

**Christ Presbyterian Church**  
**Edina, Minnesota**  
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**Deb Kielsmeier**  
**The Essential Teachings of Jesus: New Way of Life**  
**Luke 9:18-27**

Good morning, everyone. My name is Deb Kielsmeier. I'm the membership pastor here and I am delighted to be with you. I would love for us to continue today with the discipline we have been doing together of reciting the *Shema*,

*Sh'ma Yis'ra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.*

Which as you remember means,

**29** ... 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

So would you recite the *Shema* with me from Mark, chapter 12, verses 29 to 31? It will be up on the screen in case you haven't memorized it yet. I know John Crosby is encouraging everybody to say this in the morning and in the evening. Also, we would like you to let us know if reciting the *Shema* has made any difference in your life. Let's say it together, shall we?

**29** ... 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. **30** Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' **31** The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

You heard Sarah [Sarah Norton, Kids' Ministries] emphasizing the all-ness, with *all* your heart, with *all* your soul, with *all* your mind, and with *all* your strength. I know this is easier said than done.

We are in the middle of Lent and in the middle of a sermon series on The Essential Teachings of Jesus. We've gone through the Gospels and pulled out what we believe is central to what Jesus is saying to us. Today's message comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 9. Actually, part of this message is in all three of the synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Listen to the Word of the Lord. I would encourage you to just listen. Don't read it. You know, before the Bible was written down and even when it was, most people could not read or write. Only five to ten percent of the people ever read Scripture. Instead they *heard* people read it. I would like you to listen today because sometimes you *hear* a little bit differently.

**18** Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?" **19** They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to

life." **20** "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "God's Messiah."

**21** Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. **22** And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." **23** Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. **24** For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. **25** What good is it for you to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit your very self?"

That is our Scripture for today. Hard words. I want to ask you, is anybody's favorite verse, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me"? Any takers? Naw! You know, today was kind of a perfect storm for me. First, I had to get up an hour earlier. Second, I have to deliver a sermon based on *this* Scripture. It's tough! Then I lost another hour just trying to figure out how to change the clock in my car. No, not really! It is a hard word though, and yet, it's essential. It is central to what Jesus is telling us if we want to be His disciples.

Now, when the disciples heard this, they were stunned. If you have read this in other Gospels, you know that Peter tried to stop Jesus. "We don't want You to be doing any of this suffering and rejection and dying. That's not what the Messiah is about. Everyone knows what the Messiah is going to come for. The Messiah is coming to reestablish the Kingdom of David, right? Throw off the oppression of Rome, establish God's throne forever, and rule in peace." Suffering? Rejection? Death? This did not compute. In fact, the disciples continued to deny it, basically, until Jesus was raised again from the dead.

Let's turn to Luke in our Bibles, shall we? This will come up on the screen also, but if you have your Bible, turn to Luke, chapter 9, verses 18 through 25. In the pew Bibles, it's on page 1,543. We're just going to kind of go through verse 23, this very light verse, and kind of dig into it and see what Jesus was talking about here.

**23** Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."

Go ahead and underline "deny themselves" and put a 1.) next to it. If it's already underlined, circle it. Jesus is telling us three things we need to do if we are to be His disciple: 1.) Deny ourselves; 2.) Take up our cross, and here it says *daily*. That's No. 2. in this three-part program. And the third one is, "follow Me." "Deny yourself, "take up your cross," and 3.) "follow Me."

Now in the Greek, if any of you know Greek or even German, there is this continuous present tense. It sort of means that something is happening now but it keeps on happening. So, really, what Jesus is saying here is, "Whoever would be My disciple must deny themselves and keep on denying themselves, and take up their cross daily and keep on taking up their cross daily, and follow Me and keep on following Me." It is not a once in a lifetime deal; it's pretty much the program that you go with the rest of your life.

Now what does Jesus mean by **denying self**? What does that mean anyway? Self-denial is something we have to be careful about because Christians have gotten this really wrong in the

past. There can be devastating results if we think Jesus is saying one thing but really He is not, so I am going to start with what self-denial isn't. First, self-denial is not something you are giving up for Lent, like sugar or coffee or maybe a bad habit like eating crackers in bed. It is good to give up those things, but denying yourself is really not the extent of what Jesus is talking about. Also, self-denial doesn't mean to become a passive doormat and let others control you or run all over you. It doesn't mean you will never stand up for yourself or stand up for justice. That is not what self-denial is either. And it is not random acts of self-deprivation.

Here is something that I think Christians have thought. In order to be a good Christian, I just can't enjoy certain things very much. I have to deny myself things that I really, really love. But God made this world, He made it beautiful, stunning, and He made you to enjoy it. It is okay to go to the Edina hockey playoff game and watch the team win the championship. It is okay to rejoice in that. God made you to enjoy and take pleasure in things. But listen to this. Here is the worst. Self-denial is not self-rejection or self-hatred. People who go down that route find themselves dealing with tremendous spiritual and psychological damage and fallout. God made you. He gifted you, gave you talents. The Bible says that God delights over you. He loves you so much, even more than you love yourself; so much that He suffered and died for you. If God says you are that valuable, who are we to argue? So self-denial is not denigrating yourself, but then, what is it? What does it mean that I deny myself? I love John Ortberg. He just kind of gets to the heart of things. He says it this way,

Self-denial is the process of being liberated from the compulsive need to have my own way. Self-denial is the process of being weaned off of selfish attitudes and sinful appetites that, as it turns out, can't really ever lead to life anyhow, just more insatiable desire.

We are coming up to Easter, which is fun, but we remember the night Jesus was betrayed. We remember when Peter said, "I will never deny You, Lord." And then when Jesus was taken into captivity, Peter denied three times that he had ever known Jesus. He sort of just disassociated himself with Jesus. He hated the fact that he kind of turned his back on Jesus, didn't he? Well, if we deny ourselves, it is something like that. Denying ourselves is not giving enough oxygen to our selfish selves. It is not allowing our false selves to breathe and take over in our lives. It is saying *no* to that lesser, false, sinful self to allow something more life-giving to be born and begin to flourish in us to allow us to live a richer, more abundant life. That is the amazing thing. When we open up our hands and let go of all the things we are clutching and thinking will give us life, we find that we are free, no longer enslaved and driven by sin.

Okay, another Greek lesson. If I say, *me, myself and I*, the way *I* is spelled in Greek is e-g-o. Does that remind you of an English word that we use? Ego! Isn't that fascinating? When I think of ego, I think of the natural, inborn self. We all have an ego and a sense of self. This is not bad in and of itself, but egotism means when everything is done for our own self-interest. I am the boss of my life. I am the captain of my soul. I am the center of my universe. "I am doing it my way," as Frank Sinatra crooned. That is ego.

There is an acronym that is often used, that you have probably heard in songs or in preaching. Ego stands for *edging God out*. If my life is full of me, guess who there is no room for? No room for God because I am large and in charge. Ego says, "My will be done," not "Thy will be done." My kingdom come, my little kingdom come, not Thy Kingdom come. So ego really does edge God out.

Then No. 2 in our verse is “**pick up your cross daily.**” (*Slide shown.*) Do you like my stole? Can you see what it is? It is a cross, isn't it? It has a crown of thorns around it. There is a beautiful cross up here. We wear crosses. If you go into the Pathways book store, you see beautiful pewter crosses or lovely wooden crosses with all this ingrained woodwork. Crosses are on the tops of our steeples. We love crosses. They are the symbol of our faith. We love them, but let me tell you, if you have a sentimental attachment to the cross, which I do, it is nothing like the reaction the disciples would have had when Jesus said, “Pick up your cross.” The cross was well-known to all of the Jews of that day as an instrument of torture and execution. So it was something like saying, “Hey, folks, if you want to follow Me, you need to deny yourself, turn from yourself, dig your own grave, and then follow Me.” Or “Build your own gallows.” It was something like that.

We sort of think of this as meaning, “Oh, you know, this cross that I must bear through life...” and usually we are referring to a burden, like our mother-in-law, which I can say because I am a mother-in-law, or maybe a physical disability. Actually, mothers-in-law get a bad rap, don't they? Okay, it's not our mothers-in-law. But we do think it's some kind of burden. Actually, what Jesus was talking about here was death and not an easy one at that. Crucifixion was a means of execution that was used by the Romans to deter insurrection. It was the cruelest, most humiliating form of torture and execution they could devise. Josephus, who was a first century historian, talks about crucifixion throughout his history. In 70 A.D. when the Romans took siege of Jerusalem, he says that over 500 Jews were crucified that day, some upside down, some right side up, some nailed to crosses. It ended up being so many people that they ran out of wood for the crosses and they ran out of space around the walls of Jerusalem to put the bodies. Unbelievable! It was a real clear message to Israel. You do this to Rome, and this is what you can expect! Not only that, the Jews were very careful to keep all of the Law of God. In Deuteronomy 21, there is a verse that says,

**22** If anyone guilty of a capital offense is put to death and their body is exposed on a pole,

or a tree, which is what a cross is,

**23** you must not leave the body hanging on the pole overnight. Be sure to bury it that same day, because anyone who is hung on a pole is under God's curse.

So what did the Romans do? They deliberately left the bodies on those crosses for days, weeks, months, even years because the Jews would know then that they were under the curse of God. A very clear message. Here when Jesus said to His disciples, “Take up your cross daily,” everybody knew what that meant. It meant, “You are to die. Be ready to die.” Honestly, I'm looking at you and I'm like, “I want to soften this. I so want to soften this. He didn't really mean that.” But the truth is, we can't hold back anything from God. He doesn't want us to hold back anything. He wants us to give Him our all. It doesn't sound like good news to us, but the new life that God offers when we die to ourselves exceeds anything we could possibly dream or cling to here on earth. This is the way C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* put it. We have this book in the bookstore if you are interested. In the 1940s during World War II, Lewis gave some radio addresses that ended up becoming *Mere Christianity*. This is what he said to his audience.

Christ says, "Give Me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work; I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self,

Think, sinful, ego-driven self,

but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there. I want to have the whole tree down... Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact I will give you Myself. My own will shall become yours.

It is an amazing promise, that God will give us His very life and transform us from the inside out. We try to do all this, to be good enough, but God says, "Just give me the whole outfit, and I will change it from the inside out." This is where the vision of God becomes really critical because if you kind of think of God as this policeman in the sky, sort of a cosmic killjoy who is going to rage at you if you do anything wrong, it is going to be very, very hard to trust Him with your life. But if you can begin to enter into the vast love and vast grace and forgiveness that God has for you, the truth that God loves you more than you even love yourself and offers you an abundant life beyond all imagining that satisfies the soul, you can begin to start abandoning yourself into His arms.

So, "Deny yourself, pick up your cross daily, and **follow Me.**" Our culture, if you haven't noticed, loves leadership. Have you ever walked into Barnes and Noble and looked at all the books there on leadership? Not only that, you can go to conferences on leadership. You can go to institutes on leadership. You can take courses in leadership. You can even get degrees in leadership. Anybody here have a degree in leadership? I know there are some of you out there. We love leadership, and we all love to be leaders, don't we? But followership? Not so much. If I am honest, when I say, "Oh, yeah, I am a follower of Jesus," to be very candid, I kind of think, "Yeah, I like to emulate Jesus. I like to get inspiration from Jesus. I like to kind of take a few suggestions as I lead my life, but actually letting Him lead my life is a whole different story." But if you are going to follow Jesus, somebody has to lead. Somebody has to be in charge, and guess what? It is not you. That is hard. Jesus says, "Do you want to be My disciple? You have to follow." It means getting down off the throne of our lives. It means getting out of the driver's seat and letting God lead.

Okay, the second verse that we are looking at today is verse 24. This actually appears six times in the four Gospels. Lots of emphasis on this. Jesus emphasizes this a lot.

**24** For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.

and who here doesn't want to save their life, right?

Whoever wants to save their life will lose it....

It is like trying to grasp onto water. It will run right out of your hands.

but whoever loses their life for me will save it.

I don't know how many of you are familiar with the missionary Jim Elliot and the story of him and Nate Saint. Yes, I hear some of you. He was on the cover of *Newsweek*, I think, in the 1950s. But anyway, the story is, Jim and about four other men went to Ecuador, to the Amazon River basin in the rain forests. They were with their wives and families and they wanted to share the good news of Jesus with one of the fiercest tribes on earth, the Wadoni or the Acua people. The tribe was so fierce that they were killing themselves off. Their inter-family disputes ended up being fatal to the tribe.

Well, these young men, they were all in their 20s, finally landed their plane on the Amazon River, made contact with the tribe, and for some reason, the men of the tribe felt they were enemies and speared them all to death. So these men, who came with the best of intentions, were killed, martyred for their faith. There is a great movie on this if anybody here gets Netflix. It might be on Amazon, too. It is called *End of the Spear*. You can watch it, stream it. It tells this whole story, and it's really good.

Anyway, after Jim Eliot died, they were looking through his journal and found this quote. "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." The truth is, you in your own effort cannot keep your life, but if you lose it for Christ, you will gain new life that begins today and never ends. You will have eternal life today because God comes into our lives today, and that life never ends.

Well, the amazing thing about this story is that the men were killed but their wives and children returned. They made contact with this tribe that killed their husbands and fathers, learned the language, and today the Wadoni tribe is sent to help missionaries of their own share the good news of Jesus Christ. It is just one of those unbelievable stories. These men gave their lives and it brought tremendous fruit. The apostle Paul in Galatians 2 says this. By the way, this concept doesn't just start and end with Jesus. It is all through the New Testament, but this is one of the places you will hear about it. Paul says,

**20** I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live,

my ego-driven, evil self

but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

So here is the good news. You don't have to be good enough. You don't have to try any harder. You just have to give "the whole outfit" to God, and He will transform you from the inside out. He wants to give you a new self, a new life, and live inside you, so that your will becomes His will. He wants you to have the power and the desire for the joyful, abundant life that is beyond anything that we can cling to, those false gods here on earth. But we need to get out of the way, deny ourselves, pick up our crosses, and follow Him.

Well remember, this is all in the present tense. Do it and then keep doing it. Many of you, I know, have given your lives to Christ. Some of you may not have, but in closing today, I would like all of us to just do a simple spiritual exercise. What I would like you to do is, close your eyes, put your palms face down on your lap, and pray this prayer with me. If this is the prayer of your heart, God will know it.

Lord God, I confess to You that my world has me at the very center. I confess to You that I have been clinging to things and people. I've been clinging to my own interests and my own desires so fearful that life might pass me by. God, forgive me. Forgive me for holding onto myself so tightly, for holding onto things that only disappoint and, in the end, never bring true life.

Then, if you will, flip your palms up facing God. Again with your eyes closed, if you want to, go ahead and pray this with me.

Lord, God, I give You myself, my good parts, my bad parts, my brokenness, my interests, everything. Not just part of me, not just part of my heart or part of my mind or part of my will, but everything. My very life I give to You. Will You give me a new self? Will You give me Yourself? Come and live Your life in and through me as my Lord, my leader, and my King. We pray in the strong Name of Jesus. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*