



## Take Up Your Cross

Luke 9:18-27

Grace Waco | 3.21.24

Since the very beginning of Jesus' ministry in Luke, one of the central questions has been: "who is Jesus?" It's an extremely important question of course. It is obvious to everyone at this point in the narrative that he is a teacher, a unique Rabbi with followers, someone who although he is from Nazareth and not trained under any other Rabbi, "teaches with authority". It's also clear he is some sort of prophet—shown through his miraculous power to do miracles, the kinds of which haven't been seen since the days of Elijah and Elisha.

Now Jesus turns the corner of his ministry from Messianic curiosity to Messianic certainty. In **verse 18**, the disciples find themselves in a good spot—near Jesus as he prays (a spot they neglect later). And Jesus knows they are fresh from the short term mission trip to the entire region. So he wants to know two questions: first, who does everyone else say that I am? Of course the answers are teacher, prophet, etc. But then the more important question: who do *you* say that I am? The answer to that question is more important than we know, because we will find that if we answer it correctly, the cost of the answer will be incredibly high. To correctly identify the mission and identity of Jesus is to follow him into it.

## The Cost of Following Jesus

Up until today in our text, no one has correctly named the true identity of Jesus. We've been told who he is from the angels and from the demons, but never from a human witness. **Verse 20** has the first reference to Jesus' true identity spoken by a human being in the gospel of Luke, from Peter's lips. Jesus is "the Christ of God", literally, "the anointed one of God." At this point, you may be thinking: "it's about time!"

But if you grew up in first century Judea, you were taught your whole life—every passover, but also every time the Romans decreed anything disagreeable—that the Messiah would come. He was the long-awaited one, and the logical conclusion would be that we would, at the right time, gather his followers, march down to Jerusalem, wrest control from the empire, kick out the corrupt Sanhedrin, and continue his conquest of the world, the great vindication of Yawheh's chosen people. This is what the Maccabees tried just a century before. Sure, multiplying bread and raising



widow's sons and casting out demons and knowing your Torah is nice—but what about the whole “being under the oppressive regime” thing?

It's interesting that the miracle that finally pushes the right button for Peter is the feeding of the five thousand. I think it's because it is where Peter finally identifies Jesus not just as like Elijah or Elisha or a great Prophet, but like *Moses*, who also fed the people in the wilderness, but who also was the Savior who led them out of oppression. Remember that for next week.

Put yourself in Peter's shoes, a follower and disciple of Jesus. He wants Jesus to be Messiah: because if Jesus goes to overthrow Rome and rule the world, you've got to think Peter will at least get a seat at the table—chief of staff or secretary of state or something—in this kingdom Jesus keeps talking about.

But it takes Peter a second to admit it because Jesus has acted a little strange. He doesn't seem interested in political power. When he talks about freeing captives, he talks more about Satan than Rome. When he teaches, he offers up strange ethics and stories. It's almost as if Peter is bedding his time before admitting Jesus is truly *the* Messiah until he is confident that Jesus is about to head towards Jerusalem and tell Herod and Pilate and Caesar Augustus “Let my people go!” and release plagues that make Egypt look like kindergarten play-time..

And so now Jesus is sending out his disciples to tell people that the new kingdom of Heaven is coming. And Jesus is headed towards Jerusalem. Peter is ready to admit that maybe the weird humble, nomadic, forgiving Jesus is about to give way to warrior king, Messiah Jesus. I can't prove it, but maybe Peter is ready for a promotion.

And then **verse 21-22** happens. And Peter is shocked, appalled. In Matthew's gospel we are told he rebukes Jesus. Jesus shows his cards, revealing that his plan is not to overthrow Rome, but to be overthrown, not to end the suffering of the oppressed, but to suffer and be oppressed. To *be killed*, and worse than that, he hints at the kind of death he is to die in **verse 23**: a death as a criminal—the most shameful death known to the empire.

Have you ever wondered why the disciples seem to forget Jesus' promise of resurrection? Or why are they so fearful and scatter, even denying him, when he goes to be crucified, even though he *told them* he would be? I think because they never got over the shock of it.

For Jesus to be crucified was not simply the end of their short career as disciples, it was the signing of their death warrant. In the same way that Peter and the others anticipate glorious renown with Jesus if he conquers Jerusalem, they know to expect certain death with Jesus if Jesus tries and fails, which is exactly what he seems to be predicting. And the greatest horror of the ancient world was not death for a noble cause, but death by crucifixion.



The earliest pictorial representation of the crucifixion of Jesus is a piece of Roman graffiti found scratched in the wall of an ancient school for boys in Rome, dated sometime around 200-300 years after Christ. It looks like this:



The picture is of a boy praying to a man attached to a cross with a donkey head, the universal sign for shame and mockery. In case your Greek needs some refreshing, the etching reads "Alexamenos worships [his] God". And the interpretation is clear: crucifixion was not just a way to painfully execute the worst criminals, traitors, and conquered foreigners (Roman citizens could not be crucified); it was meant to shame a man by exposing his suffering for all to see and turning him into a beast to be mocked and laughed at.

I always think it is a terrible argument when atheists or critics say Christianity is just a way to make naive people feel better. If we wanted to feel better, we would have definitely made up an easier Rabbi to follow. Why is it so hard to follow Jesus sometimes? We believe Jesus is *God* incarnate. We believe he destroyed death by rising from the grave. And yet nearly every day we are called by Jesus—to love someone hard to love, to serve when we would rather be served, to set our minds on pure and holy things instead of instant pleasure, to be patient and bold and compassionate and courageous—and we shrink back, shrug our shoulders, give up, take the easy path, cut corners, go the way of greed and selfish pride. Why is it so hard to follow Jesus sometimes?



Because if what Jesus says about himself is true, we know what it will cost us. Because, like Boehnoffer says, we would rather cheapen grace than count the cost of it. We would rather craft Jesus into our terms, instead of accepting him on his. If we are honest, many days we live as if it would be better to have a fake Savior who demands nothing than a real one who costs us everything. We are used to the idea of Jesus dying for us, but we struggle with the idea that we must die with him. We have forgotten what Alexamenos now knows, seated in Paradise with his God:

“Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven.”

What Jesus calls us to in **verse 23** is nothing less than radically life altering. Look at **verse 24-25**, it's black and white. There is no half-way following. There are only two options for following Jesus: you can say yes to yourself, and in so doing say no to Jesus, and lose everything. Or you can say no to yourself, and in so doing say yes to Jesus, and gain everything.

If Jesus really is the Messiah who suffers, is rejected, and given to death—then to follow him means we must also accept suffering, rejection, and death in his name. If Jesus really went to the shame of the cross for our sake, it means to follow him we must also deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and follow him.

Let's spend the rest of our time picking apart that statement. There is no more hiding what Jesus requires. It is to 1) Deny Yourself; 2) Take up your cross.

## The Way of Following Jesus

Just saying those words makes me feel strange. When was the last time you woke up in the morning and said: “today my goal is to say no to myself”? Likely one of the first things you do in the morning is turn on your phone, check your email, social, or other updates—all of which are screaming to you—say yes to yourself!

The culture of self-affirmation we live in borders on self-worship. In their recent book *Good Faith*, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons of Barna group documented that 84 percent of Americans believe that “enjoying yourself is the highest goal of life, 86 percent believe that to enjoy yourself you must “pursue the things you desire most”, and 91 percent affirm this statement: “To find yourself, look within yourself.” As author Thaddeus Williams has put it: “In our day, the Westminster Catechism answer has been inverted: “the chief end of man is to glorify and enjoy *himself* forever.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/self-worship-booms/>



Let me clarify: Jesus is not saying that we must throw aside our personality, or somehow become less ourselves. “The self” is not the word for *who you are* but rather for your *selfish desires*. Paul calls it “the flesh” that hinders us and must be thrown off. John Newton used to call it “Mr. Self”, that version of him that was always demanding what *he* wanted.

And to be clear—this is not the real you. You were created for community and worship, not for selfishness. This is why Jesus says that when you try to gain the world in **verse 25**, you forfeit “yourself”. Contrary to what you may hear, you are more yourself when you are denying your sinful, selfish passions and desires. You are most yourself when you are forgetting yourself, as Lewis said, “not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.”

Ultimately, self-denial is about killing idols. As food for thought and application, I’ll quickly give you three idols of self that are likely the most prominent in your life and the world around you:

### 1. Self-Autonomy (The Idol of Control)

This idol tells us that we are most happy when we are most in control. When we call the shots. The way we identify this idol is by tracing our anxiety and stress. How do we react when things happen outside our control? Are we at peace or are we anxious when we are constantly put in situations which we cannot control?

And the way we destroy this idol? Well, it’s by surrendering to the sovereign will of God, chiefly through giving and prayer. “Our Father in Heaven, holy is your name. Your will be done, your kingdom come.” If you pray that as many times a day as you need, and if you give regularly and sacrificially of your money and time and everything you want to just be yours—you will suffocate your idol of control.

### 2. Self-Gratification (The Idol of Pleasure)

This idol tells us that we are most happy when we get whatever we want, whenever we want it. The way we know we are given to self-gratification is when we find ourselves stuck in a pit of despair. Lust often leads here—we believe we are entitled to self-gratification at any time (if it feels good, it is good!), but over time what used to feel good feels less and less good. It becomes sand, like eating ice cream for every meal. And what we feel is the emptiness of goodness, leading to despair. Think about the distractions you use to numb yourself, and how eventually they feel empty.

The way we destroy this idol is by giving up certain pleasures in order to be satisfied in God, at whose right hand are pleasures forevermore. It’s learning that holiness is sweet to the taste. This is foremost done by fasting—reminding ourselves that pleasures are God’s good gifts to point us back to him, and we are dependent on him to receive them as blessings, not as rights.



### 3. Self-Justification (The Idol of Image)

This idol tells us that we are most happy whenever we are most praised. One way we know we are given to self-justification is by noticing how much we want to be looked at. Pride is the indication of the idol of image. We cannot live with our true selves, we must silence that voice in the back of the head that says: “you are not enough”, and the only way we know how to silence it is by puffing ourselves up. If this doesn’t come through outward praise of self, it can also come in overtly seeking the praise of others, or a kind of guilty shyness that is always afraid of upsetting the opinion of others. Pride can be extroverted and introverted.

The way we destroy this idol is by learning to not just accept but joyfully run after association with Jesus and all the potential negative effects that might bring. And the primary spiritual discipline that fights this is evangelism—the unashamed sharing of God’s gospel. I don’t just mean telling non-believers about Jesus, although I do—I mean just overflowing with good news all the time, just it always coming out that God is good and Jesus is Lord. Let me tell you why this practice links.

Ultimately self-justification might be our biggest idol, because it lies perhaps closest to the heart of the gospel.

When we talk about taking up our cross, it is tempting to believe that means it is by our sheer effort and will that we will follow Jesus. To deny ourselves is like clenching our fists instead of letting go. And so we can easily become disciples of Jesus who are filled with pride. Look at us, look how great we are at denying ourselves: praise us, praise us! And then look, the idol of image is back!

At the heart of this problem of pride, and at the heart of the gospel, is our problem of shame, which Jesus speaks directly to in this passage. In the garden, when Adam and Eve sinned, they took on guilt, but they felt shame. They ran and covered and hid. Their image of self was tattered. Our culture is quickly turning into a honor/shame culture—it’s baked into us right now in the internet and social media age, because of how our identity must be performative, we have to put ourselves out there, our image is everything! Why do you think suicide rates are skyrocketing? Because shame puts far more powerful pressure on our emotions than guilt. We can cover up guilt with distraction, but shame tells us: “you will never measure up”, and in a culture that makes confidence a commodity, we can’t cover up our shame. It’s killing us from the inside out.

And Jesus calls us not just to deny ourselves but also to *take up our cross*. In **verse 27**, I believe he is reminding his disciples again that his death is near. The kingdom is coming in this lifetime, which means the call of discipleship is coming—or in other words—your time to die to self is coming long before your call to physically die. *Take up your cross daily.*



Jesus is calling us to take up the most shameful picture we could, to identify with him in his shame, to be unafraid to be Alexamenos, to be mocked and mistreated for being a Christian, to rejoice when we are ostracized and our image is tarnished before men, even when we are shamed by men for his sake.

But listen. Remember I said there were only two options here: life to self, and death to Christ, or death to self, and life in Christ? We see that again in **verse 26**. But what is assumed is what we need to hear. If we are ashamed of Jesus, meaning if we shun his cross and his way, then we will find ourselves on the last day not bearing shame before men but before God. We will be naked and exposed on that day.

But the opposite is also true—here is the gospel—if we are unashamed of Jesus, if we are ready to associate with him—remember evangelism, always talking about Jesus and not being ashamed of him before man—than even though we might bear the shame of the world now, on the last day Jesus will not be ashamed of us. We will not be naked but rather clothed in his righteousness. If we die with Jesus, and by dependence on the grace of God, we put our old, sinful self down in the grave day after day after day, denying ourselves, then we will also rise with Jesus to the seat of honor with him on the day when he comes to judge the living and the dead.

The cost of following Jesus is the death of the life you want—the life of self—but the reward of following Jesus is the life you never even knew you wanted: the life of Christ. And that life is true life, eternal life, the opposite of our idols of self—peace instead of anxious control; lasting eternal joys instead of instant pleasure; and it's unashamed honor instead of prideful self-image.

Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Jesus' sake will save it. Not "might" save it, or "could" save it. That is not a command, but a promise. Take up again with me your cross, following Jesus Christ, and save your life.

