

PAYING THE PRICE TO FOLLOW CHRIST

"And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me." Luke 9:23.

When Christ was here in the flesh there was an eagerness on the part of many to come after Him. They recognized that He was a very unusual person. They looked upon Him as a wonderful character and a great leader. They visualized all sorts of possibilities in connection with His career. From numerous walks of life some decided that they would come after Christ. However, before they did so, they came to Christ in penitence and faith. An unsaved person could no more follow Christ than a corpse could speak or a worm could fly.

You will recall that these well-known and oft-quoted words of our text were spoken by our Lord shortly after and in response to Peter's confession of Him as the Christ. Immediately after Peter's declaration that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, our Lord began to speak explicitly of the humiliation, suffering and death which lay before Him. As might have been expected, Peter sought to dissuade Him from going to the cross, but Christ made it clear that the way of the cross was the only one for Him.

When Christ uttered the words of our text, He revealed that discipleship is not just a matter of words but of action. In the light of His great and solemn statement, we need to understand and remember clearly that the Master was not speaking about salvation but about discipleship. God's salvation is not prefaced with any such conditions. His Word teaches emphatically that a sinner cannot be saved by any good deeds of his own. "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost." Titus 3:5. With the utmost clarity and definiteness the Bible teaches that a sinner is saved only by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works lest any man should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." Ephesians 2:8-10. A sinner is saved only by God's matchless and infinite grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the uniform teaching of the New Testament.

There is a very distinct difference between a believer in Christ and a disciple of Christ. A believer in Christ is one who has received Christ as a personal Saviour. Because of his personal trust in Christ alone for salvation, he has received the forgiveness of sins and has been saved. A disciple of Christ is a believer who has become a learner and follower of Him. A disciple is a believer who seeks to live like Christ, as he is taught and led by Him. A believer may not be a disciple, but a disciple is always a believer.

Great and glorious are the privileges which are ours in Christ. But these privileges entail corresponding responsibilities. For those who are Christians and really desire to follow Christ, there is a very definite price which must be paid in order to do so. We can no more do as we please and follow Christ simultaneously than we can go up and down a road at the same time. Since both are the very opposite, they cannot be pursued at once.

What is the price that one must pay to follow Christ?

I. Self-denial.

Christ never left people under any delusion as to the price they would have to pay to follow Him. He said, "Let him deny himself." He made the duty of denying self an essential requisite of Christian discipleship. One cannot be a follower of Christ unless he denies himself. There are two centers--self and Christ; the former, to be denied and the latter, to be accepted as an object of devotion. It is as if Christ had said, "If you would turn toward Me, you must turn away from yourself. If you would accept Me as the chief object of your desires, you must renounce yourself as such an object." If you really want to follow Christ, He tells you what it will cost.

To deny self does not mean to reject the conveniences and comforts of life. Neither does it mean to seek unpleasant things to do. Some seem to think that it means to seek something one does not like to do and do it. People often deny themselves in one respect in order to indulge themselves in another. Many substitute little acts of self-denial for a denial of self. It is easier that way, but that does not produce any worthwhile spiritual results.

To deny self means to say "no" to the strongest cravings of one's nature, to renounce evil affections and everything that would hinder Christian discipleship. It means to refuse whatever might come in competition with the love and service of Christ and actually to live for Him. It involves saying "no" to your own will and a cheerful and obedient "yes" to God's will.

Self is a many-headed monster and has various features of expression and activity. Among them are the following:

1. Self-consciousness.
Unfortunately, self can never forget itself. Self is easily wounded, imagining slights when none are intended, and is difficult to reconcile.
2. Self-confidence.
Self is quite confident of its own unaided ability and good judgment, as was evident in the life of Simon Peter. It asserts that regardless of what others may do it will never fail nor fall.
3. Self-conceit.
Self often expresses itself in self-conceit. Self-conceit is to have a high opinion of one's self; it is pride. It manifests itself by the countenance, in a high look and proud bearing. Self-conceit also manifests itself by boastful words.
4. Self-seeking.
Self is always greedily seeking admiration and adulation. It exists for its own pleasure, pride and glory. It will go to almost any length to gain prominence and power. It delights to be the center of attraction. It eagerly embraces anything which will advance its interests or oust its rivals. In an humble manner it will parade its own attainments, at the same time actually pitying those who are less accomplished. With what relief do we turn again to our Lord whose consistent attitude was, "I seek not mine own glory." John 8:50.
5. Self-assertion.
Self mistakenly believes that others are as interested in him and his achievements as he is. There is no voice he delights to hear so much as his own, so he constantly thrusts himself upon the notice of the company, monopolizes the conversation, and listens to others only that he might outshine them. He can always tell a better story, recount a worse sickness or prescribe a better remedy. There is a bird known as the Me-bird; it derives its name from the fact that it has only one note -- "Me-me, Me-me."
6. Self-righteousness.
Self sometimes expresses itself in exceeding religiousness. Self-righteousness is allied closely with spiritual pride. It always leads people to despise others. It is full of boasting.
7. Self-indulgence.
Self is motivated by desire and not by principle. There is no room for denial or discipline in the philosophy of the self-life. To want a thing is to have it. It must be gratified in everything it wants, and just when it wants it, too, or there is trouble.

We are constantly tempted to self-indulgence, to do simply what is easy for and pleasant to us, agreeable to our tastes, inclinations and habits.

8. Self-justification.

It is impossible to prove self to have been in the wrong. It always has ready several excuses for every neglect or failure. It is amazingly versatile in vindicating and justifying itself. Self will never apologize, for it is never in the wrong.

9. Self-depreciation.

On various occasions self finds it more convenient to magnify its own inability, especially when some work is offered in which self-denial is involved. Such a person usually says, "Others are much better fitted for the work," but the real truth of the matter is that more work is involved than self is willing to do. But let someone else appraise self at its own evaluation and see the fireworks! A man once said to a friend, "Well, I thank God I am not proud." "Neither would I be proud, were I in your place," rejoined the other, "for you do not have anything about which to be proud." "Haven't I?" was the indignant and revealing retort. "I have just as much to be proud of as you have." Such is self.

10. Self-pity.

Self-pity is satanic in origin. Self just loves to excite pity and elicit sympathy. It constantly complains about the circumstances or relationships of life, and is perpetually and vocally sorry for itself.

11. Self-will.

Self expresses itself in self-will. Self-will was the essence of the sin of Lucifer, that great being now known as Satan or the devil. Lucifer set his will over against the will of God and became a rebel against Him. His own will clashed with the will of God.

Self-will is the disposition or determination to have one's own way. How soon this develops in children parents know full well. It will have what it purposes to have irrespective of any consideration for others or even the outcome of its action. Self is determined to have its own way, even if it disobeys God, defies man, hurts others and injures itself. Self-will is the relentless opponent of the holy will of God, and is the ruination of multitudes of God's people.

I trust that you have already discovered that the greatest hindrance with which you are confronted in living the Christian life is self. Truly, self is your greatest enemy. It appeals in so many different ways. Be it a so-called nice self or an ugly one, it must be slain before the Lord can be pleased. You cannot follow Christ unless you deny self. To follow Him you must renounce all dependence on yourself as the controlling influence of your life and depend on Christ to control you. True self-denial is the yielding of the heart and life to the will of Christ. It is self coming down from life's throne and submitting to Christ's lordship.

Up to the time of his salvation Paul was governed by self. He had planned out his life, but his plans did not materialize. After his remarkable experience on the road to Damascus, Paul yielded the control of his life to Christ, saying, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Thus, self was dethroned and Christ was given His rightful place in Paul's life.

In order to follow Christ, self must be removed from the center of authority and Christ enthroned. We cannot follow Christ unless we deny self. When you and I learn to deny self, we shall not do those things of which self is the center and aim. When we follow Christ we shall not do anything simply to please ourselves.