

THE CHALLENGING CHRIST

"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." Matthew 16:24.

This is a stern and searching challenge. "Let him deny himself." Here is a central, basic condition for following the Lord. The denial here spoken of is the involvement of the giving of the life to God without reservation. "It means the death of self-will, and the birth of God-will," as the central force of life.

There is a well-known saying, "Where there's a will there's a way." There is great truth in the statement. Indomitable will has opened highways where paths never ran. But man's will apart from God is dangerously filled with the dynamite of destruction. It has in it the elements and germs of blasted lives and lost souls. A cynic said, "Where there's a will, there's a lawsuit." We would say, "Where God's will is your will, there is the way, the light, the life."

I. The Cost of Discipleship.

1. Self-denial is a central doctrine of Christianity and a main burden of this text. When Peter had said, "Thou art the Christ the Son of the living God," Jesus answered, "Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven." Peter's confession implied all honor and glory. At the same time Jesus had declared that He would build His church upon a rock, and that not even the gates of hell should prevail against it. The hopes of the disciples were highly excited. They saw themselves following the King and filling the chief places in his kingdom. Now, as abruptly as the swoop of a cyclone, Jesus tells them that He is to go to Jerusalem, suffer many things, and be killed. Peter said, "They cannot do this to you; get it out of your mind." Jesus said, "Thou savorest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.... If any man will come after me, let him deny himself." This was so different from what Peter had expected. He began to see himself the object of scorn and ridicule, fighting in defense of the lost cause of a persecuted, maltreated, martyred leader.

Leaving his fishing nets to follow Christ was nothing to what he now faces; paying the highest cost, making the supremest sacrifice: turning himself over to Christ and His cause without a single reservation. For Jesus is not talking of self-denial; He is here demanding the denial of self. To wish to go to heaven when we die is altogether different from the purpose to follow Christ while we live. Denial of self is the sure path to goodness, to greatness, to nobleness, and to usefulness. How different it is from the seeking of personal pleasure, indulgence, advantage! Do you say, "I am a free moral agent and have absolute liberty to do as I may choose?" You are right. You may choose your course. Your future, your usefulness, your destiny are in your hands. Self-denial means the giving of all.

G. K. Chesterton described Joan of Arc thus: "She chose her path and went down it like a thunderbolt." To take care of self is the first law of nature," said one. An old minister answers, "Yes, sir, but to deny self is the first law of grace."

A group of firemen held their annual banquet. The veterans were there. They were reminiscing. They were telling when they were the happiest. The hours of heroic sacrifice, not the hours of safety and gaiety, they gloried in. Self-denial is for life.

When Dallas, Texas, was but a small city, in it lived wealthy parents of an only daughter. They planned for her a leading role in society. They sent her to the most fashionable finishing school, to the most elite college, and to a very noted conservatory of music. After graduating, she returned home. She was beautiful, possessed a charming personality, had a marvelous voice, and had her father's vast fortune at her command. Some time passed. A great social function was planned, at which time she was to make her debut and become a leader in society. A short while before the lauded function was to take place, the young woman attended a church service. Her heart was strangely moved. She found herself praying. She promised the Lord that if He would save her, she would serve Him. He saved her. Peace and joy unspeakable flooded her soul.

At the dinner table that day she told her parents what had happened and that all her life plans had been changed. Therefore, she would not attend the social function and become a society leader. They were indignant. The father berated her, scolded her, and threatened her. In a rage he stamped his foot and said, "I will give you until tomorrow at ten o'clock to give your final decision. If you persist in this fanatical course, I will disinherit you and not one penny of my wealth will go to you."

Next morning, a few minutes before ten o'clock, he walked restlessly up and down in the living room wringing his hands, and wondering what her answer would be. He heard her room door open upstairs and her footsteps as she came down the stairway. She stopped at a piano in the hall and began playing a great old hymn and sang, "Jesus, I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow thee." Soon he was kneeling by her side. The mother came and knelt on the other side. The girl put arms around them and carried them to God in her prayer. They were both saved. The young woman, instead of throwing her life away, became a popular, useful, influential Christian. Her life was a benediction to many.

2. Denial of self means burning all the bridges behind.

That is what Ester did in the hour of her great decision. She said, "I go in unto the king, and if I perish, I perish." That is what Daniel did. In the face of the decree of the king that anyone found praying to any god, save the king, would be hurled into the lion's den, he prayed, unafraid, three times a day. That is what Luther did. He declared: "Here I stand. I cannot recant. God help me." That is what the rich young ruler failed to do. He refused to cut loose. He would not surrender. Tragedy stalked in his decision.

3. Self-denial is losing life in order to save it.

It is the doctrine of dying indeed; but it is dying into life. It is the sacrifice that brings the greatest compensation. Dr. Chesterton said, "The first time you read the teachings of Christ, you fell that they turn everything upside down; but the second time you read them you realize that they turn everything right side up."

II. The Cross of Discipleship. "Take up his cross."

1. What is this cross? It is not the cross Christ bore. No one can bear His cross. It is the cross that every Christian is to bear. It is not something to escape, as Peter thought that day. The cross rose stark and cruel before Christ, and He accepted it as the price of man's redemption. His obedience gave the Father pleasure, and the Father's pleasure gave the Son strength. There is for every cross the necessary strength. There is for every ordeal the necessary grace. We can escape our cross only through cowardice and compromise. You may go through life and seek to avoid all crosses, or you may accept and carry them. When you bear your cross, it will become light because it is tied on with love.

2. A cross is something more than a thing to bear; it is something to die on, if needs be.

Latimer and Ridley died on theirs. Peter died on his. Paul bore his, and then died on it. Christ died on His cross on Calvary. His life was full of disappointments. He was thwarted, hindered, heavy-laden. He had not where to lay His head. His aims misunderstood, His love was flouted, His words were disregarded. What life was ever lived under more uncongenial surroundings! But His life, His love, His death were not a waste. He lived to die, and died to live. He carried a cross which led through pain and death. But it also led on out to immortality. For us, Christianity is something to get and to enjoy, ourselves; not something faithfully to propagate unto death.

III. The Crown of Discipleship. "And follow me."

1. One of the rich gems in the crown of Christianity is the gem of fellowship with Christ.

Being with Him, following Him, is a priceless privilege and an indescribable joy. When are we to follow Him? Here and now; when the sun shines and when the shadows fall; when the days are luminous and musical with joy bells, and when it is dark and all the music of our hearts is turned into a sob. We are to follow Him when the crowds follow, and when they cry, "Crucify Him." We are to follow Him when the environment makes it easy to follow Him, and when conditions make it hard to follow Him; when things go well with us, and when they go ill with us; when men praise Him and when they persecute Him. Christianity is no fair weather affair.

2. There is the crown of strength in following Christ.

We are to suffer with Christ. If we suffer with Christ, we shall also reign with Him. But suffering with Him is not all there is to Christianity, no more than a fence is all there is to a garden. Within the walls of self-denial, suffering, and sacrifices of Christianity there is their crown of unshakable strength. There are the "riches in Christ Jesus."

Jesus never anywhere trimmed Christianity to fit into human trends, tendencies, inclinations, and weaknesses. But today, many of us, rather than go against popular trends and tendencies, peel and prune and hedge and wait to see which way the wind blows. In such compromise there can be no lasting joy.

In following Jesus there are some things we cannot be careless about. We cannot be careless about our consciences and convictions, our obligations and loyalties, our personalities and principles, our trusts and fidelities. But we can exercise a boldness with reference to our lives when they are committed to God. We need a religion that will reach to the depths of life and lift to the heights of God.

As we follow Christ, a joy unspeakable will well up in our souls for we will come to understand that Christianity is not something we must carry on our backs, but that it is a dynamo to carry us. It is not something for us to try to keep; it is something to keep us. It does not take away our freedom; it breaks asunder our slave chains. It does not fill with fear; it thrills with faith. Its appeal is not to the selfish softness of the hour; its appeal is to the heroic strength of the ages. Its power is not a cross a gold; its power is the cross of Calvary. A wholehearted response to it will gain for us heaven's most glorious crown. A genuine response to this challenge of Christ will make the arid areas of human existence spring up into newness of life. It will undergird life, run new purposes through it, and lift to heights sublime.