rather not do. Sometimes the motivation is negative: Read the assignment or you'll flunk the course. At other times, it may be more positive. I read of a mother who was worried because her daughter, who was away at college, had not replied to the mother's letters. The father told his wife that he would get the daughter to write promptly without even asking her to do so.

He wrote the daughter a letter, filled with news from home and that sort of thing. Then he casually added that he was enclosing a check. But he did not actually enclose the check. The daughter wrote back promptly, thanking him for the money, but pointing out that he must have forgotten to enclose it. Even college students can write to their parents if they're motivated!

Jesus has just said some difficult things about His going to the cross and the fact that if anyone wants to follow Him, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily. As we saw in our last study, Jesus was talking about denying our selfishness and daily putting to death our sinful desires. Jesus' words raise the question, "*Why would anyone want to crucify himself every day?*" Frankly, it doesn't sound like a lot of fun! So Jesus goes on to give the explanation and motivation for why a person would want to do this. Verses 24, 25, and 26 all begin with the word "for." Jesus is explaining why it is essential to live in the difficult manner He has just outlined in verse 23. To put it in the first person:

I should deny myself and take up my cross daily
because I live in view of eternity.

Each of these three verses focuses on the eternal perspective. In verse 24, Jesus shows that there is a paradox: the person who seeks to save his life by not denying self in the short run will lose his life in the end. In verse 25 He shows that the profit of living for this world will be nothing compared with eternal loss of one's soul. In verse 26 He shows that the temporary shame of being

identified with Jesus and His teaching is a small thing compared with having Jesus ashamed of us at His glorious second coming.

British scholar Harry Blamires, in his classic book, *The Christian Mind* [Vine Books], states, "A prime mark of the Christian mind is that it cultivates the eternal perspective. That is to say, it looks beyond this life to another one" (p. 67). I agree with Blamires that we have largely lost this in contemporary evangelicalism. Our focus has become that of this world: What can Jesus do for me in the here and now? Heaven is nice and hell must be terrible, but those aren't matters of concern for the present. Can Jesus fix my troubled marriage? Can He help me with my emotional troubles? Can He help me get that better job? The abundant life right now is our main concern. We have lost the eternal perspective. But in these three verses, Jesus shows us that to live wisely in the here and now, we must keep our focus on eternity:

1. The disciple daily crucifies self because he wants ultimately to be saved (9:24).

Jesus here presents a paradox that applies both to our ultimate salvation and to temporal matters of discipleship. If we pursue our own agenda, we will lose in the end. But, if we let go of our selfish aims and entrust ourselves to the Lord Jesus, living for His purposes, seeking His will, we will gain eternal life when we die and multiplied blessings while we live. Verse 24 is really just a restatement of Matthew 6:33 in its context. If we eagerly seek all the things the world seeks, we will come up empty. But if we abandon that pursuit and seek first God's kingdom and righteousness, all these necessary things will be added unto us.

The principle applies first and foremost to the eternal salvation of our souls. The way of the world is that we seek eternal salvation by our good works in this life: Go to church, give money, do deeds of kindness and mercy, try to live a moral life, and you will earn salvation. But that approach does not deal the death blow to our pride. Rather, it feeds pride. If our approach to eternal life is that we merit it by our good deeds, we can look down on those who are not as good as we are. We mistakenly think that we can commend ourselves to God. But the fatal fallacy in this approach is that it does not deal with our sin before the holy God.

I read recently of a 67-year-old man who has given an amazing 100 pints of blood. He often gives blood every 56 days, which is as soon as the blood banks allow. His comment was, "When that final whistle blows and St. Peter asks, 'What did you do?' I'll just say, 'Well, I gave 100 pints of blood.' That ought to get me in." (*Reader's Digest* [7/98], p. 85.)

Muhammad Ali, the former boxing champion, now suffers from Parkinson's disease. He jokes about his illness, "It's a blessing. I always liked to chase the girls—Parkinson's stops all that. Now I might have a chance to go to heaven." He devotes his time to a number of charity causes.

"With everything I do," he says, "I ask myself, *Will God accept this?* One day you'll wake up and it'll be Judgment Day, so you need to do good deeds. I love going to hospitals. I love sick people. I don't worry about disease." (*Reader's Digest* [8/97], p. 83.)

Those two men are going to be shocked on judgment day. They are trying to save their souls by their good deeds. But they will lose their souls because they have not abandoned their good deeds as the basis of their acceptance with God and come, instead, to the cross where the Son of God offered Himself as the substitute for sinners. The cross, coupled with the doctrine of God's sovereign grace, deals the death blow to our pride, as Paul clearly shows in 1 Corinthians 1:18-31. As Paul there sums it up (1:28, 29), "And the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no flesh should boast before God."

Salvation is of the Lord, not of us. So the disciple abandons any self-approach to salvation (self-righteousness or good deeds) and casts himself completely on Jesus Christ to save. By losing his life, he gains it.

But the principle of Luke 9:24 also applies to all of the Christian life. It applies to our money, which is not ours, but the Lord's. We mistakenly think that we gain financial security by hoarding our money and giving away very little. While the Scripture teaches that it is prudent to put aside enough to provide for future anticipated needs (Prov. 6:6-11; 2 Cor. 12:14; 1 Tim. 5:8), it also teaches that if

we are generous in giving, God will generously supply all our needs (Luke 6:38; 2 Cor. 9:8-11).

The principle of losing our life to gain it applies to our service to others. If we live for ourselves, never thinking of the needs of others, we will be lonely, miserly people. But if we give generously of our time in serving others for Jesus' sake, it comes back to us many times over. I often find that if I give time that I don't have to spare, the Lord makes up the time to me in other ways.

The principle also applies to your family life. Husbands are commanded to love their wives sacrificially, as Christ does the church (Eph. 5:25-33). Such sacrificial love requires thinking often of your wife and her needs, and seeking to meet those needs. It means praying for your wife. It means serving her, even if you don't get to pursue your favorite pastimes.

But many husbands think only of themselves. They want the family to serve them. They selfishly think, "I work hard all day. If I come home and serve my family, when will I get time for my needs to be met?" But if you serve your mate and your children, it comes back to you in the form of love, kindness, and close, caring relationships. But if you selfishly dig in your heels and say, "I'm not going to serve them any more than they serve me," you'll lose by not having your needs met at all.

The principle also applies to your relationship with the Lord. Many Christians think, "If I spend time in Bible reading, meditation on the things of God, and prayer, I won't get everything done that I have to do." They live at a frantic pace, seldom taking the time to spend in God's presence, thinking about the things above and the life to come. They end up burning out, having stress-induced physical problems, and all sorts of other crises that make life careen out of control. But if we die to self by putting time with God as a priority, He puts the rest of life into perspective.

So the first motivating reason to die daily to self for Jesus' sake is that when we do, He brings the blessings of salvation back upon us in the long run. When we live for self, we may gain in the short term, but we'll come up empty in view of eternity.

2. The disciple daily crucifies self because he recognizes that this world is insignificant and fleeting in light of eternity (9:25).

If we could only keep it in mind: This life is a fleeting millisecond in light of eternity. And yet we devote all of our time and energy as if we will be on this earth forever and as if there were no eternity! Richard Baxter, in his profound book, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* ([Sovereign Grace Book Club], p. 151), writes,

Lord, what a strange madness is this, that men, who know they must presently enter upon unchangeable joy or pain, should yet live as uncertain what shall be their doom, as if they never heard of any such state; yea, and live as quietly and merrily in this uncertainty, as if all were made sure, and there were no danger! Are they awake or asleep? What do they think on? Where are their hearts? If they have but a weighty suit at law, how careful are they to know whether it will go for or against them! If they were to be tried for their lives at an earthly bar, how careful would they be to know whether they should be saved or condemned, especially, if their care might surely save them! If they be dangerously sick, they will inquire of the physician, What think you, sir, shall I escape, or not? But in the business of their salvation, they are content to be uncertain.

Someone recently told me of a young man whose family used to attend this church. He had become very successful in worldly terms. He picked up a friend to show him his new Ferrari, but never returned. They found the crashed car with the two young men's bodies several days later. He gained the world, but may well have lost his soul.

The famous evangelist George Whitefield once told of seeing some criminals riding in a cart on their way to the gallows. They were arguing about who should sit on the right hand of the cart with no more concern than children who are going somewhere with their parents. It seems absurd that men who are about to die would be arguing about who gets the best seat in the cart! Yet isn't that an indictment of us all? We're all about to die! This life is so fleeting and uncertain. Eternity is ahead. Yet we devote ourselves

to gaining position and possessions in this world, with no thought of the world to come!

The irony of Jesus' perceptive statement is magnified by the fact that few of us ever come close to gaining the whole world. But even if we could do it, Jesus says, what good is it if we forfeit our own soul? Alexander the Great conquered vast territories and even ordered that he be worshiped as god, but he caught a fever and died at age 33. What good did his conquests do him in light of eternity? Just over 50 years ago, Adolf Hitler tried to conquer the world, but he ended up committing suicide when his plans failed. Some business tycoons, like Ted Turner, reject God and commit themselves to amassing a fortune. He owns more land than almost any other human being. But he soon will die and face God's judgment with nothing to cover his sin.

How much wiser was Jim Elliot, who was killed at 28 trying to take the gospel to the fierce Auca tribe in Ecuador. At age 22 he had written in his journal, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose" (*Shadow of the Almighty* [Zondervan], p. 15). Two years earlier he had prayed, "Lord make my way prosperous, not that I achieve high station, but that my life may be an exhibit to the value of knowing God" (*ibid.*, p. 13).

The Christian life must be lived daily by keeping in view the shortness of this life and the insignificance of the things of this world in light of eternity. When he was just 19, Jonathan Edwards wrote down 34 resolutions that he committed himself to practice for God's glory. Number 9 was, "To think much, on all occasions, of my dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 1:xx). That may strike you as a bit morbid for a young man, but Edwards was seeking to live in the light of eternity. A few months later he wrote, "I frequently hear persons in old age say how they would live, if they were to live their lives over again: *Resolved*, That I will live just so as I can think I shall wish I had done, supposing I live to old age" (*ibid.*, 1:xxii).

To apply this, think about being at the end of your life. None of us knows how long we'll live, but assume that the Lord gives you 80 years. In light of eternity, what would you want to accomplish as you look back on your life from that point? In light of this,

write out a purpose statement that sums up what you want God to do through you in the years He gives you. Then write out some specific goals for the coming year in light of that overall purpose. Then, whether you live to be 80 or 40, you won't spend your time trying to gain the world while losing your soul.

3. The disciple daily crucifies self because he lives in the light of the second coming of Jesus to judge the world (9:26).

Although Jesus had just predicted His own rejection and death (9:22), He makes it clear that that will not be the final chapter. He will come again in His own glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. The apostle Paul describes that awesome event as a time "when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (2 Thess. 1:7, 8). The Lord Jesus described His own "coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other" (Matt. 24:30, 31).

A main reason I should deny myself and take up my cross daily to follow Jesus is that He is coming again in power and glory to judge everyone. Either He will be ashamed of me on that day or He will confess me favorably before the Father and say to me, "Well done, good and faithful slave... Enter into the joy of your master" (Matt. 25:21, 23). I don't know whether Jesus will speak to me in English or whether He will give me the ability to understand Hebrew or whatever language is spoken in heaven. But in English, you can tell by a person's lips whether he is going to say, "Depart from Me" or "Well done." I try to live each day so that when I stand before the Lord Jesus in all His glory, I see His lips form the words, "Well done."

Note that Jesus says that there is the danger that we will be ashamed of Him and His words. He spoke often, more than anyone else in the Bible, about hell. Are you embarrassed to warn people about hell? It's not a popular doctrine in our day of tolerance and relativism. It would be much easier to drop Jesus' many references to hell out of our conversations with unbelievers: "Let's

take a more positive approach, telling them about God's love, not about His judgment. It sells better." I'm not advocating that we go to the other extreme and become insensitive, judgmental hell fire and damnation witnesses. But I am saying that if we do not lovingly warn people of the danger of hell and judgment, we are probably being ashamed of Jesus' words.

Another hard thing Jesus spoke about is the inability of sinners to come to Him apart from the sovereign grace of God. Jesus spoke very plainly about this in John 6:26-65, where He repeats in verse 65 what He had already stated in verse 44: "No one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father." This is a hard doctrine! Thus verse 66 states, "As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore." They didn't like Jesus' teaching because the doctrines of God's sovereign grace humble the pride of the human heart. But we must bow before the hard sayings of Jesus, as well as the words that we like, if we confess Him as Savior and Lord.

To obey Luke 9:26, we have to elevate the fear of God above the fear of people. Later, in the context of repeating a similar warning about confessing Him before men (12:8, 9), Jesus says, "My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who after He has killed has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!" (9:4, 5). If we live each day in light of Jesus' glorious return to judge the earth, we can daily deny self in order to confess Him before others.

Conclusion

In 1777, Dr. William Dodd, a well-known London clergyman, was condemned to be hanged for forgery (the penalties were a bit more severe back then!). When his last sermon, delivered in prison, was published, a friend commented to Samuel Johnson that the effort was far better than he had thought the man capable of. Dr. Johnson's classic reply was, "Depend upon it, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."

If we would keep in mind that life is very short and that eternity is just ahead, it would concentrate our minds wonderfully!

Even though it is difficult and painful, we would daily put self on the cross and follow Jesus because we will soon stand before Him on judgment day. Instead of getting caught up with the things of this world, we would live in view of the world to come. The reality of eternity is the motivation for living obediently now, even though it means a slow, painful death to self.

An Italian legend tells about a man who had a servant who was rather stupid. One day the master became exasperated and told the servant, "You're the stupidest fellow I've ever known. I want you to take this staff and carry it with you. If you ever meet a man who is more stupid than you are, give him the staff."

The servant took the staff. He met some pretty dumb men, but he wasn't sure if they were dumber than he was, so he never gave away the staff. Then one day he was called back to the castle. He was ushered into the master's bedroom, where the master was on his deathbed. He told the servant, "I'm going on a long journey." The servant asked, "When will you be back?" The master replied that he would not return.

The servant asked, "Well, sir, have you got everything prepared for your journey?" The master said, "No, I've not really made much preparation for it." The servant asked, "Could you have made preparation? Could you have sent something on?" The master said, "Yes, I guess I had a lifetime to do that, but I was just busy about other things." The servant went on, "Then you won't be back to the castle, to the lands, to the animals?" The master said he wouldn't be back.

The legend says that the servant took the staff which he had carried for all those years and said to the master, "Here, you take the staff. I finally met a man who was more stupid than myself."

We're all going to take that journey. Jesus tells us how to prepare. Trust Him as Savior and follow Him as Lord, denying self even when it's hard. One day you will see Him smile and say, "Well done!" Then it will be worth it all!

Discussion Questions

1. Luke 9:24 sounds as if Jesus is teaching that we gain salvation by our own efforts. Why is this *not* what He is teaching?
2. How can we keep eternity in focus in the midst of daily pressures?
3. How can we overcome the fear of men so that we will not be ashamed of Jesus and His words?
4. How can we warn people of the coming judgment without sounding like hell fire and brimstone preachers?

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