



Living the Cross and Resurrection

Sample

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Unit 4. The life of the cross

The life of the cross

Reflection

What does it mean to imitate Jesus?

God's great purpose in our life is that we might be "conformed to the image of his Son" (Romans 8:29). We are to be "imitators" of Jesus (1 Thessalonians 1:6). We are to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 13:14).

But are we to imitate Jesus in every respect? On the one hand, he was an unmarried Jewish male and an itinerant preacher in first-century rural Palestine. On the other, he was the Son of God, who accomplished the salvation of the world. Both in the specifics of his human vocation, and in his divine nature and saving role, we clearly cannot follow him. So what does it mean to follow Jesus?

In Luke 9:23, Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." Following Jesus means following the way of the cross. Later in Luke's Gospel, Jesus says: "Anyone who does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27). All throughout the Gospel of Luke we are presented with the evidence that Jesus is God's promised Saviour-King and invited to explore what it means to follow him. In Luke 19 Jesus arrives in Jerusalem and the focus sharpens to accentuate his death, resurrection and ascension. Luke, in these chapters, is practically begging us to ask the question, "What does it mean to follow Jesus?"

The New Testament is clear: the call to follow Jesus is a call to die. For some this may mean a call to literal death — to persecution and martyrdom. For all of us, however, the call to follow Jesus is a call to die to self and sin. This is not the calling of a few. It is the stamp of every Christian's life. Jesus says we are to take up our cross "daily". Following the way of the cross is a daily activity. To follow the way of the cross means to show the same sacrificial love, submission to God, willingness to suffer, service for others. Sacrifice, submission, suffering, service. This is our calling and our example.

Reflection

Does sacrifice, submission, suffering, and service look much different in the 21st century than in the pages of the New Testament? How might it be different? How might it be similar? In what ways do you find it most difficult to follow Jesus?

1. Following Jesus means we refuse to trust in self and trust in God's mercy

Look at 18:9-14. Here's a parable about two people. The first looks religious, respectable, moral - the kind person who you might expect to go to church and be part of God's kingdom. His prayer lists all his good works: his moral life and his religious activity.

And then we meet a tax collector, a collaborator with the Roman occupying army, one of God's enemies. He knows he has not lived a good life. He cannot even look up to heaven. He is like a naughty child who won't look you in the eye.

A good man and a bad man, side by side, and who gets God's approval? Jesus' answer turns the world of his hearers upside-down. Look at verse 14: "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." The good man turns out not to be good after all. He is full of pride and self-righteousness. Meanwhile, the bad man is bad – there is no pretending and no excuses. But he calls out for mercy from God and he receives mercy from God, and that is how we follow Jesus. No pretending and no excuses, just a plea for mercy confident that there is mercy with God.

The men in this parable are made up. Jesus creates the story to illustrate the contrast between poverty of human righteousness and the richness of God's mercy. But then the Gospel Luke shows us real life versions of these two men.

First look at 18:15-17. What have children got to offer? Nothing. How do we come to God? Like a child – with nothing.

Now read 18:18-23. This ruler is confident in his goodness, and claims to have kept all the commandments. Jesus responds by taking this man's life apart. He shows what is hidden under the shiny surface of his supposed virtue. The ruler presents as a good man, but Jesus exposes a selfish, proud and ugly heart.

Jump to 18:35-43. Here is a beggar with nothing to offer, and capable only of begging. But that's the right thing to do when we come before God. Look at what the beggar says in 18:38-39: 'Have mercy on me.' Look at what the tax collector said in 18:13: 'Be merciful to me.' That's how we follow Christ – by crying out for mercy.

Rich people often think they deserve their wealth. Wealth is down to hard work, brain power or shrewd investments. This means that rich people have a right to their wealth. That same, self-made attitude infects our relationship with God. We think we have a right to God's salvation because of the good life we've lived. But before God we are poor, undeserving beggars. The rich ruler's question is: 'What must I do to inherit eternal life' (18:18). All the while his assumption is that he can do something that will lead to his salvation. 'Give me a task to perform, a rule to keep, religious activities to follow.' But that is the wrong question. Look at 18:24-27. It is impossible for people to save themselves, but it is not impossible for God. In the very next scene we find Jesus predicting his death (18:31-34). His death will not be an accident. It's part of a plan, and Jesus knows what is coming because he is in on the plan. That plan is that Jesus will take the punishment we deserve and give us the reward that he deserves. Justice will be done so that mercy can be given.

‘What does it mean to follow Jesus?’ Stop trusting in yourself and trust in God’s mercy.

2. Following Jesus means we stop living for ourselves and live for others

What is it that stops the young ruler coming to Christ? Pride and selfishness. He lives for money, yet Jesus warns about the dangers of wealth again and again in Luke’s Gospel.

- Luke 8:14: The seed that “fell among the thorns... are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.”
- Luke 12:15: “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of one's possessions.”
- Luke 16:13: “No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

But now look at 19:8-9. Jesus has invited himself to a meal at the home of a tax collector. He isn’t just a sinner, he is a rich sinner! But Jesus says: ‘Today salvation has come to this house.’ How does Jesus know? Because Zacchaeus starts giving his money away! Living for others is a sign that salvation has come. We cannot save ourselves by our generosity, and we can only cry out to God for mercy. But when God’s mercy captures our hearts then we live for others and not for ourselves.

The call to self-denial is very significant in this central section of Luke’s Gospel. It starts with Jesus saying in 9:23: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” And in 14:33 he says: ‘Any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.’ Jesus warns his disciples that following him will bring conflict and threat (9:59-62; 12:4-12, 49-53). He calls them to love whoever they meet in need, even their enemies (10:25-37). He tells them seek first his kingdom (12:31). He tells them to invite people to their meals who can’t repay them (14:12-14). They’re to be like servants who’s only concern is their master’s business (17:7-10). As we follow Jesus along the way to the cross, we discover that following Jesus means following the way of the cross – following his example of self-denial and sacrificial love.

In our culture self-fulfilment has replaced self-denial

The importance of self-denial used to be assumed in Western societies. But that world has been turned upside down. Professor Daniel Yankelovich of New York University has documented a major shift in social attitudes over the last decades of the twentieth century.⁴ The old rules, Yankelovich says, stressed duty to others, particularly your family. Obviously people were not sacrificial all the time, but it was embarrassing to be seen to be selfish and that is because the norm was self-denial. This has now changed. It has been replaced with what Yankelovich calls ‘the duty to self ethic’ in which our primary responsibility is our own self-fulfilment. Everything else must fit round that priority. It should be safe to assume that Christians would know better, but James Davison Hunter used Yankelovich’s questionnaire to do research among evangelical students and faculty. He

⁴ Yankelovich, D., *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down*, (Random House, 1981).

concluded that evangelicals are more committed to self-fulfilment than their secular counterparts. He comments: 'Self-expression and self-realisation compete for self-sacrifice as a guiding life ethic.'

Reflection

All too easily we warp the gospel into a way for securing the 'good life' for ourselves. But there is no discount version of the Gospel. It is all or nothing. What are some of the indications that your view of the gospel life is focused on yourself? What could be some of the results?

In our culture self-expression has replaced self-restraint

This new world is all about me, so naturally what I want to talk about is me. People are looking for opportunities to share, to talk about their feelings, to express themselves, to 'process' everything, to be understood. This is 'therapy' by disclosure, and any sense that you might control your emotions for the sake of others is seen as repression'. But Jesus calls us to sacrificial love and one aspect of that is controlling our emotions for the sake of others.

In our culture excitement has replaced virtue

What's good – or what constitutes a good life – is now defined in terms of experiences that bring self-fulfilment or enable self-expression. So we are all chasing excitement.

By the 1980s... a large majority had begun to think that what was worthwhile in life had nothing to do with its normal routines such as getting up each day and going to work. Nor with the traditional responsibilities of marriage and the raising of children. Rather, life is about its more exotic moments. It is not about what happens on Monday through Friday, but what happens on the weekends. Its real meaning, and its real rewards, are found when the self, unencumbered by routine and responsibility, can be found, nurtured, and satisfied.⁵

We no longer value the routines of work. We don't value jobs that are mundane. We are not happy to serve others through our work, we want, expect and demand the job itself to be fulfilling. But in the Bible what is good – and what defines a good life – is a life of virtue, loving what is good, doing what is good, doing the right thing, self-denial, sacrificial love. True fulfilment is found in serving others – not in chasing excitement. The good life is a life spent doing good and loving good and loving God.

In our culture personality has replaced character

Think about what kind of life the two options of self-denial and self-fulfilment create. What happens when either one shape your life or become the pattern of your life? The answer is we develop 'character': good character or bad character. Good character is the result of

⁵ Wells, D., *The Courage to be Protestant*, (IVP, 2008), 136.

repeatedly doing the right thing so we develop a habit, an instinct, a taste for goodness. But in a world focused on self-fulfilment personality replaces character, and no one is concerned about being good. The good person has been usurped by the attractive, magnetic and exciting person. A culture like this no longer has 'heroes' – people with the courage to do the right thing - but 'celebrities' – people who are famous because of the way they express themselves. In a culture in which self-expression matters more than self-denial you get celebrities instead of heroes.⁶

The way of the cross, and especially the love demonstrated in the cross, is the essential mark of Christian discipleship under the lordship of Christ. This can certainly involve persecution, but its characteristics are broader in scope. It is characterised by humility, submission, service and suffering, a denial of self and desire to live for others, both in the church and in the world.

Reflection

In our culture self-fulfilment has replaced self-denial, self-expression has replaced self-restraint, and the pursuit of excitement has replaced the pursuit of virtue.

- Where do we see this in the world around us? Where do we see this in ourselves? How should we decide whether it's right to have fun?

In our culture personality has replaced character, men often avoid responsibility, and mothers expect to find deep, emotional fulfilment in the routine of motherhood.

- Where do we see this in the world around us? Where do we see this in ourselves? Think about people we know with godly character. What has shaped them?

The way of the cross has an impact on both our big life choices and our small daily actions, so that it includes both martyrdom and washing up. Every small act of service is a preparation for martyrdom. In fact, every small act of service is a kind of martyrdom already – a dying to self. Many of us think we might do well on the big things – at least in theory, but we do not do well in the small things. I remember a missionary visiting us – someone who had moved across continents to serve Christ. That is a big choice to make for you and your family. But he never did the small things like offering to help with washing up, or clearing the table. It made me wonder whether he crossed continents because he treasured Christ or because he treasured his reputation.

⁶ I've only sketched these contrasts. For those who read novels, let me recommend Wendell Berry's novel *Hannah Coulter*. It's a beautiful description of this ethic of self-denial and the deep contentment it brings. It gives real depth to what we've seen.

Reflection

Does the pursuit of self-fulfilment make us happy? How will it differ from the pursuit of self-denial? What will the way of the cross mean for you in the next five minutes? Five hours? Five days? Five months? Five years?

Jesus says: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.' (Luke 9:23-24)

