

Practicing the Way Series

Self-Denial in an Age of Self-Fulfillment

By JOHN MARK COMER

The Way of the Cross

Now it happened that as he was praying alone, the disciples were with him. And he asked them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” And they answered, “John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen.” Then he said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” And Peter answered, “The Christ of God.”

And he strictly charged 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 on the third day be raised.”

And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”

— Luke 9:18-24

“In one phrase, what is following Jesus all about? He would answer you, ‘It’s all about self-denial’ . . .

To say ‘Yes’ to Jesus is to say ‘No’ to a thousand other desires:

- to say No to spending your time and money however you want
- to say No to a life of individualism (to give up your autonomy and control and to instead live in community with a group of people to your right and to your left)
- it’s saying No to self-expression of your sexual identity or desire or whatever standard makes the most sense to you at this point in your life.

The cross is saying whatever, whenever, wherever:

- whatever you say to do, I’ll do it
- wherever you say to go, I’ll go
- whenever you say to go there or not go there, I’m yours and I’m all in 100%.”

— John Mark Comer

Crucifying the Flesh

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

— Galatians 5:16-24

The Flesh (“*First Order Desires*”) — Your base animal-like desires (for food, sleep, sex, safety, dominance). They have become distorted desires due to the human condition and therefore have become sinful desires (they miss the mark of what God intended when he created us).

- Sexual immorality, idolatry, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, dissensions, divisions, envy, etc.

The Spirit (“*Second Order Desires*”) — Your higher human desires to want to want something better that are animated by the Holy Spirit to cultivate in you the inner disposition of Jesus.

- Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, etc.

Everyday we face a war of desire within our body and within our mind and within our soul. We constantly live in the war and tension between these two sets of desires that are present within us. And so, one of the key tasks to discipleship to Jesus is learning to “crucify the flesh” or to “put to death the flesh — our first order desires — in order to experience that which is truly life.

Crucifying the Flesh (“*Second Order Volition*”) — The ability to exercise your will power to override your First Order Desires for your Second Order Desires. Or in the language of Jesus, it is the resolve to deny yourself and to take up your cross and follow him.

“(Self-denial is) the overall, settled condition of life in the kingdom of God, better described as ‘death to self.’ In this and this alone lies the key to the soul’s restoration. Christian spiritual formation rests on this indispensable foundation of death to self and cannot proceed except insofar as that foundation is being firmly laid and sustained.”

— Dallas Willard

The very first step in our discipleship to Jesus is the step of denying yourself.

Excuses to Side-Step Self-Denial

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” And Jesus said to him, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Yet another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

— Luke 9:57-62

Notice in this passage the problem is not a problem of belief; the problem is that they are not willing to pay the price to become a disciple of Jesus.

“The issue here is not apprenticeship versus atheism. It’s apprenticeship versus a vague, non-committal, consumeristic faith that wants the benefit of Jesus with the cost.”

— John Mark Comer

Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

— Luke 14:25-33

Jesus is often way more straight-forward than what is comfortable to us.

And a ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.’” And he said, “All these I have kept from my youth.” When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.

— Luke 18:18-23

“My secret is that I want to be relevant and popular. I want my desires fulfilled and pain minimized. I want a manageable relationship with an institution rather than messy relationships with real people. I want to be transformed into the image of Christ by showing up at entertaining events rather than through the hard work of discipline. I want to wear my faith on my sleeve and not look at the darkness in my heart. And above all, I want a controllable god. I want a divine commodity to do my will on earth as well as in heaven.”

— Skye Jethani

Our Age of Self-Fulfillment

The Western world has moved from a culture of authority (one where we acknowledged an authority or morality outside of ourselves that we must acknowledge on some level and adhere to) to a culture of authenticity (one where the individual is the authority and the one who determines what is right and wrong for themselves).

What we as an individual think and feel within ourselves is now what determines our definition of what is right and what is wrong. The mantra, “Be true to yourself” is the new American way and dream.

“The understanding of life which emerges with the romantic expressionism of the late 18th century, that each one of us has his or her own way of realizing our humanity and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside by society or the previous generation by religious or political authority.”

— Charles Taylor

The goal of Western culture now is to throw off any external authority and to become your authentic self so you can live in a life of freedom (as freedom is now defined).

“Freedom has been redefined. It used to mean the freedom to want the good, the beautiful and the true and to exercise the willpower to do the good, the beautiful and the true. But now when people talk about freedom they basically mean the freedom to do whatever the heck they want as long as they don’t hurt anybody.”

— John Mark Comer

The Way of Jesus vs The Way of the West

“The modern Western world does not like the idea of kingship or queenship or an absolute authority at all. We prefer democracy where every man is his own king and every woman is her own queen. So this idea of Jesus as ‘The King’ with a capital K (which is what the word Messiah or Christ means — King) is so against the flow of our culture because the heart of kingship is the idea of authority and we are anti-authoritarian.”

— John Mark Comer

“To come under authority is to surrender (under your own free will and volition) your autonomy and control over your life to somebody else... and we hate that in the West.”

— John Mark Comer

“We subtly imbibe the implicit prosperity gospel through consumerism and advertising, but also through viewing the lives of other Christians who seem to lead amazing, meaningful, pleasure filled lives... We only have to trawl through our Instagram feeds to find pastors, believing musicians, artists, authors, and activists who seem to live incredible lives. These people seem to have the best of both worlds: They follow Jesus and get to travel, live in cool neighborhoods, hang with really interesting people, have incredible marriages or rock the single life, and connect with the most amazing people... We do not recognize the way in which the implicit prosperity gospel affects us until our unspoken expectations are not met... We understand that God would ask people in the Two-Thirds World to give up things — to sacrifice — but our heresy hidden under the surface is our belief that God would not ask Western people to deny themselves.”

— Mark Sayers

We want the best of both worlds: We want to be generous AND we want to be rich. We want to follow Jesus AND to live like a Hollywood celebrity. We want character BUT we do not want the suffering and the perseverance that it takes to produce that character. We want humility BUT we definitely don't want any form of humiliation. We want patience BUT we don't want to actually wait. We want to be a person who is full of kindness BUT we don't want anyone in our life who annoys us or who agitates us. We want to hear God's voice and to experience his presence in our lives BUT we don't want to actually get up early and take time to focus in on prayer. We want the life of Jesus BUT we don't want to take up the cross of Jesus.

“Following Jesus is about those moments where you have that decision to make between the flesh and the Spirit. Following Jesus is a thousand small deaths that lead to one massive life.”

— John Mark Comer

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”

— Matthew 13:44

“He is no fool who gives up what he can't keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

— Jim Elliot

What will it cost you to follow Jesus — to be an actual disciple of Jesus?

What will it cost you to not follow Jesus — to believe in Jesus but to not be an actual disciple?

“St. Ignatius of Loyola notes that, ‘Sin is unwillingness to trust that what God wants is our deepest happiness.’ Until I am absolutely convinced of this, I will do everything I can to keep my hands on the controls of my life because I think I know better than God what I need for my fulfillment.”

— David Benner