***TAKE UP YOUR CROSS***

**Luke 9:23-25**

**The Commands of Christ – Week 3**

**By Andy Manning**

1. **INTRODUCTION**
   1. Christians love the cross of Christ. How many of you have a piece of cross jewelry? We love cross decorations. How many of you have some kind of cross decoration? We wear clothes that have the cross on it. How many of you have a piece of clothing with a cross on it? We love to sing about the cross. Some of the most famous, most beloved hymns are about the cross: “The Old Rugged Cross,” “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” “At the Cross,” “Near the Cross,” etc. We love to focus on the cross, on the fact that Christ died for us. And we should. But did you know that Jesus calls us to carry our cross, too? The cross isn’t just about what Jesus did for us, it’s about what we are called to for Christ.
   2. **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** wrote, “When Christ bids a man to follow him, he bids that man to come and die” (Cost, 89).
   3. We’re going to learn what it means to take up your cross today.
   4. Right before Jesus ascended to heaven, He commanded His disciples to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, and teaching them to obey all His commands (Mt 28:19-20). This is called the Great Commission. It is the central mission and responsibility of the church. And that means it is the responsibility of every Christian to learn and obey Christ’s commands.
   5. But what are Christ’s commands? That’s what we’re studying in this sermon series. We’re looking at six, even though there are many more, and eventually we will come back to this topic and look at the rest.
   6. Today we’re going to look at Christ’s command to “take up your cross.”
   7. The passage that we studying to today is going to answer the question, “How do I become a Christian?” It also answers the question, “What is a Christian?” or “How should a Christian live?”
2. **TEXT**
   1. **Luke 9:23-25** 23 Then he said to them all, “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me. 24 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me will save it. 25 For what does it benefit someone if he gains the whole world, and yet loses or forfeits himself?”
3. **AN INVITATION** 
   1. In this passage Jesus issues an invitation. Notice four things about this invitation:
      1. **It is a salvation invitation.**
         1. Jesus is not inviting His followers into a deeper relationship with Himself, or to a higher commitment; He is inviting people to be saved; to become Christians; to begin a saving relationship with Himself.
         2. Why do I say that? Two reasons.
         3. First, the invitation is made to everyone.
            1. V. 23 “Then he said to them *all*”
            2. V. 23 “If *anyone* wants to follow after me”
            3. V. 24 “*whoever* loses his life because of me will save it.”
            4. Jesus isn’t just talking to people who were already His disciples. He was talking to everyone.
         4. Second, the invitation is to “follow after” Jesus.
            1. What does that mean?
            2. It can mean two things, and both of them point to salvation.
            3. First, it could refer to following Jesus to heaven. Jesus told His disciples that He was going back to the Father (Jn 13:36), so He could have been saying, “If anyone wants to follow me to the Father in heaven, here’s what you need to do.”
            4. Second, it could refer to becoming a follower, or a disciple of Jesus (i.e., becoming a Christian). In other words, “If you want to be my disciple, here’s what you need to do.”
         5. If you want to know how to become a Christian, or how to go to heaven, this is your passage.
         6. Aren’t we saved by faith alone? Yes. But what is true faith? What does it mean to believe in Jesus for salvation?
            1. We know that there’s more to it than just mental assent or agreeing that the facts of the gospel are true; even the devil has that kind of belief (James 2:19, 26).
            2. We know saving faith involves repentance, or the decision to turn from sin and turn to God (Acts 2:38).
            3. So what Jesus seems to be doing here is explaining what it means to believe in Him for salvation in different terms.
         7. Some people think that Jesus invites unbelievers to believe, and He invites believers to take up their cross. They think that to become a Christian you need to believe, and then to grow as a Christian you need to take up your cross. That’s not the case. He issues the same invitation to everyone. If you want a saving relationship with Jesus, you must believe in Him, and that means deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Him.
         8. Often at major sporting events like NFL football games you’ll see someone in the stands holding up a sign that says John 3:16. And why not? That’s a great verse. It says that God loves us, Jesus died for us, and we can have eternal life. How come you never see anyone with a sign that says Luke 9:23? That’s not as appealing. But John 3:16 and Luke 9:23 go together. To believe is deny yourself and take up your cross. Without that, you haven’t believed, and you can’t be saved.
   2. **It is a universal invitation.** 
      1. Let’s go back to the language Christ used.
         1. V. 23 “Then he said to them all”
         2. V. 23 “If anyone wants to follow after me”
         3. V. 24 “whoever loses his life because of me will save it.”
      2. Christ invites everyone to be His followers; to be saved.
      3. Jesus was a rabbi, an expert Bible teacher. Back then rabbis had a group of Talmidim – disciples or students who followed them around everywhere they went. They were studying to become a rabbi. The Talmidim were a very exclusive group. Only the brightest of the bright qualified to become a student of a rabbi. You essentially had to have a 36 on the ACT, or a 2400 on the SAT, and a 4.0 GPA. Rabbis would often quiz prospective students with very difficult questions. They might ask, “What is the number of times the name of the Lord was used in the eleventh chapter of Leviticus?” Rabbis were very exclusive in their picking of a student because the quality of the student reflected the quality of the teacher. If a rabbi had only the best students, it showed that he was the best teacher. If he had lousy, lazy students, then it showed that he wasn’t a very good rabbi. So typically rabbis were very exclusive in who they invited to be their students.
      4. Not so with Jesus. Jesus invites all, anyone, whoever.
      5. Some people might think, “I can’t become a Christian; God will never forgive me; not have what I’ve done.” Jesus invites you to be His follower.
      6. Jesus offers this invitation to everyone, no matter who you are or what you’ve done. Everyone is invited to follow Jesus. Everyone is invited to receive eternal life. Everyone is invited to receive God’s forgiveness.
   3. **It is a Christocentric invitation.**
      1. The invitation and command in this verse is to follow Jesus. He said, “Follow me.”
      2. Some people claim that Jesus didn’t believe that He was God. If you meet someone like that, tell them to consider statements like Luke 9:23.
      3. Jesus was not inviting people here to follow the Father, to believe in the Father, to be devoted to the Father; He was inviting people to give their complete and unconditional commitment to Him.
      4. That’s not what a good preacher does. A good preacher points people to God. He encourages devotion to God. He doesn’t call people to believe in himself, or to give him their devotion. He points people to God. Not Jesus. He called people to devote their lives completely to Himself.
      5. Jesus was constantly elevating Himself, talking about Himself, and calling people to Himself.
         1. He said to receive eternal life you had to believe in Him (Jn 3:16).
         2. He said people had to love Him more than their parents or children (Mt 10:37-39).
         3. He said, “I am the resurrection and the life. I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the gate. I am the way, the truth and the life. I am the resurrection and the life.”
         4. He claimed that one day He was going to sit on His throne and judge everyone, deciding their eternal fates.
      6. When someone talks like that it means one of two things:
         1. Either He was arrogant and a bad teacher.
         2. Or He believed that He was God and that He deserved people’s total commitment.
      7. Nobody believes Jesus was arrogant or a bad teacher. Everyone agrees that Jesus was a good man, a good example, a good teacher. Therefore, He must have truly believed that He was God.
   4. **It is a conditional invitation.** 
      1. Finally, notice that this is a conditional invitation.
      2. Notice His wording again. **Luke 9:23** Then he said to them all, “If anyone wants to follow after me….”
      3. Jesus said, “Anyone can be my follower, if…”
      4. To become a Christian, to go to heaven, there is condition to meet. There is something we must do. Actually, there are three conditions. What are they?
      5. **Luke 9:23** “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me.”
4. **HOW TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN**
   1. **Deny yourself.**
      1. What does it mean to deny yourself?
      2. Other Bible versions put it like this:
         1. NLT: You must give up your own way.
         2. AMP: let him deny himself [disown himself, forget, lose sight of himself and his own interests, refuse and give up himself]
         3. GW: say no to the things you want
         4. LBP: put aside his own desires and conveniences
         5. MSG: let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat--I am.
      3. The ***NIV Study Bible*** (Lk 9:23) describes self-denial as "complete dedication and willing obedience."
      4. In other words, to deny yourself is to give Jesus complete control of your life.
      5. I like the analogy of driving. Think of your life as a car. Before you become a Christian you are sitting in the driver’s seat. You are in charge. You are calling the shots. To become a Christian, you need to let Jesus sit in the driver’s seat.
      6. A lot of people like Jesus, but they don’t want Him to be in the driver’s seat. They want Him to be in their car, but they still want to be in control. That’s not Christianity. To become a Christian and be a follower of Jesus you must deny yourself. You need to get out of the driver’s seat and let Jesus take the wheel.
      7. Self-denial simply means saying no to yourself and yes to Christ. **William Barclay** wrote, "He must say no to his own natural love of ease and comfort. He must say no to every course of action based on self-seeking and self-will. He must say no to the instincts and the desires which prompt him to touch and taste and handle the forbidden things. He must unhesitatingly say yes to the voice and the command of Jesus Christ. He must be able to say with Paul that it is no longer he who lives but Christ who lives in him. He lives no longer to follow his own will, but to follow the will of Christ, and in that service he finds his perfect freedom." (*Barclay's Daily Bible Study*, Mk 8:34-35)
      8. Some people think that self-denial mean giving up the bad things – you have to give up drugs, and alcohol, and cigarettes, and sex outside of marriage, etc. Yes, self-denial involves turning from the bad things; but it’s more than that. It means giving Jesus complete control. That means not only quitting the things that He wants you to quit, but doing the things He wants you to do.
      9. The ***NIV Study Bible*** (Mk 8:34) says that to deny yourself means, "Cease to make self the object of one's life and actions."
      10. Before you were a Christian your life is all about you. It’s all about your dreams, your goals, your desires, your pleasures, your comforts, your plans, your morals, your values, your priorities, your standards. It’s all about you. But to become a Christian you must deny yourself. You must make Christ the object of your life and actions. For a Christian, it’s all about Jesus. What does He want? What does He like? What pleases Him? What are His morals, and standards, and values, and priorities? What are His plans? What is His mission? What are His goals?
      11. The ***NLT Study Bible*** (Mk 8:34-38) says, "To turn from your selfish ways involves letting Jesus determine your goals and purposes in life."
      12. One way to understand self-denial to compare it to Peter’s denial of Christ. If you remember, when Jesus was finally arrested, they asked Peter if he was a follower of Christ, and Peter denied Christ three times. **William Barclay** wrote, "Peter once denied his Lord. That is to say, he said of Jesus, 'I do not know the man.' To deny ourselves is to say, 'I do not know myself.' It is to ignore the very existence of oneself. It is to treat the self as if it did not exist. Usually we treat ourselves as if our self was far and away the most important thing in the world. If we are to follow Jesus, we must forget that self exists." (*Barclay's Daily Bible Study*, Lk 9:23-27)
      13. To deny yourself means choosing Jesus over everything else. **Kyle Idleman** wrote, "Followers are willing to deny themselves and say, 'I choose Jesus. I choose Jesus over my family. I choose Jesus over money. I choose Jesus over career goals. I am his completely. I choose Jesus over getting drunk. I choose Jesus over looking at porn. I choose Jesus over a redecorated house. I choose Jesus over my freedom. I choose Jesus over what other people may think of me.’" (*Not a Fan*, 145)
      14. One mistake that people is that they think they can become a Christian by compartmentalizing the parts of their lives that they don’t want to surrender to Jesus. “I’ll follow Jesus, but I’m not going to tithe. I’ll follow Jesus, but I’m not going to give up pornography. I’ll follow Jesus, but I’m not going to give up drinking.” Self-denial means saying no to yourself and yes to Jesus in every arena of your life.
      15. There was a report on MSNBC about a group of new vegetarians. One twenty-eight-year-old-girl named Christy Pugh said, "I usually eat vegetarian, but I really like sausage." The report said that there is a growing number of people who call themselves vegetarians, but they eat meat whenever they want. So, the traditional vegetarians pressured them to change their name; they said, “You’re not true vegetarians.” So they did change their name, calling themselves “flexitarians.” If you look it up, a flexitarian is someone who eats most vegetables, but occasionally eats meat. A lot of people need to stop calling themselves Christians and call themselves flexitarians. They like Jesus and they obey Him, unless He tells them to do something they don’t want to do. They follow Jesus, except when they feel like going their own way. Then they disobey Him. That’s not self-denial. That’s not Christianity.
      16. The New Testament uses a word for Christians that clearly expresses the meaning of self-denial. Christians are often called slaves of Christ. Paul, Peter, John, Timothy, Jude, James – they all called themselves slaves of Christ. Even Mary, the mother of Jesus, called herself the Lord’s slave (Lk 1:38). They didn’t use the word servant; they used the word slave (*doulos*). What’s the difference? A servant works for someone; a slave is owned by someone. In fact, the word Christian is only found three times in the New Testament, but the word slave is found 124 times. Christians are slaves of Jesus Christ. In Israel after a slave had served six years, by law they had to be released. But if they wanted to, if they loved their master and believed life would better for them as a slave, a slave could choose to remain their master’s slave for life (Dt 15:16-17). Then they were called a bondslave. That’s what Christians are. Christ doesn’t force us to be His slaves; we choose it. We deny ourselves. We choose to be His bondslaves. **Kyle Idleman** wrote, “Choosing to become a bondslave was an act of complete self-denial. A bondslave gave up all their rights to the master. He is agreeing to give up all his possessions to the master. A slave couldn't pick and choose what was part of the deal. He couldn't say, 'I'm going to be a slave but I want to keep the car, and I need every other weekend off. I need to have a room with a view.' It wasn't a negotiation. A bondslave would say, "Everything I have, everything I am, I sign over to you." (*Not a Fan*, 152)
      17. But there’s more to self-denial than simply saying no to self and yes to Jesus. There are two aspects to self-denial.
          1. Deny unrighteousness. Give up your sin – anything that is against God’s will – and do God’s will.
          2. Deny self-righteousness. Admit your sinfulness, that you are undeserving of heaven, that you can’t save yourself, and that you need a Savior.
      18. That’s self-denial. That’s the first condition to becoming a Christian.
   2. **Take up your cross.**
      1. **Luke 9:23** “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me.”
      2. Let’s start with what this doesn’t mean. Sometimes people say, “I have a cross to bear,” and they are referring to a difficult time they are facing – a chronic illness, an unhappy marriage, a rebellious child, an job they dislike, etc. But that’s not what Jesus is talking about. A cross is a painful consequence of your commitment to Christ.
      3. In Jesus’ day the cross was a tool used for execution. It was used for crucifixion. Jesus and His audience were very familiar with crucifixion. Some estimate that the Romans crucified 30,000 Jews during the lifetime of Jesus. When Jesus was about eleven years old, a Jew named Judas the Galilean led a rebellion against Rome. He raided the Roman armory at Sepphoris, which was just four miles from Christ’s home in Nazareth. The Romans burned the entire city to the ground, sold the inhabitants into slavery, and two-thousand of the rebels were crucified on crosses which were set in lines along the road as a warning to all.
      4. The cross was not a piece of jewelry back then. It was a symbol of suffering and death.
      5. Therefore, to take up your cross is to obey Jesus whatever the cost.
      6. It helps if you connect these two conditions – cross-bearing with self-denial. Self-denial means giving Jesus complete control of your life. Taking up your cross means giving Jesus complete control no matter the cost.
      7. It means doing what Jesus wants you to do even if it costs you money, time, energy, friends, family, reputation, career, comfort, freedom, pleasure, even life itself.
      8. The cross is a symbol of three things:
         1. Humiliation. The Romans had a number of ways of executing people. They could kill you with a sword, force you to drink hemlock, burn you to death, stone you to death. Crucifixion was expensive. It required the oversight of four soldiers and a centurion. So, why did the Romans crucify people? For humiliation. They wanted to make a public statement that this person had no power, had nothing, was nothing. They would strip them naked, raise them up on the cross, and put a sign above their head stating their crime. To take up your cross is to say, “I’m willing to be humiliated for Christ. I will do whatever Jesus wants me to do, even if it means humiliation.”
         2. Suffering. Crucifixion began with flogging. They would strip you naked, tie your hands to an upright post, and then whip you. The Romans were experts at whipping a person to within an inch of their life, although people often died from the whipping due to massive blood loss. Then the criminal would be forced to carry the patibulum (the horizontal beam of the cross) to the site of the execution. To take up your cross is to say, “I will do whatever Jesus wants me to do, no matter how painful it is.”
         3. Death. Once the criminal reached the site of the execution, the soldiers would attach the patibulum to the vertical beam of the cross. Then they would nail your hands and feet to the cross. Being in that hanging position made it difficult to breathe, so scholars believe Jesus died by suffocation. To take up your cross is to say, “I will do whatever Jesus wants me to do, even if it kills me.”
      9. One time a young man asked an older Christian, “What does it mean to take up your cross?” The old Christian thought for a moment and said, “Well, to be crucified means three things. First, the man who is crucified is facing one direction. Second, the man who is crucified is not going back. He has said his final goodbyes. Third, the man who is crucified has no further plans of his own.” That’s a good description of taking up your cross. You are facing one direction – Jesus. You are not going back to your old life. And you have no future plans except to do what Jesus wants you to do.
      10. Kyle Idleman, in his book *Not a Fan*, tells a sad story about taking up your cross. After he had preached at a church out of town, a father-in-law came to speak with him and said that his daughter was about to marry an atheist, and he begged Kyle to speak to the young man before he left. Kyle agreed and called the young man, and they had lunch the next day. They talked for several hours, and the young man repented of his sins and gave his life to Christ. About six weeks later Kyle called the pastor of the church and found out that the young man was active in church and rapidly growing as a Christian. He didn’t hear anything about the young man for about a year until the young man called him. He said he was having some problems and he needed advice. He said that his father-in-law was telling him that he needed to “throttle back” his faith. You see, the young man was taking the Bible’s command to tithe seriously, and his father-in-law didn’t like that. He also refused to work on Sundays so that he could go to church, and his father-in-law didn’t like that either. His father-in-law said, “I’m glad you became a Christian, but Jesus never wanted you to become a fanatic.” In other words, “I’m glad you’re following Jesus, but why don’t you put that cross down.”
      11. A lot of people want to follow Jesus, but they don’t want it to cost anything. But if you want to become a Christian, it will cost you everything. You must deny yourself and take up your cross.
   3. **Follow Him.** 
      1. **Luke 9:23** “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me.”
      2. The third condition of becoming a Christian is to follow Jesus.
      3. What did Jesus mean here?
      4. To follow Jesus means to join Him in what He came to do.
      5. What did Jesus come to do? He told us on multiple occasions.
      6. **Luke 19:10** “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost.”
      7. Jesus came to die for the lost and then to gather together a group of people who are fully-devoted to Him.
      8. **John Piper** wrote, “Therefore, when he demands that we follow him, he means that we join him in the task of gathering (Lk 11:23). There can be no neutral followers; we either scatter or gather. Following Jesus means continuing the work he came to do -- gathering a people in allegiance to him for the glory of his Father." (*What Jesus Demands From the World*, 70.)
      9. To follow Jesus means to join His mission of world evangelism. To devote your life to reaching people for Christ and building the church.
      10. In other words, it means devoting your life to serving Jesus and His mission, His cause.
      11. Being a Christian is not just about being moral and nice. It’s about being a missionary. And you don’t have to go far to be a missionary.
      12. My daughter Mari went on a mission trip this summer. She spent six weeks doing Vacation Bible Schools. Do you know where her team went? They stayed right here in Louisiana. When she came home she said, “Dad, I had no idea that the need for Christ was so great right here in our back yard.” She had no idea that the lostness was so great right here in Louisiana.
      13. You can be a missionary for Christ without going anywhere. Start in your home, and then your extended family, and your school, your team, your workplace.
5. **CONCLUSION**
   1. How do you become a Christian? Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus.
   2. I began this sermon by making some observations about Christ’s invitation in Luke 9:23. I said it is a salvation invitation, a universal invitation, a Christocentric invitation, and a conditional invitation.
   3. Let me make two more observations about this invitation.
      1. It is an honest invitation.
         1. Jesus didn’t try to attract new followers by offering them health, wealth, and prosperity – not in this life. Instead, He offered them self-denial, cross-bearing, and service.
         2. If you own a company and are trying to attract new customers, you need a good logo, and a good slogan.
         3. For Christ’s logo He chose a cross. That’s like someone today choosing a noose, or an electric chair for their logo.
         4. For Christ’s motto He chose, “Come die with me.”
         5. Make no mistake. Don’t follow Jesus if you want a life of ease and comfort and luxury. He doesn’t offer that. He offers a cross.
      2. It is a loving invitation.
         1. Christ isn’t asking us to do something He didn’t do, is He? He carried His cross. He walked the *Via Dolorosa*, the way of suffering. He faced rejection, criticism, false accusations, torture, and death. He never asks us to do something that He didn’t.
         2. And more than that, He never asks us to give Him more than He gives us. Yes, the Christian life involves self-denial, cross-bearing, and service, but the reward is eternal life with Him in paradise. The Christian life may not be a life of luxury, comfort and ease, but it will be the best life. Because you will be in a relationship with Him. You’ll get to know Him, and walk with Him, and experience His love and power and grace on a daily basis. You’ll experience a life of meaning, and significance, and purpose. And when you die, you will spend eternity in paradise with Jesus.
   4. So let me offer you the invitation of Jesus. Would you like to become a Christian? All you need to do is deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Him. Do that, and He offers you Himself; He offers you eternal life; He offers you forgiveness; He offers you transformation.
   5. The missionary martyr, **Jim Elliot**, said it best. “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”