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The Supreme Condition for Discipleship

“If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me!” (Lk 9:23)

These words of Jesus set the supreme condition for discipleship. All the four Gospels record them. Actually in Matthew and Luke this saying of Jesus is found twice (Mt 10:38; 16:24; Mk 18:34; Lk 9:23; 14:27; Jn 12:25). No other saying of Jesus is given such emphasis.

Many people come “to” Jesus; but very few come “after” Him. “Come to Me” was Christ’s message to the unsaved; “Come after Me” was His message to those who joined Him. Coming to Jesus means enjoying privileges, primarily; but going after Him involves enduring problems, essentially. When we come to Jesus, we receive forgiveness of sins; when we go after Him, we must renounce our sinful self.

The percentage of backsliders is high these days because the call to come to Jesus is proclaimed repeatedly whereas the challenge to go after Him is presented rarely. If you are wondering why you are still a baby and have not matured in Christian life, this meditation will answer your query.

The condition Jesus lays down for discipleship has both a negative and a positive component. Negatively, it is saying “no” to self. Positively, it is saying “yes” to the cross. Let’s study here this twofold condition in some detail.

a) SELF-DENIAL

According to Matthew Henry the great Bible Commentator, the first lesson in Christ’s School is self-denial. There’s no other way to live a Christian life than by continual death to self. If anyone would go after Jesus, he “must” deny himself.

Jesus the Example

Jesus denied Himself of the place of unending happiness and became a “man of sorrows” (Isa 53:3).

Jesus denied Himself of the Heavenly company and became a “friend of sinners” (Mt 11:19).

Jesus denied Himself of the eternal glory of the Godhead and became a “rejected stone” (1 Pet 2:7).

Jesus denied Himself of being ministered to continually by the hosts of Heaven and became a “humble servant and slave” (Phil 2:7,8).

Jesus denied Himself of being worshipped day and night by angels and became a “laughing stock” before men (Mt 27:39-44). The holy Son of God was charged as demon-possessed and an agent of Beelzebub (Jn 7:20; 8:52; Lk 11:15).

Jesus denied Himself of the perfect beauty and splendor of His deity and became “sin” for us (2 Cor 5:21).

Jesus denied Himself of the Throne and became a “sacrifice” on the Altar (Eph 5:2).

Self-denial was reflected in everything Jesus chose to do or not to do. Look at these instances: He refused to yield to the pressure of temptations to show off His power (Mt 4:3-11). He forewent the basic comforts in life and went forth without a

place to lay His head (Mt 8:20). Unmindful of His time to sleep or sup, He ministered to ignorant teachers and ignominious thirsters (Jn 3&4). He refused to be influenced by the filial love of His own family members in the matters of the Kingdom of God (Mt 12:46-50). He laid aside the prestige of His lordship in order to wash the feet of His disciples (Jn 13:3-5). He refused to pray to the Father for the release of battalions of angels to fight for Him (Mt 26:53,54). He remained silent when the judgment meted out to Him was unfair (Mk 15:3-5; Isa 53:7,8). He withheld His tongue from reviling back when He was reviled (1 Pet 2:23). He directed His sympathisers to weep for themselves and their children (Lk 23:27,28); He refused a pain-killer drink while agonizing on the cross (Psa 69:20,21; Mt 27:34).

Burning out!

Self-denial is the supreme sacrifice. It means saying “no” to the self-gratifying desires of the flesh, to the self-promoting appeals of the world, and to the self-feeding temptations of the devil (1 Jn 2:15,16). We all love ourselves enough and more. It is a fact of humanity and it is our natural orientation. But we need to train ourselves to deny self. Every act of self-denial takes us forward in Christian life. As a man goes down in self he goes up in God. How can we shine unless we burn? John the Baptist was a “burning and shining light” (Jn 5:35). The secret was his philosophy: “I must decrease and He must increase” (Jn 3:30). Hudson Taylor burnt out for God in China. He challenged the Christians, “God is looking for some wicks to burn. The oil and the fire are free.”

Paul was another example. His slogan was, “Not I but Christ!” He testified to the blessedness of self-denial: “As dying, and

behold we live; as chastened and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things” (2 Cor 6:9,10).

Self-denial costly

Self-denial is not cheap. Jesus challenged His followers to count the cost. He gave them illustrations of building a tower and battling against an invader. He concluded that it was wiser not to begin construction without enough money, or march to warfront without enough manpower. This kind of teaching might have looked like demotivating the people. But what Jesus actually wanted was to deepen the commitment of His followers (Lk 14:27-33). Folks should not be following Him for bread and fish. Those who kept going after Him just for blessings and miracles would be terribly disappointed.

Rights and Enjoyments

The disciples of Christ are called to deny themselves of even certain legitimate rights and enjoyments of life. “He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (Jn 12:25). Paul predicted how this teaching and practice would be unpopular in the last days. While listing out the signs of the end times, see which He mentioned first: “Men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money,...” (2 Tim 3:1,2). All that we have is not for us to enjoy. All that we earn is not for us to expend. “Whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple” (Lk 14:33). Here lies our problem. We attempt what Jesus pointed out as impossible— “You cannot serve both God and Money!” (Lk 16:13). It’s foolish to wait for a calamity to strike us and force us to loosen our grip on riches. Jesus became poor voluntarily.

Self-denial — difficult

Having said all these, we admit that self-denial is not easy. D. L. Moody once said, “I have more trouble with D. L. Moody than with any man I ever met!” But the doctrine of self-sacrifice has proved sufficient to produce many instances of the purest heroism that this world has ever witnessed. Church history, why, even the world history, will be only blank pages if we remove the word “sacrifice” from them. Because, all great virtues bear the imprint of self-denial.

At present, can you name a few areas where you are practising self-denial? If you cannot find any, why not resolve on something in which you may deny yourself from today?

b) CROSS-BEARING

Self-denial is a prerequisite for taking up the cross. At the same time, if self-denial is not followed up by cross-bearing, it becomes irrelevant to Christian life and discipleship. There had been men and women who made great sacrifices but never took up the cross. The whole world might have applauded them, but it profited them nothing in the light of eternity. Immediately after stating the condition for discipleship, Jesus asked, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mk 8:36,37).

Cross unpopular

The Cross was an instrument of violent and painful execution. It was a symbol of shame and suffering. It was a picture of curse and condemnation. It was an object of ridicule and reproach. Who would ever like it, leave alone taking it? No wonder Peter could not visualise the Cross in God’s redemptive

plan. He had just then been commended by Jesus for the unusual revelation he received from Heaven concerning His Person. But the very mention of the cross drove him mad and he began to “rebuke” Jesus. And Jesus rebuked him back in the hardest terms, because according to Him a Crossless religion was Satanic. It was following this incident that Jesus stressed the condition for discipleship (Mt 16:13-24).

The message of the Cross has never been popular among the religious or the radicals (1 Cor 1:18-23). We do make occasional references to the Cross from pulpits, but I am convinced that the main stock of Christians has no true understanding of cross-bearing.

Mockery and Martyrdom

To “take up the cross” was to carry the horizontal beam of the cross out to the site of execution, usually past a jeering mob. If we follow Jesus, we must be ready to face literal scorn on the road to eventual martyrdom. From the moment of faith believers must count their lives forfeit for the Kingdom. Jesus was crucified outside the city of Jerusalem. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews called his readers, “Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach” (Heb 13:12,13). For those Jewish Christian readers this might imply being willing to be expelled from the Jewish community. Many who believe on Christ from non-Christian religions face the same situation today.

In our passage under study, note that Jesus made reference to unashamed witnessing immediately after He spoke of self-denial. “For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father’s, and of the holy angels” (Lk 9:26).

Ours is an “adulterous and sinful generation” (Mk 8:38). One has to work against internal and external forces if he should keep on witnessing. There’s nothing called a light cross! We will be hated by the world “without a cause” because of the cause of Christ (Jn 15:18-25). By avoiding persecution we may save our physical life but lose the eternal reward (Lk 9:24). Revivalist Leonard Ravenhill put it differently: “In saving our lives, we not only lose them, but we lose other people’s too!”

Peace or Sword?

The first mention of the word “cross” in the New Testament is in Matthew 10:38. The context is how a man will have to go against the wish of even his close family members in order to witness for Christ. Read carefully verses 27 to 39. The world would have been denied of hosts of great missionaries if they had stayed back to please their families. Even if one does not step out fulltime to work in God’s vineyard, not many parents would cherish their sons or daughters involving deeply in reaching the lost. The painful operation of Christ’s “sword” is inevitable (v34.)

Our love for God to fulfil His great Commission must be such that all other loves are, by comparison, hatred! (Lk 14:26; Mt 10:37). “The sign of our professed love for the gospel is the measure of sacrifice we are prepared to make in order to help its progress,” said Ralph Martin.

Humiliation and Pain

Anyone who would come after Jesus must take up “his” cross. Each one has a situation or difficulty that God has designed for him. We must not try to escape it! “It is good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone and keep

silent, because God has laid it on him ... Though He causes grief, yet He will show compassion according to the multitude of His mercies” (Lam 3:27-33). The cross may be a trial which has something humiliating in it, something which brings a sense of shame, something which lingers, something which is painful to the old nature, and so on. It subdues the pride of our hearts.

Cross symbolises chastisement. “If you endure chastening, God deals with you as sons” (Heb 12:2, 7), It is in weakness that we experience the power of God. “Though Jesus was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you” (2 Cor 13:4).

Cross-bearing daily

Cross-bearing for a Christian is not meant to be an occasional experience but a way of life. He must take up his cross “daily.” He will have to go on facing difficulties in his daily duties and responsibilities. “Hostility from sinners” will be his daily portion. Irritations will be constant. But he should not become weary and discouraged in his soul. He must be willing to risk anything, even his life, in his all-out match against sin (Heb 12:3,4).

Cross and Crown

The Cross was not the end of Christ’s life. When He finished His course, He was crowned with glory and honour. As we go following Him on the same road, we can be singing —

*So I'll cherish the old rugged Cross
Till my trophies at last I lay down.
I will cling to the old rugged Cross,
And exchange it some day for a crown!*