Following Jesus: Marks of a Disciple – Lesson 3

"Learning Obedience: Denying Self and Following Christ"

Summary

In Luke 9:23-27, Jesus presents one of the clearest descriptions of true discipleship. Following Christ involves more than believing certain truths or attending church. It requires daily surrender, self-denial, and obedience to God's will. Jesus calls His followers to take up their cross daily and follow Him, placing His kingdom above personal comfort, ambition, and self-interest. Obedience is not a means of earning God's favor but a response to His grace and lordship. As disciples learn to obey Christ, they grow in spiritual maturity and become more like Him.

Scripture

Luke 9:23-27

1. Introduction

Opening Thought

Modern culture encourages people to pursue personal happiness, self-fulfillment, and individual desires above all else. We are often told to "follow your heart," "do what feels right," or "live your truth."

Jesus offers a very different message. Rather than calling people to live for themselves, He calls them to die to themselves. This teaching was as challenging in the first century as it is today. When Jesus invited people to follow Him, He never hid the cost. His call included sacrifice, commitment, and surrender.

The Christian life is not merely about adding Jesus to our existing plans. It is about allowing Him to become Lord over every area of life. Today's lesson explores the meaning of self-denial, the significance of taking up our cross, and why obedience is essential to discipleship.

The Context of Jesus' Teaching (Luke 9:18-22)

Before calling His followers to take up their cross, Jesus revealed His identity as the Messiah and foretold His coming suffering, death, and resurrection. The disciples expected a conquering King. Instead, Jesus spoke of sacrifice. He then explained that His followers must embrace the same pattern.

The pathway of discipleship follows the pathway of Christ. Just as Jesus submitted Himself to the Father's will, His followers are called to do the same. Discipleship is not merely admiration for Jesus. It is imitation of Jesus.

2. Denying Self: The First Step of Obedience (Luke 9:23)

Jesus said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." Self-denial does not mean self-hatred or denying our value as God's creation. Instead, it means surrendering the right to rule our own lives.

- At the heart of sin is self-rule.
- At the heart of discipleship is Christ's rule.

Self-denial means choosing God's desires above our own when the two conflict. This teaching reflects the biblical understanding of repentance. Repentance involves turning away from self-centered living and submitting to God's authority.

Biblical Illustration
Jesus demonstrated perfect self-denial in the Garden of Gethsemane when He prayed: "Not my will, but yours be done." (Luke 22:42)

Though facing immense suffering, Jesus chose obedience to the Father's will. He modeled the very surrender He later demanded from His disciples.

Practical Application
Daily obedience often begins with small choices that demonstrate who is truly in control of our lives. Self-denial may involve:

- Choosing forgiveness instead of resentment
- Pursuing holiness instead of temptation
- Serving others rather than seeking personal recognition
- Obeying Scripture when culture teaches otherwise
- Trusting God's plans over our own desires

3. Taking Up the Cross Daily (Luke 9:23)

In the Roman world, the cross was a symbol of suffering, shame, and death. When Jesus spoke about taking up one's cross, His audience understood that He was referring to complete surrender. The cross represented dying to self and embracing God's purposes regardless of the cost.

Notice that Jesus says this is a daily commitment. Discipleship is not a one-time decision. Each day believers must choose whether they will live for themselves or for Christ.
The Christian life requires continual surrender.

Biblical Illustration
The Apostle Paul expressed this principle when he wrote: "I die every day." (1 Corinthians 15:31) Paul understood that following Christ required continual surrender and dependence upon God's grace.

Practical Application
The cross represents willingness to place Christ above comfort and convenience. Taking up our cross daily may involve:

- Remaining faithful during difficult circumstances
- Standing for biblical truth despite opposition
- Persisting in prayer when answers seem delayed
- Serving faithfully without recognition
- Obeying God when it requires sacrifice

4. The Great Paradox: Losing Life to Find It (Luke 9:24-25)

Jesus declares: "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it." This statement reveals a central truth of the Christian faith. The world teaches fulfillment through self-promotion. Jesus teaches fulfillment through surrender.

Those who spend their lives pursuing personal gain often discover emptiness. Those who surrender themselves to God discover true life. Jesus asks a profound question: "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?" No earthly achievement, possession, or success can compare with the value of a soul surrendered to God.

Biblical Illustration
The rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-23) desired eternal life but was unwilling to surrender his wealth. He walked away sorrowful because he valued possessions more than obedience. His story illustrates the danger of placing temporary treasures above eternal priorities.

Practical Application
Discipleship calls us to pursue God's kingdom above all else. Believers must regularly evaluate:

- What am I living for?
- What controls my decisions?
- What am I unwilling to surrender to God?
- Are my priorities shaped by eternity or temporary success?

5. Obedience as an Expression of Love (Luke 9:23-27)

Throughout Scripture, obedience is closely connected to love for God. Jesus later taught: "If you love me, keep my commands." (John 14:15)

Obedience is not legalism. Legalism attempts to earn God's acceptance through works. Biblical obedience flows from a heart transformed by God's grace. Because Christ has loved and saved us, we desire to obey Him. Love motivates obedience. Grace empowers obedience. The Holy Spirit enables obedience.

True discipleship is not perfection but a growing willingness to submit every area of life to Christ.

Biblical Illustration
Abraham demonstrated his love and faith through obedient action when God called him to leave his homeland and later trust Him with Isaac. His faith was expressed through obedience. Faith and obedience always work together.

Practical Application
Obedience becomes the visible evidence of an inward relationship with Christ.
A disciple who loves Christ will seek to obey Him in relationships, finances, speech, integrity, sexual purity, service, worship, and personal conduct.

6. Discussion Questions

1) What does it mean to "take up your cross daily"?
2) How is biblical self-denial different from self-punishment or self-hatred?
3) Why do you think Jesus connected discipleship with sacrifice?
4) How is obedience an expression of love for God?
5) What obstacles often hinder obedience?
6) What area of your life is most difficult to surrender to Christ?
7) What practical step of obedience is God calling you to take this week?

7. Closing Thoughts

Jesus never promised that discipleship would be easy, but He promised it would be worthwhile. The call to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him challenges the natural desires of the human heart. Yet it is through surrender that we discover true freedom, purpose, and life.

Obedience is not about losing something valuable. It is about gaining something greater. Every act of surrender draws us closer to Christ and shapes us into the disciples He has called us to be. As we follow Jesus, we learn that true life is not found in pursuing our own will, but in embracing His.

Challenge for the Week
Each morning this week, pray: "Lord Jesus, help me deny myself, take up my cross, and follow You today. Show me where I need to surrender and give me the courage to obey."

Identify one area of your life where God has been prompting you to obey. Take one practical step of obedience this week and record what you learn through the experience.