

What did Jesus mean “deny yourself and take up your cross”?

1. Study Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34 and Luke 9:23. Look up the Greek term for “deny” and discover what the term meant to these Hebrew writers.

The Greek term “aparneomai”, translated in English as “deny” has the meaning to “disown” or “renounce.” Used within the context of the imagery of taking up the cross and following Jesus, “denying oneself” conveys the sense of a person disassociating himself from his self interest to serve a higher purpose.

Self denial is not to deny one’s personality, to deny things as an ascetic or to withdraw from the world. It is instead the turning away from the idolatry of self centeredness and every attempt to orient one’s life by the dictates of self interest. In essence, it is denying your selfish sinful desires.

In a similar context towards Believers, the apostle Paul writes in Romans 6:4 “... we have been buried with Him..” indicating that their former sinful ways of living died with Christ.

In Galatians 2:20, the apostle Paul further develops the idea that being “crucified with Christ” allows Christ to live within him. In other words, the selfish self righteous and self centered Saul died and was replaced by the apostle Paul, living “by faith in the Son of God.” In essence, if God loved me enough to give Himself for me, then He loves me enough to live out His life in me. By replacing his ungodly desires with Godly desires, Paul’s life became Jesus Christ’s.

“Denying oneself” is a consequence of true faith, not works or legal obedience, that leads one forward into life “in Christ.”

2. Examine John 5:39-47 and 6:1-36. How did some perceive salvation and Jesus Christ? What is the significance of Jesus’ message of “denying oneself?”

The Jews searched the Scriptures thinking that they would find life there; they believed that works according to the Mosaic Law was the basis of salvation. Legal correctness to the Mosaic Law brought security in mutual acceptance and glory from each other.

Instead of seeing Jesus as the “bread of life”, the soul sustaining power of the word of God, people saw Him as the provider of bread that would assure their bodily life on earth.

The world did not know what salvation and its process was really like. Life was defined by a culture that did not seek honor from God. Jesus’ call for “denying oneself” revealed a re-evaluation of worldly norms and values and a desire for them. What the world called life was not life; it was the mere appearance of life. The life Jesus promised was a better life in a different world.

3. Jesus uses the cross to represent true discipleship five times (Matt 10:38; 16:24-26; Mark 8:34-35; Luke 9:23-24; 14:27). What is the meaning and significance of the cross? Does this message apply to only initial salvation (salvation from the penalty of sin)?

In the Roman cultural context, “carrying the cross” was tacit admission that the criminal was wrong and that the death sentence was just. Death by crucifixion was excruciatingly painful.

With this Roman cultural context in view, “carrying the cross” symbolizes Jesus’ sovereign right over the lives of disciples and their submission to the One who they had at one time rebelled against.

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From a theological perspective, the cross was:

A place of sacrifice: Jesus' life / your sins

A place of atonement: Jesus' work on the cross / your freedom from the **penalty** and **power** of sin

A place of redemption: Jesus' glory / your forgiveness and restored relationship with God

Luke 9:23-24 mentions, “... take up his cross daily...” which makes clear that this imperative is not a onetime event (as in initial salvation); thus, it is an important concept for the process of sanctification (salvation from the power of sin).

What does it mean to “take up the cross daily”? This may be a reference to the struggle against the challenges and temptations of personal sins. So while one may be free of the penalty of sin (initial salvation), the Christian life is discovering God's holy standard, striving towards making it our own and realizing that we cannot do it by our own efforts.

“Take up his cross daily” is a constant reminder of the nature of Jesus' atonement. The belief in Jesus' work on the cross is the basis of repentance and the motivation to be holy. This “change in mind” causes a change in behavior” and provides a life by grace. Here are some examples:

Feeling proud? Remember the gospel: Jesus substituted Himself for you personally and died painfully in your place.

Feeling discouraged? Remember the gospel: Jesus fulfilled the Mosaic Law by permanently removing the cause of God's wrath (expiation) and making you favorable to Him (propitiation).

Feeling self righteous? Remember the gospel: only Jesus could redeem you by paying the judicial penalty of your sin and liberating you from its penalty.

Feeling hopeless? Remember the gospel: Jesus reconciled a divine relationship between you and God which resulted in eternal life for your soul.

Feeling afflicted? Remember the gospel: Jesus canceled your “certificate of debt” and took away the force of any demonic accusation.

The gospel message is not just for the non-Believers; it is important for Christians to preach the gospel to themselves. In failing to remind ourselves about the personal message of the gospel, we risk:

1) Taking pride in our efforts toward faith and practice and look down at others (Christians and non-Christians). This focus on comparing ourselves to others is clearly not what God honors; instead of bringing glory to God, we only glorify ourselves.

2) Feeling guilty and discouraged in our failures and inconsistencies towards meeting God's standards. This focus on our faith performance is clearly not the basis of God's love and acceptance of us; instead of being joyful having a new basis of self esteem, we wallow in self pity.

References:

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