

## *How Committed Does a Christian Need to Be • Luke 9:23-27*

One of the challenges of being a pastor is the perception of having all the religious answers. I have been asked questions that range from the basic to the bizarre. For example, one Sunday a fourth-grade boy told me that he wanted to be a pastor when he grows up and asked what he should do to prepare. My first mental response was that he needed to finish high school in the next eight years, go to four years of college and three years of seminary and talk to me again in fifteen years. But I was afraid that might discourage him, so instead I suggested that he really get to know the Bible. Read it. Study it. Master it. Memorize it. I told him that knowledge of the Bible is one of the most important and valuable things he could do to become a pastor. A month later he stopped me in the hall and asked what he should do next.

Then there was the evening a man called me at home and asked how much money he should give to God. I explained to him that the Bible's principle of stewardship is that everything belongs to God and we show our love and gratitude and commitment by our financial giving. I told him about proportionate giving—that many Christians use 10% as a guideline but that the more we have the more we should give. I suggested he read 2 Corinthians 8-9.

He listened patiently and then asked me how much he should give. I thought I had just explained the basic biblical principles, but he wanted to know exactly how much—to the dollar. It turned out that he and his wife were working on their family budget and got into a serious argument over how much to give. They couldn't settle it by themselves so they agreed that they would let me decide for them.

But there are some questions that are really hard for me to answer. Often they are very personal and highly specific. They are questions about the faith and eternal destiny of someone loved and possibly lost. The conversation may go something like this: "My Uncle Harry (or Aunt Jennifer or husband George or mother Mary or a brother or a sister) once professed to be a Christian. He even prayed to ac-

cept Christ as his Savior from sin. But he doesn't live like a Christian. He never reads the Bible, doesn't pray much or go to church or give money. He swears a lot and can be very abusive. He pretty much lives for himself. So tell me, Pastor, when Uncle Harry dies will he go to heaven or hell?"

It's not an easy question so it can't have an easy answer. I explain that I really can't know another person's eternal destiny. That's up to God, and I'm not God. I do know that Jesus came to save us from sin and that those who truly accept him as Savior and Lord will be saved from sin and will go to heaven. But, when a person truly believes, that person is changed and it's not just someday in the future, it starts here and now. I explain that Christ's change shows more in some people than in others. It shows faster for some and slower in others. And, it's not just that Jesus saves us from what we are but he saves us from what we might have become.

After the explanation the question usually comes back to, "But what about Uncle Harry? Could he really be a Christian and never show any evidence of being a Christian?" And I have to say, "I really don't know about Uncle Harry, but I do know that it is simply not possible for a person to accept Jesus Christ and become a Christian without being changed. Jesus always changes people. What I suggest is that you leave Uncle Harry

***...it is simply not possible for a person to accept Jesus Christ and become a Christian without being changed. Jesus always changes people.***

to God because God is always fair and just and always does what is right. But, what about *you*—have you trusted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord? What difference is he making in *your* life?"

That was Jesus' approach. Jesus talked about it in Luke 9:23-27:

... "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of

Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.”

That’s quite a list of expectations: self-denial, loss of life and absolute allegiance. It could be enough to scare away anyone who is seriously considering following Jesus anywhere. These are either totally unreasonable and excessive demands or the best deal anyone has ever been offered.

Jesus makes it clear that Christianity has a cost. To be a follower of Jesus is not always easy. In fact, it is often difficult. Jesus begins with self-denial saying, *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”* Self-denial is voluntarily giving up something we want and could have. It may be that a couple sells their big house and moves into a smaller one. Perhaps an executive resigns as CEO to take a lower salary with less prestige. A celebrity may choose to leave it all behind and go to some obscure place that most of us have never heard of. Maybe a friend donates a kidney to save the life of someone else. Or a teenager throws away a CD his parents hate but don’t know he has.

Jesus invites us to be his disciples, asking that we regularly practice self-denial. He may ask us to put others first and not insist upon having our own way. He may want us to let go of anger and animosity when we have been wronged. Or perhaps he expects us to sacrifice what we want in order to benefit someone else.

For a Christian, this is a way of life—not to be a nice guy or out of some misdirected masochism but for the sake of Jesus Christ. Self-denial is surrendering claim to something I could have kept. “Taking up my cross” is accepting and not complaining about a burden I would rather not have.

What might this look like? We have been wronged, but we give up the right to get even because we follow Jesus Christ. We would prefer to watch more television at night or sleep later in the morning, but instead we give up some of that time in order to pray for the needs of others. We are saving up for a vacation but we give away the savings to help someone in need. We were cheated out of part of our inheritance by a close relative but decide not to let that damage our relationship. We have something wrong physically that is never going to

get better, but we choose to love and trust God as if nothing were wrong. We are hassled because of our Christian faith but decide to take the unfair criticism and treatment without letting it take us down.

The issue is not so much how self-denial is expressed but that it is expressed daily and for Jesus’ sake. It must become a habit of life because of our relationship to Christ. We must be absolutely convinced that we would rather have less with Christ than have more without him. It is part of the deal in becoming a Christian. We don’t live for ourselves. We live for Jesus. We are different because of him and for him. Whatever the price, he is worth it!

Let me ask you directly: How are you denying yourself for Jesus? If your honest answer is “I don’t know” or “I can’t think of anything”, I have a challenge for you. Try it starting today. Think of what you want or already have. Decide to deny yourself what you want in a way that will help others in the name of Jesus Christ. Try it once. Try it twice. Try it every day for four months until it becomes a habit. Jesus said, *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”*

If that doesn’t seem radical enough for you, listen to what Jesus asks next: *“ . . . whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self.”*

There is a frequent phrase that comes up in movies about the relationship between the president of the United States and members of the Secret Service. It asks if the agents in the presidential protection detail would “take a bullet” for the president. I can vividly remember seeing the films of the assassination of John Kennedy and the shooting of President Ronald Reagan. Bodyguards immediately tried to determine the source of fire and then stood in the way. One of the reflex responses is for the agent to throw his body on top of the president.

I’ve wondered if I could do that. Life is a very important thing to risk. It seems to me that putting my life in the line of fire for someone else is saying that the other person is more valuable than I am. It’s saying, “It’s good if he lives and okay if I die. In fact, it’s better for me to die than it is for him to die.”

To be a Christian is to put my life on the line

for Jesus. It is an upfront admission that Jesus is worth more than I am. His reputation matters more than mine. What he wants is more important than what I want. He's more important than I am.

An interesting test of Jesus' teaching came up during the persecutions of North African Christians during the Roman Empire. Citizens were forced to swear allegiance to Caesar and deny Christ in order to get the documents they needed to work, buy food and travel. There were many church members who agreed to the government's terms and denied Christ for the sake of their jobs and homes. When the persecution was over they wanted to return to the churches, but the Christians who had suffered were convinced that anyone who denied Christ was not really a disciple of Christ. Many were denied reentry to the church.

I've wondered what I would have done. Would I have been willing to die under the rule of the Roman Emperor Nero or under the Chinese dictator Mao Tse-tung? Am I enough of a disciple of Jesus Christ to be willing to give up my life for him?

There is a sense in which all of this may be easier when it's harder and harder when it's easier. In the absolute worst of times with a very clear choice maybe we would be willing to step forward and die for Jesus. But in modern comfortable America it is too hard to take a stand for Jesus Christ.

Understand that I'm not "preaching" to you as much as I am letting you in as I "preach" to myself. I find it so easy to accumulate possessions, to take care of myself, to build up my reputation, to protect my life, to watch out for me. Far too often I fight for things that really don't matter very much and hold tenaciously to things I really can't keep. Worst of all, my life can be so consumed with all that I have and do that there is no time left for Jesus and what is really important. How sad because ". . . whoever wants to save his life will lose it but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and yet lose or forfeit his very self?"

Are you ready for one more? To "self-denial" and "loss of life for his sake", Jesus adds his call for absolute allegiance to him saying, "*If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will*

*be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.*" Jesus asks for absolute allegiance. He wants his followers to be as devoted to him now as we would be if Jesus came back to earth as the judge of human destiny.

Have you ever known someone who is proud of a rich relative when there is something to get but ashamed of that same relative the rest of the time? Jesus wants absolute loyalty from Christians at all times and in all circumstances. He wants us to believe in him and what he says whether it's popular or embarrassing, whether we will be rewarded or punished, whether it's here and now or someday in heaven.

Allegiance is an attitude, but allegiance is also actions. We dare not say we are loyal to Jesus but then use his name to swear, ignore his teachings on sexual morality, hold unforgiving grudges against others or be greedy with our money. Allegiance is allegiance. It's loyalty to Jesus Christ in everything.

Maybe you are thinking what I'm thinking—there must not be very many Christians. How many of us measure up to this kind of commitment that encompasses complete self-denial, loss of life and absolute allegiance?

Most of us don't measure up. Neither did Jesus' disciples standing around to first hear these words in Luke 9. Later in Jesus' biography we hear Peter denying three times in one night that he had ever met Jesus. Thomas had his doubts that Jesus really rose from the dead. These are the guys we call "Saint Peter" and "Saint Thomas". If they flunked, what kind of chance do any of us have?

There is a really strange but interesting line at the end of this teaching of Jesus in Luke 9:27 when Jesus said, "*I tell you the truth, some of you who are standing here will not taste death before*

*they see the kingdom of God.*" It's a hard expression to figure out. It seems to be saying, "You disciples are going to see the best of God before you die." Many Bible scholars think that this refers to the next story about Jesus going up the Mount of Transfiguration with Peter, John and James and let-

***Jesus ... wants his followers to be as devoted to him now as we would be if Jesus came back to earth as the judge of human destiny.***

ting them get a peak of what Jesus will look like in heaven.

But I think there may be an additional meaning. Jesus is saying, “You guys are in. You are my disciples. I expect 100% from you. I know you think this is too much and too hard, but I’m going to help you. I’m going to get you there. Trust me. You guys are going to see the kingdom of God. You guys are in.”

These teachings about radical discipleship are not to scare anyone. They are to show us how big a deal it is and how serious it is to be a Christian. Jesus is serious. He wants all of our lives. For those who are ready and willing, he’ll help us get there.

The traditional marriage vows pledge obedience and lifelong commitment—“for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part.” Is that a good deal or a bad deal? Is that a smart promise or a stupid promise? You know the answer—it all depends on whom you marry! If you marry the right person who loves you with all of his heart and will always do right by you and you are completely committed and love him with all of your heart, it’s a great promise.

That’s what Jesus Christ offers to every Christian. He promises that he will love us always, that he will give us his very best, that he will never leave us or abandon us, through better and worse, richer

and poorer, in sickness and in health, for ever and ever. And what does he ask in return? He asks that we always put him first even when that means denying ourselves and what we want, he asks that we love him more than our own lives and he asks that we give him absolute allegiance always. It is called being a Christian.

Father, help us understand what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. As Jesus Christ is fully committed to us, may we be fully committed to him. By your Spirit give us the strength and the grace to be faithful to your Son—just as he is faithful to us. Amen.

*Faith Matters*® is the Broadcast Ministry of  
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church  
6630 Shady Oak Road  
Eden Prairie MN 55344  
952-944-6300  
[www.wooddale.org](http://www.wooddale.org)  
©Leith Anderson