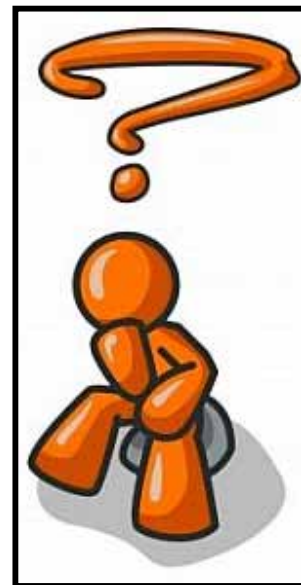


# What About ... *Self-Denial?*

BY DR. JERRY A. COLLINS

Then he said to them all, "If anyone wants to become my follower, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23). For any believer contemplating following Christ, it requires that one not be attached to the world, its values, its acceptance, or its priorities. Jesus said such a commitment will require daily diligence. A disciple, following Jesus while living in this present world, can expect to be opposed. To survive, Jesus said, demands taking up your cross, losing one's life, and not being ashamed of the Son of Man (Luke 9:23-26). It's clear the world does not embrace those who follow Jesus. It's also clear that following Jesus will be costly.

On three occasions, Jesus pointed out one other significant aspect of the cost of discipleship. A disciple *must deny himself* (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23), if he is to follow Christ. The disciple's life consists of basic self-denial. It means to say 'no' to one's self. It means to refuse or decline something for oneself. While on-the-one-hand, the world may oppose one following Christ, on-the-other-hand, a disciple must oppose himself. Not indulging, but denying. This, too, will be costly. Jesus said it is the way forward into life with Him.



## Following Jesus Is a Choice

*If anyone wants to become My follower...*

Jesus began His statement with a condition. *If anyone* implies a choice that one may or may not make. Jesus doesn't coerce one to become a disciple. The path of following Jesus, in light of where He is going, is hard and difficult. But in spite of this, some may still make this choice. Discipleship is available to anyone desiring to follow Jesus. Any believer who "wants to" has enough reason to do so. If the desire is there, it should be encouraged and nurtured, since Jesus declared its value. To *become My follower* includes the initial decision to follow Jesus along with the ongoing continued determination to stick to this chosen path without swerving due to distraction, preoccupation, or deliberate willfulness. To come after Him, then, is the simple essence of discipleship. It's a choice based in a desire to continually follow Jesus Christ.

## Following Jesus Requires Self-Denial

*He must deny himself...*

A daily continually following Jesus emerges from the fundamental decision of self-denial. Jesus did not specify what we deny ourselves, only that we must deny ourselves. We can consider two realms where self-denial operates. First, a disciple is responsive to the directive will of God. When his will conflicts with God's, he practices self-denial. Self-denial is essential because our sin nature will always want to do things contrary to our new nature. Temptations toward sin we desire can only be dealt with by denying ourselves those sinful desires. So

self-denial may often have to do with something sinful of which one must deny himself, like wanting to take revenge. There is no discipleship without this self-denial. Self-denial includes giving up something one sinfully desires as a condition for following Jesus.

Second, self-denial may also apply to denying ourselves priorities, ambitions, hopes, plans, or opportunities that are non-sinful, like refusing a promotion that would conflict with fathering one's children. Sometimes, due to the cost, denying ourselves may seem unacceptable. Paying this cost is what Jesus said marks one who is following Him. That cost may look like one is even opposing what is in his own best interest. Self-denial says 'no' when either a sinful desire or non-sinful desire conflicts with one's desire to continually follow Jesus. Jesus commanded that His followers practice self-denial. He leaves it up to us to decide how devotedly we will follow Him.

Self-denial teaches us the following:

- Self-denial requires that one constantly ask where he must oppose himself to follow Christ.
- Self-denial means we lose something in the exchange. What we deny ourselves is to not act on our own desire, sinful or non-sinful, so that we can follow Christ.
- Self-denial is an affirmation to God of our commitment to honor Jesus Christ by following Him.
- Self-denial is a virtue, from God's point of view, that has eternal value.
- Self-denial is a right of passage into discipleship. One cannot follow Christ otherwise.