

## Letting Go of Yourself – Matthew 16:21-28

**Introduction:** Several years ago when our boys were younger, we went with a Sunday School class on a tubing trip. It was our first adventure on the rapids. The boys and I roped our tubes together, and away we went. We hadn't gotten very far, when the rest of the group got way ahead of us. Well, before long, our tubes hit some rocks and busted, and down in the water we went. We got caught up in a tree that had fallen across the river, and couldn't get out. All the time I was trying to hang on the boys while hanging on to a tree branch. Finally, the boys got loose and climbed up on some rocks, but I was trapped by the rapids and by the tree. I stayed there in that water for about an hour before help came. When the park ranger dove in to rescue me, he hit his head on the bottom because the water was only about three feet deep! So he simply stood up in the water and told me to let go and I could walk to the bank.

Letting go of things can be hard to do. Whether it's some sinful habit, or a negative trait, or bitterness, pride or worry, people tend to hang onto things even though they know they are not good for them. But this morning, I want to point out something from our text that God says we must let go of if we want to follow Him. And it's the one thing we want to hang onto the most - ourselves. Jesus says in vs. 24, "*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*" It's a question of Lordship. Who is Lord of your life? Let's read the context of vs. 24 found in Matthew 16:21-28

### 1. The Meaning of Letting Go.

What does Jesus mean when He talks about denying self and taking up His cross? People think they know what it means. I've heard people talk about when they've been diagnosed with some ailment such as arthritis or when they have to face some hardship or difficulty in life that it was the cross they had to bear. I even heard a guy say that when his mother-in-law moved in with him that was his cross to bear. But those things don't even come close to the meaning of what Jesus said about taking up your cross.

Taking up your cross means that **Jesus Becomes Lord of Your Life**. Now saying Jesus is Lord and letting Jesus become Lord of your life are two different things. Jesus said in Mt. 7:21 (NIV), "*Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of Heaven.*" When Jesus becomes the Lord of your life, it means He sets the rules, and you submit to His authority. It means He has the right to tell you what to do and when to do

it, and you don't question Him. Quite frankly, there are not a lot of people who are willing to do that. What I'm saying is that there are many today that want Jesus as their Savior, but do not want him as their Lord.

When Jesus becomes Lord it means we give Him control of our lives. Jesus said in Mt. 6:24, "*No one can serve two masters...*" When Jesus is our Lord, we pledge our allegiance to Him. We become willing to serve Him instead of ourselves. We die to self and become a willing servant of Christ.

It's as if our old self ceases to exist. Paul said in **Rom. 6:6-7 (NIV)** "*For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin-- because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.*"

We learn in baptism that not only do we receive forgiveness of our sins, but we also die with Christ and our old self is crucified in Him. That means that when we're tempted to do the sinful things we want to do, we need to see our old selves as dead. And a dead person cannot be tempted to sin. If a pretty girl walked up to a body lying in a casket and tempted that guy to lust after her, what would he do? Nothing! He's dead. That's how we need to see ourselves when temptations come.

But not only that, Paul also said in **Col. 3:5 & 10 (NIV)** that while we are to "*Put to death... whatever belongs to your earthly nature...*" we are also to "*...put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.*"

And in **Gal. 2:20 (NIV)** he said, "*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.*" So when we really die to ourselves, and take up our cross, those temptations will become easier to resist, because the power of Christ living in us will help us live the Christian life and we'll become more and more like Christ every day. But now the \$64 question: Why is letting go of self so difficult?

## **2. The Difficulty of Letting Go.**

Once there was a man who went to work for a banana company. He was a great worker and often did more than was asked of him. One day the owner came to him and told him that he had great potential, but he said, "*We're looking for more than hard work, we're looking for commitment. If you want to succeed here, you'll have to give your life in exchange for bananas.*"

To many, eternity with God in Heaven sounds great, but the idea of giving your life away doesn't sound too appealing, does it? (pun intended). There are a couple of reasons why letting go is so difficult. First:

**A. We Want to be in Charge.** We like those feel good verses in the Bible where it says that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us, and where God promises us that He'll never leave us or forsake us. But we squirm on our pews when we hear about bringing the tithe into the storehouse and turning the other cheek and denying self and taking up a cross. That doesn't sound too appealing. We want the goody, but don't ask me to give up any of my stuff to get it.

Paul said in **2 Tim. 3:2 (NIV)** "*People will be lovers of themselves...*" And that is certainly true. There's a famous poem entitled "*Invictus*" and in that poem the writer said, "*I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.*"

That is the philosophy of a lot of people who think that they are the master of their lives. They like to be in control. They feel like if they are not, then their freedoms are taken away, or that it's a sign of weakness and vulnerability.

Some are intimidated by the thought that God might ask them to do something they don't want to do. They'll sing, "*Wherever He Leads, I'll Go,*" but only as long as it's where they want to go!

When Jesus says that we must lose our lives to find it, He's talking about giving up the idea that we're number one. But a lot of people are not comfortable with that because they want to be in charge. The sad part is, those who think they are in charge will one day find out that they were not as in control as they thought they were. They'll find out as the rich man did in the Bible – the man who amassed so much wealth he tore down his barns and built bigger ones to hold it. Then he said he'd eat, drink, and be merry and take his ease. He found out that he wasn't in control of his life after all because he was dead before the next sunrise. Letting go is so difficult because we want to be in charge. But it's also difficult because:

**B. We're Selfish.** We're like the kid who got his hand caught in the vending machine. He couldn't get his hand out because he was holding on to a candy bar. We tend to selfishly hold on to stuff in life thinking it's going to bring us pleasure.

The idea of sacrifice and giving up things doesn't sound appealing to a lot of people. Someone once said, *"We are a people that want to know the price of everything and the cost of nothing."* We want to get as much as we can and do as little as possible to get it. That is why a lot of people are head over heels in debt today. They say, *"I'll pay for it later because I want it now. If it feels good it must be right."* And we'll justify just about anything for instant gratification. We think the more we have and the more we indulge in then the more successful we are.

It was this kind of selfish philosophy that cost Esau his birthright. He sold his birthright – his inheritance – his very future for a bowl of stew. Because of his selfishness, Esau couldn't see past the here and now. And sadly a lot of people still live like that.

But here, Jesus comes along and calls us to be willing to sacrifice, and willing to deny ourselves and give up our selfish desires. It sounds foolish to a lot of people but remember what Jim Elliot said? *"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."* Letting go of yourself isn't easy, but it must be done. Which leads me to the last point.

### **3. The Process of Letting Go.**

Let me leave you with three quick principles of letting go of yourself. First, you must:

**A. Lay Down the Crown.** When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming to be baptized, he said to his disciples, *"I must decrease and Christ must increase."* That's the philosophy we must adapt. We must be willing to lay down the crown and get off the throne of our lives and realize that we are not the master of our fate or the captain of our soul. We must step down from our position of authority over our lives and give Jesus His rightful place as Lord and Master. Secondly, to let go of yourself, you must:

**B. Pick Up the Book.** You don't have to train kids how to do wrong. They know it instinctively. What we have to do constantly and continually is to teach them to do right. The same is true when it comes to letting go of yourself. You don't learn that overnight. It's not just a one time decision, and that's it. It's a constant and continual and daily process. But eventually we can train ourselves to let go of ourselves.

In **1 Cor. 15:31 (NIV)** Paul said, “*I die every day....*” In order to do that, we’ve got to pick up the instruction book - the Bible, and read it, study it, meditate on it, and memorize it until it is engrafted in your life and it becomes a part of you. Train yourself to be godly. Finally:

**C. Eye the Prize.** This life we live here on earth can be filled with many good things. I know people that are not even Christians who just enjoy living life and it shows. But let us understand something. This life ain’t all there is. I know it doesn’t sound like it, but even the life of denying self and taking up your cross can be a good life - a better life to live.

Sometimes we live life like the guy who saved up to go on a cruise. He bought his package for a cruise and he was so excited. But he had spent all his money for the ticket, so he didn’t have any left for food. So in his suitcase, along with his clothes and his toiletries, he packed enough crackers and beanie wienies and sodas to last him the week. When he got on the boat, he looked with envy as all the other passengers who were indulging themselves at the buffet bars every day, while he went to his room and ate crackers and beans. The day before they reached the port, a steward noticed this man sitting in his room eating his meager supper and asked him why he wasn’t in the dining room. The man explained that he spent all his money just to buy the ticket and didn’t have enough for the meals. The steward assured the man that when he purchased a ticket the meals were included. He was eating beans, when he could have been eating a buffet.

I wonder how many people live life that way? They’re getting by, but they don’t realize there’s a better life. And it comes by denying yourself, and taking up His cross. It comes when we learn to let go of our lives.

In **Phil. 3:7-8 (NIV)**, Paul said, “*But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.*” What do you need to let go of today to gain Christ? Whatever sacrifice you have to make, it is well worth it.