Dying to Ourselves through His Cross

Fourth in our 2018 Lenten Series, “Come to the Cross”

# Scripture: Gal 2:19,20; 5:16-26; 6:14,15

# Key thought: Through his cross, Jesus gives us power to deny ourselves and live holy lives.

# Intro:

## Spiritual not religious

In today’s world we have an increasing number of people who say they want to be spiritual but not religious. Why is that? One of the reasons for it, I believe, is that many people who profess to be religious are satisfied with what one might call entry-level Christianity. They have enough Christianity to increase their comfort but not enough to change their character.

## Why do we need more that believing?

It is too easy to simply say we believe in Jesus without allowing the teachings of Jesus to change our hearts and actually challenge our inner selfishness. Did you ever meet someone who believed all the right things but wasn’t a very Christian person? I have. Many people who claim to be Christian never allow God to change them. They use God’s name in vain, get drunk, cheat other people, lie, and don’t keep their word, etc. Yet they claim to be Christian.

Unfortunately, it is quite possible to believe out of selfish motives and adopt Christian practices out of selfish motives and remain a selfish person.

* We may simply want to avoid hell so we believe.
* We want to feel good as a part of the group so we attend church
* We want to feel less guilty so we confess
* We want situations resolved to our comfort so we pray but prayers center in ourselves.

Notice that in all these things, while our religious practices look great, our motives are still very self-centered. The classic devotional writer, Oswald Chambers warns;

“Nothing blinds a mind to the claims of Jesus Christ more effectively than a good clean-living, upright life based on self-realization.” Oswald Chambers in Approved unto God, p. 96

Paul labels this natural selfishness of ours as our “old self.” Sometimes theologians have identified it with the word “pride.” I think of it as the twistedness of our nature (stemming from the original sin) that inclines us to choose our own way, to insist on being our own boss, and to resist submitting our will and our ways to God.

The Methodist movement, going back to John Wesley himself, has emphasized that God does not intend us to remain at such a muted and anemic level of Christian faith. The writer of the book of Hebrews plainly admonishes us to move on from the “elementary things” (Heb. 6:1).

## We want to be the center

Methodist missionary and writer E. Stanley Jones put it this way;

Fix it in your mind not as an idea, but as a Maxim, that if you are self-centered, then you are off-center, and nothing will come out right. You are not the center of the universe, never intended to be and never can be. If you try to be, you will try the impossible, and you will come out a frustrated and unhappy person, inevitably…. God is the center of this universe. And the only attitude to take is self-surrender to the center. And when you do this, your life sums begin to add up to sense. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God,… And all these things,” including yourself, “shall be added unto you.” Seek something else first, for instance yourself, and all these things, including yourself, will be subtracted from you…. If you belong to the one to whom the universe belongs, then you belong to the right one. On the other hand, to belong to yourself means that you trip over yourself at every turn, get tangled up with yourself, and become increasingly fed up with yourself. You are a problem instead of a person. “Oh God, my Father, I come to Thee to let go the one thing I have – myself. Take me over and make me over. Amen” Growing Spiritually p. 71

God has more in mind for us, but we must be ready to hear Jesus’ prescription to receive it.

## We want to remain in charge

The problem is, we like synthesis. We would just rather add a little religion into our lives with all the rest, and remained firmly at the helm ourselves. We very much like to have our cake and eat it too - so to speak. We want to be religious, but we don’t want our own besetting sins challenged. We just want a good reason to label other peoples’ sins.

## We are frustrated by an inner contradiction

We end up experiencing the strange contradiction that the apostle Paul describes in Romans chapter 7. We are confessed believers, but we find ourselves doing things that we know we shouldn’t do, and seemingly unable to stop.

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. Rom. 7:15-17 NIV

Paul calls this situation being “slaves to sin.” When we find ourselves in the spot, we cry out asking, “Is there any hope?”

# Identifying with the cross

## Good news through the cross of Jesus

Paul asks that key question at the end of chapter 7 in Romans.

“Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24 NRSV)

And he comes back with the good news,

“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Rom 7:11 NRSV).

But how does Jesus rescue us from our own selfishness and inability to combat our sinfulness? The key is found in our identification with the cross of Jesus Christ. This is one of the reasons that it’s so important for us to celebrate the Lenten season each year and to take time to think and reflect on the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Some don’t want to think about the cross of Jesus because it was a gruesome and violent scene. We live in a culture that is becoming more and more violent and suffering more and more violence as well. Yet, one thing that will help us find our way the best in this troubled world today is to remember the one who did no violence but allowed himself to be the victim of our violence for the sake of others.

Jesus said;

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Mark 8:34 NIV

By this, Jesus meant that in some way the cross was to be not only his experience but also the experience of his disciples. As usual, we should not make the mistake which is listeners usually did of taking him literally when he did not intend that. He did not mean that we all needed to be crucified by the Romans or even hung on a physical cross in our own day, or even martyred in some other way. He was talking about an attitude of heart that has surrendered self, and self-interest, future, and future plans to God just as Jesus had. Paul exemplified this completely submitted and dedicated attitude in his testimony to the Galatians.

“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”   
Gal 2:20 NIV

This identification with the death of Jesus Christ is the step up in our spiritual lives that we must take in order to move forward.

To live as Christians, we must first understand exactly what occurred on the cross when the good thief expressed faith in Christ and Christ promised him eternity. It was an exchange of identities. Christ comes to the cross to die, giving his righteous life for us; we in turn come to the cross to die, surrendering our old the sinful life for him. Thereafter Christ lives in us (Galatians 2:20)." Charles Colson and Harold Fickett in The Faith page 113

This exchange is definitely counterintuitive to us. Our idea of moving forward is to grab onto all we can and hold onto it. Our idea of the good life is to do things our way—to make our own plans and do exactly what pleases us. But Jesus already warned us that if we’re going to follow him and learn to think his way then we’re going to have to learn to think quite differently.

Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Mark 8:35-36 NRSV

Apologist and teacher, Francis Schaeffer wrote,

As Christ’s rejection and death are the first steps in the order of redemption, so our rejection and death to things and self are the first steps in the order of true and growing spirituality.” True Spirituality p. 26

Author Keith Drury wrote his own testimony about a key turning point in his spiritual life that sounds very much like what Paul is talking about in Galatians.

One windy March day, I settled the issue of Christ’s control of my life and placed my total life in his hands. I decided that the Lord would sit at the steering wheel of my life. That decision meant I would no longer run the affairs of my life for my own benefit. I noticed several changes following this ‘final wrestling match’ with the Lord. But the greatest permanent change occurred in my heart. Ever since that day I have had a consuming passion to obey Christ. He has become the central force of my life. I have this new thirst for holiness…. What I have is a new passion to be like Jesus…. Obedience to Christ is now the central purpose of my life. To be like Jesus is now the consuming passion of my heart. (Holiness for Ordinary People by Keith Drury, pages 92 and 93)

# Dying to fleshly ways

According to the apostle Paul, in chapter 5 of Galatians, the biggest result of personally identifying with the cross of Jesus, of crucifying our self-centeredness, and making Christ personally the leader and Master of our life is a new level of victory in our character development. It is like the power of sin in our lives has died and was buried and now we are alive and able to live more like Jesus. In relation to our “old self,” Paul said;

“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.” Gal 5:24 NIV

And now, as a result, we’re able to make accelerated progress, to “put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (Col. 3:10). Paul summarizes this increasing victory over greed, lust, and ill-temper in the sixth chapter of Galatians.

“May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” Gal 6:14 NIV

When we dedicate ourselves completely to following Jesus, the Holy Spirit comes to our aid by cleansing the motives of our hearts. He helps us want to do the right thing which is huge.

For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." Phil 2:13

Consider this slight rewording of Heb. 9:14—same words with helping verb moved into more direct position– “The blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, will cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God.”

I remember the first time in my young life that I asked God’s help to make a significant moral decision. I was probably about the age of these confirmands or maybe a year younger. I was the oldest of four siblings and a full two years older than my next brother. I was taller and stronger and was used to being the one in charge. Somewhere around the time that I became a teenager, we discovered that my younger brother could run faster than I could. I know it shouldn’t have been, but it was a major blow to my ego. I had never felt jealousy until then-envy and a little bit of rage. That’s three of the things in the list of the works of the flesh from Galatians chapter 5 verse 20 that we read earlier. And being from a very devout family as I was, I probably knew that verse quite well by then. I remember deliberately asking God’s help with my feelings about the situation. And I remember being shocked that after I prayed for God’s help, somehow the feelings of jealousy and anger stemming from the fact that my brother could run faster than I could just went away. I couldn’t explain it but somehow I just understood that running was my brother’s gift, it wasn’t mine. Now looking back, I can clearly see that it was God helping me to deny myself and be able to rejoice in someone else’s success. I’m sure I have not always done it that well, but it was a good beginning at learning to truly apply my faith to my daily life.

# God’s new creation rising

Francis Schaeffer put it this way, “After the death to self, after the rejection of self, there is and there continues to be a resurrection.” True Spirituality p. 26

So, we if we become identified with Jesus in his death, we will also be identified with him in his resurrection, not just in the life to come, but now!

We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.   
Rom 6:4 NIV

My brother Allen, that same brother who ran faster than I also became a pastor before I did. He was a Methodist pastor for many years and once wrote in his church newsletter,

“To say, I must sin, is to deny my Savior. To say, I cannot sin, is to deceive myself. To say, I need not sin, is to declare my faith in the divine power.”

So, when we move past the beginning stages of our Christian faith, we begin to think of our daily life as being a continuing new creation by God. God is constantly inventing something new through the Holy Spirit’s transforming influence. He is molding our mind and attitudes. He is using your gifts and abilities for service to God and others.

“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come (II Cor. 5:17)”

This is not some private spirituality, God’s new creation in us is very much integrated with the real world in which we live.

“The path to holiness always leads to the world and God’s work there.” Keith Drury in Holiness for Ordinary People p. 19

## Christ living in you and through you

Think of it not as you living your life on your own, but Christ living through you. He is making another miniature incarnation of himself every day in your life.

As Paul put it,

“I have been put to death with Christ on his cross, so that it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. This life that I live now, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave his life for me.” Gal 2:20 TEV

Old-time Methodists and others from the Holiness Movement called this step up in holy living “sanctification.” But it is not something we do, it is a work of God’s grace helping us to move forward with Him.

“Sanctification is not the perfection of the human character, but the impartation of the divine nature, and the union of the human soul with the person of Christ, the new Head of redeemed humanity.” A. B. Simpson in Walking In the Spirit p. 50,51

The Apostle Peter spoke of the fact that our real spiritual progress comes from letting God move deeply in our lives. Peter encouraged us by telling that through God’s precious promises,

“You may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.” 2 Peter 1:4

When this is happening, we have “everything we need for life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3 NIV 84)

Let me illustrate what I am trying to say this way. Occasionally I watch drag racing on YouTube. I don’t know much about it, but I have noticed this; there are different levels of drag racing. There are beginning levels where you can take your old jalopy down and put it on the track and see who you can out-race in a side-by-side competition. And you will soon run up against somebody who has a bigger and better engine than you or a quicker reaction time. But at this level everybody is using gasoline for fuel. But then I’ve noticed there is a whole other level which drag racers call funny cars. Now funny cars may look a little bit like your ordinary souped-up stock-car. But apparently they are a whole different breed. To begin with, the whole body tilts off the chassis. The engine is usually mid-mount rather than in the front like your car. And a funny car team might cost a couple million. But the difference that I wanted to point out especially is that funny cars run at a whole different speed level because they don’t run on regular old gasoline, not ever premium gasoline; they run on a fuel called Nitro which produces so much more power than plain old regular gas.

Friends lets use that for a parable of our Christian lives.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian church and he said I can’t write you like I want to because you are still worldly or carnal (1 Cor. 3:1). What did he mean? He was telling them that they were still living on an entry-level in their Christianity. He says you’re not living by the Holy Spirit. They were still running their lives on the gasoline of their own power. In their case, he told them that he could tell because of the divisiveness that was a huge factor in the Corinthian church. They were living on a very human powered level. Factions, dissension, and discord are among those things listed in the works of the flesh in Galatians chapter 5:20, along with many others. Paul is telling them the way to tell if you’re living entry-level is by what kind of fruit keeps showing up in your life.

He wanted them to start living under the Lordship of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, filled with the fruits of the spirit that he lists here in Galatians 5:22, 23 “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

One of the earliest and greatest of the Christian preachers, John Chrysostom, said this:

*Paul sets before us a demand: to bring about a newness of life by a changing of habits. For when the fornicator becomes chaste, when the covetous person becomes merciful, when the harsh becomes subdued, the resurrection has taken place, a prelude to the final resurrection which is to come. How is it a resurrection? It is a resurrection because sin has been mortified, and righteousness has risen in its place; the old life has passed away, and new, angelic life is now being lived. (John Chrysostom quoted in devotional classics edited by Richard J Foster and James Bryan Smith p. 310)*

When we are allowing God's power two make us a new creation, here are five results we will notice.

1. We will notice that we are more attracted to prayer and worship, and we think of our faith as a relationship rather than just a creed or a good habit.
2. We will find a drive in our hearts toward purity and integrity.
3. We will see ourselves growing stronger in faith, expecting God to be at work, as read the Word and as we receive answers to our prayers.
4. Will notice that we are more empowered for personal discipline. Paul writes here that self-control is one of the fruits of the Spirit. (see also 2 Tim. 1:7)
5. We will find a drive toward expressing love in practical good deeds. Doing nothing will not be an option because we will be about the Master’s business.

# Conclusion

So, it’s very counterintuitive, if we want to step up to the next level in our spiritual lives, we begin at the cross of Jesus. We begin by identifying with his death. Only when we have done that, when we have denied ourselves, and, so to speak, taking up our cross as he asked, are we able and ready to receive of his Spirit and live on an entirely new level.

I remember the spot at the altar rail where I knelt as a young teen and first turned my dreams over to God. I had my own plans and castles built pretty high already. But that morning, I prayed and submitted my plans to the leadership of Jesus. In my case, it didn’t just happen once as with Mr. Drury, but many times through my life, especially in my young adult years.

Making a decision to live our Christian lives on a higher plane, to take our commitment to a deeper level does not mean that you will have to become a pastor like I am. The key thing is to know that God knows best and where ever he leads, that is the best and most fulfilling place for you. There are many committed deeper life Christians like my Mom and Dad whose dedication to Jesus never took them more than a few miles from home -- out of their comfort zones a few times, but not far from home. There are others like a pastor I follow on FaceBook who is the son of a Kansas farmer. His dedication to God has taken him around the world and into the highest leadership circles of our land. But it is not where you go, it is what you allow God to make of you.

John Woolman was born into a Quaker farm family in New Jersey in the 1700s. He wrote a journal about his Christian experience that has been much read and admired. Here’s a comment he wrote about the difference between what I’m calling entry-level religion and the deeper Christianity to which God calls us.

Where people lose their minds after the love of outward things and are more engaged in pursuing the prophets and seeking the friendships of this world than to be inwardly acquainted with the way of true peace, such walk in a vain shadow while the true comfort of life is wanting. Their examples are often hurtful to others, and their treasures thus collected do many times prove dangerous snares to their children. But where people are sincerely devoted to follow Christ and dwell under the influence of his Holy Spirit, their stability and firmness through a divine blessing is at times like dew on the tender plants around about them, and the weightiness of their spirits secretly works on the minds of others. (Excerpt from the Journal of John Woolman quoted in Devotional Classics edited by Richard J Foster and James Bryan Smith p. 231)

All that’s left is for us friends is to confess our self-centeredness, and our seeking of this world’s ways. To acknowledge that the fruits of our lives have been described more by Galatians chapter 5 verse 20 then by Galatians chapter 5 verse 22. And then to implore God to help us. To help us follow him more completely, to have him make us more deeply his child through coming to the cross, and this allowing the transforming work of the Holy Spirit within us.