

The Cost of Discipleship

by Erlo Stegen

The sermon emphasizes the importance of denying oneself and taking up the cross to follow Jesus and receive eternal reward.

Duration: 56:24

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Matthew 10:39, Matthew 16:22-25, Mark 8:34-35, John 12:24-26

Topics: "Discipleship", "Self Denial"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of humbling oneself and denying one's own will in order to follow Jesus. He refers to Jesus' words to His disciples, where He calls them to come and follow Him, but only if they are willing to give up themselves. The speaker highlights the paradoxical nature of Jesus' teachings, where one must lose their life in order to gain it and go down in order to be uplifted. He shares a personal anecdote about a preacher who emphasized the need for suffering in order to receive blessings from God. The sermon concludes with a cautionary tale about a young man who missed out on the opportunity to become a disciple of Jesus because he was not willing to deny himself and follow Him.

Transcript

Let's read words from the Lord Jesus' mouth, Matthew 16. Let's start at verse 22. But he turned and said to Peter, sorry, verse 22, then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, far be it from you, Lord, this shall not happen to you.

But he turned and said to Peter, get behind me, Satan, you are an offense to me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men. Then Jesus said to his disciples, if anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Then he said to his disciples, if anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. I want to highlight this point today. He who desires to follow me may take up his cross and follow me.

Let him deny himself. If you want to follow Jesus, it is something that requires total commitment. It means denying yourself.

I remember many years ago in Germany, a certain servant of the Lord spoke to me. He said, when I got converted, I went to Bible college. And I had an amazing experience.

Because when we were first to be accepted at the college, we were interviewed by the principal who would cross question us. And then a certain young man, a white man, came. He was very well educated and had a number of degrees from university.

He had studied, in particular, fruit trees. How they are pruned, how branches are thrown away, and how things are done. And he had wonderful marks, got an honorary degree with excellent results.

Now the principal of the school called him. He gave him a pair of pruning shears. And they went out together in between apple and cherry trees, fruit trees.

And he said, young man, I would like you to please prune these trees over here. And he said, young man, I would like you to please prune these trees over here. And he explained to him, he said, look, I want you to remove that branch, and I want you to see to this one over here, and that branch over there too.

And he said, yes, I hear. And he showed him the wrong way. The branches that shouldn't be cut, should be cut.

And the opposite as well. He told him all the wrong things, and said, now you do. Now here's the specialist, he knows how to do it.

And he tells him the opposite, and says, now you do it. Then he left him. And then he went away, saying to himself, now I'm going to see whether he is willing to put aside all his expertise, all his knowledge, all that he feels and knows to be true about trees, and do what I've told him, which is the opposite.

He said to himself, I want to test him. I want to see if he can humble himself. He went back to the committee running this institution, and said, now I've put a test before him.

He's highly qualified in this area of trees. And I've told him to do it in another way. I want to see whether he's willing to bow.

If he's not, then he can't be accepted at this college. He said, this place is run by the Holy Spirit. We don't want anyone who wants his own way, his own will, who cannot bow and listen and be obedient.

Then he went back to the trees, and he found that he had cut the branches exactly as he had been told. He said, we're willing to accept you. He had done exactly what he was told.

He says, because in the kingdom of God, there's no room for a disobedient person who doesn't do what you tell him. There is no room for a person who is stubborn and stiff-necked who cannot bow. He says, if you don't bow, then I'll tell you to bow down to the ground, and you'll understand what I mean.

If you don't bow, then you'll understand what I mean. If you don't bow, then you'll understand what I mean. Just observe those who leave the track and see the characteristics of stubbornness, disobedience, not being willing to humble themselves.

Now some here might be a bit upset with this director of the college who did this, that he didn't do the correct thing. Whether we agree with him or disagree, the truth still remains. That a person who doesn't humble themselves, isn't willing to deny themselves is worth nothing, is rubbish.

The Lord spoke to his disciples, he spoke to the people and said, come follow me. But then said, he who wants to follow me can never follow me if he's not prepared to give up himself and his own will, to deny

himself. This saying of Jesus is like a paradox.

For he says if you want to gain life, you've got to lose your life. If you want to be uplifted, you've got to go down. If you want to be among the great, you've got to be among the little, the small.

If you don't do that, you'll never get anywhere. And take up your cross, describing and meaning death. Before you get the crown, you must take up the cross.

The cross before the crown. If you want glory, be willing to suffer. If you want true gain, true profit, then give up everything, let it be sacrificed on the altar.

There's sacrifice before reward. If you want to truly gain, then sacrifice. Giving before gaining.

Do you see how utterly unlike our thinking this is? It is completely against the natural man's way of thinking. Losing before you win, before you gain. I don't know if it was around about 1954-55, somewhere around there, where I was present at a meeting of Reverend Nicholas Bengu's preachers, where he was to address them.

He said, brothers, you've seen how greatly God has blessed me. And maybe you too desire such blessings that you should walk in them as well. He said, there is no shortcut to the way of blessing.

If you do seek blessing, then suffer first. He said, for that is what I had to learn, suffering. He said, I know what it is to truly suffer.

He was really saying what Jesus says, if you want to gain, then be willing to lose. And then he shared with us how he preached the gospel. How it was when he began preaching the gospel, he had nothing.

He had no vehicle, no pickup, no bicycle, he just walked with his wife. They were hungry, walking along the way. They had to walk along the road with their newborn.

And on the way, this infant took ill and died. They had no money for a coffin. They had no money for anything.

And he said, along that very road, along that main road, he just took this infant, wrapped it in a blanket, dug a hole and buried his child. They couldn't go to a graveyard. You parents, if you've ever lost a child, you know what that means.

And he preached, if you really seek blessing, then be willing to suffer, for it is through suffering that we enter into blessing. Do you see why so few walk the road and endure and persevere? It is because they're not willing to deny themselves for this which Jesus said is so contrary to our human instinct. If you've just completed your studies and that you have high goals for your life, you want to achieve something, Jesus said if you really want to achieve, be willing to lose, be willing to go down and you will gain.

If you really want to achieve, be willing to lose, be willing to go down and you will gain. If you really want to achieve, be willing to lose, be willing to go down and you will gain. It's so important that they cannot pick up a paper, they cannot do anything lowly, and so they don't gain anything.

They lose because they try to grab at things. The Jews, when Jesus came, it was in a dispensation where they were looking for a political liberation from the yoke of Rome. Jesus said to his disciples, the Son of Man needs to suffer and be killed.

Now Peter, not wanting to rebuke him openly, took him by the arm to one side and said, Lord, don't even think in this way, don't say it. He said, far be it from you, Lord, this shall never happen to you. He said, never, I will never allow that.

Jesus said, get behind me, Satan, for you are a stumbling block to me. For you are not mindful of the things of God, but rather you are mindful of the things of men. That's the high cost of discipleship.

So if you want to be a true disciple, you need to know there is a great price to be paid. Because it costs so much, that is why so many fail along the way. Jesus said, if you love your father or mother more than me, you are not worthy of me.

And if you love son or daughter more than me, and if you don't take up your cross and follow me, you are not worthy of me. I'm not yet a hundred years old, but I've seen many Christians who rather side with their child, wife, daughter, son, than Jesus. That is why Jesus said, if you do not deny yourself, you cannot be my disciple.

The Greek word for this word, deny, starts with the meaning of apart. And it means to utterly, completely disown and separate oneself from it. Total, absolute denial and separation from that thing.

If you cannot do that, you can never be my disciple. Now if you re-examine that principle of that college that we had spoken of earlier, you begin to realize that his technique was indeed backed up by scripture. One day, a young man, very handsome, very successful, wealthy, came to Jesus and said, what must I do to inherit the kingdom of God? Jesus said, on your father and mother, do not commit adultery, etc.

He went through the list of commandments. But then he said, young man, one thing you lack, and as Jesus looked at him, he loved him. There are very few people with a clean record like this young man had who could say, I have obeyed my parents, I have obeyed this and that.

Perhaps he was the only one like that. He was upright. Despite his wealth, his parents must have brought him up and have really dealt with him in a way that brought out integrity and honesty.

Jesus looked upon him and loved him. He wouldn't have had that attitude if this young man was being hypocritical about what he said. Jesus said, one thing you lack, take all that you own, go and sell it all, and then come and follow me.

Then you will have an inheritance in heaven. He looked back at Jesus, was silent, then sullen, turned away and walked away. Then Jesus said, it is difficult for a person that is rich to enter into heaven.

But if you are content with what you have, then you will be content. You will have food, you will have clothes, you will have a house, you will have children, you will have a house. You will be content with what you have.

Now maybe you say, well, obviously it was because he was just too rich. Think about yourself. Maybe you are rich in other types of things.

You have family, you have friends, brothers and sisters, lots of things that are very precious to you. And you are not willing to deny all to follow Jesus. Just imagine, had this young man obeyed Jesus, and done exactly as Jesus had said, and received a heavenly treasure, and he had followed Jesus, how blessed he would have been.

Maybe he would have been one of the disciples of Jesus. Maybe he could have become an apostle. Maybe there would be writings in the New Testament, many of them about how the Lord had worked through him.

But his story meets up with a dead end street. He stopped right there, we hear nothing of him again. But what kind of a man could have he been, if he would have let go? Just imagine the type of preacher he would have been.

Just imagine the kind of preacher he could have become, had he denied all his possessions and followed the Lord. Perhaps he is burning in hell, if he didn't repent after that. Thousands of years already, two thousand years, he is burning.

Because there was this God, this single idol in his life. And Jesus said, if you do not deny all, say goodbye to everything, and take up his cross, you cannot follow him. This does not imply that everybody has to sell their material possessions.

But spiritually, this is the principle. I remember around about 1956, my oldest brother came to me and he said, I'm going to sell everything, businesses, farms, whatever, and I'm going to follow Jesus. I said, brother, well, I can't make the rule for you.

But I said to him, if you are to ask that of me, I don't yet feel that. I said to him, take all that you have, all that God has blessed you with, and consecrate it there on the altar, leave it there before God. Deny everything, surrender it to God.

Be like, it says in the Bible, a husband who has a wife, who should live like a man who has no wife. The one who has a treasure like one who is not rich. In other words, take everything and surrender it on the altar.

He did it. But to the rich young man, Jesus was saying, literally, sell all that you have. Jesus speaks in unique ways to different people, but to this young man, he meant it materially.

But the principle still being, if you want to follow him, then say goodbye to everything treasured. I remember when the Lord Jesus called me when I was still very young. I so enjoyed living with my parents.

I wasn't like youth today who use their first opportunity just to get out the house and run away from their parents, get to the city as quick as possible. No, I loved home. I loved to be with my parents.

I would feel troubled if I wasn't at home by the time the sun had set. And if even one of the children wasn't home, there would be a gap. We'd all feel it.

I remember when the Lord Jesus called me then to work for him. And I made my decision. I walked out of the lounge.

I was weeping. There were tears in my eyes. I walked through that front door and I said, Olo, you're as good as buried.

You're in a coffin now. And I said, I am dead to my parents. I'm dead to my family.

I'm going to be dead to everything that I've held dear. That was about 1951 or 1952. I denied myself regarding my parents, my family, my home, my inheritance, everything.

And I realized I've had to die to it. Have you ever experienced that? I remember a certain preacher from Russia. He told me how much he loved his wife and her six children.

He had been hired as a KGB agent. He had been arrested. He had been arrested by them because at that time it was the practice of the KGB to arrest preachers and then to send them to exile them up north to Siberia in the coldest places possible.

He said, as a preacher, when the KGB came to arrest me and I was led away from my wife and my children, I had to die to them. He said it was awfully difficult. It was like undergoing death to them.

Remember what I said earlier on about that dying man who said, I took those children out of my heart. Now this preacher, when he was arrested, he said he would have suffered too much. He wouldn't have made it had he clung to his wife and children in his heart.

He had to separate. Jesus spoke to them. Verily, verily, I say to you, If a grain of wheat doesn't fall down onto the ground and die, it will remain alone.

Just hear that. It will remain alone. Maybe you're alone.

How many souls have you saved? How many people have you brought to Jesus? You're alone. Why? You haven't died yet. You don't know what it means.

So Jesus said, if a person, if any man wants to follow me, I like the English translation here where it says, who comes after me, not before me, but after me. If you want to follow after Jesus, you've got to deny everything you have. And that describes absolute surrender.

If you do that, you'll be his disciple and follow him. You won't be thinking, but what about this person? What about that? Remember Jesus, when he called some to follow him, the one man answered, but Lord, I've just got married and my wife is at home. And the other said, but I've just bought 10 oxen.

I've got to go and check on them. The other said, my father's gravely ill. I must go and arrange the funeral.

And as Jesus was telling this allegory, he said, the Lord who had called them said, none of them will be able to come and be with him in his palace. This applies to us all. Whether you are a regular member here and you come and listen to services here often, or if you visiting, this applies across the board.

If you want to go to heaven, here is the way. Have you said goodbye to everything else? Is there something that you love more than Jesus? If you have done that, surrendered completely, you won't just try and side with your child. You'll never justify your child.

You'll never side with your wife or your child. You'll see why some people have godless children, children that are on the way to hell. It's not only sacrificing the good things.

Some people hold on to die, to direct sin, damnable things, things of hell. Like Tante Waltraut said to that man, don't argue, speak those things. You talk like this because your life is full of sin.

Oh, my. I think Jesus is coming soon. I can tell you when.

Jesus even said he doesn't know the time, only the Father. But when he comes down on the clouds, riding the clouds, coming down, and you see him there with his blazing eyes, his head shining brighter than the

sun in its brightness. Will you run away or will you meet him? And say, yes, Lord, you meant more to me than anything else in the world.

Maybe you're thinking of marriage. Your marriage can be planned already and he can come back before you are married. Don's cousin was a lawyer in Meritsburg, and she died the other day with her two children, small children, eight, nine year olds.

He can come to you in different ways. He can come with a last shout, trumpet sound. He can come in an accident, sickness, whatever it may be.

Will you meet him as one who was a follower of him or not? Doesn't matter whether you're a Buddhist, a Muslim, a Hindu, whatever you are. Doesn't matter. He'll come.

He died. He rose again. He's coming again to judge.

And he'll judge you. Are you ready? Were you a lazy man? If you're a wise man or woman, brilliant, educated, uneducated, doesn't matter. You'll stand before him and be judged accordingly.

He didn't come to judge the world, but his words will judge us. Let's pray. Thank you, Lord, that we could listen to your word.

Lord, we ask you that by your Holy Spirit, you would explain to us and make clear to us what these words mean. Lord, you've come the first time and you've promised to come the second, where each one will give account before you. Lord, may each one here be able to stand before you without shame, but rather to hear the words from your mouth.

Well done, good and faithful servant. Amen. Amen.

Yesterday at the funeral, an old man got up and he sang a solo of a song, and he said, and at the end brought in the congregation to sing that chorus which says, When I've gone the last mile of the way. One day we'll go the last mile of the way. Blessed are those who hear and obey.

Listen carefully and keep the words of Jesus.

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