

When the Church Isn't Gathered
The Pattern of Discipleship (Part 1)
Luke 9:23-27

When I was a kid, our church had a Boy Scout troop: Troop 007. That name gives you a hint about the culture of our troop. If you've ever read that book *Lord of the Flies*, you've got a pretty good idea of what our troop was like. Let's just say that we were under-supervised. Anyway, we took a 50-mile, 5-day canoe trip every summer. I'll never forget my first first 50-miler.

I was paired with my buddy, Elbert. He was in the front of the canoe and I was in the back; all our gear and food for 5 days was in the canoe between us. I can't remember how much training or experience I had before that fateful day. Obviously I didn't have enough because I didn't really know how to steer a canoe; and the person in the back of the canoe is the one who steers.

We got in the canoe, our scoutmaster pushed us away from the shore, and we headed down the Little Black Creek, which was really a small river. If you've ever seen the movie *Deliverance*, it was a lot like that. The first stretch went fine because the creek was really wide at that spot. But after about a hundred yards, the creek turned to the left.

As we approached that bend in the creek, I tried to turn left, but I couldn't. I didn't know how. Instead of turning left, we kept going straight, headed toward a huge oak tree whose branches reached out over the water. As we got closer to the oak tree, Elbert started screaming. It turns out there was a snake (later identified as a ground rattler) on a branch at eye-level. Right before impact, Elbert stood up. The snake hit him in the chest and dropped into the canoe at his feet. I'll spare you the details. I'll just say that Elbert was okay, but sadly I can't say the same thing about the snake. I just hope it was ready to meet its Maker.

That scary little story illustrates a lot of things. But it mainly illustrates how sitting in a canoe doesn't make you a canoeist. In retrospect, I should have learned how to do the J-stroke and how to steer a canoe before embarking on that journey.

You've probably heard the analogy that just as sitting in a garage doesn't make you a car, sitting in church doesn't make you a Christian. That is a tired, old analogy, but during this season in which we can't "sit in a church building," it does seem important to think carefully about the role of our weekly worship gatherings - what they are and what they aren't.

This season in which we haven't been able to gather in worship is probably revealing to you things about your walk with God, its strengths and weaknesses. Some of you would probably say, "My walk with God has remained strong. I miss being able to gather for worship, but I'm still walking with God." Others you might feel like I felt in that canoe as we approached the bend in the creek. Just as I realized, "I know how to sit in a canoe, but I don't know how to steer the canoe," you've realized, "I know how to go to church,

but I don't really know how to walk with Christ." Most of us are probably somewhere in between. We are going to take a few weeks to talk about what we can and should do when we aren't gathered. Whatever we do when we aren't gathered **has** to be related to our mission - the main assignment Jesus has given the Church.

The mission Jesus gave the church after He was raised from the dead was to "make disciples" among every group of people on earth. The mission of making disciples involves going (not sitting still), baptizing (as a parable of dying and rising with Christ), and teaching them to obey everything Jesus commanded (which has been called the "great omission"). This mission is only possible because He has all authority in the heavenly realm and on earth and because He is with us through the promised Holy Spirit. Everything we do should further the mission Jesus has given His church.

How do our worship gatherings help us accomplish our mission? First and foremost, disciples are worshipers; our goal in corporate worship is to bring joy to the heart of God. Worship isn't a means to an end; it is an end in itself. God deserves our worship. Period.

Having said that, Scripture makes clear that we also receive great benefit as a byproduct of our worship (see Ephesians 5:19). One of the things I have missed the most over the past 6 weeks is corporate worship. My soul is nourished when we sing together from the heart. Many times our worship prompts me to express things to God that I wouldn't have on my own.

As well, the messages that we bring from Scripture each week are meant to equip us to walk with Jesus throughout the week. We want you to come away from a passage of Scripture understanding its meaning and having some ideas of how that Scripture applies to your life. And hopefully over time you grow in your ability to go to Scripture on your own, understand it, and apply it to your life.

In other words, our times together should help equip and motivate us to walk with Jesus throughout the week **when we aren't gathered**. Our corporate worship should help us become **a community of disciples that makes disciples** all week long.

Toward that end, we're going to take several weeks talking about things that we can and should do when the church isn't gathered. This week and next we are going to consider a passage of Scripture in which Jesus explains a pattern of life necessary for those who "wish to come after [Him]. . ." Jesus describes a basic pattern of discipleship in Luke 9:23-27.

Let me set the **context**. Jesus is alone with the disciples and asks them, "Who do people say that I am?" His disciples give the range of opinions: John the Baptist, Elijah, or that one of the prophets has raised from the dead. But then Jesus asks them the question that He asks each one of us: "But who do **you** say that I am?" Eventually we have to quit giving others' opinions and say, "This is **my** conviction about Jesus." Peter answered for the rest and said, "The Christ of God." They believed that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah.

Here is Jesus' response in Luke 9:21-22:

21 But He warned them, and instructed them not to tell this to anyone, 22 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 up on the third day."

Jesus would accomplish His mission as the Messiah by being rejected, crucified, and raised up on the third day. Through His death and resurrection all the families of the earth would be blessed.

In verses 23-27 Jesus explains what people need to do if they actually want to follow Him as disciples. As we look at these verses, keep in mind what Jesus had just said about His own life and mission because a disciple is someone who is apprenticed to a master teacher in order to do what that teacher does. If the teacher is going to the cross, being His disciple/apprentice will also involve a cross.

With that context in mind, consider what Jesus says this about those who wish to "come after" Him:

23 And He was saying to them all, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. 24 "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it. 25 "For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself? 26 "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His glory, and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. 27 "But I say to you truthfully, there are some of those standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God."

Today we'll consider only verse 23. Next week we'll look at the rest of this passage.

23 And He was saying to them all, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me.

Notice Jesus begins by saying, "***If*** anyone wishes to come after Me. . ." Jesus readily acknowledged that not everyone wants to follow Him. We have numerous examples in the gospels of people who had an interest in Jesus and His teachings but didn't really want to follow Him (e.g., Matthew 19:16-22). The same thing is true today.

You and I would be wise to pause and consider honestly, "Do I really 'wish to come after' Jesus? Do I really want to live my life as His disciple, apprenticed to Him, learning from Him how to live like He lived?" You can be a very moral, compassionate person and not be a follower of Jesus. You can be a faithful "church-goer" and not be apprenticed to Jesus. You can study the Bible and theology without a commitment to living as Jesus lived. But if we do want to "come after Jesus" as disciples, we will have to settle some foundational issues in our lives.

Of course we don't try to follow Jesus out of sheer willpower or human effort. So don't think that following Jesus isn't for you because you're not strong enough, committed enough, etc. We experience God's power through our weaknesses. His Spirit empowers us and gives us the will to follow Christ.

Jesus lays out three things that a person must do if they want to come after Him. The first two involve addressing yourself - your desires, your will, your identity, the most foundational orientation of your life. The goal is to get ourselves into a position to experience Jesus as fully as possible.

First, Jesus says, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself." To deny is the polar opposite of "to confess" (Leifeld, p. 923). We are supposed to confess Christ (in the sense of acknowledging Him and identifying with Him) and deny ourselves. This isn't a rejection of our personalities and our uniquenesses. This doesn't suggest that we're worthless; to the contrary, we were so valuable that God sent His unique Son to die for us. Rather, denying ourselves means that we say "no" to everything within us that keeps us from confessing/following Christ in thought, word, and deed.

Some of you are having a very intense parenting experience right now. You are at home with your child (or children) 24/7. One thing (not the only thing) that responsible parents do is deny their children things that are bad for them:

- * "No, you may not have seven cookies; you may have 2 cookies."
- * "No, you may not borrow my car; you're only twelve years old."
- * "No, you may not stay out until 3 a.m. Rarely does anything good happen after midnight [or 9:30 p.m. or whatever you tell your kids!]."

Responsible parents deny their children all sorts of things **for their own good**. The goal is for our children to grow and mature so that we don't have to tell them "no" because they tell themselves "no"! They **deny themselves** all sorts of things for a greater good.

Our heavenly Father wants His children to mature to the place where we deny ourselves the things that keep us from following and experiencing Christ. This, of course, would include saying no to desires that are **patently sinful**. If you want specifics, read Galatians 5:19-21 where Paul lists a sampling of the "deeds of the flesh": ". . .immorality, impurity, sensuality . . . idolatry, sorcery. . . strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger . . . envying, drunkenness, carousing. . ."

In addition, there will be times when we deny ourselves things that are **permissible** but **not profitable** (see 1 Corinthians 10:23). For example, you won't find a command in the Bible that says, "Do not watch four hours of television every night." But if (as is probably the case) watching four hours of television each night dulls your senses and makes you lethargic, you might deny yourself and break that habit for the sake of your discipleship. In the new covenant, the Spirit replaces the law (see Galatians 5); the Spirit leads us to deny ourselves in ways that are specific for each of us.

Second, Jesus says, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and **take up his cross daily**. . ." Jesus took up His cross (literally - He carried a cross on the way to His execution); if we wish to follow Him, we too must take up our cross

(figuratively). Jesus is using brutal, shocking imagery here. In our day He might say, “You need to strap yourself into an electric chair.” In the first century if you saw somebody “taking up his cross” he was on “a one-way journey . . . he’d not be back” (Leon Morris, Luke, p. 170).

The imagery teaches that if we want to follow Jesus, we need to die to self. Instead of living for ourselves, we now live exclusively for Christ. Notice that Jesus said we must take up our cross **daily**. This isn’t a one-time decision. This is a settled way of life.

We have to be very careful how we think about this idea of dying to self. As Dallas Willard points out, Jesus taught death **to** self, but not death **of** self. When you live exclusively for Christ, you become more fully the person you were designed to be. You shed off all the things that mask and distort the image of God within you. You begin to experience the “glorified” person you will be after you are raised immortal. The new heaven and earth will be the most God-centered, Christ-centered, Spirit-centered place imaginable. In that place, nobody will be living for themselves, right? Jesus would have us anticipate that day and live exclusively for Him here and now.

We’ll talk about this more next week. In Luke 9:24 Jesus called this pattern of discipleship “losing **your** life so that you find [**true**] life.” We’ll talk about why this way of life is far superior to the alternatives. Even though this way of life is hard, it’s full of purpose and satisfaction; it allows us to experience God’s presence and blessing in ways that are unaccessible to those who live for themselves.

Third, Jesus tells people who “wish to come after” Him: follow Me. In Jesus’ day, some of His disciples literally followed Him around. But the term was used figuratively of following someone’s teaching or way of life. God said of the children of Israel, for example, that they wouldn’t enter the Promised Land because “they did not follow Me fully” (Num. 32:11). They bowed down and worshipped idols; they grumbled against God and Moses; they wished they were in slavery in Egypt again. Following God fully would have meant accepting that His teaching was good and walking in that truth.

To follow Jesus means to accept His teaching/truth and walking in it. To use the terminology of John 15, it means abiding in Christ and letting Christ’s word abide in us. Paul spoke about letting “the word of Christ richly dwell within you” (Colossians 3:16) so that His teaching might form the way we think and act. Peter spoke about imitating Jesus’ pattern of suffering – not returning evil for evil or insult for insult but giving a blessing instead (1 Peter 2-3).

To follow Jesus also means to follow Him in His mission as the Messiah. Think about it this way. It would be strange to be apprenticed to a master mechanic and never actually work on cars. It would be strange to be apprenticed to a master painter and never paint. It would be equally strange to be apprenticed to the Messiah and not be involved in bringing blessing to all the families of the earth. Following Jesus will involve following Him in being the light of the world and of making disciples of all the nations.

The progression is important here. It is only when we 1) deny ourselves, and 2) take up our cross daily, that we have the mind and the resolve necessary 3) to follow Christ. This is the core thing we do day by day when we aren't gathered.

After I pray, we will have a series of questions on the screen that will help you internalize the things we've talked about this morning. If you are with others, talk about these questions for a few minutes; if you're alone, please ponder them by yourself. The questions will stay on the screen for a few minutes; when you're finished discussing/pondering them, you will be dismissed.

Questions on Screen:

Do I actually "wish to come after Jesus" and follow Him?

How do I need to "deny myself" or "take up my cross" today?

In what ways do I want to follow Christ this week (through Scripture, relationships, serving others, etc.)?