

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pastor Eric Chang

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LET HIM DENY HIMSELF

Luke 9:23

To people who may be interested in following Jesus, the Lord has hard words to hear. ‘Make no mistake about it,’ He said, ‘The path of discipleship is hard, extremely hard.’ As dreadful as Jesus’ own destiny as Messiah has been, those who decide to follow him should expect nothing less. Christ’s road to Calvary was one of self-denial and self-sacrifice. In the same way, the road that the disciple is asked to take is one of self-denial and self-sacrifice. This is how Jesus put it in Luke 9:23.

Luke 9:23. Then He said to them all, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.’

Cutting your ties

‘Let him deny himself.’ This is the expression that we want to concentrate on in our lesson today. ‘Let him deny himself.’ What does it mean to ‘deny yourself’? Let’s examine carefully this word ‘deny’. The Greek word for ‘deny’, *aparmeomai*, is a very strong word as you can guess. It comes from the word *arneomai* which means to forsake, to abrogate, to renounce something. *Aparmeomai*, translated as ‘deny’ in Luke 9:23, is a strengthened form of *arneomai*. It is used to say that you have no connection whatsoever with an object or a person. So when you ‘deny yourself,’ *aparmeomai*, you affirm that you have nothing more to do with yourself.

In the Greek OT, it is found in Isaiah 31:7 where it is used to describe what will happen one day when Israel decides to deny or cast away its gold and silver idols. *For in that day every one of you will reject (aparmeomai, throw away) the idols of silver and gold your sinful hands have made.* There was a time when these idols were precious to Israel. Now Isaiah is calling on the nation to reject, to deny, its idols and to turn back to God. Isaiah is basically telling them, ‘Say to yourself, ‘I’m finished with these idols. I don’t want to have anything to do with them anymore.’’

It is also used in Matthew 26:34 in Jesus’ statement foretelling Peter’s denial. *Jesus said to him (to Peter), ‘Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny (aparmeomai) Me three times.’* ‘You will say that you have no connection, no relationship with me.’ And that is exactly what Peter did. In order to save himself, Peter denied Jesus. He lied and said three times that he did not know Jesus.

Rejecting yourself?

So here the Lord Jesus is saying something astonishing. ‘Unless you completely reject yourself, unless you cut your ties with yourself, you cannot be my disciple.’ How is that possible?

This command is not only astonishing, it seems impossible to obey! How can I reject myself? It seems that Jesus is asking us to lose our identity. Or is He saying that the disciple should have no self-esteem? Are we to reject any sense of self-worth? What becomes of our dignity in all this?

This statement of the Lord Jesus appears unintelligible because we naturally keep what we like and we reject what we dislike. Let me put it simply in this way. Let's say you are in a restaurant and there comes the dish that you ordered. You are hungry and you can't wait to eat it. But supposing that you see three flies landing together on our plate. Suddenly you lose your appetite. You do not want your dish anymore. You keep what you like and you reject what you dislike. Here Jesus seems to require that we go against the natural flow of our feelings. He seems to ask us to reject that which we are satisfied with, that which we love, ourselves. And if we are satisfied with ourselves, how can we reject our own person? That is why Jesus' statement does not seem to make sense. Of course, you cannot deny yourself, right? How then should we understand Jesus?

The rejection of our self-centeredness

Here the Lord is not asking us to reject our identity. What He is asking us to do is to reject our way of thinking, to be dissatisfied with the way we think. What is wrong with our thinking? It is its self-centeredness. The way we think is self-centered. When Jesus says, 'Deny yourself,' He is referring to that selfish inclination within us, that propensity to think only about ourselves. As long as you are satisfied with this way of thinking, then of course you will have no desire to change. And if you do not want to change, God cannot transform you. Because Christianity is about transformation, about God's power coming into your life and making you a new person. God's power cannot come into your life if you want to keep this self-centered way of thinking. The new cannot come if the old is still there. The new comes when your mind is renewed. Paul talks about a complete 'renewing of our mind' in Romans 12:2. Nothing will happen in your spiritual life until God's power comes to work in you and change your self-centered thinking into a self-giving person. And for this to happen, you must deny yourself. You must be willing to let go of your selfish desires. 'Self' is no longer in charge of your life. God is. When you deny yourself, you allow his self-giving Spirit to take charge of your life.

And notice. It is an utter denial, not a partial denial. A partial denial will not work. The totality of the denial is expressed in the command to take one's cross. 'Let him take up his cross daily.' The cross is an instrument of death. When death comes, life is completely gone. It cannot be partially gone. A believer has died to a whole self-centered way of life. So you have to come with an attitude that is completely finished with this old way of thinking. Otherwise you will end up being what James calls 'a double-minded person, unstable in all his ways' (James 1:8). 'If any man would come after Me, I require him to deny himself totally. Anything else less than 'total' is not acceptable.'

Self-denial, a matter of hating

So this is one way to understand Jesus when He talks about 'denying ourselves.' In the second part of our lesson, I am going to connect Jesus' command to deny ourselves with another sentence of our Lord. And it is the passage in Luke 14:26. From this connection, I will say that to deny yourself means to hate yourself. To deny yourself is to hate yourself, hate in the sense of Jesus' use of that word in Luke 14:26. Let's read Luke 14:26.

Luke 14:26. If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.

This is a verse that makes us very uncomfortable the moment we read it. Our discomfort centers around the word 'hate.' 'If anyone does not hate his father and mother...' How can Jesus say that? This does not agree with our understanding of the Bible. It directly contradicts well-known scriptural passages like Matthew 15:4 where Jesus said, *For God commanded, saying, 'Honor your*

father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' We are supposed to honor our father and mother, not to hate them. We find the same instruction in Matthew 19:19. *'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*

Loving less?

Some have tried to reduce the abrasiveness of the word 'hate' by interpreting it as meaning 'loving less.' In their opinion, Jesus is asking us to not so much to 'hate our parents', but to 'love them less' than himself. So it is a question of degree.

Certain passages are used to support this view. For example, Matthew 10:37: *He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.* 'You see, here Jesus says it plainly. 'Loving someone more than him.' He wants us to love him more than our father and mother. Therefore He must be saying the same thing in Luke 14:26 when He talks about hating father or mother. We are to love them less than him.'

Another passage is Genesis 29:30-31. *So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years. When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren.* Here it says that Jacob 'loved Rachel more than Leah,' which means that he loved Leah less than Rachel. It also says that 'Leah was hated', which means that Jacob hated Rachel. 'So in the same passage, the Bible says that 'Jacob loved Leah less' and 'Jacob hated Leah.' You see, from this OT passage, it is possible and justified to interpret 'hate' as meaning to 'love less.'

There is a problem with this explanation of Genesis 29. What is the problem? When it says that *Leah was hated*, it was Leah's own subjective impression that she has been hated. It was her perception of Jacob's attitude towards her. It was not that Jacob hated her. This becomes more obvious in v. 33. *She conceived again and bore a son, and said, 'Because the Lord has heard that **I am hated**, He has given me this son also'; and she called his name Simeon.* 'I am hated,' Leah said. It is Leah who felt herself to be hated, and God accepted her estimate of the situation as correct, that she felt rejected by her husband. Jacob was forced into marrying Leah even though he never wanted her. If we put ourselves in her situation, it is easy to understand why she felt hated. From Jacob's perspective, he loved Rachel, but he loved Leah very much less, if we can use the word 'love' at all. It is not so much that Jacob hated Leah, but it was perceived by Leah as hatred given the dynamics of the relationship.

Now concerning the use of Matthew 10:37 to explain Luke 14:26, that is problematic too. Because Matthew 10:37 and Luke 14:26 are not strictly parallel passages. They come from a different context, Luke 14 being much later than Matthew 10. So to explain Luke 14 on the basis of Matthew 10 creates an exegetical problem. The Lord Jesus, in the later context of Luke 10, is talking about the matter of discipleship. If He simply wanted to say 'love less,' why did He use such a strong word like 'hate'? He had already used the term 'love less' before. He could have used it again in Luke 14. But He did not. He chose to say 'hate.' Why?

There is also another point to consider. When the Lord uses the word 'hate' in other contexts, does He always mean 'to love less'? If He uses the same word in that 'weaker' sense elsewhere, then we might be justified to affirm that He means the same thing here in Luke 14. But when we read the Gospels, we find that it is not the case. If we look elsewhere to see how Jesus uses the word 'hate', we observe He does not seem to mean 'love less' at all. Let's look at these two examples in the gospel of Luke:

- Luke 6:22. *Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man's sake.* When people hate you, when they are hostile towards you, they do these things. They exclude you, they revile you, they denounce your name as criminal. It is not that they love you less.

- Luke 21:16-17. *...and they will put some of you to death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake.* If they put you to death, they do not love you less. They literally hate you.

The word 'hate' (*miseo*) is used fairly often in the NT. If you take the time to look at all the occurrences, you will see that everywhere it has the same basic meaning. It simply means 'to hate,' hate in the sense of disliking strongly. It never means 'to love less.'

Hating, an act of worship

What does it mean then to hate when Jesus tells us to hate ourselves? 'In order to become a disciple, you have to love Me and hate yourself.' How should we interpret those harsh words?

Let me begin by saying that when Jesus asks us to deny ourselves, He is asking us to hate ourselves. Let's put these two verses together:

- *If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself* (Luke 9).
- *If anyone comes to Me and does not hate ... his own life, he cannot be My disciple* (Luke 14).

These two sentences say the same thing.

And when Jesus talks about hating ourselves, He is referring to an act of worship in the spirit of Paul's words in Romans 12:1 where the apostle urges us to 'offer ourselves as a living sacrifice to God.' We hate ourselves when we present ourselves to God as a sacrifice. Sacrifice and offering are concepts that are taught early in the OT. Outside the Garden of Eden, the first presentation of offerings and sacrifices to God involved Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-4). Cain brought some crops from the land as an offering. Abel brought some animals from his flock.

We do not need to be a psychologist to know that it is easy to give away what is of no use for us. Sometimes we hear this kind of announcement in the church. 'Bring to the church the things that you don't need in your house. We will sell them and give the money for a church ministry.' Sadly to say, the church often ends up with a pile of junk that is hard to sell. It is easy to give away what we do not need. It is even easier to give away what we do not like (think of the dish with the flies on it). And it is totally easy to give away what we hate.

That is why in the OT, when you offer a sacrifice to God, that sacrifice must be perfect. God does not accept anything that is imperfect. If you are offering a sheep for sacrifice, if there is the slightest imperfection in the animal, you may not offer it to God. The word of God specifically says that 'no animal that is crippled, lame, or have any defect can be offered to God.' Leviticus 22:21: *And whoever offers a sacrifice of a peace offering to the Lord ..., it must be perfect to be accepted; there shall be no defect in it.* You can offer only the best. In other words, you offer the animal that you really love. After all, if you have a flock of sheep, then clearly the one that you love the most is the one that has no defect. It is precisely that one that must be offered to God. It is precisely that one that God wants.

Killing what you love

When we say we offer a sacrifice to God, what do we mean? In OT terms, it means to kill, to kill the animal we are offering in sacrifice. Normally we kill what we hate. In a sense, to kill what you hate is easy. But to kill what you love is extremely difficult. You can imagine the feeling of the farmer who goes to the temple with his perfect lamb. He offers up what he dearly loves to God. Any sacrifice implies a complete giving up of that which is sacrificed. Now think of Abraham when he offered up his son to God (Genesis 22). God commanded him to offer Isaac. Abraham obeyed. Isaac was his only

son whom he waited for so long to have. His precious son was standing in front of him. And the Lord said, 'Offer him up to me.' Abraham took his knife. At that moment, he had to kill what he loves. He had to hate what he loves the most. It is precisely because he loves Isaac so much that the cost was so high. We love our parents dearly. But the Lord is saying, 'Hate them.' 'What? No, I can't dislike them. How could I?' That is not what Jesus is saying. He is saying, 'Give me as a sacrifice what you love. Offer up your parents as a sacrifice. That is what it means to hate what you love.'

Keep that principle in your mind. To give away what you hate, that is no sacrifice. To give away what you love, that is agony. To hate what you love, that is the spirit of sacrifice. I love myself. I would be a hypocrite if I say that I do not love myself. I would be a hypocrite if I were to offer to God myself that I hate. No, no. I come to God and I say, 'Lord, I offer what I truly love to you. I offer my person.' That is precisely what Paul means by 'presenting your body as a living sacrifice to God' (Romans 12:1). I offer myself whole and alive and perfect. Perfect in the sense of complete. I hold nothing back. Do you see that when you are doing that, you are doing what Abraham was doing? You are offering something that is extremely precious for you. You hate what you love.

There are many things I love dearly in this world. I love my job, my house, my car. I love my wife, my children, my parents. But now, everything that is precious to me, I hate them in the sense of offering them as a sacrifice to God. You can say that you have killed them in your heart and given them to God. They are no longer mine. To me, they are dead. From now on, they are still with me as the Lord's. Whether it would be my wife or my parents, or anything precious to me, I offer them up unreservedly to God. When you offer something in that way, spiritually you have killed it. In the eyes of the world, you have hated it. You have cut your link with these things. You stopped your fleshly desires from having access to them.

Self-denial, offering up ourselves as a sacrifice

Now you see that the Lord was not saying 'to love them less.' For the less you love them, the less it would be a sacrifice. It is when you love them much that the sacrifice becomes meaningful. It is painful but genuine. And so, Jesus is saying, 'Unless you hate even your own life, which you love so dearly, you cannot be my disciple.' The Lord's demand is absolute.

The apostle Paul repeats the same teaching in his writings. We already mentioned Romans 12 about 'becoming a living sacrifice for God.' But perhaps more important than that, in Romans 4, Paul speaks of those who have a faith like Abraham. How do you have Abraham's faith unless you do what Abraham did? This is the kind of person who will be saved. Paul is giving the same teaching as the Lord Jesus, but in different words. The Lord is saying, 'Only this kind of person can be my disciple, the one who hates his own life.' Paul repeats the same thing in Romans 4 and says, 'Unless you have this kind of faith in which Abraham offered up what was most precious to him, you do not share his faith. And if you don't share his faith, you are not having Abraham as your spiritual father.' Romans 4:16: *Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all.*

How can we appreciate what Jesus did for us and refuse to offer him the sacrifice of ourselves? He took all that was precious and He offered all that up to the Father for the redemption of our sins (Philippians 2). How can we follow a Lord who did that for us and our response to him is to offer him less than our best?

In this lesson, we tried to understand Jesus' words when He said, 'Deny yourself.' We discussed two aspects of this command. Firstly, to deny ourselves means to put an end to our self-centered way of thinking. It means an utter rejection of our selfishness. It is only when our whole thinking gets rid of this self-centered way of living that the power of God will become a reality in our life. And secondly, to deny ourselves is not merely the negative putting away of ourselves, but also a

positive offering up of ourselves to God. Jesus asks us to hate what we love. Hate your parents, your children ... even yourself. By this, he meant that we offer up everything that we consider precious to God. We have to kill them in our heart. Or, to use Jesus' words, we have to hate them. We have to hate even our own life. In doing so, we obey Jesus' command to deny ourselves.