

Let Him Deny Himself; Mark 8:34

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And he called to him the crowd with his disciples and said to them, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me for whoever would save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?

For what can a man give in return for his life? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, in this adulterous and sinful generation of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed, when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels. And He said to them, Truly I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death.

So that's the passage before us, although we'll just be looking at verse 34 this morning. So I want to say two things about verse 34 before we begin, two things that I hope will be helpful. I hope everything I say will be helpful, but in particular, I hope that these will be helpful as we begin to think about verse 34.

Number one, the first thing to say about verse 34 is, verse 34 contains probably the most offensive aspect of the gospel. We know that the gospel is an offensive message. We've heard that if you've been around the teaching of God's word for any length of time. You have heard the reality that the gospel is an offensive message.

In fact, we dealt with this some last Sunday as we talked about Peter and the other disciples. choking on the cross, stumbling over the cross, this teaching that God has sent forth His Son to take up humanity, to take up perfect humanity, and this perfect humanity must die in our place and do what we're unable to do.

So that is offensive, but just to be honest, I have never really felt the weight of that offensiveness like a Jew would have felt that weight. We've talked about this. As recently as last Sunday, but on other times before this, of just how the Jew who was steeped in the Old Testament really stumbled upon the fact, the teaching, that the Christ must suffer.

Now, I know this to be an offensive message. But in reality, I've never really felt much of the weight of that offensiveness. I don't know if you have, but I have not. But the offensiveness of the gospel is not contained only in that aspect of the gospel message. The, the aspect that the righteous must, the righteous must suffer for us.

God must do what We cannot do that our sinful condition is such that we cannot deliver ourselves from it. Instead, the offensiveness, the offensive aspect of the gospel is contained in what? So I will endeavor as we walk through this passage to open up to us so that we see the true offensiveness of this message, but I warn you ahead of time that this message is a very offensive message, and if the Holy Spirit does his work to open your understanding to what verse 34 is saying to us, you too will find this a difficult message to contend with, and we'll work through that as we go on through, but the second thing that I must say is What's been said really all along in Mark's gospel, which is to say that without the divine work of the Spirit None of this will be opened to us.

We will not understand this. And so when we come to verse 34, this is true for all of scripture, but in particular the truth that's being brought to us in verse 34 is I feel like one of the truths of The gospel message, the doctrine, that Mark is showing to us. One of the aspects that is the most difficult for us to wrestle with in terms of truly grasping the spiritual meaning of this, this is a particular truth that if Holy Spirit is not at work in your heart, I will not be able to articulate this to you because this is, this is a truth that goes beyond words.

I can attempt to put this into words as best I can, but Holy Spirit must work, and He must work diligently in all of our hearts for us to see what I feel that the passage is showing us. And so in order to know whether Holy Spirit has truly opened your understanding of this passage. You will be offended by it.

So, if we get done this morning and you're not particularly offended by what this passage is saying to us, then perhaps there's more work to be done here. But nevertheless, with those two things being said, let's dive into our passage, beginning from verse 34. So, we begin by reading, That Jesus, we, it says Jesus called to him the crowd with his disciples.

And so we'll pause there and just reflect upon the fact that we've now read something that we probably never have read before in any other, part of the gospels, which is Jesus calling to himself a crowd. We have said multiple to of the mark. The picture that Mark is presenting to us is this picture that Jesus is more or less mobbed by people all the time from the beginning of his ministry.

Up until the point in which he's in Jerusalem and he's arrested, it seems as though Mark is showing us a picture of Jesus that at all times he's mobbed by people at every turn. He has to get up before the sun comes up in order to have any time alone to pray. He has to call for a boat. For his possible rescue, if the crowd gets too close in and pushing too much on him.

And so we're given this picture of the enormity of the crowd, the size of the crowds, and yet here we're told that Jesus has to call the crowd to him. So what is this about? Has the crowd now just sort of wandered off and Jesus has to regather the crowd? Well, I think two things are going on here. First of all.

This is taking place at a point. We mentioned this last week. This is taking place at a point in Jesus's ministry in which the crowds have begun to dissipate and they've begun to dissipate because of the difficulty of His teaching. From John chapter 6, we read that Jesus then begins to teach about how He will, in order to be his follower, you must drink of his, eat of his flesh and drink of his blood.

And we are told specifically there that due to the difficulty of that teaching, many of those who were following him stopped following him. And so Mark is reaching over into that time period to pull those events into this episode here for a teaching purpose. And so for one thing, the crowds have seemed to begun to dissipate somewhat.

But nevertheless, even if the crowds have begun to thin to some degree, why does Jesus seeming, seem to have to call the crowds unto Himself? Because if the crowds are thinning, then that would make even all the more sense that the crowds would be close to Him. Because those who would be left at this point would be those who are most committed, those who are most devoted, those who weren't.

Say, scared off by Jesus's difficult teaching of eating His flesh and drinking His blood. So wouldn't it make sense that it, that Jesus doesn't need to regather people back to Him? But we should understand that when we're told that Jesus calls the crowd unto Himself, Mark is not speaking to us about a spatial arrangement of people.

He's not saying to us that the crowd had sort of drifted off and they're over there doing their own thing and then Jesus and His disciples are over here and then Jesus says, Wait a minute, I got something I want them to hear too. Let me call them back over here to me. Mark is not saying something to us about the spatial arrangement of people.

Instead, Mark is making a theological point. And that point is easy to see once you focus in just a little bit on those words. He called them to Himself, or He called them to Him. That is a phrase that Mark, in particular, and all of the Gospel writers, reserve for those instances in which we know that those around Jesus are the called-out ones.

They are the ones who have heard and responded to this call. They are Jesus people. They're not the curious. They're not the ones who are there just to eat. The ones who are interested in what Jesus is all about. They want to learn more. Maybe mixed in with those who are opposed to Jesus and they're listening to His teaching trying to find something to trip Him up on.

And then mixed in with some lepers who are, have come because they've heard he's healing people and some lame people and this is mixed conglomeration of people. Instead, when we read the phrase, he called unto him, then the ones that are follow that, the ones that are called to him, always in the gospels are Jesus's people.

He called to himself. His apostles and he named the 12. He called to himself his disciples and sent them out two by two He called unto himself Those who would go up the mountain to hear the sermon on the mountain in Mount in Mark chapter 5 one of the places that we see this most explicitly because it's put together as in such a way here in Mark chapter 3 for us to see both sides of this.

So look with me in your notes at Mark chapter 3 and you'll see what I'm speaking of here. From Mark chapter 3 verse 8, When the great crowd, so great crowd speaks of a mixture of people, those who are just curious, those who just showed up, and those who are devoted followers, along with some of those who are hostile to Jesus.

When the great crowd heard all that he was doing, now look at this phrase, they came to him. In other words, on their initiative, their decision, their choice, they came to Him. And He told His disciples to have a boat ready for Him because of the crowd, lest they crush Him. For He had healed many, so that they, those who had diseases, pressed around Him to touch Him.

Now verse 13. And He went up on the mountain, and, now notice the difference. called to Him those whom He desired, and they responded and came to Him. Do you see the difference there? Do you see the difference between Jesus summoning and the crowd's initiative to come to Him? That is a nuanced sort of difference, but once you see it, it is distinct, and all the Gospel writers hold it constant.

That when Jesus calls people to Himself, we know that He's now speaking of His people. Now, why is that important? That's important because what Jesus then follows up by saying to those He's

called to Himself, we know now that Jesus is saying these things to people who are the called-out ones. who are the chosen, who are the ones who have heard the shepherd's voice, and hearing the shepherd's voice, they have responded and come to Him.

These are His true and devoted disciples. Now, that's important to recognize because what Jesus is about to say, depending on who He's saying it to, could sound like two different things. If we understand this is something that Jesus is just saying to a mixed crowd of people, what Jesus is about to say could sound something like, how do you become a follower of mine?

Well, how do you become a follower of mine? Well, you deny yourself. You take up your cross. You follow me. You see? If he were saying that to a mixed group, then it could be understood that way. Now, we know that that just doesn't fit, right? And so we instinctively know that Jesus is not giving instructions on how to become a follower of Christ.

Instead, he's going to give a description of what the follower of Christ looks like. Now, we know that because we instinctively know the message of the scriptures, but It's important to know that by more than just instinct. Instinct won't get you there. Instinct will lead you astray. It's important to see it in the text, to see in the text how we know that Jesus is not saying, listen, if you want to be a follower of mine, here's what you got to do.

You got to deny yourself. You got to take up your cross and you got to come after me. We know that that's not what Jesus is saying because of who He's addressing, not to mention the fact that that would contradict things that are said elsewhere in the gospels and particularly in the epistles. So Jesus here is, is not speaking to the curious.

He's not speaking to those who are just interested. He's speaking to those who have heard a call and responded, and they are his true and genuine followers. And now he's going to say to them something of what it means to be his follower. So he says he called to him to the, to, he called to him the crowd with his disciples, and he said to them.

If anyone would, now that word would is translating the word that means desire or will. I really wish that our English standard translated that more literally instead of would. Because the word there is literally to desire or to want or to will. So Jesus says if anyone's will If anyone's desire, so we automatically begin thinking here of, well, if someone has the will, if they have the desire to come after or be a disciple or be a follower of Jesus, then they have that desire because God has done that work in their heart.

So Jesus is saying here, if you have this desire, if this desire to be my follower, if this desire to belong to me is in your heart. Then what he's going to say after this, what he's saying is, is that this is a work that God has done in your heart. Because we know that no one has that desire to belong to him unless he has done that work in your heart.

No one wants to belong to Jesus unless they are one of his sheep. No one just on their own says, I would really like to be a follower of Jesus. Genuinely in my heart, I would like to know him and be his follower. So Jesus is saying, if you have that desire, If that desire is in you, because again he's speaking not to a mixed group, he's speaking to a group that has that desire.

So he says, if you would have that desire, he says, if anyone, now that word if, there's two ways that we can understand if, right? If, even in our language, if can mean two things. If can mean, first

of all, it can mean a statement of assumption, or it can be a statement of condition. We use it the same way. And so we could use the word if.

to describe a state of condition. And we might say something like this, you know, if I had brought my money, then we could all go to lunch after this. Or if we had, if we have time, we can all go over to Cracker Barrel and eat lunch afterwards, right? You see, that's a statement of condition. If this meets this condition, which is, if your body has time and we want to, we go to lunch.

So if that condition is met, then this will happen. This next thing will happen. We'll do this. But if can also mean not, not a statement of condition, but a statement of assumption. And that would sound something sort of like this, you know, if we're all here hearing my voice, then we are all listening to the word of God.

And so what I'm not saying is a condition. You know, if you are here, if the condition is true that you're here, what I'm saying is a statement of assumption because you are here. It's plain that you're here. If you're all in the room, then you're hearing my voice. So we use that word two ways. The Bible also uses that word two ways.

Here it's using, Jesus is using this not as a statement of condition, but a statement of assumption. In other words, he's saying, since you have this desire, because you have this desire, because it is your will, therefore I now say these things to you. So, since, or because, or if. Anyone would desire or want to come after me.

So Jesus is using that word come to describe a state of discipleship. He uses this word the same way in many, many different places. For example, John chapter 5 and verse 40, here it's very plain. You refuse to come to me that you may have life. So you see, had you not refused and had you come, you would have life.

And so Jesus is not saying, you know, to move yourself from there to over here close to me and you'll have life. Just like He's not saying to these, to the crowd that is around Him now, you know, if it's your desire to come along with us, you know, we're on our way to Jerusalem. And if you want to come along, then just come on along with us.

We've got these crosses here that we're carrying to Jerusalem. So come on and help us carry these crosses. That's not what Jesus is saying. He's using the word, it's synonymous to discipleship, to an invitation and a receiving and an accepting of this call to discipleship. So, if anyone or since you, in other words, have this desire to come after me, that's the word for follow, to come and follow, or come after me, let him, and then now we have these three conditions, these three.

statements, these three directives here. Let him first deny himself. Secondly, take up his cross and three, follow me. So we'll take them one by one. So first we say, we read this, let him deny himself. So here, unfortunately, I've got to say for the second time already this morning, is this, that we have a little bit of an unfortunate.

Translation. I wish that it was not translated the way that it is. I wish it was not translated, let him deny himself. Because that misses, I feel like, the clear force of what Jesus said. So when Jesus says, let him, Jesus is not saying what it could sound like he's saying, which is he's making this suggestion or he's putting forth an option.

In fact, um, not only does our ESV translate, I think everything, just about everything except for. The New American Standard and the New Living. I think everything else translated, let him. Even King James translates it, lets him. So I wish we were more literal here. Because Jesus is not saying something as this option or this suggestion.

Because you have this desire to come after me, then let me make a suggestion. You take up your cross, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. That's not what Jesus is saying at all. Instead he's saying something that is definitely More forceful than this. So the verb here is the verb to deny, to forsake, to abandon the knowledge of.

To, remove from, to, to distinguish yourself from, to separate from, to emphatically declare that you have no connection with or no knowledge to. Okay? So the word there translated deny, it is in what's known of in the Greek language as the middle voice. We don't have voices in English. But the middle voice works something, something very close to how a reflexive verb works in English.

In English, we can make many verbs a reflexive verb by adding a personal pronoun as an indirect object to direct the action of the verb back to the one who's doing the action. That sounds like a lot of words, but, but here's what it sounds, here's what it looks like in real life. You can say something like I drive to work or you can make it reflexive and you can say I drive myself to work.

You see how the object of the driving is now you. You could say, I drive my car, or you could make it reflexive and say, I drive myself to work. Or you could say, I wake up at 7 a. m. Or you could make it reflexive and say, I wake myself up at 7 a. m. And so it's taking the action of the, it's making the actor and the one acted upon the same thing.

So in English, we do that by adding that, that pronoun as an indirect object. But the Greek has what's called the middle voice, which is essentially the same thing. It takes the actor and makes the actor. And the object of the action, the same thing, deny self. We'll circle back around to that, but deny self.

Now the next thing to see about that is it's an imperative. And we understand what an imperative is. An imperative is a command. So it's translated, let him deny himself. Now, let him deny himself can be a command. We can understand it as a command. But really, it could also be understood as a suggestion, as a choice, as an option that Jesus is offering.

And so at the very least, it's not very clear, but what is crystal clear is that Jesus is issuing forth a command. Jesus is not issuing a suggestion. He's not saying, if you have the desire to be my disciple, here's a suggestion. Instead, he's issuing a command and all of the commands of Christ are.

Optional or obligatory? They're absolutely obligatory. They're absolutely non-optional. So what Jesus is saying, we should first try to feel the weight of the necessity of what Jesus speaks. What Jesus is going to speak is something that is This is non-optional, not, this is not a choice for any believer.

This is not sort of believer 2.0. This is not follower of Christ revisited. This is not the next step up. Jesus is saying, if you have within your heart a desire to be mine, then you must deny self. Okay, so now that we've kind of got that out of the way, this non-negotiable command, let's now turn our thoughts to what self-denial means.

What is self-denial? What does it mean to deny one's self? So here we begin the portion of the passage that if Holy Spirit really communicates to you Jesus meaning. You will find this a difficult passage to wrestle with, a difficult statement from Jesus to wrestle with. The denial of self is a concept, is a reality in the scripture that is not an easy thing for fallen people, redeemed fallen people, to swallow.

So what is self-denial and what does self-denial mean? Well, the best way to understand what Jesus means by self-denial is to look at how the same word is used elsewhere in the Gospels. The word is used. I didn't count the exact number of times, somewhere around 25 times in the Gospels. And the great majority of those times, there's a, there's this instance and the parallel instances in the, in, Matthew and Luke.

There's one other instance in, in Matthew's gospel in which Jesus says that if you deny me before men, I'll deny you before my father, but the vast majority of the rest of the usages of this word come in. One instance. One instance, and that instance. We find this word five times in Matthew 26. We find it five times in Mark 14.

We find it three times in Luke 22. We find it another two times in John 18. All of those are narrating the same event. And then we find it one more time in John 13 where that event is prophesied. And you know the event I'm speaking of. It's that instance in which when his master was being beaten and abused and convicted Peter, because his hands were chilly, was warming his hands by the fire.

And then he says those words, I don't know that man. I don't know him.

And if we were to, not to be unnecessarily offensive, if I were to literally say to you, on the third time Peter said that, as he called down a curse upon himself, as he said, I'll be damned if I know that man. I will be damned if I'm connected to him. I will be damned if I have any association with him.

Seventeen times that word is used to describe that incident. And so it's simply not possible for us to understand what Jesus is saying when he speaks of self-denial outside of the context of what Peter did on that night. So now, deny, to disavow knowledge of. To disavow connection to to forsake self.

So self-denial, the denial of self, the disavowing of connection to the disavowing of knowledge of self. So self-denial. Let's just begin by thinking about what self-denial is not. Self-denial, there's at least two things that self-denial is not that we, and the church, and particularly the modern church, but the western church, the church always has really stumbled over this doctrine, but the modern church has almost made an art over stumbling over this doctrine.

Because what we've often done is we've taken the two things that self-denial is not and we've made them what self-denial is. Because two things that self-denial are not are one, number one, asceticism. You know what asceticism is? Asceticism is just the, the voluntary denying of some, Comfort or pleasure for religious purposes.

That's asceticism. To deny oneself some sort of comfort or pleasure and to do it for some sort of purpose, usually a religious purpose. Okay, so what are some examples of asceticism? Fasting. we could think back into church history and we find Abundant examples of asceticism in terms,

particularly like you think back to the monastery day, the monks and everything, and even today, these monks, these monasteries, they will take, for example, vows of silence.

To deny oneself the speaking or vows of poverty in which they take this vow to not own anything is the denial of something, some sort of pleasure or comfort for religious purpose. Many times there will be in the, particularly back in, um, earlier parts of church history, they would take these vows to wear clothing that was made a very harsh.

script like burlap kind of material beside the skin so that you were in a constant state of discomfort. Okay, we could go on and on. These examples are plentiful in church history. These examples are plentiful today in Roman Catholicism. These examples are plentiful today in false religions. The idea to deny oneself some sort of pleasure.

For a religious purpose, that's asceticism. Self-denial and asceticism are not the same thing because look closely at the text. I don't barely even have to really point this out to you. Look at what the text says. Jesus says, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself something. Jesus doesn't say, let him deny himself something.

He says, let him deny himself. And so somehow we've taken deny self. And we've added something onto that. And so what Jesus is really saying was, if you're going to come after me, you have to, you have to deny yourself something. Some sort of pleasure, some sort of comfort. You have to deny yourself something to come after me.

So self-denial and asceticism are not the same thing. The other thing that self-denial is not is discipline. Self-discipline. So self-discipline and asceticism have a lot of overlap. But there is some distinction. Self-discipline is the inflicting of harsh treatment upon yourself for the purpose of strengthening or training.

And so we know what self-discipline is all about and we know how helpful self-discipline can be. For example, in the gym, right? No pain, no gain, that kind of thing. But when it comes to the words of Jesus, Jesus is not speaking of self-discipline. He's not speaking of harsh treatment of yourself for the purpose of strengthening or training yourself.

He says very plainly, if anyone would come after me, let him, what, deny self, deny himself. So this is really the rub of the passage where Jesus says these words to deny self, to truly understand what he is saying is something that will strike deep into the heart of fallen man. To deny self is a teaching of Jesus that if Holy Spirit opens this to us, this is something that we all will not only wrestle with today, but we'll wrestle with every single day.

This denial, this denial of self. So in order to kind of get at this. There's two images that help me and I'll share these two images with us now these two images that really help me to get my heart around what Jesus means by deny self. And those two images are this. The first image is this, is the image of a room.

In my mind, it's a small room. It's a rather small room, kind of like a walk-in closet size room. But you can make your room whatever size you want. In my room, it's the walls are white. You can make your walls whatever color you want. But in my room, it's a rather small room with white walls. And there is a wall on one side and a wall on the other.

And on one of those walls is a window. And through that window, I can look through that window and I see heaven and I see the heavenly father and his arms are open and he beckons me to come to him. Then on the opposite wall, make sure that in your, in your room, the, this is the opposite wall, not the adjacent wall, but the opposite wall is a mirror.

And so on one direction, there's God beckoning me to him. And in the opposite direction is a mirror. And in the mirror is me and that reflection of me. Here's the part to really start getting your heart around. My heart loves that. In fact, my heart is fanatical about that mirror. My heart is like every other heart in existence, fanatically in love with that mirror.

Now, for the image to work for you, you might be like me, in which mirrors aren't really your favorite thing. Mirror's not my favorite thing. But you've got to understand that if, for you, looking in a actual physical mirror is not something that really excites you, that's still because you love yourself.

Because of your deep love for self, when you look in that mirror and you're, you don't think that what you see is necessarily what you want it to look like or what you think it should look like, that's still evidencing for yourself, your deep love for self. Okay, so, so sort of get that out of the way, sort of the physical, for me, the revulsion of a mirror.

Of a mirror, but this, the point behind it is that to one side is me and my heart is fanatically in love with that, but to the other side is my father. Who beckons me to Him. So that's the one image. We're not done with that image. We'll circle back to that in just a minute, but let me introduce the second image for you because the two of these images are going to work together.

The second image is the image of merging on the highway. We've used this image before. And so if you've been here any length of time, you know that, that one of the, cardinal sins that God commands us against. And his word is the sin of not knowing how to merge on the highway, right? So, this is, this is the main thing that driving schools fail to teach driving students is that you merge onto the highway with the right pedal, not the left pedal.

The left pedal is not for merging, the right pedal is for merging, okay? So, you just know that if you're on the highway and you're merging in and you're using the left pedal and I see you, just know that I'm judging you for that, okay? But all that aside, merging, we've talked about this before, but for this image, we're not talking about merging onto a fast moving highway.

This instead is not the image of cars moving down the highway at 70 miles an hour and then someone comes up trying to merge too slow. Instead, this is the other kind of merging, when there's construction on the road and they take two lanes down to one. Alright, so you know what I'm talking about. They take two lanes down to one, and then you sort of reach that point where you have to merge over, and what always happens is, is whoever's in that lane over there would rather drive his car in the ditch than let you in front of him.

You know what I'm talking about? The most annoying thing on planet Earth as though to be 30 feet ahead of you makes that much difference. But how many, what percent, I don't know, what percentage of the drivers on the road are like that? That they would rather crash into you than let you be 30 feet in front of them.

If you can sort of grasp that, that's the human heart. That is the fallen human heart that is so fanatically in love with self. That they are not about to let anyone in front of them. As meaningless as that may be, they're not about to let anyone in front of them. That picture, for me, helps me get my mind, if you will, around the fallen human heart and around the human condition.

Because we live in a world of, what's the world population, 8 billion? 8 billion people who are that driver. Now you say, well, not everybody's like that because some people let you in and some people are kind and some people are generous. Absolutely right. And thank God for that. But the point is, Jesus did not say, if anyone would come after me, he must be kind.

That's not what he said. He did not say, if anyone would come after me, he must be generous. Jesus said, if anyone's desire is to come after me, he must deny self. Because, you see, the fallen human heart is so fanatically in love with that mirror that every decision we make, every goal we have, every text message you send, every website you visit, every movie you watch, every decision you make for lunch, everything is guided emphatically by the human heart's love for self.

Is anybody familiar with Alaskan King Salmon? Anybody familiar with that? You've probably seen this on the Discovery Channel or the Wildlife Channels, you know. The Alaskan King Salmon is that salmon that every year they will swim upstream 2,000 plus miles. No kidding. No exaggerating. 2,000 plus miles to the very spot in the very same stream where they were spawned.

And that's where they lay their eggs and that's where they're hatched. You've seen that on the nature shows? Have you ever seen that and you've thought about just what an unbelievable drive God put into that salmon? You know, they show them jumping up the waterfalls and everything, and the bears are getting them and eating them, and yet they're just, they just continue.

They will not stop until they're either eaten by a bear or they get to that spot. What an incredible drive. The drive of the Alaskan King Salmon. And to return to the place in which he was spawned can't hold a candle to your fallen heart's love for yourself and your fallen heart's drive to promote self, to preserve self, to protect self, to pleasure self, to advance self at any cost.

And if you can, through the help of the Holy Spirit. See that in yourself, that how deeply in love your fallen self is with yourself, then Jesus words for you will begin to become offensive. Because what he says to you is that in order to follow me, you have to be a denier of self. I don't know that man.

I've never seen him before. I have no association with him. Do not connect me with him because I'm not part of his little group. Jesus says, in non negotiable fashion, to come after me, you must be a denier of self.

So this is the image of the salmon swimming upstream. And in that image, We're thinking, okay, that's like my drive. My drive to look in that mirror. My drive to get in front of the next person, or make sure that I get in front of as many people as I can. My drive for self, self, self. Me, me, me. Always me.

Always me. Always me. Yes, I may be capable of doing some kind things. I may be capable of doing some generous things. But at the heart of it all, at the bottom of it all, is me, me, me, me. Jesus says,

that's what must go. Now, let's return back to the first image, and we'll bring this all the way back around.

We're back now in the room with the mirror on one side and the window on the other side. Okay? So now we have this window on the one side, and through the window our Father is looking, saying, come unto me, all ye who are weak and heavy laden. Come unto me and I'll give you rest. But then on the other side is the mirror.

Now what happens when you look in the mirror

and you see God behind you?

And that is every false religion in the world, looking in the mirror and seeing yourself up front and God over your shoulder and thinking, this is how I get to him.

In fact, not only is that every false religion in the world, that oftentimes is the Christian expression, or should I say the distorted Christian expression. That is oftentimes how we misunderstand what Jesus is saying. To say, you must deny self, well, what He's saying is you must deny yourself something.

You must deny something of yourself. To say that what Jesus is saying is you must deny something of yourself is looking in the mirror and seeing yourself, seeing God over your shoulder and saying, this is, this is how I get to my Father. So you see the, the analogy, how the image is working, that helps me to really get a grasp on what Jesus is speaking of when he says, you must deny yourself.

So this was the first step. Jesus says, if anyone, or since you have this God implanted desire to be mine, let me tell you what must happen. You must. First, deny self. You must turn from the mirror. You must turn your back to the mirror and turn to me. Secondly, he says, take up your cross. So you must deny yourself and take up his cross and follow me.

So these words must have been very strange for the disciples. For us, they're not so strange. And they're not so strange for us because we know that Jesus will die on a cross. And so for us it makes a lot of sense. But for the disciples, Jesus has not gone to the cross. So these words from Jesus, take up your cross, they must have been very odd for Jesus to suddenly begin bringing into the conversation a cross, a Roman cross.

Now, the disciples, don't be mistaken, we might say, well, well, Jesus is using a phrase. This must have been a phrase that people use to mean, kind of like we use the phrase, take up your cross. We'll get there in just a minute. But we use this phrase, take up your cross. Jesus was, maybe he was saying something like that.

Some sort of phrase that people of Jesus's day would have understood to mean that you must be dedicated unto death. The only problem is there is absolutely no such phrase. That Jesus or any one of Jesus' contemporaries ever would've known of, because in Jesus' day, the idea of a Roman cross was something that was crystal clear in everyone's understanding in the entire area of the world in which Jesus lived.

You know, it's been estimated that during Jesus's lifetime, the Romans crucified somewhere around 30,000 people. 30, 000 people. So death by crucifixion, understand this, death by

crucifixion was not something that an Israelite would have heard of every now and then. Death by crucifixion would have been one of the ugliest realities of almost everyday life, especially everyday life in Judah and Jerusalem.

Now Jesus and 11 of the disciples are from Galilee. But nevertheless, even Galilean Jews do what every year? They go to Passover in Jerusalem. They go to the Feast of Booths every year in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is a center aspect of the life of every Jew. And so the reality of what took place in and around Jerusalem on nearly a daily basis would have been something that as soon as Jesus mentioned this word cross, you can rest assured that nothing popped into their mind about some sort of article of jewelry, or some sort of adversity in life, or some sort of difficulty that you must bear.

Nothing like that would have popped into their mind. So the disciples, they've got to be thinking, What in the world? is Jesus now talking about, a cross. You must take up your cross and follow me. So in the same way that we have taken Jesus words, you must deny yourself, and we've twisted that into, you must deny yourself something.

We've twisted that into, instead of, you must deny yourself, well, in order to follow Jesus, you must deny yourself of something. So if you're going to follow Jesus, then, tell you what, I'll give up chocolate for Lent. There you go. Or I'll give up sandwiches for Lent. My favorite sandwich, Chick fil A sandwiches.

I'll give them up for Lent, right? Following Jesus. In the same way that we perverted His teaching of self-denial, so also have we perverted His teaching of taking up a cross. Because what does Jesus mean by take up your cross? He doesn't, He doesn't tell us. He doesn't explain it. So, we're left to ask the scriptures.

What does Jesus mean by take up your cross? What could Jesus mean? So, we've interpreted take up your cross. Basically, it falls into two schools of thought. Take up your cross. Jesus is speaking of the tribulations and the trials and the difficulty of life. And so we often will think about, carry my cross as, well, my cross to bear is a spouse that is not very kind.

And that's just my cross to bear. Or my cross to bear is that, I work at a job and my boss is not very kind to me. And I'm not, I'm not very much appreciated. That's my cross to bear. Or. We've understood. Take up your cross as to mean something to do with afflictions in this life. Maybe physical afflictions, maybe, maybe a bad back, maybe a back that hurts me every day.

Maybe, other health issues. That's just my cross to bear. What a perversion of what Jesus is saying. Because not one of Jesus contemporaries would have heard that and ever connected that together with some sort of tribulation in life, or some sort of sickness or malady. If you could get into a time capsule, and you could travel back to the first century, and you could sit in on one of those early church meetings, And you were to say, you know, Hey, when Jesus said that we all got to bear our cross, you know, that just means so much to me.

And I just think about the situation at home where my kids just don't really respect me and they don't listen to me. And that's just my cross to bear. They would have looked at you like you have two heads. And they would have said, what in the world are you talking about? Bearing your cross as your disrespectful kids?

So what does Jesus mean when He says bear, you must take up your cross and bear your cross? So first of all, we understand that bearing the cross meant something different for Jesus than it does for His disciples. That is necessarily the case. Because for Jesus to bear the cross, what does Jesus do on the cross?

What does the cross mean to Jesus? To Jesus, the cross is the instrument of execution. By which he became the sin of his people, and becoming the sin of his people, he is punished for the sin of his people. And being punished for the sin of his people, God's wrath is satisfied, and his people can enjoy the righteousness and the acceptance of their Father.

That's what the cross means to Jesus. But the cross does not mean that for us, because the scriptures teach us quite emphatically that no one can pay for the sins of another person. That's why Jesus had to come and do that. So for us, the cross can't mean the place where we make the payment for sin. So what does the cross mean to us?

What does bearing this cross mean to us? The best way to answer that is to ask the Bible. What does the cross mean? What does it mean to bear the cross for a believer, for a disciple? And we find the clearest answer in Romans chapter 6. Look with me in your notes from verse 4. We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death.

So you see Paul here is talking about Not only the death of Christ, but Paul's connection to, Paul's identification with, Paul's union with Christ in his death. We were buried with him by baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His. You can follow Paul's train of thought. He's looking to the cross, he's looking to the death of Christ, and he's seeing in the death of Christ something of his identity in that.

Something of his union, of his togetherness 6 is where Paul gets really plain. We know that. Our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. I'm not sure how Paul could have been more clear than that. Because what he says is, to the believer, to the follower of Jesus Christ, here's what the cross means to you.

You look to the cross, and you see yourself, specifically your old self, dying on that cross. Now, you don't see yourself dying on the cross to pay for your sins. You don't see yourself making the payment for your sin. What you see is Christ making the payment for you, but you see yourself in Him, and you see the old man die up there on the cross.

And so when Jesus says, If you would come after me, you must take up your own cross and follow me. He can't be meaning anything other than what Paul means when Paul says, look to the cross and you must see your old self being put to death on the cross. So when Jesus says, if you would come after me, you must deny yourself and take up your cross.

What Jesus is really saying, it seems to me, is not two different things, but two sides of the same coin. The same thing phrased differently. There must be a denial of self. I don't know that man. I don't know him. He is dead to me. I have no association with him. And then taking up the cross, looking to the cross, and seeing on the cross of Christ.

The old Elisha is dead. The old Donna is dead. The old Josh is dead on the cross. I don't know the old Josh. I don't know him. He's dead to me. He's gone. He's up there on the cross. He's been put to death. All I know now is the newness of life that I now have in Christ. Which is what Paul would go on to say in Galatians 2 and verse 20.

For I have been crucified with Christ. No longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So the epistles, particularly Paul's epistles, will paint for us a very clear picture of what Jesus meant when He's saying, you must take up your cross. And to say that when Jesus says you must take up your cross, what He really means is, you must bear the troubles of this life and just keep on trusting Jesus.

Now, it's true, you must bear the troubles of this life and keep on trusting Jesus, but that cannot be what bearing your cross means. And to deny yourself, Jesus can't be saying, if you're going to be a disciple of mine, you've got to find something in your life to, to, to, I'm more valuable than, and you've got to be willing to put me ahead of, of, I don't know, eating meat on Lent.

And you've got to be willing to say, you know, I would rather have Jesus than eating meat for Lent. What a mockery! of Jesus teaching. You know, I firmly believe, I don't have any statistics or any research to back this up, but I firmly believe this. That when we think about those in Western culture who have heard the Gospel message and rejected it, we often want to think that most of the people who have rejected the message of Christ have done so because they find His rules too stringent, too hard to follow, or they find the supernatural aspects of the Scripture too hard to believe.

I don't think that's the case at all. I think that most people in the Western world who have heard the claims of Christ, who have heard the gospel message and rejected it, didn't reject it because they found the rules to be too hard. Or didn't reject it because they found the supernatural aspect of our faith to be too hard to believe.

They've heard it and rejected it because they've understood something about the claims of discipleship and then they look to the Christians that they know and they see that the Christians that they know take it far too trivially. That's why I think that most often Christianity is rejected by those in the first world is they see the followers of Christ, the disciples of Christ, treating the commands of Christ so trivially as if to say that self-denial is something about, well, something really like self-discipline.

Can non-believers have self-discipline? You betcha. You don't need to know Jesus. In order to give up some pleasure in life, hoping to gain something better by the giving up of that. Or you don't need to have the Holy Spirit residing in your heart in order for you to, to enforce some sort of harsh treatment on yourself because you think you'll be a better person afterwards.

Anybody can do that. And so to treat the claims of Christ, in particular in this passage, when Jesus, I believe, is giving to us the core description. of a disciple. The fundamental description of a disciple. A disciple of mine is one whom God has placed into your heart a genuine desire to be mine. That person must deny himself, take up his cross, he must see his old self as dead, he must turn from self, he must turn from the mirror, and lastly, he must.

Follow me, whoever would, I'm sorry. And he called to them. He called to him the crowd with his disciples, and he said to them, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his

cross and follow me. So we've seen that the church today has, or really the church throughout all of our history, we have really distorted the denial of self.

We've really distorted the taking up of the cross. And once you know it, we've also distorted the follow me. Now, the church has done this throughout church history, but particularly the modern church has really turned this into an art form of distorting Jesus command to follow me. And here's how we've done it.

When Jesus says, follow me, what we often want to associate that with today is, is the following of a person, the connection to Jesus person. And so what Jesus is saying is, is this is what's important, your connection to me. Just follow me. Just, you just got to know me and you just got to love me. Sweet Jesus.

We just love sweet Jesus. He is ours. He's our savior. He's our master. We love him. He's, he is, the, the, the big brother, he's the, he's, he's the best dude in the church. He's, he's our, the one that we follow. He's Jesus. And so we attach ourself to the person of Jesus. But that's not what Jesus was saying.

Yes, Jesus is saying there is an attachment to me, to my person, to me. But when Jesus says you must follow me, He is not saying that there's just simply this attachment to me. He's saying that there's an attachment to me and there's an obedience to what I say. Necessarily, in Jesus words, to follow me, necessary to that is the command to obey what I say.

You might say, well, where does the text say that? Well, let's take a look. It actually says it in two places. If we were to follow the train of thought, Jesus says, take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life, and here it is the first time, for my sake.

So there's the person of Jesus. There's the connection to Jesus, the person of Jesus, for my sake and the gospels. You see? Jesus put together himself, the person of Jesus. And his words, because that's what the gospel is. The gospel is. The words of God, the message of God that says to us something of our sinful condition, of what our sinful condition has done, and what God has done to remove that and have, and bring reconciliation.

That is the gospel message, that is the doctrine, that is the theology of salvation. And Jesus says, to follow me, you must also, not only for my sake, but also for the gospels. Then he's going to say it one more time. If we look down to verse 38, for whoever is ashamed, and here it is, here it is again, of me and of my word.

So two times in the same passage, Jesus connects together, not only devotion to him as a person, to him as our master, to him as our rabbi, but also devotion to his words. So when Jesus says, follow me, he's not just saying, That you're attached to me, that you have love for me and devotion to me. He also says the same thing he's going to say in John's Gospel, if you love me, you'll keep my commands.

So those are the three criteria that are put forth if anyone. And since you have this desire placed into your heart to want to be his, he has placed this call on you. Jesus says, let me describe to you what the disciple of Christ must do. You must deny self. You must take up cross and you must follow me and follow my words.

So just to wrap this up, just with me, recognize the impossibility of this. The total, complete impossibility of this.

What must the Alaskan king salmon do to not go up the stream? The bear's have to get him. Otherwise he's going to kill himself getting up the stream. Why? Because that's His nature. It's the nature that God gave to Him. And so what Jesus is describing is something that only happens when a new nature is given.

Because all of us know that even with Christ in our heart, and even with this new heart that He's given us, all of us know that this denial of self is utterly contradictory to flesh. Which is why the scriptures paint that in such a stark contrast. You either walk by the spirit or you walk by the flesh.

It's utterly contradictory to the nature that we were born with because all of us were born as being fanatical lovers of self, fanatical promoters of ourself, fanatical preservers and protectors of ourself. And it's only through a new nature. It's only through God doing the impossible. It's only through connection to the vine that this is possible.

So Jesus is speaking of a supernatural thing here. Jesus is not describing some sort of hard, difficult task. I've often heard expositors handle this passage and commentators handle this passage to say, Jesus is describing the hardest thing in the life of the Christian. And there's a sense in which that's true.

There's a sense in which this is absolutely the most difficult aspect of following Christ, and that is the denial of self and taking up the cross. But let's not lose sight of the fact that this is only done by those who have a new nature, a new nature that has been Open, who have had eyes open to the Christ and have seen Him and have loved Him and have had the indwelling of the Spirit come into our souls in such a way that denial of Him is not a possibility.

The straight and narrow path that we must agonize to pass through, the narrow gate that we must strive to pass through, yes, it is striving, but for the one who has tasted and seen that He is good, there is no other option. And so Jesus's description, his description to the, those who are called out is to say, God has put this desire in your heart.

And so let me tell you how this desire is going to play out. This desire to belong to him, this desire to be his is going to play out like this. You have to strive. To put to death the old self. You have to strive to turn from the old self. You have to strive to see continually every day the old self on the cross died.

It's died with Jesus, it was put in the tomb with Jesus, and what came out of the tomb wasn't my old self, it was my new self. I am truly, 2nd Corinthians 5 and verse 17, I am truly that new creation in Christ. That, brothers and sisters, I would suggest It's probably the most difficult aspect of following Christ, is daily, every day, seeing that.

Seeing the old self dead, denying the old self, putting to death the old self, and seeing what you can't see with eyes that are in your head, but instead with eyes of faith, seeing the new self that scripture has told us that he has made you.