

Self-Denial and Discipleship

by John Murray

The sermon emphasizes the importance of self-denial and taking up the cross in discipleship, highlighting the need for radical transformation and preparedness to suffer for Christ's sake.

Duration: 48:02

Scripture: Psalm 24:3, Matthew 5:29, Matthew 6:33, Matthew 16:24

Topics: "Self-Denial"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of honoring God and not compromising on His demands. He highlights the need for justice and honor in our lives, and warns against following sinful ways. The preacher also emphasizes the honesty and truthfulness of Jesus and how we should strive to emulate that in our own lives. The sermon is based on the Gospel of Matthew, specifically chapter 16 verse 24, where Jesus speaks about the coming judgment and the rewards that will be given according to one's actions.

Transcript

Let us now call upon God's name in prayer. O Thou eternal and ever-blessed God, who dwellest in Thy holy temple, who art high and lifted up, but who also dwellest with the humble and the contrite, do Thou grant unto us that we may have a profound sense of Thy glory and of Thy presence. May the knowledge of the Lord captivate our mind and our heart, and may we have an all-pervasive sense that Thou art the Lord God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, granting us Thy presence in Thy sanctuary in accordance with Thy promise that where two or three are gathered together in Thy name, there Thou art in their midst.

May we, O Lord, have the experience of this inestimable grace, and may the words of our mouth and the meditations of our heart be acceptable in Thy sight. O Lord, Thou strength and Thou redeemer. Amen.

The gospel according to Matthew, the sixteenth chapter, at verse twenty-four. The gospel according to Matthew, chapter sixteen, verse twenty-four. Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

One of the egos in the professing Church of Christ, particularly apparent in our day, is the tendency to cheapen the gospel. Now, the gospel is free, but the gospel is not cheap, and the gospel is cheapened when the conditions and demands of discipleship are torn down. Our Lord himself, in the days of his flesh, never concealed the cost of discipleship.

He never tried to enlist disciples by suppressing what a discipleship would involve. On one occasion he said to a certain person who said, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest, foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not whereon to lay his head. And he said to another who made what was apparently a reasonable request, I will follow thee, but suffer me first to go and bury my father.

He said, Let the dead bury their dead, but follow thou me. Lord Jesus never suppressed the cost of following him. And there is no text in the scripture, no words from the lips of our Lord that brings out the conditions of discipleship more forcefully than this particular word.

If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. A disciple of course is one who follows Christ. Just as a disciple in the human sphere is the person who has a master and who follows that master, so with reference to Christ, a disciple of Christ is just one who follows him, who is absolutely committed to him.

There are always certain restrictions in the human sphere, for no one man may ever commit himself entirely without reservation to another man. It would be blasphemy. It would be a substitution of what is a divine prerogative for a human prerogative.

But with reference to Christ, the following that is of him is a following that involves total self-commitment. And it is that kind of following of which Jesus speaks in this text, and it is that kind of following that constitutes a disciple. A disciple is one who follows Christ and who follows him in total self-commitment.

When Christ is our Master and our Lord, then he is our Master and our Lord without any reservation or without any qualification. Now these words of our Lord, if any man will come after me, let him deny himself, are frequently misunderstood. To deny oneself is not simply to deny oneself certain things.

It is true that if we have denied ourselves, we shall desist from certain things. And our abstinence from certain things will of course be the proof that we are the disciples of Christ. Discipleship means repentance, and repentance means turning from sin unto God.

And if we turn from sin unto God, we turn from specific sins. We don't know what repentance is if we simply turn from sin in general, because there never is in this world something that is general without a particular. And if we repent, we turn from specific sins.

And we abhor certain specific sins to which we ourselves have been addicted, and we abhor ourselves because of these particular sins. And repentance manifests itself in a very concrete and practical way by turning away from specific sins and idolatry. We turn to God from idols to serve the living God and to wait for His Son from heaven.

And if we turn from specific sins, particular sins, we also turn from those things which so they may not be sinful in themselves, become the occasion of sin to us. Jesus said to His disciples, If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee. It is better for thee to enter into life with one eye than having two eyes to be cast into hell.

Now, an eye is a precious gift of God, but if such a precious thing as our right eye becomes the occasion of stumbling, then we are to pluck it out and cast it from us. Not that we are to be guilty of self-mutilation. The great truth is that however precious a thing may be, if that particular thing, because of our weakness, because of our sinfulness, becomes the occasion of sin to us, then we are to turn from it.

But we are not getting to the heart of this text if we think that that is what the text means, that we are to deny to ourselves certain things. In fact, we may deny ourselves certain things, and that very self-denial becomes the means of cultivating self-absorption and self-righteousness. And self-absorption, self-righteousness, is the very opposite of self-denial.

And don't let us be deceived. There are lots of people in the world and in the professing church and that Christianity to a very large extent consists in a few things from which they abstain, things which in themselves are not sinful at all, but they make these, as it were, the criteria of godliness. And if they abstain from just a few things of which you know perfectly well, they think they are very devoted and unconcentrated Christians.

My friends, it is a great deception of the devil. In the days of the apostle Paul, he wrote that there would come in the last days deceivers, and one of their doctrines would be commanding to abstain from meat which God has commanded to be received with thanksgiving. And he called that doctrine, that doctrine, the doctrine of demons and the propaganda of seducing spirits.

And my friends, don't be deceived by that prohibitionism that is abroad in the world that is so frequently identified with Christianity. It's a doctrine of demons, and it's the work of seducing spirits. No, the great truth of this text is that we are to deny ourselves.

And it means a renunciation of ourselves. It may be, it will certainly be a renunciation of sins. It will certainly be a renunciation of specific sins.

And it certainly will be the renunciation of things which are not sinful in themselves if they become the occasion of sin for us. But, what this text says, what this solemn word of our Lord says is that we must deny ourselves. And we cannot appreciate this truth unless we realize what lies back.

What lies back of that truth on the part of our Lord is an indictment against human nature. An indictment against human nature, of course, in its fallen state. But nevertheless, an indictment against our persons.

And it is to the effect that our persons, our selves, are so identified with sin that the first requirement is the denial of our own selves. Have you ever thought of it, my friend, with sufficient seriousness? That the first thing we have to be saved from is from our own selves? No, sin is enmity against God. As I pointed, as I tried to point out to you this morning, that's the essence of sin.

It's enmity against God. It's the contradiction of God. And it's the contradiction of God all along the line of His perfection.

But nevertheless, where there is that ruling sin, of that ruling character, there is always something that goes along with it. And that is the enthronement of our own selves in the place of God. Sin is, first of all, directed against God.

But when it is directed against God, we put ourselves in the place of God, and we worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator. And the indictment which our Lord brings against us in this particular text is this, that sin has taken such possession of us that the tangle of iniquity has so wrapped itself around us that we ourselves are identified with that which is the contradiction of God and of His glory. That's it.

Our own selves have become so identified with that which is the contradiction of God that the first thing that has to be done if we are to be disciples of the Savior is that we are to be saved from ourselves. And

that will manifest itself in the exercise, in our own exercise, in that which engages our responsibility in this, that we deny ourselves. If Christ is our Savior and Lord, He saves us from ourselves, and therefore there must be that radical transformation which our Lord here calls self-denial.

It means an abandonment of our own self-confidence, of our own self-worship. It means the renunciation of our own self. That's the sentence of our all-important interest and affection and attention, and nothing less than that is the intent of our Lord, and we cannot reduce this refinement to any lower term than that.

Now you have the expression of that in many places, but perhaps there is no place where that is hooked into such a practical, concrete form as that which was the confession of Job, the man of God. I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eyes seeeth thee, therefore I abhor myself. Intent, indictment, indictment.

And why did Job abhor himself? Because he got a vision now of the matchless glory of God. And when he got a vision of the matchless glory of God, he saw his own self in the light of that glory, and he was perfectly in perfect glory. O my friends, let us realize how subtle is iniquity.

Iniquity is identified with our own person, and the first thing that we have to be saved from is our own soul. And the first thing in the exercise of practical repentance is just this, that we deny ourselves. Now the second condition which Jesus lays down in this text is take up his cross.

We are dealing, of course, with that which is the condition of being a disciple. And being a disciple is to be a follower of Christ. And to be a follower of Christ is to be a follower of him in total self-commitment.

And it is with that that Jesus is dealing here, and the true condition that he prescribes of being a disciple is this self-denial and taking up the cross, of the cross and following him. Now that word of our Lord has been oftentimes misinterpreted, and it has been misinterpreted by well-intentioned, well-meaning people. Quite often some particular trial is called a person's cross.

I don't know are you accustomed to that terminology, but I am in any case accustomed to that notion that a particular trial is the cross of that particular person. And taking up the cross is interpreted as submissive and patient endurance of that particular affliction. Now it is perfectly true that oftentimes there is one particular trial and temptation which torment a child of God.

It is sometimes called, and quite properly called, the truth in the law. And there is oftentimes just a particular temptation which is constantly gnawing at the comfort, at the peace of mind of a particular person and of a particular child of God. And of course it is perfectly true that if we have taken up our cross and followed Christ, we shall prove that fact by our patience and submissive endurance of any particular trial which God has sovereignly pleased to call into our law.

That is perfectly true. But there is no good ground for supposing that that is what our Lord means in this particular instance. Take up his cross and follow me.

There is no good reason for that. There is something far more basic in our Lord's mind than simply that. Because that is something that belongs to a believer, that he has to bear patiently the afflictions which God in his providence has sovereignly imposed upon him or her.

But Jesus is here dealing with something which is far more basic, which belongs to the very inception of the Christian life. And he's not dealing simply with something which comes subsequently in order to try

and prove a true believer. Another line of thought has oftentimes been applied to this particular condition.

And this line of thought is that Jesus is here referring to his own cross, that we are to take up the cross of Christ and bear the cross of Christ. Now of itself there's a great deal of truth in that interpretation. I mean a great deal of truth in the principle itself.

And it is perfectly true that if we are Christ's disciples, we are to embrace the cross of Christ for what it is. We are not to be ashamed of it. We are to reckon the cross of Christ, the price of our redemption, and we are to bring everything into captivity to that redemption which Christ brought when he died upon the acacia tree.

And it is perfectly true that every believer has, in a mysterious sense, died with Christ and has risen with him in his resurrection to newness of life. It is perfectly true that the cross of Christ must be always central in the faith, in the love, and in the hope of the believer, because it is the price of redemption, the shedding of Jesus' blood, that binds the believer to the Savior, binds him to him in peace, in that which Jesus here requires, that he should deny himself and take up his cross. But there is an obvious objection to that particular interpretation in this sense.

Jesus is not here talking about his own cross, but a very important distinction. Jesus doesn't say, if anyone will come after me, let him take up my cross and follow me. Not at all.

If anyone will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross. And there is a distinction between the cross that we bear and the cross that Christ bore. And it is possible that we could very gravely distort the meaning of this particular text if we understand it to mean the cross of Christ.

Because after all, although the cross is the price of our redemption, although we identify ourselves with it as that which was our redemption, nevertheless, we do not really bear the cross. You see, it would be blasphemous to say that we bear the cross. Christ alone bore the cross.

And we do not bear it at all, in the sense that Jesus means in this particular instance. Don't you see that he alone went to Christ? He alone bore the unparalleled and unspeakable agony of Calvary, the 33, and of the people there was none with him. And we do not participate at all in the bearing of Christ's cross.

He bore it all alone. He has trodden the winepress alone. And of the people there was none with him.

And it can be very prejudicial to the uniqueness of the cross of Christ to represent our relation to it as a bearing of his cross. It's one of the greatest heresies that was promulgated in the Church of Christ to represent us as participating with the Redeemer in the bearing of his cross and the making of excretion and resurrection. What then is the meaning of this particular condition? It's not difficult to find the meaning if you study the context very carefully.

Our Lord is here speaking of something that occurs at the inception of the believer's life, at the very beginning of discipleship. If any man will come after me, that is, follow me, let him deny himself and take up his cross. Of course, it isn't something that terminates at the beginning.

If we take up the cross, we continue to bear it. We don't lay it down. That's implied in the very figure that Jesus uses.

Let him take up his cross and follow me. That is, follow me, bearing his cross. We are not to think of this as something that occurs just once for all and then is repudiated any more than can we think of self-denial or something that takes place once for all and then repudiated.

It is something that continues indeed, but at the same time it is something that occurs at the very inception of the believer's life. What is it? Well, it is just what is indicated by the context, that the cross stands for the most regretful and shameful object. In the Near East there sat particular tribes, in the empire that existed there sat particular tribes, a criminal who was to be crucified had to bear his cross to the place of crucifixion.

And it is to that custom that our Lord is here clearly referring. It is the clue to the meaning. If we are to follow Christ, we must be prepared to suffer death itself for his sake.

The cross is the symbol of death, and it is to be prepared to die for his sake. But when he says the cross, he is also referring to the most regretful, the most shameful, the most ignominious, and perhaps the most painful form of death. That's what Jesus means, that we are prepared to die for his sake.

And die not with all the glory of heroism, but we're to die for his sake with all the associations of shame and reproach and ignominy and pain. That's what Jesus means. To give death with all the shame and dishonor that this world attaches to a death upon the tree, isn't it? And there is confirmation of that in this particular context, because Jesus proceeds, for whosoever will save his life shall lose it, and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it.

And that means the saving of our own natural life in contrast with the loss of life eternal. It is therefore the losing of our natural life, the life which we now possess, which is temporal in the way associated with crucifixion, and therefore associated with all that shame and ignominy in which crucifixion implies. Now, Jesus did not say this, and he did not mean that everyone who is a disciple must actually die a shameful death for his sake.

And of course it is not at all Christian to crave martyrdom, to invite, as it were, persecution, to invite it unnecessarily. No, we ought to take all lawful endeavors to preserve our own life and the life of others. But the point here is simply that we must take up the cross and therefore be prepared to endure all sorts of reproach, reproach to the extent of the most shameful and painful death for the sake of Christ.

Be prepared. That is to say, our self-commitment to Him will manifest itself in that preparedness to take all costs, if His glory and His honor requires it. If we prize our life, that is, our natural life, more than Christ's honor and will compromise His truth and glory rather than part with life, then we are not Christ.

That's the principle. We're not His if we'll compromise truth and justice and honor in order to preserve our life at the extent of Christ's glory. Now, that demand often comes to us in the form of the alternative between our means of livelihood and the truth and honor of Christ.

How often do you hear the allegory, I don't believe that I'm doing this right, I don't believe this type of business in which I'm engaged is really right, I have to do many things which I don't believe are ethical, but I simply have to do it in order to live. Have you not heard that repeatedly? And if you have come to any years of understanding, have you not oftentimes been confronted with that very situation? You're required in terms of your earthly vocation, as you say, to do certain things that are not straight, that are not compatible with the principles which govern the Christian faith. And perhaps you're tempted, or perhaps

you have even succumbed to the temptation to say, I don't like it.

I don't believe it's quite straight. I don't believe it's quite right. But nevertheless, I just have to do it because I have to live.

Don't you see the fallacy? Isn't it, doesn't it become very concrete and practical in that form? But what you said, you have to live. But Jesus says this, you don't have to live at all. If you have to live at the expense of conscience, it's better to die.

That's what Jesus is saying. If you have to live at the expense of a guilty conscience, if you have to live at the expense of the honor of Christ, fidelity to His commandment, it's better to die. My friends, we don't have to live, but there's something that we must do.

And that is honor. His glory, the demands of His kingdom, the commitment which belongs to Him, as, as, as God has said, is a commitment that demands of us that we shall never answer for our own truth, justice, and honor, for the sake of a man, for the sake of our own, of our own worthiness of death. No, that's the truth, and there it comes to us in a very concrete and practical and touching way.

If any man will be my disciple, let him take up his cross. Follow me. And that means nothing less than this, that if we are Christ's disciples, we shall have to say in every concrete situation of our life, in every emergency with which we are placed, here is the gibbet for my execution, and it is the only alternative.

And the honor of Christ and loyalty to Him is my gift. And Jesus is saying nothing less than that. O my friends, I say it with all tenderness, but I must say it as the ambassador of Christ, that we don't have to live, but we do have to be faithful, otherwise we are not.

My friends, where would we be if Christ had acted on that principle? He wouldn't have gone to Calvary. He would have compromised before Pilate. He would have compromised before the high priest.

And He wouldn't have been the faithful Christian. And if Christ had acted on this principle, that is the principle upon which so many of His professed followers are, it would be all the same. Christ would never have gone to Calvary.

Here is the great, the great truth of what we are and what we shall be in the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And perhaps we have begun to see something of the accepting character of Christ in man. We are too ready to tone it down.

Awareness of our own infirmity and awareness of the infirmity of others is too ready to lead us to make accommodations, to make certain reservations and to try to make apologies whereby we can evade the clear force and implication of Jesus' statement here. Let me pick up this topic. But my friends, however plausible that kind of argument may be, however much we may try to accommodate the word of our Lord to our infirmity, to our weakness and to our sinful lust, there is no possibility of evading this sinful force of that which Jesus here describes.

And when we try to accommodate the word of Jesus to our weakness or to the weakness of others, whenever we begin to tamper with the stringency of the word of Him who is the truth, who is the faithful witness and who went to Calvary to persevere that the scripture might be fulfilled, we are guilty of iniquity. And we show guidance that we are not following Christ. When Christ is our Lord, then we don't quibble with His actions in their simple means and in their simple direction.

Jesus was supremely honest. And He was supremely honest because He was the truth. And it is the severity of that honesty and truth that will break upon us with awful avenger if we fail in this radical truth with our own selves and with the love of the world which our own selves so frequently extend to Christ.

Now what is that? What is it in this particular situation and in this particular text that gives urgency to the severity of Jesus' word, that gives urgency to the conditions which we here prescribe? Well, our Lord Himself tells us in this very context. For the Son of Man shall come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He shall reward everyone according to His word. The Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His holy angels.

The issues at stake are ultimate. If the issues at stake were simply those that belong to the span of this life, if it were simply the perspective of the temple that Jesus had on this particular occasion, then it would be foolish to make things so severe and so stringent. But it was not the short span of life in this world that came within the perspective of our Lord on this particular occasion.

It was the perspective of final reckoning, and it was in that perspective that He spoke these words. It was in the perspective of the judgment that is that He Himself is ordained to execute. And it is as we view the present in the light of the final judgment, the final adjudication that we see the grandeur.

I say the grandeur, and nothing less than the grandeur of this particular word of our Lord. You know it is severe, isn't it, that we have to part with life itself if the honor and glory of Christ demand it? It's severe indeed, and we don't like it. It's entirely contrary to the ethics and to the philosophy of this world.

Entirely contrary. But my friends, I tell you that this is the severity of pure honesty, of pure goodness. It is the severity of everlasting love, because it is the severity of Him who spoke in the light of eternal reckoning, of His final judgment.

Severity that takes account of that which will stand out to me in the pure light of judgment that is irrevocable. It was because Jesus was jealous for that kind of discipleship that would be weighed in the balances and not found wanting that He spoke these words. If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

But whosoever he takes shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation. For him shall the son of man be ashamed, for he cometh in the glory of his Father with his own flesh. And Jesus spoke these words for all of us because He was, in His whole outlook, determined by that that is raised in the reality of household duties.

And it is the severity of goodness, of honesty, but it is the severity of eternal life. In my saying, may we have witness from our hearts that with the consequence of the requirements which Jesus He has instilled in us, which Jesus has sustained in us, has suppressed begotten from the flesh, enunciates in this particular text, if any man will come after me, be mine, follow me. If any man will be a Christian, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

And that is the person of whom Jesus will not be ashamed, for he cometh in the glory of his Father with his own flesh. May our reckonings, my friends, be the reckonings that are dictated by heaven, by the issuance of Christ ultimate, unerring, and irreversible judgment. And when our thinking is dictated by these characters, then we shall place our amen to the word of our Lord, and we shall be ready to say, here is the gibbet for my crucifixion.

It is the honor and glory of my Redeemer All upon God's name we pray. O Thou eternal and ever-blessed God, and Thou the Redeemer who art exalted at the right hand of power, to Thee we come imploring Thy grace that Thy word may be written upon our hearts, that it may bring conviction to our consciences, and that by Thy Spirit there may be generated in our hearts that faith by which we shall count all things but love, for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord. And may we be able to say in truth with all its implication for life and for death, that to us to live is Christ and to die is death.

That we may be able to reiterate with thanksgiving that we know nothing among men save Jesus Christ in whom we die. May we know, O Lord, what it is to be captive, to want crucified, arisen, and then exalted, and the coming Lord. And may we have the joy of those who are the bondservant of Jesus Christ.

Have mercy upon us, O Lord, and wash away all sins, bind us to the cross, in all the efficacy of His finished work, in all the glory of His touch, and in all the perfection of His high priestly, kingly ministry, that Thy will be done, that we may know Him as the Lord of glory, as the One who is exalted far above all mercy and dominion and power, and who will come again to receive His people unto Himself and will give them a kingdom that will be everlasting. O Lord, bless our meeting today. Feel Thy Word upon our hearts and feel us under His favor in the bondage of complete, total commitment that we may know none save Jesus Christ, and Him to be God.

In all the emergencies that arise in this life, in every situation in which we are placed, may the honor of Christ be paramount, and may we come in to be indeed the cheapest among ten thousand and all together for His name's sake. Amen.

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