

Our Self

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it” (Matthew 16:24-25).

It seems that we have within each of us a thing called “self.” Self is not just an abstract term. It seems to be a real part of our innermost being. Freud obscured things with his terms of “id,” “ego,” and “superego.” “Self” (*heautou* in the Greek text) is a perfectly good term. Perhaps it’s distinct from our “soul,” which may be the very essence of our being, our life. “Self may be what our will acts on, causing us to do, say or think whatever we do, say or think. We always seek to protect our self and its desires, ambitions, and values. Self seeks always its own good. We intensely love our self.

But “self” is fallen! It makes us selfish. It makes us want to be independent of God. It gives us desires that are inimical to God. We seek always to exalt our “self,” to live a self-centered and self-indulgent life. And “self” is the part of us that sin controls. This exceedingly powerful force called sin acts on self making us incorrigible, inveterate, hopelessly and totally corrupt sinners. Our “self” is now odious to God. Satan (and/or his wicked hosts) seems to have access to our “self” as well, invariably causing us to do evil. Self takes great pleasure in sin. It thoroughly enjoys sinning. Sin gratifies the self. Self lusts for the pleasures of the body and for all that the world (Satan’s playground, the sphere over which he has dominion) puts on offer. Satan was proud, full of himself. Pride is the exorbitant love of self. (Humility, in contrast, is such control of the self that one has a reasoned or realistic understanding of self.)

We say that Jesus was “selfless.” More accurately, He had complete control of His self. He could love, serve and obey God, etc, without the self-gratifying, self-loving pull of the self that we fallen humans all have. The fruit of the Holy Spirit includes that self-control (Galatians 5:22).

So Jesus calls on us to “deny” our self. (Matthew 16:24-26; Luke 9-26). That cannot mean we renounce or abandon our identity. God gave each of us our own persona, our own personal identity, which we retain even in heaven. (At the Transfiguration, Moses was Moses and Elijah was Elijah.) The Greek word translated “deny” means to reject or to disregard. To “deny our self” therefore must mean we’re to stop gratifying or indulging or protecting the self; and we do that, presumably, by an act of the will. Evidently we have the power to do that or, if not, the indwelling Holy Spirit (if we’re *in Christ*) enables us to do that. If we don’t, we cannot please God. We can only please God, love God, serve God, imitate God, love others, etc, if we “deny” our self-loving “self.”

Because of the pull of the self, we cannot and will not think clearly about God or His will or spiritual matters, as compelling as they are. Because of the self-gratifying nature of self, we refuse to obey God. We refuse even to want to know His Word. Self blocks us from understanding that God is Judge, or even that there’s an existence beyond death. (Such thoughts are alien to almost the entire human race, due to the power of self.) We must deny self by an exertion of the will in order to please God. Our love of self also blocks us from even seeing the needs of others, let alone sacrificing self in some way to do something about those needs. We must deny self in order to love others.

Taking up a cross and following Jesus is denial of self in the extreme. Anyone carrying a cross is about to be dead. Such a person has no interest in self-glorying, in bodily pleasures, or in the things of this world; all those things are totally irrelevant because the end of life is imminent. The cross purposely humiliates; any vestige of pride vanishes when carrying a cross. Nothing matters to the one carrying a cross and heading to death, except whatever legacy that person may be leaving for others. Carrying a cross is the ultimate denial of self. Jesus asks us to have such an attitude if we’re going to follow Him.

If we’re willing even to sacrifice our very lives for the sake of Christ, out of love for Christ [to love Christ is to love God], we have successfully and thoroughly denied self. Not all of us are called to do that, but if the willingness is there, we are denying self. There are only two options, evidently: love of self, or love of Christ.

The “saving/losing//losing/finding” verse (v. 25) means that a law exists external to ourselves that reverses our corrupted understanding of life. We’ve gotten things backwards. God has decreed that the life that counts, the life that

pleases God and receives His blessing and reward, is the one that entails denial of self. The life that obeys Scripture, that imitates both Christ's Person and mission, is the true life.

Is Christ Jesus in these verses enjoining asceticism on His followers? No. Jesus was no ascetic. But He knew clearly His identity and His mission and He was not allowing anything either to distract Him or to block Him from faithfully fulfilling His God-ordained mission. He is calling us to the same degree of commitment to God's will. Jesus was God's promised Servant. We're here also as servants of God. So we too need to exercise extraordinary commitment to carrying out God's will, regardless the risks or consequences or sacrifices needed. But more than commitment, we need love, supernatural, transcendent love. And that can only exist if there's denial of self.

If there's not denial of self, that life is lost, wasted. Yes, it may be a happy life, a life that's totally enjoyable. That's because self delights itself in sin. Sin really is enjoyable (in a perverse way). But in the final analysis, when God judges us, that kind of life has already been deemed "lost."

Jesus heightens the demand, thereby forcing the issue, by saying further that we must even "hate" our self (Luke 14:26) if we desire to be His disciple [which means to be saved]. If we are aware – *painfully* aware – of how corrupt our fallen self is, of how much it loves to sin, of how it rebels against God, we will indeed hate our self. And if we do that, our recourse (the only recourse there is) is to flee to Jesus for new life, His beautiful and perfect life.

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"But wait," someone will protest, "you're making this up. Those verses in Matthew and Luke are simply Jesus' way of exaggerating things in order to teach commitment. We're saved by believing in Jesus. So whatever else you try to add to believing in Christ is crass legalism. Jesus has set us free from all laws; we're under grace. Don't you know that salvation is a gift?" My response necessitates a brief discussion of commonly misunderstood soteriologic terms:

First, belief in Jesus is not mental assent to, or cognitive acceptance of, the bare facts of the Gospel. Belief is as belief *does*. Thus, to believe in the Person of the Lord Jesus is to submit in obedience to His teachings and commands. James 2:14-26 argues this. "Faith without deeds," James states, is ineffective; "useless," he says. Faith is made complete by what we do (v. 22). A person "is justified by what he does and not by faith alone" (v.24). This is not legalism, which is trying to be saved by obeying certain rules. Nor is it works salvation, which is trying to merit being saved. These verses are there because our beliefs are genuine if we do something about them. Beliefs are powerful; they must change us in some relevant or appropriate way. Paul says the same thing. In Galatians 5:6, for example, he writes, "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." Notice: Not simply faith, but faith *that expresses itself* through love. Faith, if it's genuine, expresses itself in a way that glorifies God. We believe, after all, not in a thing or an idea, but in a person, and that Person is God. Our attitude toward God is fear, love, submissive obedience, trust, faithfulness and service. Always. The goal for us of believing, indeed, the goal of salvation, is to glorify God. And we do that by being godly, that is, by being as He is and as He does. Being godly is living out His Word.

Second, we need to think about freedom. Unfortunately, the term "free" is misunderstood in modern Christianity to suggest that we're free to live as we please, just so we have faith in Christ. That's baloney. No one at any time is free to live as he or she pleases. Since creation and until forever in the future, human creatures are obligated to obey our Creator's instructions how to live in His world. So why, in Galatians, does Paul write that we're "free" (Gal 5:1, 13a)? That can't mean we're free from all laws, because right there in Galatians Paul also states that we're under the Law of Christ (6:2; also 1 Cor 9:21). Paul's argument in Galatians is that if we're in Christ we're free from (a) the rituals, which mostly pointed to the coming of Christ, and (b) those laws that created a distinction between Israel and the Gentiles. Thus, the Law's demands for circumcision, Sabbath and festival observance, worship at the Temple, dietary laws, etc. are obsolete; Christ's coming fulfilled many parts of the Law. And in Christ both Gentiles and Jews are in community. So Galatians reveals that Gentiles can be saved by trusting in the Jewish Messiah *without* having to become Jews. But the righteous requirements of the Mosaic Law reflect God's enduring holy will. Christ even enhanced many of them and enjoined them on His followers. (See for example the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew.) We are slaves to righteousness (Rom 6:18). God forbid we should be in any way like the pagans all around us.

Third, grace is misunderstood. We are fallen creatures, enslaved by a fallen self, a sin nature, and by Satan. We're ugly and odious to God, thus deserving of nothing but eternal condemnation. Yet God shows great mercy instead, and He provides for us a Savior and lovingly showers us with the blessings of salvation. Thus, election, justification, forgiveness, regeneration, adoption, sealing, and eventually glorification. We deserve none of these, but God is good. We err in supposing that grace is something for the Church, but that Law was for Israel. Grace was fully in evidence to Israel in the O.T. era. They were saved by grace by trusting in something God said (or promised) in His Word, and they were given the Law for their sanctification. Same with us! We're saved by grace, thru faith, *and* we've been given the Law of Christ for our sanctification. And – don't miss this! – it is God's will that we be sanctified (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

And the fourth term to think carefully about is gift. To us, today, a gift is given without strings attached. Not so back in the era of the writing of Scripture. Back then, giving a gift meant that a relationship with the giver was either being maintained or was being initiated by the gift. The gift came with the full expectation of reciprocation in some way. Salvation is a gift, yes, with awesome privileges. But it is given to create a relationship with Christ. It is given in love, expecting love in return. It comes with the expectation of certain (revealed) responsibilities being fulfilled. No one in his or her right mind would turn down the gift God offers, but we cannot (dare not) take the gift and refuse to reciprocate in the way that God intends.

Dear reader: Self always seeks the easy and comfortable life. It loves the pleasures and the riches the world we live in puts on offer. [But see Luke 7:14!!] It seeks honor, lusting for the esteem of others. It finds distractions to replace knowing God and doing His will That's why we fall into error so easily regarding these theological terms. But understand this, We do it deliberately! We're rebels, *condemned* rebels. Only the mega-powerful work of the Spirit of God can loose us from the power of self, sin and Satan. But we have to first acknowledge the need. And we don't want to do even that.

What we in America do today, in our hideous self-centeredness, is distort the Gospel and miss its very purpose to serve our own selfish ends. We suppose that we're saved for our own gratification, for our own protection. Wrong! The cross was necessary for God to be just and yet able to justify condemned sinners. The atonement was for God, so that He could make us fit to be in His presence and receive the blessings of sonship, of participation in the Godhead. The forgiveness of sins is necessary so we can be in relationship to God. The atonement was to make it possible for us to love God, serve God, be like God, and to love others. But what we do in our self-love is suppose that forgiveness of sin and escape from hell is the end, the goal and purpose of salvation.

Let's ask a church-goer: "Bro., are you saved?" "Yes!" "Good. But, Why?" "Huh? 'Why?' So I don't have to be in hell." "Yes. But that's not the 'Why?' Try again." "Because God loves me." "Yes. That's the means of salvation, but it's not the *purpose* of it. Try again." "Well I don't know what you're getting at."

OK, I made up this dialogue. I'm sure my readers would give far better answers. But let's think about what Bro. said (or rather, didn't say). To him, and indeed to most of us, trusting Christ to have my sins forgiven and my being saved from hell is what there is to Christianity. It's all about ME. Well, No! That response to the Gospel is only the portal, the beginning. It's how we get started on a new life in Christ in which we become like Christ and serve Him as He's revealed in His Word. This isn't subtle. God calls us to join Him in defeating evil, to glorify Him by reflecting His Person to the world, and to be with Him forever in a uniquely blessed, loving relationship. God is infinitely glorious. We cannot add to His glory in any way. We glorify Him only *by reflecting His glory*. We do that by being like God. That requires intentionality on our part, and full time commitment. Christ Jesus is our model. We're to imitate Him.

The demand to deny self, to repudiate the fallen selfishness that is our default controlling force, is the first step toward glorifying God. Without that first step we cannot go on in godliness. As Paul puts it, we first put off the old man, then put on the new (Col 3:5-11). The "old" is our fallen self. The "old" is dead, having died in Christ on the cross. The "new" is Christ, raised and exalted. We put on Christ by obeying Him, regardless the risk or sacrifice it may involve. We put on Christ by being Christ-like in our person, by doing what Christ came to do, and by thinking and behaving according to His Word. If we're saved, Christ *is* our life. We live the rest of our days here on earth as the exalted Christ, thru us, expresses His life to the world and continues His mission to save His beloved human creatures. *That* is salvation.