

The Heart of a Servant

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What is the process for developing the heart of a servant? Become my disciple, Jesus Christ says: “Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt.10:39, NIV) and “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34, NIV).

The heart of Christian discipleship lies in this concept of victory through loss and a commitment to following Jesus. If we will not do it the way Jesus says, he tells us we are not worthy of him (Matt. 19:37, NIV). Our Lord requires us to ask, “What can we give?” which is in stark contrast to asking, “What do we get?” His requirements for us are costly.

The cost of discipleship is seen many times throughout the gospels. Luke 14:25-27 states that we must hate father, mother, and ourselves to serve Jesus Christ. When Jesus begins Matthew 16:24 with the words, “If anyone would come after me,” he is speaking about a complete and total surrender. In Luke 9:23, Jesus adds the word “daily” to emphasize his calling us to an every day lifestyle of obedience to him. Jesus’ utterances remind us of the three attitudes we must have when we come to him: self-denial, cross-bearing, and following Jesus.

Denying Ourselves

Self-denial means to completely disown, to utterly separate oneself from someone or something.¹ It is also defined as “the forsaking of self in wholehearted consecration to Christ and in service to his kingdom.”² Self-denial is similar to the “leaving and cleaving” principle of marriage, where separated from their parents, both partners give their trust to each other for a lifetime. When we “come after” Jesus, Scripture states that we become his bride and belong to him (Eph. 5:31-32, NIV). We no longer can place our trust or sufficiency in another, or ourselves, for we have learned that we are nothing and Christ is everything. Therefore, self-denial is an act of covenantal faithfulness. If Jesus is our Savior, then he must be our Master and Lord.

Denying our selves involves a decision. We resolve to leave self behind, as it is no longer the center of our attention. This revolutionary decision, according to William Barclay, means that in every moment of life we say no to ourselves and yes to God:

To deny oneself means once, finally and for all to dethrone self and to enthrone God. To deny oneself means to obliterate self as the dominant principle of life, and to make God the ruling principle, more, the ruling passion, of life. To deny ourselves is . . . to ignore the very existence of oneself. It is to treat the self as if it did not exist. Usually we treat ourselves as if our self was far and away the most important thing in the world. If we are to follow Jesus, we must forget that self exists.³

In his *Commentary on the Bible*, Matthew Henry says that self-denial is no more than what Jesus practiced to redeem and instruct us and is, also, the fundamental spirit required for admission into

¹ Craig Giannini, “Gaining by Losing.” Online. Available. <http://www.gospelcom.net/cgi-bin/bible?Matthew+16:24-27>.

² Bakers Evangelical Dictionary. Online. Available. <http://www.biblestudytools.net/Dictionaries/BakersEvangelicalDictionary/?word=Denial>.

³ William Barclay, *The Daily Bible Study Series, Revised Edition* (NavPress, WordSearch CD-ROM, 1995).

Christ's school.⁴ It is the sum and substance of Christ's call to true discipleship, coupled with daily taking up the cross, and following him.⁵

But we Christians struggle as we attempt to deny ourselves. Living godly lives in service to the church and our neighbors is difficult and troublesome. It is also thoroughly and completely opposed to the practice of the world. For who in his/her right mind would want to live a life of self-denial?

Self-Denial to Most Is “Deviant” Behavior

To most Christians and the rest of the world, this desire would be labeled “deviant” behavior. Yet in Jesus' kingdom, the King acts as a *doulos*, a slave. He makes his kingdom known by his service to those suffering. In this kingdom values are completely changed in order to show that the law of Christ is to love one's neighbor.⁶ In this kingdom the meaning of life is no longer centered on self-interest. The law of Christ motivates us to give our lives to Christ and to others with a serving attitude. This new law on our hearts “encourages us to ask what we can do for those people who are completely without prospect”⁷ Unfortunately, “We have been trained to believe that fulfillment comes to those who make their lives an endless round of party-going with plenty of laughs,” says Tony Campolo. But “Jesus tells us that people who cry because their hearts are broken over the things that break the heart of God are the fulfilled people in this world.”⁸ To the world, that is certainly deviant behavior.

Deviance implies that which goes against cultural norms and expectations. A sociological definition of *deviance* is, “A behavior or condition that is outside the range of what a society considers normal. Deviance is culturally determined. What is normal in one culture is deviant in another and vice versa.”⁹ Christians represent a self-denying culture. In Christ, caring is a badge of identity. Those who are in Christ, and who have been disciplined in Christ, show by their actions that they are following him.

Self-Denial Is Costly

Jesus' teaching presented the world with a new model for living: self-denial. The road to joy is found in suffering. According to Robert Wuthnow, “It is hard to imagine Jesus saying to his disciples, ‘take up your cross and follow me—it'll make you feel good.’”¹⁰ To some people the idea of denying self is absurd. If they have to deny themselves as a requirement for helping people, they are not going to do it. That is not a price they are willing to pay.

Jesus showed us that love is painful and costly. His service in our behalf certainly was not cheap. Therefore, our service in Christ for others must cost us something. Genuine caring requires a great investment on our part. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer challenges Christians to embrace a costly grace:

⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentaries* (NavPress, WordSearch CD-ROM, 1995).

⁵ Baker's Evangelical Dictionary, op. cit.

⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, (Exeter, 1982), 261 quoted in Jaap Van Klinken, *Diakonia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 38.

⁷ Arnd Hollweg, *Gruppe, Gesellschaft, Diakonie* (Stuttgart, 1976), 231, quoted in Van Klinken, op. cit., 41.

⁸ Gerald W. Schlabach, *And Who Is My Neighbor?* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990), 25.

⁹ Definition of “deviant behavior.” Available. Online. <http://www.nwmissouri.edu/nwcourses/martin/general/DEVGENE.HTML>.

¹⁰ Robert Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 87.

Costly grace is the gospel which must be *sought* again and again, the gift which must be *asked* for, the door at which a man must *knock*. Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is *grace* because it gives a man the only true life Above all, it is *costly* because it cost God the life of his Son: “you were bought with a price,” and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is *grace* because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the incarnation of God.¹¹

Conversion to grace is an invitation to follow Jesus who denied himself and took up his cross so others could have new life. This conversion to self-denial begins in the mind. We cannot serve others until our minds are freed from the world’s mold and then transformed by the Lord’s power. Conversion is an invitation to follow Jesus to the death of self, and through that process, to be used by God for the sake of others. God converts us to his love not only as a means in itself, but to the end that we will offer his love to others.

Self-Denial Requires a Crucified Mind

Bonhoeffer also states, “When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die”¹² To have a heart for God is to have an open wound of love. For Christians to have a heart for God we, “must go by a way in which [we] enjoy not.”¹³ For Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama, to have a heart for God is to “read the scriptures with [others’] needs in mind.”¹⁴ He says that the essence of having a heart for God is having the mind of Christ, the crucified mind. It is allowing Emmanuel, “God with us,” to influence our lives today through the salvific work he accomplished in past history. According to Koyama, this crucified mind “is not a neurotic mind. It is not a morbid mind. It does not have a persecution complex. It is a positive mind. It is a healthy mind. It is the mind which is ready to crucify the self for the sake of building up a community.”¹⁵ For Koyama, the servant heart begins with the nurture of the crucified mind. He says, “There is no way to domesticate Jesus Christ.”¹⁶ Anything else distorts the image of God. Too many times we give God our intellectual compliance while refusing to turn over our wills and agendas to him. Jesus relinquished his entire will to do the will of his heavenly Father.

In Christ we have the freedom of surrender; we are freed to lay down the burden of self-will. We can, then, fall totally into the arms of Jesus trusting him completely for all things for all-time. This is what the apostle Paul speaks about when he says, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20, NIV). We need to be crucified—purged of everything that cannot be used by God, so God can use us in the world.

God attached himself to the world in order to produce the crucified savior and, in the Savior’s followers, the goal of a crucified mind. According to Koyama, having a crucified mind, then, means to attach ourselves to the needs of others. Koyama writes about the culture of Thailand where to be detached represents the idea of good. It can be portrayed as “clothing washed, neatly ironed and placed in a closed, undisturbed drawer. Don’t wear it! It will get dirty! The clothing must stay

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 47-48.

¹² *Ibid.*, 98.

¹³ Kosuke Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1974), 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

detached from the dirty world.”¹⁷ This detachment is a commitment to non-involvement, but Jesus calls us to a commitment of involvement and being attached to the suffering of our neighbors.

Our neighbors are not interested in our Christology but in our living it out by being neighbors. They may not be concerned with whether we “Love God with all our heart, soul, and mind” (Deut. 6:5, NIV). But they are more concerned with our self-denial and whether we “Love our neighbor as ourselves” (Lev. 19:18, NIV). Our neighbors can easily explain the passage, “He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he cannot see” (1 John 4:20, NIV), and they know all about us.

Jesus was not like this. He faced the reality of his neighbor’s needs. Our attitude toward our neighbor, modeled after the likeness of Jesus, carries with it a unique responsibility for theological and practical obedience to Jesus. The only way we can be authentic in our life and lifestyle is by imitating Christ in our personal relationships.

Self-Denial Calls for a Simple Lifestyle

In denying self, we adopt simpler life-styles, developing churches which model Christ in ministry and social conscience. We need to be conscious—when satisfying our basic needs—of others’ needs. Then we need to seek ways to satisfy them. Our giving should support those ministries which serve both the physical and spiritual needs of people. We should live in loving defiance to the world and against a society that does not value Christ’s examples.

Simpler living for affluent Christians means trying to take both of these facts seriously. It means using all the gifts God has given us, and sharing them with others. But how sad it is when the church fails to do this. In *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*, Jack Miller says, “I was standing in the midst of the Great American Church Tragedy. That tragedy is the local church with an abundance of resources and spiritual gifts held back by unbelieving apathy”¹⁸ The chief reason for this apathy is that “needy” people—the sick, the dying, the poor, and the despairing—are usually not attractive, and sometimes they have fallen into their problems by their own failings. It is easy for Christians to start looking for the noble, deserving poor and to discover that such people are in very short supply.¹⁹ What we need to do is find and learn about the ignoble poor.

Self-Denial Requires an Understanding of Poverty

As we deny ourselves, we need to learn about those to whom many basic needs are denied. This is not the kind of learning that is done for its own sake, as if it were enough to know about poverty and be against it. Rather, it is intended to lead to other kinds of activity and to give meaning and purpose to those actions. Learning about poverty is one thing. Getting to know the poor is another. Knowing the poor is a prerequisite to caring about them and helping them in many ways, including financially. The Bible calls us to learn about the “Lazaruses outside our doors.” Senator Ernest F. Hollings of South Carolina tells what this kind of learning meant to him:

I was a victim of hunger myopia. I didn’t really see hunger until I visited some families in a Charleston, South Carolina slum. Before we had gone a block, I was miserable. I began to understand that hunger is real, that it exists in hundreds of humans in my own home city. I saw what all America needs to see. The hungry are not able-bodied men,

¹⁷ Ibid., 84.

¹⁸ John Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 84.

¹⁹ Ibid., 154.

sitting around drunk and lazy on welfare. They are children. They are abandoned women, or the crippled, or the aged. Bridging the barrier of economic segregation and becoming acquainted with the poor near our own homes might do more to help us understand what Jesus and the prophets were talking about than anything else we could do.²⁰

Some of those “Lazaruses outside our doors” are our homeless neighbors. At Tenth Presbyterian Church, it is good for us to establish friendships with these neighbors and vice versa. We are maintaining our testimony of calling the world to repentance, while at the same time, seeing that the needs of individuals are met. The renewal of both urban life and church members is accomplished as the Scriptures are read, explained, understood, and as Christians are used in ministry to others. It is the servant heart and crucified mind that denies self and is open to giving. It is the mind that does not seek its own profit. It is the mind that is happy in giving of itself for the benefit of another. It is a crucified mind, the mind of Christ. It is a mind of self-denial based on Christ's self-denial.²¹

²⁰. Klay, *op. cit.*, 72.

²¹. Koyama, *op. cit.*, 223.