

Series: Ruin to Renovation	Reference: Luke 14:26-27 & Various Scriptures	Title: Followers	Date: 03.18.18
Website Writeup: This week we continue the discussion of Self Denial, exploring how we become true followers of Jesus!			

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Thanks to Dallas Willard, this series is born out of his book, *Renovation of the Heart*. Many of his thoughts & words make it into these sermons; read the book as you follow along.

We've been exploring ourselves & society in light of Christ & spiritual formation over these weeks...I thought I'd start today by bringing our attention to a recent film which depicts some of what we've been exploring...

Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri... a movie about a woman's effort in trying to get the local police to find her daughters brutal killers; wrought with overtones of racism, misogyny & rural poverty. If you'd like to understand what we've been saying in these sermons about the postmodern philosophy of life, or the current humanistic & individualistic world view, and a society which has unhinged itself from God, just watch this movie.

Some might think the central lesson from the movie is 'violence begets violence.' Especially since it's stated by the simplest nonviolent character of the movie, a 19 year old woman. But for me, the film's summed up by the lead character, Mildred Hayes, when she finds herself in a field alone with a deer standing nearby. She speaks, as if to the deer, saying, *"Yup, still no arrests. How come I wonder? 'Cause there ain't no God, and the whole world's empty, and it doesn't matter what we do to each other?"* Now, I did *not* call the movie studio & instruct them to put that line in there. Nor did I see the film until after I wrote my recent sermons. It simply reflects exactly the sentiment of we've identified in society! Turns out Nietzsche was right! God is dead, we've killed him, and we're now suffering the consequences!

Since in saying this, she acknowledges the current humanistic individualistic worldview which is, without God life doesn't matter, and as such, it doesn't matter what we do in our bodies, or to each other. But she also reveals the angst in living under such a hopeless system through her overall anger & unrelenting pursuit of her daughters killer. *Not to mention*, she follows her statement with, *"I hope not."* Which reveals the current worldview doesn't work, given there's something in us which knows it's not right, since we're made in God's image - there is a god, life's not empty, or purposeless, and it does matter what we do in our bodies, and to each other.

The funny thing in focusing on personal spiritual formation, is that we become better more communally minded people, violence subsides & peace reigns as Jesus reigns in individual hearts, which collectively make up a community of peace.

Last week we spoke about dying to self, or denying the self. Not a nail biting struggle, but a calm joyous submission to the hand of God moving in our hearts. It entails firstly

what Jesus said in Luke 14:26-27... *“If anyone comes to me & does not hate (or could be translated - ‘prefer over’) father & mother, wife & children, brothers & sisters - yes, even their own life - such a person cannot be my disciple. 27 And whoever does not carry their cross & follow me cannot be my disciple.*

Which means, anyone who hasn’t fully counted the cost of following Jesus, and not made him also Lord of their lives, can’t follow Him (be a disciple). They can’t grasp Christ’s teaching - they simply can’t enter into the process of total transformation. It’s not that they can’t intellectually grasp the concepts, it’s that their heart isn’t transformed by the Holy Spirit to be able to experience them as needed. The prideful self still stands in the way.

Remember, Romans 8:7-8, *“The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. 8 Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.”* It’s not that God doesn’t want them to experience spiritual transformation, or won’t allow them - they just can’t. They don’t have what it takes.

If I cringe at Romans 12:1-2 in it’s command to submit before fully understanding, if my pride’s hurt in that I think myself intellectually superior to the Scriptures, that they must conform to me, or that I need full understanding before I’ll make an intelligent decision to follow, or instead of me submitting myself to be transformed by Jesus & His Word - I’ll never be able to walk intimately with Him.

It’s not unintelligent to say there are things in Scripture you don’t understand, or even which rub you the wrong way, but that you trust them & submit to their authority anyway. That’s simply wisdom in understanding this is the revealed Word of God given to humankind for the sake of knowing God over time - something we grow in while trusting. But if I say, “I don’t agree with that part of Scripture & I’ll not submit to it’s authority,” we must understand, that pride stands between us & Jesus, and Romans calls that sowing to the flesh - Adam & Eve all over again, saying, “I’ll choose how is best for me to live.”

Willard compares the person who won’t submit to Christ’s Lordship in these areas to telling a blind person they can’t drive a car given they can’t see - it’s not that we aren’t allowing them, they just can’t see to do it.

Keeping that Romans passage in mind, we also think on Jesus’ words in John 3 as he spoke to Nicodemus... *“Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water & the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’”*

So, this goes beyond mere intellectual acuity & the grasping of knowledge. This discussion has divine fingerprints all over it - something of God must happen in a person in order that they’re born again - Spirit gives birth to spirit. That, coupled with Romans 12:1-2 saying to us that submission precedes understanding, makes clear the first & most important step is counting the cost of following Jesus. Then, saying yes to

Him even if we can't understand what all that means. He is safe. He can be trusted with your soul.

But no amount of prattling on my part from the pulpit will convince you of that. However, if God's calling you into relationship with himself for the first time, or deeper into spiritual formation & away from hidden roadblocks, then you'll not be able to contend with Him as His words reach your ears. He'll wear you away like water on stone if he's laid claim to your soul. Although, He wants you to willingly join in that intimate relationship. And we will give in, no one can resist the loving hand of God for long.

It's necessary for us to speak the Gospel message to ourselves, one another & out to the nations; it's not only commanded, it's healthy joy to do so! *Jesus said in Luke 11:28, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God & obey it."* And Romans 10:17 states, *"Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ."* And the story of Christ is a scriptural one.

In addition to all this, we must avoid making this concept of dying to self become a legalistic ladder in order to climb our way to God, or of judging another's heart. Of becoming too focused on outward behavior, disregarding Grace & misunderstanding that true change happens over time from a truly changed heart by the work of God.

"...for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose." (Philippians 2:13) We're simply pursuing Jesus well, putting ourselves in the position of receiving new mercies & grace daily, and in doing so we're transformed by the renewing of our minds.

So...when we worry we won't be able to think on some *thing* again (*insert your favorite elicit or violent fantasy here*), or that we can't do some licentious activity any longer, we must remember - spiritual formation in Christ means, *we won't always need to avoid that action or thought. Rather, our desires will conform to Jesus' desires, as He transforms us; we simply won't want to think on that thing any longer. In essence, it's the alcoholic losing their desire for drink.*

And how valuable is it to gain this life in Christ? Let's say your childhood friend, who has always been honest with you, wins the lottery for \$300 million, cashes out, but never spends it. He's got no family & no one knows what he's done with the money. Out of respect you never ask. But on his deathbed he shows you where he buried it in his basement. He says he'll sign over his house to you if you'll liquidate your personal assets & give it all to charity. Would you do it? Of course you would.

You sign over a few hundred thousand dollars to some charity, and for only a moment it seems you have nothing. But with a stroke of the pen, you've gained more than you can imagine. It's the same with Jesus.

In Matthew 13:44 there's a one verse parable of the field, it says... *"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field."*

In his joy, sold all he had, bought that field - that's the denying of self we're talking about. Doing all we can to get to Jesus - even getting out of our own way to do so. He's the treasure in the field. Last week we tried to look at how self denial isn't a teeth grinding endeavor of pain & loss, rather, God's changing our desires, so we no longer want those things which are harmful, but rather now we desire healthy godly things in life. We talked about our willingness in dying to self in coming to Christ, realizing that in Jesus there's life abundant.

We realize the lies we've believed in the common culture's worldview in which we've all swum. The lie being, our pursuit of self fulfillment, in whatever form, will give us fulfillment & satisfaction - but it doesn't. Our desires simply grow more ravenous. Our identity, wherever we place it, becomes more needy. If it's in your job, or some role in life, and that gets taken away, you're lost. If you're identity is centered around your sexuality (which is a very new phenomena) it'll crumble. If you're identity is in some other person & they leave, or are taken from you, you're lost. Rather, we need to be like the man in this field. Do you think he was sad, or it hurt to sell all he had to get what was more valuable? No, not at all. It is a joy to give all we have to gain the kingdom of God. Someone once said... *"He is not a fool who gives up what he cannot keep for the sake of what he can never lose."*

To die to self is always exchanging the lesser for the greater. It's not just a matter of intellectually grasping the principles of proper theology. But a divine movement, enabling us to have the Kingdom of God implanted within us. It's not about personal fulfillment, but of gaining identity in Christ - of Jesus leading us to actual true personal fulfillment, which is only found in him. This brings about a perfect joy which isn't about everything going well for me, but rather suffering well as Jesus did for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Which produces the life of Christ in us to be able **to live out teachings** such as Luke 6:37-40...

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. 38 Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." 39 He also told them this parable: "Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into a pit? 40 The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher."

Because, it's a spiritual axiom, we'll have dry times, or experience pain & suffering - it feels more like the cross, than the empty tomb. It's at these times when we must hold onto the truth of Scripture & keep moving forward. We need to hold onto words like 2 Corinthians 9:6-8... *"Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.* (There are times when we don't want to give

of ourselves, we don't want to show up, we don't want to engage in the spiritual life)
7 Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work."

I was recently speaking with someone who's feeling dry. Not getting anything. That's normal. My advice was simply keep going. Plod through the valley. Be methodical. Use your well worn tools which have worked before. Since in digging in the dirt, you get sweaty & tired, but eventually you uncover something God has in store for you.

It's in these times we remember the promises we have more than any other. *Luke 12:32-34... "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*

When we feel dry we want to give up, our desires rear their ugly head & say, "This'll make you feel better!" But it won't. Keep moving forward, knowing where your identity lies, in Christ, in his Kingdom! *Do all things without grumbling or arguing (Philippians 2:14).*

Kim and I have noticed the words of loving your neighbor have been usurped by the secular community (Mark 12:30). But loving your neighbor without framing it in the love of God - putting of Jesus first - always degenerates to love of self. It means you love one, but hate the other. It births self-deification where we get to decide who deserves love & who doesn't. But love of God, driving towards a true love of neighbor, pulls all aspects of the human condition together making for a whole person in proper alignment as God intended it to be. As we experience God's kingdom life more, we see this to be true. As we submit, understanding comes & we become better neighbors.

As we submit our time, talent, treasure, sexuality, relationships, body, words & thoughts, we become more & more aligned with Jesus' heart & see life more clearly through his eyes (Romans 12:1-2). We know ourselves better as we learn to view ourselves through the eyes of the Creator.

George Mueller once said, *"There was a day when I died: died to George Mueller, his opinions, preferences, tastes and will; died to the world, its approval or censure; died to the approval or blame even of my brethren or friends, and since then, I have studied only to show myself 'approved unto God.'" People said George Mueller had the 23 Psalm written on his face.*

Wouldn't you enjoy peace? A life where others opinions of you only mattered in healthy ways? Or the news didn't upset you so much? Or traffic didn't tie you in knots bringing out the worst in you? Or not to worry about money? Or you could lose that crippling

anxiety plaguing you in social situations, or in times of apparent physical danger? Or lose that self-righteous pride & constant disgust & judgment of others? Wouldn't that be nice?

St Francis of Assisi said, *“Wear the world like a loose garment, which touches us in a few places & there lightly.”* Tight clothes limit movement. Being in the world but not of it is like wearing a light toga! That's done by being an engaged disciple of Christ; putting ourselves in the position of receiving more of him daily. That's not to turn off our feelings, or eliminate our desires, rather in submitting ourselves to him, our desires & feelings come into order & proper alignment - they're no longer all consuming & hurtful of us & others around us.

If our desires in Christ are strong at all, they reveal His desires & not our own selfish directives. The maturing Christian has little concern about getting their own way & much more concern about seeing Christ's initiatives of love, forgiveness, mercy & justice established. They live in & trust the words of Romans 8:28, *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”* They realize God's not only in charge of their life, but the world which settles their soul. Anxiety, fear & anger ebb away as they realize God will work all things out for his good. They need not control themselves, given their desires fall in line with Jesus, nor others, it's simply not their job - they allow God to be God.

Very simply in submitting to Christ, we fall into becoming a disciple; a follower. One who dies to self, not controlled by thought, feeling or actions of self-exaltation, or having their own way. Rather we're controlled by the love of God & neighbor in that order. *We're not perfect. We're growing. As it says in 1 John 1:8, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. We don't deny, we can fall back into self-will, but we have the tools to get out of that pit at our disposal. Jesus extends a hand to lift us out. 1 Corinthians 10:13, “No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.”*

This becomes important when we become embroiled in conflict with others. Where anger & self-will so easily take over. *But it's then, we must look to John 12:24-25, “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. 25 Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”*

The life of Christ in us, as we're transformed by his Word & Spirit, subverts, overtakes & replaces the radical evil which so easily seems to take over. When that happens, the desperation, anger, un-forgiveness, anxiety & need to retaliate upon others is cut out of us like with a knife. Then Jesus is allowed to work, not only to bring peace to our minds, but to our relationships & our spheres of influence in the world.