



# “Sacrifice and Sacrament”

a sermon by

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## Text: Luke 9:18-27

What a strange day that must have been. The disciples had by now grown comfortable in their place near Jesus. But, there were conversations like this – awkward exchanges of questions and answers – that revealed clear misunderstandings about the person and work of Jesus. The text that is before us teaches something about the life of Jesus. Specifically we learn that Jesus prayed; we hear a conversation that involves only Jesus and his disciples; and, finally, the voice of Jesus can be heard calling out through time, calling out to you and to me.

In learning about the prayers of Jesus, we do not at this moment hear specific words or utterances. However, from the conversation that follows, we are allowed to peek inside the window of Jesus' prayers. For example, in this and in other New Testament texts, we see that Jesus is known to pray in the presence of his disciples.

More than occasional moments of solitude, prayer is important in the life and work of Jesus. His prayers can be seen as important for his ministry with the larger crowds, important for his conversations with his disciples; and, necessary for him as he walks towards his death on the cross and the empty grave. It is also in the context of his prayers that Jesus calls through time and space to summon both you and me.

As Jesus continued on his journey, crowds began to gather around him. Having seen his work, these crowds began to develop important expectations of Jesus. For example, some expected Jesus to fulfill the expectations that are described in the Old Testament writings. In the fourth chapter of Malachi<sup>1</sup> we read, "See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.... Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him.... Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse."

Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" Their answers indicate that Jesus was believed to be one of the prophets, perhaps even one who would tell of the coming Messiah. But, Jesus was much more than this. Jesus then asked another question, this time of his disciples, "Who do *you* say that I am?" Peter then answers, "The Messiah of God." We would expect this story to follow the obvious sequence of events. The story should unfold like this: with such a profession of faith, Jesus celebrates Peter's correct statement and commands his disciples to go out into the world proclaiming this message of hope to all who would hear. But, this is not at all what happens. Instead, Jesus ordered and commanded them to tell no one. There is one question asked often about this text: Why does Jesus command the silence of his disciples?

Jack Kingsbury, who may be the finest living scholar of the Gospels, answers the question in this way: "The answer is that although the disciples know who Jesus is, they do not as yet know that his destiny is suffering and death. Until they comprehend the latter [Jesus' destiny of suffering and death], they are in no position to proclaim the former [Jesus' true identity as "The Messiah of God."]. Directly following his command to silence, Jesus tells his disciples for the first time that he is constrained by divine necessity to suffer, die, and be raised (9:22)."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Malachi 4:1 – 6.

<sup>2</sup> Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Conflict in Luke: Jesus, Authorities, Disciples*, Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1991, p. 53.

Curiously, it is in this moment, when Jesus speaks of the hardships that he will endure, that he summons others to follow. Again, the way that Jesus addresses this subject tells something of the mistaken assumptions about the true nature of his work. The crowds are expecting a triumphant victorious leader, one who will either proclaim or cause certain changes to come about. Those who seek after that particular person are not invited to come after him.

Jesus anticipates a tremendous personal self-sacrifice. It is here that Jesus invites others to follow after him. The crowds (and at this moment even his disciples) expect to follow Jesus to victory. To the contrary, Jesus speaks through his crowds, truly speaking through time and space so that you and I can hear his voice. "If any (people) want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."

Jesus commands that we are 'to deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and follow him' Just what exactly does this mean?

Fred Craddock, a well-know preacher asked similar questions regarding this text, "What are our crosses to be borne? Luke alone has the modifier "daily", verse 23 which shifts the emphasis from martyrdom [following Jesus to his death] to sacrificial living. A way of life that could be called cross bearing would have to be a life one had 'taken up'; that is, it would be voluntarily chosen." Very specifically, Craddock concludes that, "A way of life that could be called cross bearing would have to involve denial of self in the service of God."<sup>3</sup>

Consider also recent comment by Joel Osteen, a fairly new and very popular televised minister based in Houston, Texas. Speaking on what he called "the benefits of the Christian life", Osteen spoke about a variety of benefits – including God's protective veil that covers all of his people who are worthy to receive such protection; and, curiously, good parking places at the store.

Remember the words spoken by Jesus. "If any [people] want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?"

Fred Craddock and Joel Osteen are great preachers. But on this issue, they are just wrong. Fred Craddock describes "taking up your cross" as something different from living with hardships and illnesses that you did not choose to endure. While "taking up your cross" requires you to sacrifice intentionally of yourself, the act of following Jesus will lead us to unpredictable places and events. Joel Osteen suggests that because of our faith, God will protect us from hardship. That idea is simply wrong – very wrong. And, I must add, absolutely offensive to those whose lives have been visited by hard realities of life.

What do the words of Jesus demand of us here, now? The acts of denying yourself, taking up your cross daily and following Jesus are all very different. Denying yourself requires that you set other priorities ahead of your own self. Taking up your cross daily does require a pro-active commitment to sacrificial living. The act of following Jesus requires in part denying yourself and taking up your cross. But, more than that, you are required to do these things wherever you may be. At times we try to convince ourselves that we are excused from these actions because we live and work in a city, and not for example in a foreign mission field. Even here, we are not excused from the instructions given by Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> Craddock, p. 130.

Consider for example the dilemma that once confronted Chuck Colson. Colson served in the Nixon Whitehouse as a Special Assistant to the President. He was an insider who learned about the Watergate break-in long before it had become public knowledge. Colson's eventually had a choice about how to end his involvement in this situation: He could choose to plead guilty to a misdemeanor of which he was not guilty; or, risk being indicted of a felony of which he may very well have been guilty.

Colson refused to negotiate for a plea agreement that required a confession of a crime that he did not commit. Incidentally, when it did come time to enter a guilty plea, Colson's accuser was none other than Colson himself. No possible explanation exists for such life-changing honesty – except for this: Chuck Colson finally reached a moment in his life where he was willing to deny himself, to take up his cross daily and to follow Jesus.

The story does not end here. Having served much of his minimum prison term, there came to be a real crisis in the Colson household. Several of Colson's closest friends believed that he needed to be home with his family. They were so convinced of this that they themselves willing to serve the final weeks and months of his of his prison term.

Without doubt, Jesus lived in a peculiar time and place in history. Other teachers who were contemporary to the life of Jesus were described as peripatetic – language of walking around in circles.

While to some, Jesus may have had this same appearance, in reality, his journey was very different. He walked about the region to teach, preach and heal. And even though there was much work to be done on any given day, we must not lose sight of the fact that each day Jesus was closer to his final steps towards the cross.