Going without – Christ’s call to self-denial

Text: Mark 10:28-31

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**Scriptures:** 1 Kings 19:19-21; Luke 9:23-25; Mark 10:17-31

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 63, 501, 509, 488, 149b

Series: Occasional (Lent: pre-Easter)

Theme: Jesus teaches his disciples about the costs and benefits of following him

Proposition: Be prepared to let go of whatever is most precious to you apart from Christ

**Introduction**

Today is the last Sunday before Easter and comes towards the end of the period on the liturgical church calendars of the Roman Catholic, Eastern and some protestant churches known as ‘lent’. The word ‘lent’ comes from the Middle English term ‘lente’ which means springtime. In the Northern Hemisphere, it is springtime now.

In the church calendar, the first day of lent (termed ‘Ash Wednesday’) is preceded by ‘Shrove’ or ‘Fat’ Tuesday, also known as ‘Mardi Gras’. Historically, and in some places currently, this was typically a day when people eat as much of everything they wanted before the coming days of fasting. It was also often characterized by drunkenness, debauchery, lewdness and wild partying.

Traditionally lent is a period of 40 days following Fat Tuesday. A time of self-denial, repentance, and reflection leading up to Easter Saturday. Self-denial is a practice found in virtually every major religion, including Biblical Christianity, but how does a disciple of Jesus Christ faithfully practice self-denial? What is the reason for a Christian to do so? What are the benefits of self-denial in the life of a believer in Christ?

Today we turn to the Word of God to find the right answers to these questions.

1. **The practice of self-denial**

I was at a wedding celebration yesterday, enjoying second helpings of a delicious dinner and I mentioned to some people at my table that I was due to preach on self-denial today. Nobody said ‘Yeh, that’s one of my favourite topics!’ Self-denial is likely not near the top of our lists of preferred spiritual disciplines! Self-denial is ‘sacrifice of one’s own desires and interests’.

We know something of the interests of Peter from Mark’s gospel when we encounter him in chapter 1, casting a net into the Sea of Galilee together with his brother Andrew. Peter’s interest was in catching aquatic animals with gills - otherwise known as fish! However, when Jesus said to him and his brother “*Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men*” (Mark 1:17), Peter and Andrew left their nets, left their ‘trade’, their livelihoods, their families, their previous way of life, and followed Jesus.

Christ had a different desire and interest to theirs. His primary goal is seeking and saving the lost (Luke 19:10). When they left their nets and followed Jesus, Peter and Andrew sacrificed their own desires and interests for the desires and interests of Christ. The same was true of fellow fishermen, James and John (Mark 1:20), of Levi the tax collector, and the other 7 disciples.

When Peter says in v28 of our text “*We have* ***left*** *everything and followed you*”. Here he is speaking on behalf of the 12 disciples as a group. The word ‘left’ here means to ‘let go’, to send from one's self, to forsake, to hurl away, to put away, to disregard, to put off. It conveys the basic idea of an action which causes separation and refers to total detachment, total separation, from a previous location, condition or affection.

Self-sacrifice means going without something or somebody. So let’s ask this question: was Peter’s bold declaration true; had he actually left everything to follow Jesus? No. He had **not** yet let go of the desire for self-preservation. Remember Peter’s vehement threefold denial of Jesus in the courtyard after Christ had been arrested? (Mark 14:66-72). Church tradition says that, when Peter was put to death, he asked to be crucified on an inverted cross. The reason for his request, it is said, was that, because he had denied his Lord, he did not consider himself worthy to die as Jesus had.

We don’t know from Scripture how Peter died. However, we do know for certain that after His resurrection Jesus restored Peter and the Apostle no longer sought to preserve himself. His goal from then on was to proclaim Christ whatever the cost, as we clearly see in the book of Acts and in his letters. It is true that Peter ‘*loved not his life unto death*’ (Rev 12:11). He had come to understand the extent of Christ’s call to self-denial: "*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me*” (Luke 9:23).

Peter’s confident statement that the disciples had left everything to follow Jesus was prompted by the previous interaction of Christ with a very wealthy man. Matthew’s gospel indicates that he was young (Matt 19:22). He had great possessions (Mark 10:22). This man came to Jesus, not like the Scribes and Pharisees, to test him, but rather to genuinely seek eternal life. His problem he had was **not** his wealth. His extensive material possessions themselves were **no**t the barrier to his entering the Kingdom of God, but his great affection for them was.

The self-denial which Jesus calls ALL his followers to practice is the letting go, forsaking, hurling away, putting away, disregarding, of anything and everything which might impede their love for the Lord. Self-denial is really the removal of all idols of the heart. When we make any person, other than God, the best person for us and the object of our primary desire then we create an idol. Husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, families, church can all be idols. When we make anything the best thing and the object of our primary desire then we create an idol. Houses, lands, cars, clothing, our own looks, our bodies, our wealth and our status can all be idols.

Whatever you most want to hold onto is what is most valuable to you. If that is not the Lord, then you have not fully denied yourself. Jesus said, **“***For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also*” (Luke 12:34). In essence this is not a new teaching which Jesus brought, but the outworking of the first commandment ‘*You shall have no other gods before me*’ (Ex 20:3).

In our reading from 1 Kings we heard of Elisha who was called to serve as God’s prophet next prophet by Elijah. He ‘burned his bridges’ by sacrificing his team of 12 oxen, together with their yokes. There would be no going back to ploughing for farmer Elisha – he had let go of his former interest in agriculture to serve the Lord as a prophet.

Earlier in history we see the self-denial of Abraham when he followed the LORD’s call to leave his ‘country, his kindred and his father’s house’ to go to the land that God would show him. We see Abraham’s self-denial in his response to the call of God to “*Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and…offer him …as a burnt offering*.” (Gen 22:1) This was a test of Abraham’s faith and trust in the Lord. When Isaac’s father’s faith was proven, God provided a ram to take the place of his only son. God’s gift of that substitute ram points to his gift of His Son.

Surely the greatest act of self-denial ever performed was that of God giving up, letting go of, forsaking, discarding, putting away, going without, His own Son, whom he had loved from before the foundations of the world (John 17:24), on the cross at Calvary. God made “*him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Cor 5:21).

Surely the greatest act of self-denial ever performed was that of Jesus Christ giving up, letting go of, forsaking, discarding, putting away His own interests. He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2).

Brothers and sisters, Jesus is not calling us to do anything which he himself has not already done. His call to go without is not ‘*do as I say,* ***not*** *as I do*’, ‘*but do as I say* ***and*** *have already done for you*’. Beloved brother and sister in Christ, if your heart is free from idols this day then He is not calling you to let go of that which is most precious to you. He is not calling you to deny yourself of your Saviour.

Which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **The motivation for self-denial**

Why we do what we do is more important that what we do. In the Christian life, doing the right thing with the wrong heart motivation is doing the wrong thing.

As we noted at the start, self-denial is a practice found in virtually every major religion. For example, in Buddhism, self-denial is seen as a means to spiritual enlightenment, a mechanism of great detachment from the material world. In Islam, fasting is an obligatory act during the month of [Ramadan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramadan). The purpose of this self-denial is to prevent your spirit from paying excessive attention to anything except Allah. In Roman Catholic teaching, self-denial is for the purpose of self-purification. According to the Roman Catholic Encyclopaedia, “the real aim of Lent is, above all else, to prepare men for the celebration of the death and Resurrection of Christ…the better the preparation the more effective the celebration will be. One can effectively relive the mystery only with purified mind and heart. The purpose of Lent is to provide that purification by weaning men from sin and selfishness through self-denial and prayer”.

The purpose of Biblical self-denial is not greater detachment from the material world, not a redirection of attention away from anything apart from God, nor a means of spiritual purification. In addition to these errors, self-denial can be practiced as a form of punishing the body for many wrong and dangerous motivations including:

* **Seeking to gain control over one’s life.** This can find expression in eating ‘disorders’ such as bulimia and anorexia. Kind, compassionate, gentle and informed pastoral care is essential in this complex area. If you are someone today who struggles in this area, seek help.
* **Self-harm as an outworking of depression and anxiety.** Deliberately injuring your own body can be an expression of not wanting to live, or not feeling that you are worthy of doing so or finding the pain of self-inflicted injury easier to deal with than the dark turmoil in your mind. Kind, compassionate, gentle and informed pastoral care is essential in this complex area. If you are someone today who struggles in this area, seek help.
* **Seeking to win favour with God.** Before his eyes were opened to the truth of salvation by faith alone, Martin Luther practiced self-denial by frequent fasting and sleeping outdoors in the winter without a blanket. He beat himself with a whip to show God how sincere he was in his desire for holiness and salvation.

The Apostle Paul warns against this approach to religion where man-made regulations for self-denial are followed in Col 2:23 saying **“***These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh*”. Beware congregation that there are many wrong reasons to let go of bodily needs and pleasures.

However, there is a motivation for self-denial which is good and true. This right reason is expressed in our text by the words of Jesus as he responds to Peter’s declaration of having ‘left everything’ to follow Christ. Jesus said, "*Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for* ***my sake and for the gospel****, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life*” (Mark 10:29-30). Did you hear the true motivation for self-denial in the midst of these words? “*For my sake and for the gospel*”.

The motivation for self-denial is a **greater affection** for Christ than for oneself, or for anyone or anything else and a greater goal in life than one’s own personal ambitions or the ambitions of another descendant of Adam. Notice here the connection between self-denial and the good news of salvation in Christ alone, by grace alone through faith alone. When we proclaim the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to others, we **must** teach others that following him is very costly.

Remember the pearl merchant in one of the parables which Christ taught? **“***The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it*” (Matt 13:45).

Following Jesus will not necessarily cost you everything, but it will cost you that which is most dear to your heart if your highest affection is not for Him. This is not a very effective’ marketing technique’ from a human perspective! But our call is not to ‘market the gospel’ according to the principles of this world, but to be faithful disciple-makers by proclaiming Christ and His message. Would-be followers of Jesus must be able to count the cost before committing to His Lordship over every aspect of their lives.

Jesus teaches this in Luke 14 by illustrating firstly a person desiring to build a tower. If he doesn’t understand how much it will cost him, then he runs the risk of not finishing the project and then being ridiculed for a half-finished construction. Then Jesus reinforces the point by speaking about a king going to battle without checking to see if he has enough troops to gain the victory. If he’s not able to win, he’ll be humiliated when he pleads for peace as the greater force approaches.

How then can you and I cannot accurately count the cost of following Jesus when we don’t know in advance what we may need to let go of, forsake, hurl away, put away, disregard, to put off in the future? Here is the way:

**Firstly** ensure that your **highest affection is for Christ** and His ongoing work, through his disciples, to seek and to save the lost by proclaiming the gospel.

Thenensure that your **highest affection continues to be for Christ** and His ongoing work as you live out your life day by day.

Ask yourself today - Is Jesus and His mission my highest affection, my greatest goal in life? Is this what I desire above all else? Is this where my treasure really is? Jesus and the gospel must be the core motivation for our self-denial or else we will have wrong and likely dangerous reasons for going without.

There are, however, many blessings which come from self-denial, which brings us to our 3rd point:

1. **The blessings of self-denial**

Monk Martin Luther tried going without personal comfort to earn salvation. People back then were going without their hard-earned cash by paying the Roman Catholic Church for indulgences which were thought to buy you, or someone else, a reduced sentence in purgatory.

In more recent times there is a false teaching which is called ‘prosperity theology’. It is sometimes referred to as the ‘health and wealth gospel’ or the ‘gospel of ‘success’. It teaches that financial blessing and good health are God’s will for all his people and that increased faith and donations to religious causes will result in greater material wealth. The ‘prosperity gospel’ appeals to our natural, fallen, human desire for gain without godliness.

The message of our text and of the Bible as a whole is NOT that we deny ourselves so that we can receive benefits from God. The idea of such an unholy transaction whereby we trade our own interests for greater goodies given by a deity who rewards us for our pious self-sacrifice is contrary to the gospel and appeals only to our self-serving nature.

However, as Jesus clearly identifies in our text, there are real blessings which come as a result of self-denial. Be careful though. If you do not understand the motivation for such self-sacrifice, you will never understand the blessedness of these blessings. Listen again to what Jesus says: "*Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel,* ***who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life***” (Mark 10:29-30)

The first thing to note is that Jesus promises a multiplication of what has been let go i.e. the blessing from God is far greater than the cost of self-denial. Secondly note that ‘a hundredfold’ is a figurative expression, in Luke’s parallel account, he uses the phrase ‘*many times more*’ (Luke 18:30). The blessings which Jesus lists ‘houses, family members, lands’ are also figurative, not completely literal.

Thirdly notice that these blessings are to be received ‘in this time’ i.e. in this life. What then are these huge blessings? They include:

* A new family – brothers, sisters, mothers and children in the household of faith (Gal 6:10; Eph 2:19), in the church.
* Holiness – Christ-likeness.
* Contentment – a source of great gain (1 Timothy 6:6).
* Joy – a gladness of heart independent of circumstances.
* Peace – a profound inner wellbeing and wholeness.
* Fellowship with God – a communion with the One who loves you perfectly, faithfully and who will never ever let you slip away.

We experience these blessings in the Lord in this life, but they are not complete.

* Relationships in our church family can be fragmented at times.
* Our holiness is incomplete, at times we think, speak and behave in unholy ways.
* Our contentment can be undermined by our greed, envy and remaining idolatry.
* We fail to count it all joy when we meet trials of various kinds (James 1:2).
* Our peace is compromised because we do not make our requests made known to God in prayers of thanksgiving and supplication (Phil 4:6-7).
* Our fellowship with God is weakened at times, not because God moves away from us, but because our sins, when unconfessed, distance us from Him.

The blessings of self-denial are incomplete in this life, but will be perfected in the age to come. In the New Heavens and New Earth, we will enjoy perfect family life with all of God’s people, we will be in reality what God now declares us to be via the righteousness of Christ – completely holy. We will be free from all sin. We will enjoy complete wholeness and well-being of body and soul. Our fellowship with the Triune God will be continuously close and glorious. These blessings are the essence of eternal life.

Now there’s one more consequence which comes with self-denial. Can you see it there in v30? ‘with persecutions’. Do you struggle to see how that last one can be in the company of a list of ‘blessings’? The truth is that if you are persecuted for the content of the message you proclaim about Christ Jesus and the gospel of salvation, then you are very blessed. Jesus said so! "*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account*” (Matt 5:10-11); “*If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you*” (John 15:20)

If Jesus is your highest affection, your greatest love and proclaiming the gospel is your main goal, then you will be blessed through persecution! That is exactly what Paul wrote to the Philippian church: **“***For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake*” (Phil 1:29).

Some of the blessings which accompany persecution **for Christ’s sake** include:

* Confirmation that He is your greatest love.
* Confirmation that you are proclaiming the gospel effectively.
* Continuing spiritual growth of a type and intensity that is difficult to obtain apart from persecution.
* Contentment with personal weakness as the strength and power of Christ is experienced (2 Cor 4:7ff; 12:10; Rom 8:35-39).
* Comfort that He will never leave you nor forsake you in the midst of your struggle.

Listen for the blessing which attended the persecution of 18th century English evangelist John Wesley's as he records in these diary entries:

* Sunday, A.M., May 5 Preached in St. Anne's. Was asked not to come back anymore.
* Sunday, P.M., May 5 Preached in St. John's. Deacons said, "Get out and stay out."
* Sunday, A.M., May 12 Preached in St. Jude's. Can't go back there, either.
* Sunday, A.M., May 19 Preached in St. Somebody Else's. Deacons called special meeting and said I couldn't return.
* Sunday, P.M., May 19 Preached on street. Kicked off street.
* Sunday, A.M., May 26 Preached in meadow. Chased out of meadow as bull was turned loose during service.
* Sunday, A.M., June 2 Preached out at the edge of town. Kicked off the highway.
* Sunday, P.M., June 2 Afternoon, preached in a pasture. Ten thousand people came out to hear me.

**Pastor John MacArthur** has noted that *“Self-centred Christians who serve the Lord half-heartedly seldom have to pay a price for their faith. They are of little threat to Satan’s work because they are of little benefit to Christ’s”.* **You may have heard this probing question before** “*If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?*” It’s worth thinking about in light of Christ’s call to self-denial.

In summary: You and I have Christian liberty to observe lent. You and I can use these 40 days to especially focus on denying ourselves for the sake of Christ and the gospel. We may even choose to fast. However, Biblically, this practice of self-denial is to be a 365-days-of-the-year lifestyle of ensuring that Christ is, and remains, our greatest love and the gospel our greatest goal. Then we can be assured of a multitude of blessings in this life, with persecutions, and eternal life continuing forever into our residency in the New Heavens and New Earth with Christ.

AMEN.