

A Meditation on Self Denial

by John Piper

As Christians, we will live our lives in a state of sacred schizophrenia, where the old self and the new self coexist in tension, until we die and become one unified self.

Duration: 24:28

Scripture: Mark 8:34

Topics: "Self Denial", "Following Jesus"

Description

This sermon emphasizes the concept of 'sacred schizophrenia' for Christians, highlighting the internal conflict between two selves - one that seeks worldly desires and one that follows Jesus, calling believers to deny the self that seeks temporary pleasures and embrace the self that treasures eternal life with Christ. The message stresses the importance of self-denial, taking up one's cross, and being willing to endure opposition and suffering for the sake of following Jesus. It also addresses the ongoing battle between seeking worldly possessions and human approval versus treasuring Jesus and His words.

Transcript

Let's pray. Father, I ask for your help now for these few minutes to be useful, to build up the faith of everyone here, and to glorify your name, and to help these students understand who they are. I pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen. What I want to do is make plain to the graduates, but really to everybody here, that if you're a Christian, you're going to live the rest of your life on the earth, however short or long, in a condition which I'm going to call sacred schizophrenia. My dictionary, after the medical and tragic definition, has this definition of schizophrenia, a state characterized by coexistence of contradictory or incompatible elements.

That's what I mean by schizophrenia in this talk. I call it sacred because it is brought about by the Holy Spirit. It's not a perfect state, but it's a good state, a temporary state.

It is a sacred schizophrenia. Or to put it another way, all of you who are Christians will live the rest of your lives on the earth as two selves. And I want to clarify from the words of Jesus who the two selves are, which one of them is your true self, and then two major flashpoints of conflict between the two selves that Jesus says you will battle for the rest of your life on the earth.

And now the reason I'm saying the rest of your life on the earth is because after you die, you won't have this condition anymore. Or if Jesus comes back first, you won't have this condition anymore. There will be no longer two selves.

You will not have sacred schizophrenia. You will be one unified self, and all conflict will be over. Until that day, it is absolutely imperative that you know the condition you're in, which I'm calling sacred schizophrenia.

You need to know who your two selves are. You need to know which one of them is the true self, and you need to know what Jesus says are at least two of the major flashpoints of conflict that you will fight. So the text I have in mind, I'm not assuming that you have Bibles under your coat, your cloak, your robe, so listen carefully to Mark 8, 34 to 38.

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever would save himself will lose it, saves his life, will lose it. Whoever loses his life for my sake in the Gospels will save it.

For as a prophet of man, if he gained the whole world and loses his soul, what can man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the son of man be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his father and with his holy angels. So that's my text, verse 34. If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

To be a follower of Jesus is to be a denier of self. If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself. If you are denying yourself, there is a you that is being denied, and a you that is denying.

Which means to be a follower of Jesus is to have sacred schizophrenia. A self that must be denied, and a self that does the denying. You with me? Seems pretty plain to me.

What's the difference between these two selves? Jesus explains that the reason this one self needs to be denied is because you're called to take up a cross. If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross. And as you know, a cross is an instrument of torture and death.

To take up your cross willingly and intentionally is to choose a path with Jesus of opposition, shame, suffering, death. That's what happens when you take up your cross. And Jesus is saying, in order to do that, you must deny yourself.

Why? Because in every one of you, there is a self who will not take up a cross. Hates opposition, shame, suffering, death. Says to that option, no way am I going to endure that.

And when you hear yourself say, I don't want opposition. I want approval. I don't want shame.

I want honor. I don't want suffering. I want comfort and pleasure in this world right now.

And I don't want to die. I want to be safe, and I want to be secure, and I want to stay alive. When you hear yourself say that, you must say, no.

You're not in charge anymore. You're not who I am. Your days are numbered.

And so you may keep your mouth shut. You will not hold sway in this affair. That's what you must do.

You have a holy schizophrenia. So when you rise up, you rise up and say to you, no. Who's talking? Where did that come from? Where did this you that treasures Jesus so much that a cross is worth it? Opposition, shame, suffering, death is worth it? Where did that come from? It came from the new birth.

Nicodemus, you must be born again, or you won't ever see the kingdom of God. You won't ever see me for who I am in my infinite value and infinite beauty. You won't ever see me that way until you're born again by the Holy Spirit.

That's where it came from. You're a new creation. You came into being.

You weren't born this way. You weren't born ready to take up a cross because of how satisfying Jesus is. This is new.

It is the true you if you have the condition of sacred schizophrenia. Verse 35. Sometimes I hear people describe the Christian teaching on self-denial as though the denied self is the real lover of life, the one who's really committed to joy and pleasure, while the denying self is morose, has a death wish, carries a cross around like a bludgeon against joy.

If you're inclined to think that way, you need to read verse 35. Goes like this. Because whoever would save his life will lose it.

But whoever loses his life for my sake in the Gospels will save it. What motive is Jesus appealing to? Listen. Whoever would save his life here in this world by cross-avoiding will lose it.

And you don't want to lose it, do you? No, I don't want to lose it. And you shouldn't want to lose it, so don't lose it. That's the motive.

It's clear as day. Don't lose your life. Whatever it costs, don't lose it.

Love life. Or he goes on. Whoever would save his life here in this world by avoiding the cross will lose it.

Whoever loses his life, now we're on the second part, whoever loses his life by treasuring me so much that you're willing to take a cross, whoever loses his life will save it. And you don't want to lose your life. You want to save it, so save it.

Isn't that the motive? He's pleading with you. Save your life, graduates. Save your life.

Don't throw away your life. That's the way Jesus is arguing. Who's the real lover of life here? Who's got the death wish here? Isn't Jesus who's got the death wish here for you? Don't throw away your life.

Follow me, he says. My whole argument in having you deny the old self is that he's a liar. He's a fool.

He thinks that 80 years of human approval and the pleasures of this world are better than 80 millions of years of undiminished, unparalleled joy in the presence of God. He's a fool. Are you going to listen to him? Are you going to let this old self be you? What an idiot he is.

And Jesus is pleading with you. Don't die with him. Live with me.

I said there were two flashpoints between this old self and new self. One of the flashpoints comes in verses 36 and 37, and one of the flashpoints comes in verse 38 and will be done. Here's verse 36 and 37.

It's an argument for what does it profit a man? To gain the whole world and forfeit his soul. For what can a man give in exchange for his soul? This is the flashpoint of I want the world. I'm going to gain.

I'm going to have more stuff. This is my life. Every one of you has a self, Jesus is making plain, who will tell you till the day you die.

And I'm a 71-year-old warrior with this self. And he is as real today in so-called post-professional life, more real, more real, because the whole world is telling 70-year-olds to play and get more stuff and enjoy stuff, and that's life. There's a 20-year-old version of your idiot self, and there's a 70-year-old version of your idiot self.

And you will need to make war on this self till you are no longer two, but one glorious self. And he's going to say to you, this old self, come on. If we can just accumulate more of this world, more possessions, more protections, more insurance policies, more symbols of power, more possibilities of bodily pleasure, then we will have life.

We will save our lives. He's a liar. You won't save your life that way.

You will lose it, even if you gain the whole world. In the next 60 years, for some of you it will be less, a few more, in the next 60 years of your life, there will scarcely be a day when you don't receive the message from the world, having things is having life. And Jesus says, no, having things is not life.

Having me is life. Will you believe the self that loves the message? Things, things, things. That's flashpoint number one, the power of possessions.

Jesus says, you're going to fight this or not. Flashpoint number two is in verse 38. It probably is more powerful.

I think it is. Whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. The Son of Man appears, the glory of the creator of the universe, the Father, millions of unfallen angels.

He's coming. What's the flashpoint here? The first one was the power of possessions. This one is the power of approval and praise.

You know what's so shocking here? Is that the self in us that craves approval from people is pictured in this text, this verse 38, as loving the approval of adulterers and sinners. What does being ashamed mean? You're ashamed of somebody. It means I don't want to look like a foolish Christian when all the adulterers and sinners are so cool.

Don't want to look like a fool. And I'll tell you, that old self will do almost anything, make almost any compromise to keep from looking like an idiot to the world of adulterers and sinners. That's insane.

Is there an alternative audience that you might want approval from? Only the Son of Man and the glory of the Father and the holy angels when they come. That's all. That will be the audience on one side, the perishing world.

Sinners will be the audience on the other side. And one of yourselves loves the smile of the world, and one of yourselves loves the smile of Jesus. Those are the two flashpoints that Jesus said you will deal with till you're dead, human possessions and human praise.

And how you respond depends on whether you're in the condition of sacred schizophrenia. It might be helpful to end with a kind of warning and hope from the life of the namesake of this college, James Pettigrew Boyce. He was born in Charleston, South Carolina, on my birthday, about 1827.

He attended Charleston College, and then Brown University, and then Princeton Seminary. While he was at Charleston College, he was not yet a believer. He was not yet in the condition of sacred schizophrenia.

He was more of a prankster and a playboy. And one day, for whatever reason, President Brantley of the college saw him hiding behind a tree and said these words. There is Boyce, who will be a great man if he does not become a devil.

That's true for everyone in this room. Those are the only two options in front of you. Yes, they are.

You are all destined to be unspeakably great in eternity or a devil in eternity. Whether you become a devil or great depends on whether you are in the state of sacred schizophrenia. If you're a follower of Jesus, you have sacred schizophrenia.

It is painful, it is glorious, and it is temporary. There is a self that must be denied and a self that denies. The denied self desperately seeks life from the pleasures, possessions, praises of man and therefore says no to the cross.

The denying self loves real life that lasts forever, loves Jesus as all satisfying, loves meaning more than money, loves the praise of holy heaven more than the praise of sinful earth. The denying self is the true you. Do you hear me? The denying self is the true you if you have this condition.

That you will live forever. Don't begrudge a few decades of sacred schizophrenia. It will be over soon enough.

And there will be one self someday, one unified true self. And all self-denial, just picture this, all self-denial will be over. All of it will be over.

Do you hear what that means? Everything you will ever want, you will have. Everything that God can be for you in Jesus. Father, help us to own our temporary, painful, embattled, sacred schizophrenia and make these students successful in this warfare.

I pray in Jesus' name, amen.

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