

January 25, 2009  
 Romans 1:1-17 / Luke 9:18-27  
 Confessing Christ

A.W. Tozer, in his classic work "The Knowledge of the Holy," began his book with this intriguing statement: *"What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."*

*"Worship,"* he goes on to say, *"is pure or base as the worshipper entertains high or low thoughts of God. For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at any given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God."*

In that light (and I do believe Tozer is right, by the way!) the question Jesus poses to his disciples in today's text and the answer they give to it, is one that says as much about **THEM** as it does about **HIM!**

I can learn a lot about any person simply by learning what they in their inner heart of hearts really believe in regard to God, and who Jesus was and what Jesus was or is like (since Jesus, we are told in Hebrews) *"is the exact representation of God's being."*

Tozer is right: Our answer to that question will ultimately determine how we worship, who we are worshipping when we worship, and it will even determine what our lives will look like. For we do, as he says, "by a secret law of the soul, move toward our mental image of God." We do tend to become like the God we worship.

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That's why it's so important to see that in this passage Jesus isn't simply interested in getting His disciples to give the "right answer" to His question. Who they "confess Him to be" or "say He is" (as opposed to who everyone else is saying He is) isn't His ultimate concern! The passage itself makes that clear! For Jesus it's NOT the whole issue!

Because even more important than who they "say" He is, is the issue of what they believe in regard to who they say He is! That's where Jesus takes this whole conversation! He isn't content with the fact that they got the right answer, but rather, He uses the fact that they get the right answer to give them the right content to go along with that answer!

Showing us (I believe) that His purpose all along (what He was led to do as a result of His time of prayer in verse 18) wasn't simply to see if they'd correctly discerned that He was "the Christ of God," but to be sure they had the correct understanding of what the Christ of God would be like, and what He would do!

**THAT** (as Tozer points out and Jesus seems to confirm in this passage) is as important as, if not more important to a person's life, and how they think and what they will be like, than the simple confession that "He is the Christ."

After all, Mormons say Jesus is the Christ. / Jehovah's Witnesses say Jesus is the Christ. / Moonies say Jesus is the Christ. / Baha'is say Jesus is the Christ. / Many New Age groups and other cults say Jesus is the Christ — just as Christians do!

But what they mean when **they** say "He is the Christ" varies so significantly from what **we** mean when we say it that you wouldn't even know we're speaking about the same person!  
(In fact, we're often not!)

Which means the issue is not so much who they "say" He is, but what they "believe" in relation to who they say He is! That's why, as soon as they get the right answer, He gives them the right content about Himself to go along with that right answer. Because it was that which would have the greatest effect on who they would become and what they (as his disciples) would do!

In fact, that's precisely how the text is divided up:

- 1.) Verses 18-20 are centered around Who they confess Him to be.
- 2.) Verses 21-22 are centered around What He wants them to believe about who they confess Him to be!
- 3.) Verses 23-27 are centered around What He expects them to be like once they do truly understand who He is and what He really came to do.

So let's look at each one in the order they are given to us, starting **FIRST** with "Who they confess Him to be." He is, as they correctly discern, 'The Christ of God,' or as the Jews would have put it, "God's Messiah." That is, He is "The Anointed One." That's what the words "Christ" or "Messiah" mean — "Anointed One." And more specifically: The One Anointed By God with the Holy Spirit. That's how John the Baptist knew Jesus to be the Christ at His baptism — because He saw the Holy Spirit come down upon Him and remain upon Him or come down upon Him and "anoint" Him.

Yet someone will protest and say: "Wait a minute, that happens to all believers." "All believers get anointed with the Holy Spirit." And they'd be right in saying so. We do!

But there's one big difference! On Jesus, God poured out the Spirit without limit (John 3:34). It's John's way of assuring us that Jesus was anointed in a much fuller way! / A much more powerful way. / A much more complete and inexhaustible way, without SIN hindering or quenching or limiting that anointing in any way as it does with us!

Jesus was the only person ever to live, who **NEVER** grieved or quenched the Holy Spirit—which can never be said of us! So, the disciples correctly discerned from what they had seen and heard that Jesus was the Christ whom God had anointed with the Holy Spirit. He was the one God had given the Spirit without measure or limit. It was obvious to them from the things Jesus was doing!

Then **SECONDLY** we come to verse 22 and "What He wants them to believe about who they confess Him to be." Having correctly confessed Him to be "The Christ of God," or "The One Anointed by God with the Holy Spirit," He then resolves to make sure they know what He's all about and exactly what He came to do.

And contrary to the assumptions held by the general populace, He immediately assures them that although He is the "Son of Man" (His favorite Messianic name for Himself, by the way) He did not come to be a warlike, political or military Messiah, or to crush all the enemies of Israel, or call down fire from heaven to consume and obliterate all those Roman soldiers who had dared conquer and occupy God's chosen people — which is what people wanted, and is what the Jews were looking for and hoped for!

But that was NOT what Jesus came to do! The enemies of God's rule — the real enemies of God's purposes and kingdom on earth were not the Romans, as the Jews self-righteously thought. They were sin, and greed, and lust, and hypocrisy, and idolatry, and injustice, and disobedience, and evil, and fornication, and adultery, and envy, and impurity, and arrogance, and unforgiveness, and unbelief and on and on we could go!

If Rome or the Romans were the real problem, then God surely would have dealt with them and done away with that problem in the fashion the Jews desired. But they weren't the problem. Sin, and human fallenness was the problem, and thus Jesus tells them in very blunt terms exactly how it is that He intends to deal with THAT problem (the real problem).

**Verse 22: “The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”**

THAT, says Jesus, is what the Messiah came to do and how He intends to deal with the real problem! He would gain the victory over the enemies of God’s reign, but He would not do it by crushing the Romans, or killing all those that others considered to be “the problem.” (Those really bad and militarily aggressive sinners!)

No. He wants them to know that contrary to common assumptions, the Messiah or the Christ would come and gain the victory by allowing those sinners, that everyone thought He should kill, to kill him.

A concept so radical and so contrary to the way we normally think, that even though He tells them that here in this passage, and repeats it again in greater detail 9 chapters later, they still couldn’t process it or get it or wrap their minds and hearts around it!

***“The Son of Man,” says Jesus in Luke 18:32. “will be handed over to the Gentiles, and they will mock Him, insult Him, spit on Him, flog Him and kill Him. On the third day He will rise from the dead.”***

And then Luke adds in verse 34: ***“The disciples did not understand any of this. It’s meaning was hidden from them and they did not know what He was talking about.”***

**Why?** Because it’s so absolutely contrary to the way we think. It’s so terribly hard for us to conceive of a Savior or a Christ or a Messiah who wins by losing! / Who defeats the enemy He came to deliver us from by letting the enemy kill Him! / Who has all power, and could call down fire from heaven to consume and obliterate entire nations simply by speaking the word, but refuses to use that power, and instead goes to the cross like a lamb led to the slaughter saying nothing.

That’s such a stumbling block to people! A Christ who gets hung on a cross! A prophet of God (more than a prophet of God — the SON OF GOD!) whom God fails to rescue at the last moment! It’s like reading a novel or watching movie where you’re expecting a Rocky Balboa type ending, only to get a Bambi type ending that leaves you saying, No! That’s not how it should be! The good guy should rise up and win!

That was the taunt of the crowds below the cross: ***“Come down from that cross if you are the Son of God!”*** That’s what a Messiah would do! He’d use His power to save Himself and crush His enemies!

A Divine King who allows puny little human beings to mock and insult and spit on and flog and crucify Him is inconceivable! That’s why Paul can say in I Cor. 1:18: ***“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.”*** It is. It doesn’t make any sense to them!

***“Jews demand miraculous signs,”*** Paul says 4 verses later, ***“and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified (we preach a crucified Messiah!): a stumbling block to the Jews, and utter foolishness to the Gentiles...”***

That’s why the early Christians were laughed at and looked at by their contemporaries as if they were crazy! Because they preached and believed in (and asked others to believe in) a Savior who came to change the world by allowing the world to kill Him!

It would be similar to me, coming here and telling you, that someone who had done miracles, and was later arrested for being a traitor, and executed by the local authorities down in Philly by lethal injection, was the Savior of the world! You’d laugh at me! You’d cock your head and wonder what institution I escaped from! You’d look at me like I had two heads!

Yet that is what the Gospel story sounded like to those who heard it in those early years before it became commonplace and institutionalized and was made more acceptable by being adorned with all the various religious trappings that make it more palatable for common consumption.

Especially the subtle implication that that is what was expected of Him but it’s not what is expected of those who follow Him. That He won by losing, but we can win by winning! That He won by dying and sacrificing Himself for the very people who crucified Him, but we win in just the opposite fashion.

You see, somehow the message of Jesus has lost it’s “stop you in your tracks effect” over the years. It doesn’t shock us the way it first shocked those who heard it. The sting to our pride has been taken out of it.

We don’t tend to see it as the “stumbling block” it was to the Jews, or the “utter foolishness” it was to the Gentiles, because generally speaking we’ve been able to separate what Jesus did from what He expects us as His disciples to do.

Yes, we say, strange as it was, He did take up His cross and deny Himself, but we don't have to. / Yes, He lost His life, but it's ok for us to save ours. / Yes, there is a shame in that, but we don't ever need to bear it. / Our style of Christianity is a bit more tidy and respectable and dignified and palatable than His!

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Which brings me to my **THIRD** point in verses 23-27: What Jesus expects us to be like (or live like) once we do truly understand who He is, what He really came to do and the way He really came to do it! After assuring them that He came to be the Suffering Servant and not the Victorious, Military-like King, He then takes the opportunity to tell His disciples what they need to be like in light of who He is, what He came to do and the way He came to do it. His life and method of dealing with sin and sinners being the blueprint for ours. Try as we might, we can't get around it: His life was meant to be the pattern for His disciples.

His way of SELF-SACRIFICE was meant to set the pattern for our lives of self-sacrifice. / His life of SELF-DENIAL was meant to be the blueprint for our lives of self-denial. / His LOSING HIS LIFE in order to gain it was meant to be the pattern that we, His followers, are to follow!

And lest we think otherwise, He prefaced it all in these terms — “If anyone would come after me, he ***must*** ...”(v. 23). Or putting it another way 5 chapters later, when speaking once again about the same things He says: ***“Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me, CANNOT be my disciple.”***

If we think we are a disciple of Jesus — a follower, student or an apprentice of His — but do not live in the fashion He lays out today, we are only deceiving ourselves. Denying one's self and taking up one's cross daily is not optional, any more than believing in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, or confessing from your lips that He is Lord, or being born again by the Spirit is optional to the Christian life.

So, what must a disciple of Jesus do? He must deny himself or herself. It's one of the central themes of the Christian faith — so much so that he or she who does not practice self-denial must question if they are really Christian.

And in our society that's hard! ***Because in our society it is almost exclusively about self-fulfillment and self-esteem and self-image and self-dignity and self-respect and self-worth. It's about caring for the self, and ministering to the self and loving the self and even pampering the self.***

And believe me — in that cultural climate, a Jesus who tells people that in order to be His disciple they must “deny themselves” does not go over well at all! To most people it’s a 100% turn off!

Life in America is almost exclusively about the self! It’s about my space and my time and my needs and my desires and my hopes and my dreams and my preferences and my feelings and my, my, my everything! A message that has infiltrated the churches as well.

In fact, most American churches have pretty much done away with the God-centered Christian message of self-denial, and replaced it with an almost entirely man-centered message of self-fulfillment.

Whereas the goal of Jesus preaching was to call us to repent for being so selfish and self-centered and pre-occupied with us, calling us instead to an unconditional commitment to God that is willing to give up ALL for His cause, and seek FIRST His kingdom regardless of what it costs us (be it family or friends or jobs or fortunes) and solicit from us the obedience that God as the all-glorious One is worthy of, the goal of the vast majority of modern day preaching is simply to make people feel good about themselves.

Whereas the message of Jesus was a God-centered message — God and His glory being primary — the message of American evangelicalism has become almost exclusively a man-centered message about feeling good about ourselves. (To the point that preachers are evaluated on any given Sunday morning, not by biblical fidelity, or faithful application of the message of the Bible, but by how good they make people feel about themselves — since that is now the be all and end all of much, if not all modern-day American life.)

It’s no wonder, then, that in such a climate Jesus message and demand for self-denial from His disciples (if they want to be considered His disciples) is downplayed to the point that it’s rarely spoken on nowadays.

So, despite the fact that this might not make you feel good about yourself (or about me for not making you feel good about you!) it needs to be said:

You must, if you would come after Jesus, deny yourself. / Deny yourself pleasures that others indulge in. / Deny yourself fulfillment that others achieve. / Deny yourself the easy way out that many take. / Deny yourself riches that others pursue. / Deny yourself accolades that others strive to attain. / Deny yourself sin that others engage in. / Deny yourself vengeance that other meet out.

Deny yourself upward mobility others use cutthroat tactics to attain. / Deny yourself ease and comforts others may get to enjoy. / And yes, God forbid, you must, as a general rule, deny the self... period. Say no to the self. Say no to what the self wants and craves when what the self wants is contrary to what God wants!

"I want to get out of this marriage." NO! / "I want to buy far more than I can afford." NO! / "I want to shirk my responsibilities to my family and just disappear from the scene." NO! The wants and desires of the self are secondary to the will and commands of Christ. When we forego what we really yearn for, and refuse to even pursue it because God says no, that's self-denial.

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Then **LAST**, Jesus says *"If anyone would follow after me, he must... take up his cross daily and follow me."* And He means: "Take up His cross, and like me, make His way to the place of crucifixion." It's another way of speaking about self-denial, except it takes self-denial to a higher level and into the realms of putting to death the self! Not just denying the self, but actually crucifying the self (self-crucifixion)!

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Yet what does that mean? You see, we've been told for so long that "carrying our cross" means bearing the burdens and hardships that come our way, that we've actually managed to change the meaning of the phrase so that it now means that! It means putting up with my mother-in-law, or that old car, or that cranky boss, you name it — it's the "cross" I'm called to carry. But that's not what it means! Or at least it didn't mean that to those who first heard it! To them the cross was one thing —an instrument of death!

It was something people were executed on! It meant one thing and one thing only — dying...period! To "take up one's cross" meant to carry it to the place where they would be put to death! There was no metaphorical meaning to it! It meant being willing to suffer a shameful death for Jesus at any time.

Metaphors develop over time as actual historical things or events come to be expanded upon and applied to things they didn't originally refer to! So, believe me when I say the disciples, on hearing these words, didn't think: "Oh yes, He means I must put up with my mother-in-law."

**Not at all!** To them "taking up one's cross daily" would have meant being willing to go to the place of crucifixion daily! / Putting the self to death daily! / Dying to sinful desires and the sinful self daily. / Putting those selfish urges and those self-first desires to death daily! / Even being willing to die for Jesus daily!

Jesus must become so precious to me that like Paul, I would be willing to lose everything for Him  
— even my life!

I must come to the point where I consider everything else like dung in comparison to the  
surpassing greatness of knowing and having Christ Jesus!

I must be so committed to him that I would be willing to lose all and sell all and even die, if the  
choice were between those things and Jesus.

That's what it means to be willing to "take up one's cross daily."

Are you? Is Jesus that precious to you? "Anyone who would come after me **MUST**... take up  
his cross daily and follow me."