

Some of the things Jesus said are hard to understand. Even after all my years of studying the Bible there are still times when I get finished reading a paragraph of Jesus and I think, “Ok Jesus, say that again, a little more slowly this time.” There are a lot of things that Jesus said that you need to chew on for a while before you get what he is saying. (Give an example?)

Luke 9 is not one of those times, but part of me wishes he’d been a little less clear.

The section from Luke 9 that we are really going to chew on for a while this morning is the last paragraph, the last two verses where what Jesus says is very clear but I kind of wish he had been a little less clear.

Then Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.”

I mean, it’s pretty straight forward, right? Jesus very clearly tells us what kind of a life we can expect if we are going to be his disciples and follow him.

“If you want to be my disciple get ready to deny yourself, take up your cross daily and follow me.

And more than a little bit of me hopes that doesn’t mean what I think it means.

Because what I think it means is this:

Jesus wants me to deny myself.

Clearly when my heart desires things that don’t line up with Jesus’ Word (desires to lie, to gossip, to use sex in a non-God-approved way, etc.) Jesus wants me to deny those sinful desires and live his way. But there is more to it than that. Denying myself goes deeper than just not doing things that Jesus says I shouldn’t do.

At its core, denying myself means giving up how I would do things if I were god...

If I stop and think about it, it doesn’t take me long to come up with a long list of things that I would do if I were god.

If I were god I know what the weather would be like - personally, I’d have four seasons but none of them would last for more than 3 months – so none of this six months of winter, two days of spring and then summer business that Wisconsin has.

If I were god I know what I know what I want for my family - for them all to grow old, healthy, wealthy, and wise; for my kids to find good, Christian spouses and give my wife and cute grandbabies that we can spoil for our 80-90 years of mostly healthy life.

If I were god I know what I want for my career and this congregation (how I’d want people to think about me as a pastor, what kind of legacy I’d like to leave behind).

It doesn’t take me long at all to come up with a nice long list of things that I would do if I were god. I have a pretty good idea of how I’d like things to go and unfold. I have plans. I have dreams. I have worries and fears. And if I were god the plans and dreams would come true, and the worries and fears wouldn’t. Sure in a sinful world my life won’t be perfect, but I’ve got a pretty good idea how my life should go despite the imperfections.

And I’m betting you know how you’d do things if you were god... it’s the stuff your daydreams are made of, it’s the things you pray about...

To deny myself is to daily realize that I’m not God.

And I know that the real God loves me, and he wants to hear my prayers, and he too has plans and dreams for my future, but the reality is, his ways are not my ways and his plans are not my plans. That truth is written all over the pages of the Bible – just ask Moses, or David, or Peter; the Bible is full of people whose best laid plans were ruined or wrong and had to trust in God’s plan.

That truth is written all over these very verses. What disciple of Jesus would choose a life of daily cross carrying? Wouldn’t we all like to think that following Jesus will make life easier and better – daily picking up a cross doesn’t sound like easier and better to me.

To deny myself is to give up how I would do things if I were god. To deny myself is to give up the delusion of control; to give up the hope of ever having control over my life. Jesus is asking me to deny myself and give complete control over the plans and path for my life to him.

What Jesus says is clear as day, but more than a little bit of me hopes that doesn’t mean what I think it means... because I spend an awful lot of myself trying to exercise some semblance of control over my life.

Jesus wants me to deny myself and to pick up a cross and follow him, and if carrying a cross isn’t an intimidating enough thought, let’s not gloss over that one incredibly intimidating word – *daily*. As in, every day for the rest of my life, day after day after day after day after day following Jesus means picking up a cross.

A cross, in case you need reminding, is an object of suffering and torture. In Jesus’ day you wouldn’t have seen anyone wearing cross necklaces. The cross equals pain and suffering.

Sometimes those crosses are a result of other people – Jesus very clearly predicted that if they crucified him, they would persecute his followers too.

Most of the time, especially for we who live in America where physical persecution is not a threat, crosses are the things that force us to deny ourselves. They are all of the things that we would rather not have in our lives, the things we would get rid of if we

were god – from little things like traffic jams when you are trying to get home for dinner, to much bigger things like sickness, disease, and death.

Some days the cross might not be as crushingly, murderously painful as other days, but every day for the rest of my life, following Jesus will mean suffering of some kind.

I think what Jesus is saying is clear (“**Take up your cross daily and follow me**”), but I really hope he doesn’t mean what I think he means.

But then Jesus adds that sobering reminder, “**Whoever wants to save their life will lose it.**” If you begin to obsess about avoiding the cross, if you begin to chase the life you would plan for yourself if you were god, watch out. Whoever obsesses about saving their life on this earth will lose it.

It doesn’t seem like a good way to do life, to wake up every day and think, “What plans for my life am I going to have to give up today? How much denying of myself is Jesus going to require today? And just exactly what kind of a cross is going to drop on my shoulders today?” And yet Jesus is pretty clear...

Aren’t you glad you came to church today? Real “pick me up” sermon so far, huh?

Brothers, sisters, friends, this is such a huge thing that we need to wrap our heads and hearts around today. This is one of the truths of scriptures that over the last four years I’ve learned to love the most. It’s called the Theology of the Cross. The Theology of the Cross is a worldview. God literally wants to change how you think about everything. God wants to change the lenses through which you view every aspect of your life. God would have it defined by this theology of the cross.

And this is an incredibly tough thing to wrap your head and heart around because is completely contrary to the natural setting of your head and heart. It is completely counterintuitive, countercultural, counter-everything that you’ve thought and felt and seen and been taught. There is no way I can unpack for you all of the Theology of the Cross in just one sermon, but this passage gets to the very core of it.

God wants you to deny yourself, give up on how you would do things if you were god, accept suffering and crosses as a daily experience of life and follow him.

That is a drastically different way to go about life. God wants me to define a successful life as one where I don’t get my way and I carry a cross every single stinking day until the day I die. That is how God would have me define a life well lived – a life filled with self-denial and cross carrying.

Jesus says if you are going to be his follower, this is it. This is what you *must* do.

The rest of the world does not get this. Even a large portion of the Christian world doesn’t get this. And when I’m being honest, my own heart is hoping it’s not true.

But Jesus couldn’t have been clearer. There is nothing confusing or ambiguous about what he said in Luke 9. We just don’t want it to be true.

Again, *great sermon Pastor Hoff... really inspiring...*

I would love to sit here and talk for hours about what this means and what it looks like and help you grapple with this passage, but I know most of you didn’t come here expecting a couple hour long sermon and Bible study on the Theology of the Cross. But let me say just two more things.

The first is the *why*; why would we ever consider adopting such a crazy worldview. The second is a promise.

First the *why*:

When I was studying Luke 9 this last week there were two words that really jumped out at me. The first was that intimidating word that I really wish wasn’t there: *daily* (every day for the rest of my life cross carrying). The other word... *must*.

Before he tells us what we *must* do in order to follow him he tells us what he *must* do.

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.

Must implies obligation, like he had no other choice but to do this. But Jesus did have a choice!

Logically speaking Jesus didn’t have to suffer and die. The Bible says that death is the wages of sin, it’s what we deserve for sinning. But Jesus didn’t sin, so he didn’t have to die. Jesus clearly wasn’t looking forward to that suffering and dying. Hours before his prediction came true he’s on his knees in the Garden of Gethsemane, begging the Father so fervently that he’s sweating drops of blood, “God if there’s another way we can do this without the suffering and dying, please, let’s do that way.”

And yet Jesus says, “I *must* do this.” It’s not an outward compulsion. It’s an inner motivation.

Friends, this is how much Jesus loves you. Let that sink in. Jesus uses the word *must* because this is how much he loves you.

That’s why Jesus *must* suffer and die... love for you.

Love for you - you who are so bad at giving up how you would do things if you were god and letting God be God.

Love for you – you who are so quick to complain and grouse and worry about your daily crosses.

Love that looks at you and desperately wants to save you. Love that looks at suffering and a cross and then looks at you and says, “I’ve got no choice here. I love you too much. So I *must* do that, so I can love you forever.”

And that's the why. Why would we ever start to think of life as self-denying cross carrying? Because the one who love that much, says we must. When we deny ourselves, when give up how we would do things if we were god, when we give up control we aren't giving it over to a distant, heartless deity. We are giving control to Jesus, the one who looked at you and loved you so much that if saving you mean suffering and dying on a cross, the choice was obvious.

That's the why. Second, the promise:

Jesus said it: **whoever loses their life for me will save it.**

On the other side of self-denial and cross carrying until the day I die is life – life way better, way longer lasting, way more satisfying than any life you could ever carve out for yourself here and now. On the other side of a lifetime of daily suffering is an eternity with the one who loves you so much.

And one of the crazy things about the Theology of the Cross is that this promise doesn't just give us a pipe-dream hope for the future in heaven. It brings real peace right now.

Another way to put Jesus' promise is this: If you give up trying to save your own life, you might just find out that I'm way better at this saving thing that you will ever be. If you give up trying to save your life, you might just find out that I've got this salvation thing covered. The more you admit that you are not in control the more you can find comfort in the fact that I'm in control. The more you stop insisting that life go your way, the more you can find joy and rest as you watch your life go my way.

The Theology of the Cross is crazy, and counterintuitive and countercultural, and really hard to swallow, but that doesn't make it a bad thing. In fact, Christians much greater than I, who have grappled with the Theology of the Cross before us coined a phrase: the blessed cross.

The Jesus who loves you enough to see his cross as a necessity, scary yes, but a beautiful necessity because it means your salvation on the other side, wants you to see your cross as a necessity, but a beautiful and blessed necessity because they force you to admit you are not in control. And that is a good thing to recognize on a daily basis, because you may not be in control, but he is.

Make no mistake, there is still a big part of my heart that doesn't want what Jesus says in Luke 9 to be true. Until I get to heaven this is one more thing I have to deny myself, this is one more cross I carry, but the cross and suffering are not the only things that Jesus would have me carry away from Luke 9. The cross and suffering are clear, so is his love and his promise. And so by the grace of God I follow.

Amen.