

As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby. - 1 Peter 2:2

THE SINCERE MILK OF GOD'S WORD

The word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword... - Hebrews 4:12

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Self-Denial

Luke 9:23: *He said to all, 'If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me.'*

In the above verse, Jesus taught that being His true disciple involves self-denial (also see **Matt. 16:24** & **Mark 8:34**). Consider some things in this passage and elsewhere in Scripture that shed light on the meaning of this instruction.

The Example: **Luke 9:23** begins with the words, "*If anyone desires to come after me*" These words point us back to **Luke 9:22**. There Jesus told His disciples, "*The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and the third day be raised up.*"

Matthew and Mark's accounts inform us that Peter rebuked Jesus after He said this (**Matt. 16:22**; **Mark 8:32**). **Matthew 16:22** notes that Peter even said, "*Far be it from you, Lord! This will never be done to you.*"

In response, Jesus rebuked Peter. He indicated that Peter was promoting Satan's will by trying to stop Jesus from following through with this part of the Father's will (**Matt. 16:23**; **Mark 8:33**).

Jesus showed Peter that He was choosing the Father's will over personal comfort. He accepted whatever suffering resulted from this, including death by crucifixion.

This is the setting for **Luke 9:23**. Jesus did not "sugar-coat" His description of following Him. Jesus denied Himself of many temporal comforts and pleasures to obey the Father. His followers must do the same.

The Commitment: After saying "*If anyone desires to come after me*" in **Luke 9:23**, Jesus instructed "*let him deny himself...*"

Being Christ's disciple involves forsaking whatever pleasures, goals, ambitions, etc. one must in order to please God.

Certainly if one takes pleasure in something that is blatantly sinful, like gossip, drunkenness, fornication, or lasciviousness, such thing must be forsaken (**1 Cor. 6:9-11**), but self-denial goes deeper than this. It can involve, for instance, forsaking a job, hobby, or possession that hinders one from being all that God desires (cf. **Luke 8:14**).

Perhaps more difficult than this is what Jesus showed through His example of self-denial. Self-denial led Jesus to forsake the comfort of not suffering. Self-denial led Jesus to willfully give His life.

At its core, self-denial involves changing one's aim in life from pleasing self to pleasing God (cf. **2 Cor. 5:9**). It involves presenting one's entire being to God as a "*living sacrifice*" (**Rom. 12:1**), so that God becomes the complete ruler of one's life (cf. **Gal. 2:20**).

The Sacrifice: The sacrifice associated with this lifestyle is elaborated on in **Luke 9:23** with the words "*take up his cross.*"

While Jesus died on a literal cross, the implication for those who follow Him is that we must be willing to accept whatever suffering comes as a result of the choice to live faithfully.

2 Timothy 3:12 says, "*Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.*"

Notice that this verse does not present suffering as something that *might* happen for

those who faithfully follow Christ. It is a *guarantee* that some form(s) of persecution will come to all of Christ's true disciples.

In the context, the apostle Paul appears to reference, at least in part, *physical* persecutions (**2 Tim. 3:11**; cf. **Acts 14:19**). This type of persecution was common in New Testament times. The command, "*Be thou faithful unto death*" (**Rev. 2:10**) stresses the need to be faithful to the Lord even if it leads to dying a martyr's death, as many during that time did (**Rev. 6:9**).

What is probably more common in the time and place we live is *mental* persecution.

In **1 Peter 4:3**, the inspired apostle Peter referenced sins of immorality that the Christians he was writing to had given up. In **verse 4**, he said, "*wherein they think it strange that ye run not with them into the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you.*"

Following Christ's steps means accepting vast differences between oneself and the majority. Some people find the Christian lifestyle strange, and it is likely that some will speak poorly of us if we choose this path.

Following Jesus may lead to close family members or friends being angered at us (**Matt. 10:34-36**). It might lead to a loss of job or position.

Whatever sufferings result from our choice to follow Christ, we must not deny God's will, but do what is right. This is the implication of Christ's instruction to take up our crosses.

The Frequency: Luke's account of Jesus' statement about self-denial includes a word that specifies the frequency of this commitment. Notice that Jesus commands taking up one's cross "*daily*."

Being Jesus' disciple is not just a one-time event or a weekly event, but a *permanent, ongoing* lifestyle choice.

Self-denial is a decision to shape every day of one's life around pleasing God.

The apostle Paul expresses this lifestyle with the words, "*it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. That life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself up for me*" (**Gal. 2:20**).

Given the breadth of instruction covered by God's Word, it is not hard to see how self-denial must be a permanent lifestyle that *begins* at baptism, but is at the core of Christ's faithful disciples' lives *each* day.

The Worth: While the depth of the commitment Jesus calls for must not be under-valued, neither should the *worth* of choosing this lifestyle. No matter what we must give up to please God, it is more than worth it.

This is the emphasis in the two verses that follow Jesus' instruction about self-denial. **Luke 9:24-25** says, "*For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever will lose his life for my sake, will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits his own self?*"

In these verses, Jesus shows that whatever taking up our crosses entails, it is worth it.

Those who choose to follow Christ's example of self-denial forsake many temporal pleasures and desires, but they are truly the richest people on earth. By contrast, those who choose to please self over God might gain momentary pleasures, but they are truly the poor ones (cf. **Rev. 2:9; 3:17**).

In consideration of this, may we each choose to look to Jesus' example, deny ourselves, take up our crosses daily, and follow after Him.

- **Michael Hickox**