

# Why Did Jesus Say That?

## “Part 2: Deny yourself and take up your cross”

Matthew 16:24-28

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on July 15, 2018, by Steve Edelman

**STORY: Have you determined your relationship?** Twenty years ago my wife Megan and I were on a 24-hour break from counseling at Camp Qwanoes. A group of us came down to Victoria to stay at Meg’s parents’ house and get away for 24 hours. The way my Megan remembers the incident is a bit different than me. It all started when she asked me to go on a night walk to Oak Bay Marina and break away from our friends. Being from Calgary, I hadn’t seen much of Victoria, and Meg wanted to show me one of her favorite childhood spots. She led me to a double bench swing that overlooked the water and love was in the air. The swing had two benches facing each other and they swayed in unison. She was on one side of the swing and I was on the other. Her batting eyes with full lashes were gazing into mine and she slowly made her way to my side of the bench. Our lips magically touched and we had our first kiss under the twinkling stars. **Now, the way I remembered the incident** is that we were on either side of the swing and I was trying to get the swing higher and higher. I was really thinking about how high we could get the bench swing and how many people have lost their lunch on it. Then, she “threw herself at me (joke)” with this young passion and put her lips on mine to determine the relationship. I clearly liked it. (Don’t worry her dad is not here.)

We ended up in a long-term relationship - you should have seen the phone bills. Six months in, she says, “Well, am I moving to Calgary to be close to you or not?” I knew I wanted things to keep moving forward so, shortly after that conversation, Megan moved to Calgary and began her nursing program. Fast forward a few semesters and she *really* draws the line in the sand. She says, “I am not staying in Calgary if you are not going to marry me.” Boom!?!?! There it was. Many different thoughts went through my head. Like, do I really want to spend the rest of my life with her? Am I ready to commit to marriage? Are we ready? **I was required to make a commitment to determine our relationship or it was over.**

**Her assertive words awakened a necessary decision that tested my real commitment to her.** Megan was looking for some confirmation of why she should give her life and love to me because an Oak Bay girl staying in a city with “a real winter” required a real commitment and sacrifice. She was testing my commitment level to her and whether or not I was truly going to give my life to her or not. This was a decision that changed the course of my life. I went and bought the ring...

Just like in this story where Megan was looking for a commitment, Jesus’ difficult words, “deny yourself and take up the cross” awaken a necessary decision for his disciples and all of us today. Jesus is testing whether or not we are truly following Him or not. What is our commitment to Him? Do you truly love Him? How you respond to his jolting statement determines whether you give your allegiance to Jesus or not. The difficult words that we want to focus on today are, “deny yourself and take up your cross.”

We just started a new series on “Why did Jesus say that? Today, we are on part 2 of this series and we will be talking about why Jesus said, “Deny yourself and take up your cross.”

Today, I want to focus on why Jesus gave such a commandment and I will break it into three parts.

**Jesus said, “deny yourself and take up your cross” because we need to understand:**

- 1. THE COST REQUIRED TO FOLLOW JESUS**
- 2. THE GOOD LIFE MUST BE SURRENDERED TO FOLLOW JESUS**
- 3. THE JOY PROVIDED TO FOLLOW JESUS**

**First, Jesus addresses the cost required to follow Him.**

**1. THE COST REQUIRED TO FOLLOW JESUS**

This journey of becoming a follower of Jesus begins when we commit our lives to Him. This relationship does not start when we simply join a church or try to become a suitable person. To enter into this relationship with Jesus costs us nothing. There is nothing we can do to perform or earn our way into a relationship with God. You don't have to give a bunch of money at offering time. You don't have to have your life all together before coming to Jesus. **You come exactly how you are** and give Him your life. Similarly, when dating it cost you nothing to ask that special guy or girl out and hopefully you can start a dating relationship. However, Jesus makes a chilling statement to His disciples and to us to define our commitment level. Jesus is defining what our relationship looks like if we are going to follow Him.

Look with me at verse 24 which says, *“Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself...”*

**Jesus is telling us, If anyone would come after me and continue the work that I have started as a disciple maker then, let him deny himself.**

This statement follows Peter being rebuked by Jesus because Peter was trying to get Jesus to take the easy way out. “Jesus, you don't need to suffer because you're the King.” This well-meant statement by Peter was tempting Jesus to not accomplish what he was called to do on the cross. Jesus responds to Peter and His disciples by saying if we want to be like me you must deny yourself to be a disciple maker. **What does it mean to deny oneself?**

**a. A person must deny self (v24).**

The word deny means to disown, disregard, forsake, renounce, reject, or refuse your agenda in place of Christ's. Very simply, it means to say “no” to that inner desire to serve self – it's saying no to that constant craving, justifying, and demand for attention.

A person who is denying self is learning to let Christ rule and reign which is apparent through how we live out our desires and affections. In the Greek, the word “deny” means that the person enters a new state or condition. It means, “Let him at once begin to deny self.”

Following Jesus is a journey that comes at a high price. This is not a relationship to be entered into lightly. **This decision requires the commitment of our entire life to Jesus Christ. Coming to Christ takes priority over every other pursuit in life.** It means that he becomes the King and worship of our life. This path requires our sacrifice and, at times, even our suffering for Him. Following Christ is a free commitment that cost us our lives. **It will cost us a life of ease, a life of living for this world, old habits**

and even old associations. **It will cost us our time and treasure to spread the gospel message.** It will cost us suffering for being identified as a Christ follower. We may encounter persecution because of our faith. It may even cost us our life. Jesus demands the total commitment of the person. But in the end, we gain far more than we lose.

**ILLUSTRATION** – My mother loves gardening. At the end of the harvest she dries out many of the seeds and saves them the following year. To prepare the seeds, there is a process that involves the seed dying and once it's dead it can be buried into the ground for new growth. Unless the seed dies, there will be no new growth or a future harvest. But if it dies, it will produce a rich return. **Our dying now equals future glory.**

It's so hard! I mean, we understand what it means and yet we can't seem to do it.

A writer for Christianity Today named John Ortberg says, "This is a hard saying to die to self. Not so much that it's hard to understand. It's hard to do. What Jesus is saying is - No sacrifice, no harvest.

See, there is a part of me that is selfish, greedy and prideful that needs to die. It's killing me anyway. There is no other way to life. This is what it means to follow Jesus."

#### **Practically – what does dying to self-look like?**

- Caring for aging parents - giving up your own time / interests to help in the garden or with the housework - or just sit with them to hear their stories or do an activity they enjoy.
- Turning off the TV or social media to talk to a friend going through a hard time.
- Putting your cell phone away when meeting a friend for coffee.
- Offering to do grocery shopping for a sick friend.
- Cutting down on eating out or going to Starbucks so that you can support a child from Compassion who has next to nothing.

**ILLUSTRATION:** When you enter into a marriage relationship, you certainly bring your old self into it. I thought the old self, was pretty good when I got married, but as you try to conform for the sake of the commitment to the marriage your realize how selfish you really are. Can you take out the garbage? Can you fix the drain in the tub? Can you change the diaper? Can you put the kids to bed?

The beauty comes when you are committed to the marriage and family even when it's hard. A committed Godly spouse helps you deny the behaviors that are destructive and damaging to the health of the home. We all have issues married or not in which our character needs to be reshaped into the person of Christ. This works well when she loves you despite your idiosyncrasies and selfish tendencies. God made you a unique person that He is calling to himself.

**I want to point out that self-denial is not self-rejection.** God made you uniquely you and treasures the person He created. He made you for a particular purpose that He had in mind for only you. When you give your life to Christ, He works within you and reshapes you into an amazing person who is "renewed-in-Christ."

It not simple self-discipline or self-control that Jesus is after. You can deny yourself time on social media, or drink, or pleasures, and be a self-disciplined person and still completely miss what Jesus is talking about here. It's a change of will and purpose that happens in our own heart that he gives us. The result is not to be a more rule-abiding person, but a more Christ abiding follower of Jesus.

The next aspect of the cost of following Jesus is taking up the cross.

**b. A person must take up the cross (24b).**

Cross-bearing is mandatory for all who answer to the invitation of Christ. What does it mean to take up the cross? Does it mean that we should go into the forest and cut down two trees and make a cross? Then carry it around on the streets of Victoria? The cross carried was the instrument of death. **It represents a life-long, life-changing practice for the Christ follower.**

**Steven Lawson says, “It was the most feared form of capital punishment in that day. The cross in the ancient world was the equivalent to the electric chair of the current world. It meant a horrific death that unleashed the most excruciating pain possible. Death by crucifixion was so barbaric that it was reserved for the worst criminals in society.”**

It’s fairly obvious that Jesus was not talking in literal terms. Jesus is asking the crowd, the individual to take a step of faith within their hearts. To take up your cross means to sacrifice your self-centeredness which is painful and messy. In the old system of sacrifice, you were required you to give up your most valued animal in order to restore relationship with God because sin separated you from God. There was a cost or a payment required so that God would walk and talk with His people again.

In Romans 12:1, Paul commands believers to “offer your bodies as living sacrifices.” Unfortunately, the imagery of what it means to give your body as a living sacrifice is lost powerful is lost today. Can you picture what a living sacrifice must be like? The sacrifice when on the alter squirms, fights and claws to get away. It does not want to be there and it doesn’t want to die. If we are going to carry our cross, it’s like willingly climbing up on the altar and giving your life to symbolically die for the sake of Christ.

**So, if we want to follow Christ, what do we need to lay on the alter? The cross is an image of discipleship.**

**One must die to his or her own will and take up God’s will.**

**i. We need to die to how we use our gifts and talents that God has given us.**

It’s learning to our gifts to build the Kingdom and not just benefit ourselves.

**ii. We need to die to our need to control our relationships.**

We mostly treat other people based on how they make me feel. Not based on what Jesus asked me to do.

**iii. We need to crucify the Sexual Self**

Many people become discouraged in their struggle to overcome sexual sin because they never seem to beat it on their own strength. Part of the reason you may not overcome sexual sin is your confusion about the location of the battle. The physical indicator of sexual sin is simply the outworking of what has already been going on in the heart. The focus of your struggle must be internal first and foremost. It’s dying to self. We need to invite the Spirit God to change and crucify our bent sexuality.

**iv. We need to crucify the Material Self**

Any Christian coming from a developing country could easily say that the Western world is having a love affair with material wealth. The gospel needs to confront and crucify our desire for more and more.

**Borrowed from another pastor, here are some symptoms of the sin of materialism:**

- Overspending, compulsive buying, and being discontent with what we have.
- Hoarding or holding on to more wealth than we need.
- Failing to give God the “top portion” of our income to building God’s Kingdom.
- Cheating on our income tax

Materialism is the sin of thinking of ourselves as owners rather than as managers of God’s wealth. We need to crucify our materialism.

**Victor Kuligin says**, “When I realize I am the one intended to be sacrificed, I begin to kick and scream and fight for freedom. But it is precisely in the act of sacrifice that I am most free. Jesus teaches that if I greedily hold onto my life, I will lose it. . . . Too often believers think once they have become converted, the job is done and they can bask in the glory. Fact is, the difficult work is just beginning. Our sanctification can be a bloody, excruciating process. **This is why Jesus says we must daily take up our cross. Along with daily bread must come daily agony.** Our conversion may have involved getting on our knees and praying the “sinner’s prayer,” **but our sanctification will involve white knuckles, sweaty brows, and tearful cheeks. It should be a daily, painful process of purging, where we submit our wills entirely to the Lord’s.**”

By this illustration, cross-bearing represents a personal allegiance to Christ. If anyone is to follow Him, they must carry their cross in this world. No one can follow Jesus and continue to live in the same way as they did previously. To follow Christ, it means we all must do a complete turnaround from the direction we were previously traveling in life.

**A third aspect of the cost of the commitment to Christ is understanding what it means to follow.**

**c. A person must follow Jesus.**

To follow means to be a companion or a disciple of Christ. It has the idea of seeking to be in union with and in the likeness of. It is following Christ, seeking to be just like Him. **It’s not a sit back and wait mode of behavior, but an active pursuit or commitment to building His Kingdom.** It is energy and effort, action and work. It is going after Christ with zeal and energy, struggling and seeking to follow in His footsteps, no matter the cost. Note that the steps of Christ led to death before they led to glory (Mt. 16:21). **A person must make a wholehearted decision. A decision to live dramatically different from the unbelieving world.**

If a person really wills and deliberately chooses to follow Christ, he must consider the cost of following Jesus. The cost must involve denying self, taking up the cross, and following Jesus.

Jesus said, “deny yourself and take up your cross” so that we would better understand the cost of making a decision to follow Christ.

Secondly, **Jesus said, “deny yourself and take up your cross” so that we would understand** that the “good life” must be surrendered to follow Jesus.

## **2. THE GOOD LIFE MUST BE SURRENDERED TO FOLLOW JESUS**

What do I mean by the “good life?” I mean living your life for yourself. This would include the enjoyment and fulfillment that we all desire. Ultimately, It’s getting what we want and when we get it we are happy for a time. It’s dependent on **our resources. Our time. Our family. Our reputation. Our comforts.** When we don’t get it we are depressed and discontent. The “good life” is what our current culture is chasing. Unfortunately, many Christian’s are also chasing the “good life.”

Notice, what Jesus says:

### **a. Living for yourself is ultimately futile (v25).**

Look with me at verse 25 which says, *“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”*

**The words “life” in 16:25 and “soul” in 16:26; are emphasizing our existence beyond physical survival and success.**

**Jesus is saying that what really matters will come to the top and last. It will stand the test of eternity.**

### **ILLUSTRATION. Will it float?**

A can of spam. A bag of flour. A tub of ice cream. An old cell phone. A cat. The items would have to float for at least 7 seconds. Ultimately, it was the test of buoyancy. What you are living for... will it sink or float in the test of eternity?

The person who “saves his life” ...

- by pursuing to make his life more and more comfortable, easy, and secure (beyond what is necessary) and who **neglects Christ shall lose his life eternally.**
- by looking to gain wealth and power and fame by compromising Christ shall lose his life eternally.
- by obtaining the thrills, excitement, and stimulation of this world by ignoring Christ shall lose his life eternally.

As said above, the person who loses his life for Christ—who sacrifices and gives all he is and has for Christ—saves his life, and he saves it eternally. The person who keeps his life and what he has for himself shall lose his life, and he loses it eternally. The call of Christ is just what He says: a life of denial that takes up the cross and follows in His steps.

Let’s look at verse 26 which says, *“<sup>26</sup> For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?”*

### **b. Gaining the whole world doesn’t save a person (v26).**

What could you gain that would really make you happy? Just finish the sentence: “I would be really happy if I had... true love, health, a husband/wife, peace, comfort, a family, more time, friends, adventure, excitement, the right church, and the list goes on. Great. You may be happy for a time and that feeling will fade. **Jesus is saying that your continuous appetite for more will not save you. It will forever devastate if not repurposed by Him.**

You can gain the whole world and your soul will still be unsatisfied and undone without Him. All the pleasure and wealth and power and fame are nothing compared with the state of our soul. The soul is the inward person or seat of the new life. **Luke 21:19 (cp.**

**Mt. 10:39); 1 Pet. 2:11; 3 John 2.** The state of your soul is far superior to the things of this earth because:

- i) **Everything fades and passes away.** A person possesses something only for a short time.
- ii) **The human soul is eternal.** The soul never dies and never ceases to exist. It shall live forever either with God or apart from God.

Next,

**c. A human soul is worth more than the whole world (v26b).**

Verse 26b says, "*Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?*"

Live with certainty that there is an eternal heaven and a hell and your soul will end up in one of them. The word *soul* is the same word translated *life* (v.25). Once a person (life) is born into this world, he shall exist forever. It is just a matter of where he goes after this world: to be with God or to be apart from God.

**Here are some questions that you need to be asking:**

- **How do you know you will be going to heaven when you die?**
- **What is the test?**
- **WHAT WOULD YOU GIVE TO ENSURE THAT YOUR OWN SOUL WILL BE IN HEAVEN?**

**HISTORICAL STORY.** In around 200 AD, the events of a Christian mother named Perpetua were recorded in her diary and later were completed by a friend. Her story has been the study of many historians because she was one of the first female martyred Christians recorded in history. She was arrested by Roman guards for talking about Jesus just before she was baptized. Her father pleads with her to recant her faith in Christ in order to spare her life. The rest of the family including her own husband did exactly that, to save their own life. Perpetua refuses and is soon baptized before being moved to prison. After the guards are bribed by the family, she is allowed to move to a better portion of the prison, where she nurses her child and gives its charge to her mother and brother, and the child is able to stay in prison with her for the time being.

Perpetua's father visits her in prison and pleads with her again, but Perpetua remains steadfast in her faith. She is brought to a hearing before the governor Hilarianus and the martyrs confess their Christian faith. Six Christians were tried, refused to renounce their faith, and were condemned to death in the arena like the Colosseum.

At the demand of the crowd they were first whipped before a line of gladiators; then a boar, a bear, and a leopard were set on the men, and a wild cow on the women. Wounded by the wild animals, they gave each other the kiss of peace and were then put to death by the sword because of their faith.

"Fathers expected that their daughters would care for them, honor them, and enhance their family reputation through marriage. In becoming a martyr, Perpetua failed to conform to society's expectations. Perpetua also deferred her roles as a mother to remain loyal to Christ, leaving behind young children at the time of their death."<sup>1</sup>

Perpetua gave up her status, her wealth, her motherhood, her family, for the sake of Jesus. What would you do if you had to choose Jesus or your physical life? The

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Perpetua-Christian-martyr>

person who rejects God's will and instead pursues their own will - for their life ultimately loses eternally every earthly good he is trying to protect.

Jesus said, "deny yourself and take up your cross" because we need to understand that: **THE GOOD LIFE MUST BE SURRENDERED TO FOLLOW JESUS**

Lastly, Jesus said this so that we would begin to understand that following Him brings real joy.

### **3. THE JOY PROVIDED TO FOLLOW JESUS**

What is the life that He is calling all of us to? What is your point of reference for what "the good life is?" Is it a celebrity or a rich entrepreneur or someone you follow on social media? Jesus is saying that he provides a life of joy that can't be shaken off when the world is full of hate. When we use Jesus as our point of reference we start to see how broken we are and our need for Him. He is calling us to follow Him out of our brokenness into a life where He provides what we really need. It's a complete surrender of our will to His will. **In a complete surrender of our will, we find joy.** The question we all need to be asking ourselves is this: **are we dying to our sinful selves and becoming alive to Christ?**

Jesus is saying that we need to give our entire self over to Him. When we completely give our full self over to Jesus, **His will becomes our will.** When you don't get your way, your response changes because His will is being done even if it doesn't make sense at the time. Rather than living a life that is dependent on "your will" and "your pleasure" (which always ends in disappointment) you will find joy in Him.

What are we gaining by following Jesus? The short answer is everything. Jesus wants to come into our lives and break us out of the grooves of brokenness and give us a life full of His joy despite your life circumstances. Joy is the result of going to Jesus when we are at the end of ourselves. **"The goal of death to self and daily cross-bearing is "fellowship with Christ."**

**We cannot know real joy until we give up pursuing happiness. We need to die to ourselves and find Christ to experience real joy.**

**Why did Jesus say, "Deny yourself and take up your cross?"**

**i) It causes us to concentrate on God.** Carrying a cross focuses our attention on what is really important. That is why it is impossible to become Christ's disciple without it.

**ii) It causes us to trust God fully.** When faced with difficulties and trials, many Christians actually flee from God. This is a sign that their faith is weak, if not entirely dead. **Self-reliance is an exalted state in our world today, but God wants dependent disciples, not independent mavericks.**

**iii) It causes us to rely on his strength and not our own.** True believers are strengthened through adversity, not crushed by it. When we are willing to walk the life of self-crucifixion, we are telling God we want to trust in Him, and not in ourselves.



**George Muller, known for his great faith and ministry to orphans in 19th century England,** was asked the secret of his fruitful service for the Lord. He said, “There was a day when I died... utterly died.” As he spoke, he bent lower and lower until he almost touched the floor. “I died to George Muller — his opinions, his preferences, his tastes, and his will — died to the approval or blame even of my brethren and friends — and since then I have studied only to show myself approved unto God.”

God meets us in our humility and brokenness when we go to God and recognize we are nothing without Him. It is totally giving up on yourself (dying to self) and giving Him the reigns of your life. Surrender and brokenness go hand-in-hand. *Deciding to follow Jesus is knowing that, without God, you are, and can do, nothing.* It is a total, desperate dependence on Him in every aspect of life. It is a cry from the depths of your soul that shouts: “God, I need You! I want You! I can’t live without You! You are everything to me!”

C. S. Lewis says, “Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised to us in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. . . We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

## **CONCLUSION.**

Why did Jesus say, “deny yourself and take up your cross?” He is asking you to determine your relationship with Him. Do you really love Him? Are you committed to Him? Have these words come from your heart and not just your mouth? “Jesus, I am going to follow you, and that means I know that it’s not my life anymore. It’s yours to do with as you please. By deciding to follow you, I am relinquishing all control and self-determination, and accepting that I may be called to suffer, or even die for that decision.”

This journey leads to heaven where Jesus Himself is seated at the right hand of God the Father. Following Jesus in this life ushers us into His immediate presence in the world to come.