

Deny Your Dark Side

Luke 9:23a

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Trevin Wax writes, “Recent studies reveal 91 percent of Americans agree with this statement: ‘The best way to find yourself is by looking within yourself.’ In other words, if you want to discover who you are and what your purpose is, the place to look is inside your heart.”

When I googled the phrase, “Follow your heart,” 13 million results came up! Here are some other common catchphrases that make up this creed embraced by billions of people:

Go with your gut.

Do what’s right for you.

Pursue your dreams.

Believe in yourself.

You do you!

You be you!

While we might expect these kinds of mantras from those who don’t follow Christ, many best-selling books written for the Christian market espouse similar teaching. One very popular author makes this statement, “Trust your good little heart.” Another well-known author who professes to be a Christian, goes even further: “Maybe Eve was never meant to be our warning. Maybe she was meant to be our model. Own your wanting. Eat the apple.” BTW, her most recent book has sold over 1 million copies.

In essence, she’s saying sin is no longer what’s wrong with the world but rather, it’s our unrealized desires. This must be corrected because it is blatantly unbiblical. This is the dogma of Disney, not the doctrine of a devoted disciple. Or to say it stronger, these are lies from the pit of Hell.

Let’s listen to what the Bible says about the danger of following your heart.

- Genesis 6:5: “**The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.**”

- Ecclesiastes 9:3: “...Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live.”
- Jeremiah 17:9: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”
- Mark 7:20-23: “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Jon Bloom writes, “Our hearts were never designed to be gods in whom we believe; they were designed to believe in God...don’t believe in your heart; direct your heart to believe in God.” Or we could say it like this: *Don’t follow your heart; lead your heart!*

In contrast to the pervasive and popular thinking which states life is all about you and me, listen to the words of the living Word recorded in Luke 9:23: “**And He said to all, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.’**”

As I meditated on this verse, I remembered another quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “*Salvation is free, but discipleship will cost you your life.*” BTW, we posted a link to his book called, “The Cost of Discipleship” on Sermon Extras. As we’ve been learning in our Discipleship Matters series, *every believer is called to lovingly follow Jesus and intentionally help others follow Him.*

This week I saw something on Facebook which caused me to celebrate. It was posted by Tiffany Masengarb (I have her permission to share this): “*On our way to the dentist this morning we had to pull over for an ambulance. As we were pulled over, Amelia asked if we could take a moment to pray for the people in the ambulance. So, my sweet girl led us in prayer.*” Amelia is 7 years old! Props to her parents, Shawn and Tiffany, for intentionally discipling their children!

As we unpack this passage, we’ll begin by considering the call to follow Jesus. Then, we’ll contemplate four conditions of discipleship.

1. Desire
2. Denial
3. Death

4. Devotion

Because these words capture the heart of discipleship, I'm going to preach three sermons centered on just one verse. Allow me to read Luke 9:23 again: ***“And He said to all, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.’”*** If the sermon last weekend was less than 20 minutes long, this one will last for three weeks! We'll tackle Desire and Denial today.

One Call to All

We see Jesus' call in the first part of verse 23: ***“And He said to all...”*** Before settling into our text, let's set the context. In verses 10-17, we read Jesus withdrew with His disciples, but when the crowds figured out where He was, they followed Him. After teaching and healing all day, the disciples asked Jesus to send the crowd away so they could find lodging and food. Instead, Jesus surprised everyone when He fed five thousand hungry men with a bit of bread and a couple fish.

After this, Jesus turned to the disciples in verses 18-20 and asked, ***“Who do you say I am?”*** Peter spoke up quickly and declared, ***“The Christ of God.”*** They weren't prepared for what Jesus said next: ***“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”***

After this intense teaching time, which according to Mark 8:33 included a public rebuke of Peter, Jesus called the crowd and the twelve together. The tense for the word, ***“said”*** can be translated as, ***“was saying over and over.”*** Apparently, what Jesus was about to declare about discipleship was repeatedly emphasized. The word ***“all”*** indicates the ***“whole,”*** meaning it's intended for the curious crowd and the committed core. Mark 8:34 fills in some details: ***“And calling the crowd to Him with His disciples, He said to them.”***

What Jesus says next is not just for the disciples, but for each and every one of us. These words are for you and they are for me. We can't escape them or seek refuge in syrupy spiritual slogans.

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Four Conditions

Would you notice the call to faith is open to everyone but there are conditions to following Christ? We see this in the use of the word, “*if*.” I’m reminded of Luke 14:25, our text from last weekend: “***If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father...***”

Some of the most profound truths come in small words. Grammatically speaking, “*if*” introduces a conditional clause, meaning there are conditions or circumstances upon which certain consequences follow.

“*If*” is one of the first words a child begins to associate with logical thinking and conditional results. Parents reinforce this from an early age, “*Bobby, if you eat your carrots, then you can have some ice cream.*” The carrots are quickly consumed so the ice cream can be enjoyed.

As one grows, the “*ifs*” come fast and furiously and we figure out we have a responsibility to do something.

- “*If you finish your homework, you may go out and play.*”
- “*If you complete your chores, you may use the car this weekend.*”
- “*If you take this medicine, it should relieve your symptoms.*”
- “*If you service your car regularly, it will last much longer.*”

While I didn’t take the time to count each one, the word “*if*” appears nearly 1600 times in the Bible. Almost half of the 574 occurrences in the New Testament are found in the four gospels. The word “*if*” reminds us of our responsibility to respond and not be passive. As we’ve said before, you will never coast into Christlikeness. Here are just a few examples from Jesus.

- Mark 4:23: “***If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.***”
- John 7:37: “***If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.***”
- John 8:31: “***If you continue in my Word, then you are truly disciples of mine.***”
- John 14:15: “***If you love me, keep my commandments.***”

“*If*” means we have a choice in the matter of whether or not we’ll make our discipleship matter.

Now, let’s look at the first conditional demand of discipleship.

1. Desire. The first condition is a person must desire to be a disciple – ***“If anyone would come after me...”*** The heart of the matter is a matter of the heart. The phrase, ***“would come”*** is the idea of intentionality and involves an act of the will. This can be translated as *“desire or wish.”* Someone said we become what we desire.

In order to walk with Jesus, first you must want to walk with Jesus. The New King James renders it like this: ***“Whoever desires to come after me.”*** The New American Standard puts it like this: ***“If anyone wishes...”*** And the New Living Translation says this: ***“If any of you wants to be my follower...”***

This was not a “secret” teaching for a select few. This call of Jesus goes out to everyone and to anyone – to the curious crowd (those nearby), to the committed core (the eleven) and even to the counterfeit (Judas). These three groups are still present today. Some of you are curious about Christ, many others are committed to Him, and a few have counterfeit faith. Notice, Jesus gives the same message to each of these groups.

A common misconception in the church is discipleship is for the super-committed but not for everyone. One pastor describes it like this:

“If you’re a masochist who likes hardship, deprivation, sacrifice, and perhaps even martyrdom, you can sign up for the discipleship track...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...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...I contend that Jesus taught that there is only one track for those who believe in Him, namely, the discipleship track...if you’re not His disciple, you are not a Christian. Every believer is called to be completely yielded to Jesus as Lord...”

It doesn’t matter what you’ve done or how you’ve been living. As the song by Michael W. Smith says, *“Wherever you are, at the cross there is room.”* Romans 3:23 states, ***“all have sinned”*** and Acts 10:34 says, ***“...everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name.”***

Notice the phrase, **“come after me.”** This has the idea of movement, of lining up behind the Lord, following wherever He goes. We don’t walk in front of Him and ask Him to catch up with our ways and wishes. No, we get behind Him, so we walk where He walks. We walk after Him, not ahead of Him. We don’t live like we want and ask Him to bless us. Rather, we walk in His blessings when our lives line up with His Word.

Do you have the desire to follow Jesus as one of His disciples? Listen: *You won’t follow Him if you don’t want to.* One of Beth’s sisters made a statement several years ago which we often quote in our family. It goes like this, *“people do what they want to do.”* It sounds so simple but it’s so true. Some are not following the Savior simply because they don’t have the desire to do so or because their desire is for immediate gratification instead of godliness.

Until you desire to be a disciple, you won’t be one. If you desire Him more than anyone or anything else, you will be a disciple. Psalm 73:25: **“Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.”**

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2. Denial. The first condition is to settle your *desire*. The second condition is to *deny self*: **“...let him deny himself...”** The phrase, **“let him”** puts the responsibility on each of us; this must be intentional because it’s not automatic. I appreciate the candor of one believer when he said, *“Honestly, I don’t want to forsake myself. I like me. And I don’t want to be told that the one I like the most, I have to forsake...yet Jesus says that I have to deny or forsake the one person I like best.”*

Everything within us screams against surrendering in this way. To **“deny”** implies a *“firm refusal.”* This is the same word which describes Peter denying Jesus. One Bible Dictionary defines denial this way: *“to disown and renounce self and to subjugate all works, interests and enjoyments.”*

One commentator captures it well: *“Self-denial is turning away from the idolatry of self-centeredness and every attempt to orient one’s life by the dictates of self-interest.”* Jesus said it bluntly in Luke 14:33: **“So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.”**

My good friend Ben Lovelady, the pastor of First Baptist in Silvis, posted something last week which captures why it's so difficult to deny ourselves (I have his permission to share this):

“A tragic irony of living in a world devoid of absolute truth is not that absolutes disappear—but that they exponentially increase. Every opinion becomes elevated to that of a ‘lord.’ In ancient times, gods were thought to have zip codes—this god being god over this land and this god over that. In our times, the ‘divine’ zip codes have shrunk to the size of our heads.”

To deny self is a command from Christ Himself. It is an aorist imperative, meaning we're to deny ourselves right now, without delay. We're called to make a radical decision to renounce our own righteousness and refuse to see self as supreme. According to Titus 2:11-12, God's grace can free us from the grip of ungodliness: ***“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.”***

I appreciate the reminder from Nancy Guthrie: *“We simply cannot think that we can live the Christian life by following our hearts because our hearts will lead us astray.”* Denying self is not the same thing as self-denial, like not eating chocolate, or going on a Facebook fast. To deny self is turning from sin and selfishness and turning to the Savior. Having said that, it may involve saying no to some practices or habits or relationships.

Steven Cole writes: *“We renounce self-exaltation and live to exalt God. We renounce self-will and live to do God's will. We renounce self-seeking and live instead to seek God and His kingdom. 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.”*

Denying self means I stop thinking I'm always right, I stop living in my own power, and I refuse to pursue my own pleasures because I no longer belong to myself. We see this in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20: ***“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”***

In short, I must give up the right to run my own life because I no longer own my own life. I've been bought with the blood of Christ and now I belong to Him. John Calvin called self-denial "*the sum of the Christian life.*"

The word "**deny**" is the polar opposite of "**confess.**" This is an urgent command, because if we don't deny self, we'll end up denying the Savior. Just ask Peter. We must confess Christ, and deny self, or we'll confess self, and deny Christ. You will either live for self, or you'll live for the Savior.

I like what Erwin Lutzer posted on New Year's Day several years ago: "*But there is one resolution we all should make: that we will not begin a single day in the New Year without giving thanks to God, meditating on one chapter of God's Word, and praying, 'Father, glorify yourself in my life today at my expense.'*" Most of us, including me, are fine with glorifying God; but, we don't really want to do it, if it costs us something. We want to exalt Him, but not if it's at our expense. We can't fully follow Christ while living our lives any way we please.

If you're headed the wrong way, God may send people or problems your way to get your attention. Paul David Tripp states: "*God is quite willing to interrupt your comfort in order to reclaim the allegiance and submission of your heart.*"

This week, I listened to a song by Mercy Me called, "*So Long, Self.*" The lyrics describe a man breaking up with himself.

*Well if I come across a little bit distant, it's just because I am
Things just seem to feel a little bit different, you understand
Believe it or not but life is not apparently about me anyways
But I have met the One who really is worthy
So, let me say...so long, self
Well, it's been fun, but I have found somebody else
So long, self
There's just no room for two, so you are gonna have to move
So long, self
Don't take this wrong but you are wrong for me, farewell
Oh well, goodbye, don't cry
So long, self*

Have you ever broken up with yourself? There really is no room for two. Either self is on the throne of your life, or the Savior is.

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Action Steps

I close with three questions.

1. What have you learned about intentional discipleship? I asked this question during our staff team time on Tuesday. Here are some of the responses.

- *To be intentional and look outward*
- *Equipping parents to disciple their children*
- *Pass on what others have poured into my life.*
- *Look at every day and every opportunity to choose to be a disciple.*
- *Be accountable to God.*
- *Parents are responsible to disciple their children; the church's role is to support and be a resource*
- *Denying yourself opens doors to everything else.*

How about you? What have you been learning?

2. Is there someone you will share this with? Think of someone right now and do so this week. BTW, if you've been stirred to have someone disciple you or you're ready to disciple someone else, I invite you to an interest meeting on Thursday, February 25.

3. Have you denied yourself and surrendered to the Savior? Shortly before Robert E. Lee died, he was asked by a young mother to bless her baby. He took the baby in his arms, looked at him and then at the mother, and said these unforgettable words, *"Teach him to deny himself. That is all."*

After I became a follower of Christ, I read a booklet by Campus Crusade for Christ (now called Cru) which has stayed with me for over 40 years. The name of the booklet is, *"Have You Made the Wonderful Discovery of the Spirit-Filled Life?"*

A simple illustration depicts the difference between a life that's lived with self on the throne and a life lived with Christ on the throne. The self-directed life is filled

with guilt, worry, discouragement, discord, frustration, fear and disobedience while the Christ-directed life is filled with love, joy, peace, patience, trust and obedience.

What about you? Is self on the throne of your life, or is the Savior? Don't follow your heart; lead your heart to follow Christ.

- Do you *desire* the Savior above everything else?
- Are you ready to *deny* yourself?

Don't delay; do it today.

We're going to end by taking some time for self-reflection. Then, I will lead in prayer to give you an opportunity to deny yourself and surrender to the Christ-directed life. For some of you, this might be salvation. For others, this can be a time of rededication where you make sure Jesus is on the throne of your life.

When we're finished praying, for those who are gathered in person, I'm going to ask you to raise your hand if you made a decision today. This will help you confess Christ as Lord and will encourage others to do the same. If you're engaging online, please indicate your decision on our online connection card so we can follow-up this week.

Reflection and Prayer