

## September 29, 2013 Sermon

A chicken - a hen to be exact - and a pig were out walking one Sunday morning when they came across a church whose outdoor sign announced the morning's sermon topic - What can we do to help the poor? Well immediately the hen suggested that they feed them bacon and eggs. The pig thought about this for a moment and then said, "There is only one problem with that. For you, it requires a mere contribution. For me on the other hand, it requires total commitment.

This fun story serves as a light hearted introduction to my topic today - Take up your cross daily and follow me. We will be looking into these words of Jesus as they are found in the 9th chapter of Luke in a moment, but before we get to them, I want to share a bit of the back story of this message. As I have been grappling with my faith over the last few months and reading the scriptures and a few good books, I've been wrestling with this tension in my life - what does it mean to follow Christ in small town America? What should it look like? One of the many themes I've wrestled with is this idea of taking up your cross and following Jesus. What does this mean for me and my family? And what does it mean for us, for the church? Is it just a mere contribution or is it total commitment?

As I was talking with Pastor Aaron a few weeks back and was trying to share the basic idea I had for a sermon topic, he asked me a question. He said "Do you think this is a thing God is speaking just to you or do you think it is something he wants to speak to the congregation as well?"

It was a good question. I knew God was speaking to me, was bringing conviction and growing me in this area, but was it for all of you? I've prayed about that a lot and while I believe this message is for all of us, I would ask you to search the scriptures for yourselves and pray and consider - is this message for you? If it is, it will require a response in your life.

Now there is a second thing that came out my conversation with Pastor Aaron as well. Perhaps you saw in the lobby the table for Compassion International. Compassion is an child sponsorship organization that I have been a part of for nearly 20 years. It is an organization that Consuelo and I really believe in and one we hope you will too. We currently sponsor two kids in Bolivia, South America who get to go to school, get one nutritious meal a day, learn about hygiene and health and above all get to hear about the love of Jesus because we sponsor them. It is a one on one relationship and we write and receive regular letters from Jesus and Carolina. It is one

way that we have learned to take up our cross and it has been most rewarding. We will come back to Compassion in a bit.

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For now, if you will, please turn in your Bibles to Luke chapter 9 verses 18 - 26.

*And it happened, as He was alone praying, that His disciples joined Him, and He asked them saying, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" So they answered and said, "John the Baptist, but some say Elijah; and others say that one of the old prophets has risen again." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered and said, "The Christ of God."*

*And He strictly warned them and commanded them to tell this to no one, saying, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised on the third day."*

*Then he said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what advantage is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will*

*be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His father's, and of the holy angels.*

Before we move into unpacking God's word, will you join me in a word of prayer.

## **PRAY**

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Take up your cross daily and follow me.

Whoever desires to save his life will lose it.

If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself.

Take up your cross daily and follow me.

These words of Jesus make me uncomfortable. They scare me. They make me wonder at times whether I've traded in His gospel for a bland, generic version, watered down and cooled off and made pretty for my modern, sophisticated ways.

But before I dive into Luke 9 I'd like to preface it with a few other verses and thoughts. You see reading Jesus' words in Luke 9 alone can lead us to legalistic living, to soul strangling striving, to the co-option of comparison - all signs of trouble and not in line with heart of Jesus.

In John 10:10 Jesus tells us that, *"The thief does not come except to steal and to kill and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly."*

Jesus wants us to have abundant life! Real, full, purpose filled and fulfilling life.

We evangelicals are quite good at trusting God for our eternal life - and praise the Lord for the life eternal and the hope we have of spending all of it with Him in heaven.

But as to our daily life, the mundane comings and goings, our relationships and time and money and desires - too often we settle for less than God would have for us. C. S. Lewis put it this way - *"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 a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."*

You see, as followers of Christ, we are citizens of an upside down kingdom where the wisdom of God is foolishness to man. In God's kingdom the path to life - true life - is death. You see Jesus's words in Luke 9 - *If anyone desires to come after*

*Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily, and follow Me - and in Luke 10 - I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly - do not contradict one another. It is the Holy Paradox of the Kingdom that the world can never understand - that I often have a hard time understanding!*

And so it is that as I share my thoughts on what it means for us to deny ourselves and take up our crosses daily, we must remind ourselves, that Jesus is not trying to be hard on us, he's not trying to put an unwanted burden on us, or load us down with more work to be done. He is providing for us a way to grow in faith, to experience more of him, to abide in his love.

Pastor Aaron is away so I can talk about him. As many of you know, he has signed up for an event called the Spartan Race. It's a new kind of race, a lot of fun by the looks of it, a sort of cross country run mixed in with obstacle courses sort of affair. Now Pastor Aaron is signed up for the race. He sent in his form. He paid his money. His spot is reserved. If he shows up at the starting line, they will let him race. His entry is secure.

Now I don't know if you've noticed, but he has been working out. He's been running and lifting weights and getting himself whipped into pretty good shape. He

found a training plan and he's followed it. Now remember, his entry into the race is secure. He didn't have to get into good shape. He didn't have to get up early for runs or endure the pain of sore muscles. He didn't have to follow the training plan. He could have just sat on the couch and watched TV. He could have sat on the couch and read books and articles about getting into shape. He could have read and even have memorized the training plan without ever running an inch. Either way, when he shows up, they are going to let him race.

But I ask you which scenario is going to lead to a better Spartan race experience.

As we begin to work out for ourselves the call to take up the cross of Christ, we need to understand, that it is one part of his training plan for us. You see the best way to grow in Christ is not in a classroom and it's not by listening to another sermon. The best way is as Jesus taught, to follow him, and friends, we must surely know that Jesus is on the move. He will change us. He will draw near. It seems that while obedience to Christ is not the end, it is one of the means to the end. And with the Grace of God, we can do it. We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.

And now as we look at Jesus' words in Luke 9, I need to tell you something about myself. When I read the Bible, I read it with an understanding that Jesus wants to transform my life to be more like him. I read it with an understanding that he doesn't really care about my comfort or safety or happiness nearly as much as he cares about the state of my soul. I read the Bible fairly literally thinking that when Jesus makes a statement, He is right. When he makes a command, it's not a suggestion or something to explain away but rather something to either obey or . . . disobey. I read it trusting that Jesus has the best wisdom for every area of my life - wisdom that I would be foolish not to apply. So that is how I approach Jesus words in Luke 9 and that is why they are so difficult. But difficult or not, I also believe - even when it doesn't seem to line up or seem possible - that Jesus wants us to have the abundant life that he promises.

But like all of you, I am still marked by my fallen nature even as Christ works in me to make me more like himself and so what I believe and what I know don't always translate into my real, everyday life. The siren call of the world is loud and enticing. Too often I listen. I suppose we are all in that boat. But maybe we can together begin to work out what it means for our lives to deny ourselves, take up the cross and follow

him. Maybe together we can put some wheels on the idea that “whoever desires to save his life will lose it.”

And so now I would like to try and offer up some practical observations as to what this all might mean for our lives. Saying that we need to take up our cross and follow Jesus is all fine and well, but really, what does it mean and what might it look like in our lives.

As I have thought about this it seems to me that there are three areas of our life in which we can work this out. There may be other areas of course, but here are the three I have thought about.

We can deny ourselves and take up our cross daily and follow Christ with our time, with our relationships and with our money. These are three areas that our culture here in America has a very clear message about - Do whatever makes you happy.

All three are personal areas of our lives that we don't really want others to dictate and so I walk into the rest of this sermon with care knowing that I am probably going to step on some toes. I will probably be making you uncomfortable too for in talking about self-denial and taking up one's cross - it cannot be helped. My desire though is not for you to leave here with a list of things you need to do or not do, but

rather with a desire to search out for yourselves what it means for you to take up your cross daily and follow Jesus. It will certainly mean different things for each of us. So I implore you to search the scriptures. To gather with others here to pray and discuss what this means practically for our lives.

I'd like to lead into talking about these three areas with another quote from C.S. Lewis. I'll let him make you feel uncomfortable first. I read this a few years ago and have been in some ways haunted by it ever since. In this particular place Lewis is talking of money and our relation to money but lately I've felt that we could easily substitute how we spend our time and where we invest in relationships into what he says as well. Here it is:

*I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditures on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot because our charitable expenditures exclude them.*

So let's begin by looking at our time. And perhaps we could rephrase Lewis' last sentence as "There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot because our time spent doing Kingdom work excludes them."

This summer I was challenged by 1 Peter 2:15. It is there that Peter writes, *"For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men."*

This verse caused me to do a little self examination. Where had I been doing good? Whom had I served? How had I shown love to others in a sacrificial way? My honest answer was a bleak one. I was wrapped up in my own projects and desires. I had high aspirations for taking the time to serve others, often having great ideas throughout my day to serve the elderly widow lady with whom I work, to write a letter to a high school friend who is in prison, to take a meal to a new family in town. In the end though, none of them got done.

Why?

I had to ask myself that question and the answer was easy. I wasn't willing to deny myself - my own desires, my own to do list, the long list of things I like, want and

need to do - in order to serve others. In a word, it was inconvenient. It interrupted my routine and would have disallowed my doing other things. I could use the excuse that I didn't have enough time, but of course if I am honest with myself - if we are honest with ourselves - we know that that doesn't cut it. Pastor and author John Piper speaks to our new, social media driven generation with piercing conviction when he said that *"One of the great uses of Twitter and Facebook will be to prove at the Last Day that our prayerlessness was not from lack of time."*

As I read the Gospels, I get the picture that Jesus probably didn't use a day planner. Not that day planners or planning are bad - I am a far more effective and productive human being when I plan out my day and week, but Jesus seemed to have this other perspective. Throughout the Gospel accounts we see Jesus heading to one place or another only to be interrupted by someone wanting to be healed. His seems to be in the ministry of interruption. But Jesus is not running around from one crisis to the next with no sense of direction or purpose. Jesus says *"Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise."*

That is how Jesus used his time. And that is where we need to grow as well. We need to walk through our days asking the Father to show us the divine interruptions that will bring him Glory and show others his love. And He has made that possible! He loves us so much that he has made us heirs! We are his children! So in regards to how we spend our time, we must ask ourselves, am I denying myself, taking up my cross daily and following Jesus - for as we do that, with God's great love and patient grace, we will grow to be more like Christ.

The second area that we need to work this out is in relation to our relationships. The people with whom we interact and relate. As I read the gospels it seems that Jesus spent the majority of his time with the outcasts and downtrodden of society. Who do we spend our time with?

About a month ago our family went to an informal church service in down town Sioux Falls on a Thursday night. There was a meal before hand and then an extended time of worship before the message began. As worship time was wrapping up, Sonora wanted me to run out to the van and get something she left there and so I did. On my way back, walking up the sidewalk on 12th street, I heard a guy yell out to me from across the street. I looked over and knew immediately

what I was dealing with - he was moderately drunk and probably had been for the last ten or so years. I stopped in that moment of decision - do I go across to see him or do I go back inside with all the people I like and who are like me.

I went across the street.

He was indeed mildly drunk and his mind was also mildly broken. His first question was "Do you have 50 cents so I can get a beer." Thankfully I did not have any cash on me so I honestly told him I didn't have any money. But, I did invite him in to get a plate of food. And he came. And I got uncomfortable. Now I was chaperoning a middle aged homeless guy with a pretty messed up thought process. And when he said, "let's go in and listen" I got really uncomfortable. But we found a table in the back and he ate and wasn't too distracting with his random comments about the girl's legs in front of us or asking for water in a tad too loud voice. He tried to bum money off of several other people before the night was done and I told him that no one was going to give him money for beer but that we would love to pray for him. As he left I invited him to come back next week.

Now I don't know what happened with that guy. I spent most of the night with him praying silently for wisdom to know what to do or say that would make any

difference in his life. Mostly I was uncomfortable and not really enjoying the people I'd come to see or the message that I wanted to hear.

But this is what I do know - *the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'* Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' Those are Jesus' words in the book of Matthew.

We will not all spend time with drunken homeless men nor do we need to. But in our relationships, if everyone one we know and spend time with are people just like us, with whom we get along and share similar values - perhaps we are missing something.

Maybe it's the difficult family member. Maybe it's the annoying guy at work. Maybe it's the neighbor who smokes four packs a day and swears like a sailor or the gossipy lady behind the counter. Maybe it's all the 18 to 29 year old men in Parker and Marion and Chancellor and Lenox and Viborg who spend all their time at the bar and never grace the pew of a church. Could denying ourselves and taking up our cross daily and following Jesus involve beginning to cultivate a relationship with one of these?

Finally we turn to our money. And this of course is delicate ground. I am thankful that we are a generous congregation. When Consuelo and I were in Turkey you supported us financially and once even sent us a 50 pound care package and so we know your generosity.

But we have to go there. We have to ask the question - what does it look like in regards to our money when Jesus says *If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily, and follow Me? You see Jesus talks about money a lot.*

- Jesus talked about money more than He did Heaven and Hell combined.
- Jesus talked about money more than anything else except the Kingdom of God.
- 11 of 39 parables talk about money.
- 1 of every 7 verses in the Gospel of Luke talk about money.

And when I begin to look at my own relation to money - the value I place in it, how I use it, where I spend it - in contrast to all the teachings of Jesus, I get a little frightened. I begin to wonder if I haven't replaced Jesus' teachings with the American Dream or at least created a strange concoction of belief about money that is a little bit of each. And I suppose it's not just our money, but our possession as well. Our culture says he who has the most toys wins. The rule of the day is more and more and more. But then there is Jesus saying, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also . . . where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

I don't want to make anyone feel guilty or under compulsion but I think we all need to consider C.S. Lewis' words seriously. Is he right or is he wrong? You see it is easy to look around at the other churches in the area, at others around us and feel like we are doing pretty good. But other churches and other Christians are not the standard. God's word is our standard and so I encourage you again - prayerfully search the scriptures and see for yourself. Wrestle with this. Do we want the

commendation of man or of our Lord, who while at the temple saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury but also saw a poor widow put in two very small coins. And he turned to his disciples and told them this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth, they gave a mere contribution; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on, total commitment.

Jesus' words in Luke 9 lay out his training program for us to grow, to become more like Jesus, to be "little Christs" as the first century church was called when they were give the name Christian. Our time, our relationships and our money are the places in our real lives where this is worked out, the place where we get to take risks, and step out, and be stretched and as a result grow in our faith as we are transformed into people who are more and more like Jesus everyday and they are the places where we get to join Jesus in his work of reconciling a lost world to the father.

What does it mean to *deny yourself and take up his cross daily, and follow Jesus?*

It is a question I hope you will wrestle with in prayer and in studying the scriptures this week.

I would like to end by giving you an opportunity to step out in faith today. To give a bit of your time, to build a new relationship with someone who is different than you and to invest some of your money in changing the story of one child.

## **Compassion Sunday MOVIE**

You can be a part of changing the story of a child. It will cost you. You'll need to invest in a new relationship. You'll need to take the time to write a few letters. You'll need to find \$38 a month to sponsor that child.

But it is worth it. It will change that child's life for sure, but it will also be a part of changing your life. Your heart will grow for the lost, for the downtrodden for the children of the world.

## **Pray**