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# Self-Denial or Self-Actualization (9:18-27)

Leon Barnes

*“And it came about that while He was praying alone, the disciples were with Him, and He questioned them, saying, ‘Who do the multitudes say that I am?’ And they answered and said, ‘John the Baptist, and others say Elijah; but others, that one of the prophets of old has risen again.’ And He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ And Peter answered and said, ‘The Christ of God.’ . . . And He was saying to them all, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it . . .’” (9:18-27).*

How important it is to know what the people are saying. One of the difficulties of leadership in any area is that you tend to lose contact with what the people outside your circle are thinking. You have a group around you who feeds you information and attitudes. Your tendency is to believe that their thoughts represent the thinking of the people in general, but the problem is that they often do not. Perhaps this is the reason the New Testament puts so much emphasis on the elders of the church being out among the people, so that they would not fall into that trap. This same problem prevails in businesses and schools. The result is often a feeling of shock when some program is launched that the leaders thought everyone was behind, only to learn that they are the only ones who like the idea at all.

It is wise to sometimes ask, “What do the people think?” Jesus asked, “Who do the crowds

say that I am?” Jesus is the Son of God. Unlike us, because He had miraculous knowledge, He could have known who the people thought He was without asking. Even so, He asked. Maybe He asked so that they might see the value of His interest in what the crowd was thinking. One thing is certain and serves as a tremendous example to us—if you want to know what the people are thinking, *ask*. The apostles knew. Their response to Jesus’ question was: “John the Baptist, but some say Elijah; and others say that one of the prophets of old has risen again” (9:19). People can only think as high as their frame of reference. They had never heard of God’s coming down in the form of a man. The greatest thing they knew of was the coming of John the Baptist, or Elijah, or maybe even one of the old prophets. The problem of the world as a whole is that it cannot imagine undenominational Christianity because it is unfamiliar with it. When we try to describe the church of the Lord, the world only knows to view it as some of the “churches” they are already familiar with.

## **“BUT WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?”**

The apostles had been privileged to more information. They had seen more of Jesus’ miracles and heard more of His teaching. They had even observed more closely His prayers, His heart, and His way of dealing with people. Surely their thinking was even more important. Had they been able to see any further than the masses? It is one thing to know that the crowd does not

really understand the fullness of the message, but it is more important that those who are obligated to teach the crowd the better way be clear in their understanding. The concern of the church is not so much that the outside world does not understand the nature of the church. The real concern must be that too often those on the inside, the ones who are to teach the crowd the right way, do not understand the nature of the body any better than those in the crowd. What if the twelve had answered wrong? Jesus would surely have gone back to them to more clearly present the message of who He was so that they might see it properly.

They answered correctly: "The Christ of God" (9:20). Jesus knew that the ones responsible for the message getting out to the crowd understood it correctly, but the time was not right for the message to go out with fervor. Therefore, He commanded them at that time to tell no one (9:21). He needed to complete His mission in the world and go to Calvary for the salvation of men before the message would go out to all. Even the greatest message must be presented at the right time for the most good to be done.

When the apostles understood who He was, He immediately began to tell them about the cross. He told them that He "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" (9:22). Since they knew who He was, they now needed to understand where it was all going to lead. They, like the crowd, suffered from limited knowledge. They had followed Jesus expecting to be led to an earthly kingdom and places of leadership in that kingdom. That notion needed to be corrected. They were indeed headed to Jerusalem, but not for a throne. They were going there for Jesus to die.

### **WHAT DISCIPLESHIP WILL REQUIRE**

It was as though Jesus said, "Now that you know who I am and where I am going, let me share with you what will be necessary on your part if you continue to follow Me." Every one of us comes to this crossroad with Jesus. Discipleship is easy as long as you think in terms of a throne. It is easy to decide that you should follow Him as long as you are talking about heaven, about glory, about the blessings of living for Him and how He helps us. But one day we must

face the cross. Then that challenge strikes at the heart. Will we be true to Him as disciples, even to the cross? Or, will we turn back when we realize this is not all grace and glory?

Step one in discipleship is *self-denial*. "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (9:23). That has a strange ring to it. The message we are used to hearing is the gospel of "self-esteem," "a healthy self-image," and "self-actualization." Everywhere you turn in our society, problems are laid at the door of poor self-image. That is the blame for poor grades, drug abuse, and alcoholism. The more we promote self-esteem, the worse the problems in our society become, it seems. Could it be we are headed in the wrong direction? Jesus knows men. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He taught about self-denial. His plea was for people to get their minds off themselves and think of others. Perhaps the real problem is that selfishness takes over in the heart and drives care for others out.

The very beginning point in following Jesus is to be "poor in spirit." This involves the attitude that we have nothing to offer the Lord, for we are bankrupt spiritually. The need is for God to help and meet us at point zero for our salvation. It is not that we meet Him halfway. We need to crucify ourselves instead of trying to actualize ourselves. Jesus tied self-denial to the cross. Everyone hearing Him that day would have understood that to "take up his cross daily and follow Me" involved dying to self. Crosses were not ornaments; they were tools of death. The concept is to rise every day with fresh resolve to put self to death and focus your life on serving God by serving others. A self-centered church may swell in numbers and miss the way to God. Self-centered Christians may feel good about who they are and never become what Christ wants them to be.

Step two in discipleship is to *lose ourselves*. To save one's life is to lose it, and to lose one's life for the sake of Jesus is to save it. We will not find that line in any of the modern pop psychology books or self-help manuals. Instead, our modern thinkers tell people they must find themselves. It seems that few days pass without someone's throwing off responsibility for their family and for the job they are committed to do, declaring

that they must find themselves. Strangely, I have never known of such efforts to result in a better person who is more productive or more caring. It seems that when they find themselves, what they have found is a selfish clod who cares only for his own pleasure and happiness.

Jesus demanded the very opposite. He said, "Lose yourself." When you try to save your life, you will lose it; and when you lose it *for His sake*, you will find it. The answer to the problem of low self-esteem is to stop thinking so much about yourself and start thinking of others. It is to put Christ first in your life and to make the will of God the primary objective in every part of life.

When we look at things objectively, we see, as Jesus did, that one who gains everything in this world profits nothing if he loses his soul in eternity. Even from a physical point of view, one thing is obvious. Many spend their lives trying to achieve some material goal, such as a large bank account or a beautiful home on the lake, only to achieve the goal and then have a heart attack and die before having time to enjoy it. Values are horribly mixed when the prime importance is placed on the things of this world.

Step three in discipleship is to unashamedly *take our stand with Jesus*. If we are ashamed of Him or His Word, "of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when He comes in His glory, and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels" (9:26). It is hard to imagine anyone's being ashamed of the One who died that we might live, but it happens all the time; and, if we are completely honest with ourselves, all of us are tempted to be ashamed of Him at times. We hesitate to stand up for Him when in a crowd of those we would like to impress. How foolish! One of the strongest supports in living the life God calls upon us to live is to openly declare who we are and who we serve. It is the timid soul who is taunted day and night to do wrong. The one who stands up for His faith tends not to be bothered so badly.

"Closet Christians" are the death of Christianity. Come on out. Stand up and be counted as one of God's people. Let the world know you belong to Him by the way you live, by the words you say, and by your faith and dedication to His cause.

### THE KINGDOM IS COMING

Some standing there would be alive when the kingdom came. This seems to be talking

about the establishment of the kingdom that took place on the Day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2. That kingdom is not one that was to be built after two or three thousand years. It is now in existence (Colossians 1:13; Hebrews 12:28).

Please note that, in a very personal way, the kingdom comes into each of our lives as we take the three steps of discipleship Jesus taught here. Our goal always needs to be to deny ourselves, to lose ourselves, and to unashamedly stand up for our Lord Jesus Christ. That is quite a challenge.

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## QUOTATIONS

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"We always complain that rosebushes have thorns, instead of praising God that thorn bushes have roses."

Joe Lomuscio

"The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason."

T. S. Eliot

"An ulcer is what you get mountain-climbing over molehills."

"A faithful friend will have the courage to challenge us to grow while at the same time unconditionally accepting us in our imperfection."

Bill & Linda Swetmon,  
*Your Friendship Potential*

"The provision of the Cross not only cancels out our past but covers our present."

Herbert Lockyer,  
*Triple Truths of Scripture 1*

"Wealth is like a viper, which is harmless if a man knows how to take hold of it; but if he does not, it will entwine around his hand and bite him."

Clement of Alexandria

"I have a cure for boredom that never will fail. It is made up of ten rules: Go out among the people and perform one kind act, ten times."

Carrie Chapman Catt