

Part 33: The Flavor of Following

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In 1955, a 30 year old native Montana boy, a graduate from Lewistown High school, sat down and wrote a poem:

*There is a seeking of honest love,
Drawn from a soul storm-tossed,
A seeking for the gain of Christ,
To bless the blinded, the beaten, the lost.*

*Those who sought heavenly love,
And were filled with joy divine,
They walk today with Christ above...*

You might be waiting for that last line but I'm not going to give it to you yet. I'm going to let you sit in the tension of that unresolved poetic meter because there's a discomfort here that I think is helpful for us to experience.

This poem, even with its missing last line speaks of the riches of seeking love, finding gain, and walking with Jesus. These themes drip from our passage today in Luke's gospel and so too does tension.

We've reached a point in Luke's account of Jesus' ministry where the focus is now on Jesus' relationship to his disciples and their relationship to him. This is keenly important for us because as a Christian you must know what discipleship looks like. Discipleship is central to us at Sovereign Hope, as a church we want to glorify God and love others by being disciples and making disciples.

But discipleship is central to us, because it's central to Jesus. You can't be a Christian without following Jesus as a disciple, and you can't help other people be disciples and follow Jesus if you don't know what following Jesus looks like for yourself.

What we are going to see today is that this path of following Jesus is sometimes costly—but as the opening poem mentioned there is also costly, divine and beautiful gain. In order to understand the tension of this we need to continue our process of understanding who Jesus is.

Last week we saw that we cannot understand what we are given in the gospel if we fail to understand what we are given in Jesus as the Christ (Messiah). This week we are going to see that we cannot understand what we are going to go through for the sake of the gospel if we don't understand what Jesus himself was to go through in his own life. Your understanding of following Jesus is shaped by your understanding of Jesus.

In a world which constantly calls us to look inward for priorities and motivation, those who follow Jesus learn the way of looking upward for their priorities and motivation—that is as we see today an upwards look at Jesus and his cross. This will be our main point today: **The wonder and weight of discipleship is shaped by the wonder and weight of the cross.**

We are going to see this in three ways today. First we are going to see **The Experience of the Christ** and then we are going to see **The Expectation of the Christian**, and lastly **The Assurance of the Kingdom**.

To begin let's read **Luke 9:18-22**.

Already we encounter tension here, don't we? Peter's confession of Jesus as God's Christ, God's long awaited savior-messiah, is the centerpiece of the story so far. There is nothing more crucial to the story of human history than this statement.

Yet right after this confession, Jesus warns them seriously and commands them not to tell anyone this?

Why? Well, here we encounter our first point this morning: **The Experience of the Christ**.

Jesus himself knows that unless we have a full picture of who he is and what he came to do, we will always wrestle with truly understanding the gospel. Without understanding the experience of Jesus we want to dictate the terms of our own experience of following Jesus.

In verse 24 Jesus says, "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." In that warning is also an admission that is at the heart of humanity—all of us have a longing for salvation. All of us know at a core level that in us, or in our world, is something we need delivered from.

If you went as asked people in this neighborhood what they would want fixed in their life, you'd probably get all sorts of answers. And Jesus knew that if people only understood him as "The Christ of their own choosing," the salvation and fix they expected might not be the salvation and fix they actually needed. Everyone longs for salvation, but without the help of Jesus, we will want to dictate the terms of our own salvation and in so doing miss what we truly need.

In fact it was right around this time in Jesus ministry where John's gospel includes this piece of information: **John 6:13-15**.

If you asked any Jew during that time what their biggest problem was in their worship of Yahweh they would have all said the same thing: "Rome." Rome controlled their land, ruled over their temple, taxed their worship, and impinged on God's promise.

So if God's messiah were here, they would expect Jesus to march down to Jerusalem, lead a revolution, rid the world of Rome, establish God's kingdom in a physical sense and usher in a world of unrelenting unrivaled peace.

We are prone to wrestle with the same kind of misattributed expectations. None of us who worship Jesus seek to do so apart from seeing him as a sort of hero. But what makes Jesus the hero? In a moment of honesty introspection I want you to answer this question in your heart right now: "Jesus will be my hero if he ____." Our problem, is never that we are unaware of the problem. It's that we often misunderstand the biggest problem and therefore search for incomplete solutions.

Jesus commanded the disciples to silence because the greatest clarity would not be in the mere claim of him as the messiah, but in the distinct work he was going to do as the messiah.

The shape of Jesus' life would show us the shape of the salvation we desperately need. We not only need to hear that Jesus is the savior, but we also need to see how he is the savior.

Our greatest need is seen in the reality that Jesus is going to suffer, he is going to be rejected, he is going to be crucified, and he is going to rise again. Why is he going to suffer, be rejected, die and rise again? Because our problem was that on account of our rejection of God, our sin, we were destined to die and to suffer eternally. We need Jesus' work of substitution because we needed to be delivered from our sin.

Look at how Paul puts this in **Colossians 2:13-14**. It was on the cross where Jesus planned to set us free.

This is important for us to understand because our expectations of who Jesus came to be must be vetted by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

If our greatest need were loneliness, Jesus didn't need to die. As the creator God, he could have raised up for each of us a spouse out of our own body like he did for Adam. If our greatest need were political safety, the same one who breathed the boundaries of the galaxy could have constructed the world's safest wall. If our need were adventure the one who knows all things would have given us the world's most spectacular handbook to unseen wonders.

But because our greatest need was the debt of death on account of our sin, the one who knew only peace would suffer, the one who knew only acceptance in Triune fellowship would know rejection, and the one who knew eternal life would taste the bitterness of death.

Our desire is always to shortcut what is broken, but Jesus knew there's no shortcut to resurrection. The lens of the world views weakness as waste and suffering as shameful, but Jesus' own ministry redeems what the world hates by subjecting himself to it for our own sake.

And here is the beauty of Jesus in the flesh, the glory of the incarnation of Jesus—it's in the seeming weakness of Jesus' ministry that he becomes our greatest apologetic to the realities of life.

How many times have you heard people bemoan: "How can a good God let bad things happen to good people?" Well here a good God allowed terrible things to happen to the only good person. Or maybe you've heard, "If God is good then why does he allow suffering?" But here, God himself endured suffering in the flesh for the purpose of good. Or maybe, "How can you say that God will bring good out of the evil in this world, evil is simply what it is, it has no utility, no grand scheme, just arbitrary and pointless pain" But here, in the moment of greatest evil, in the most spectacular display of injustice, God purposed to do good at a master level through Jesus' death and resurrection.

The incarnation validates our experience of life in a broken world by showing us the life our own savior was subjected to. But it adds something better: the hope of a resurrection. Jesus as our brother in the flesh would feel the pain we feel, but Jesus as the Son of God would redeem it all in his resurrection. Out of temporary affliction God produces eternal glory.

Knowing the end of the story, we skip to the victory of the resurrection but remember the disciples didn't go to Vacation Bible School. They didn't know what was coming and what they probably heard

more than anything else was the scandal of weakness that would typify Jesus who was their long awaited hero.

But it's in this tension of understanding Jesus' work of redemption that also shapes the life of those who would follow him. Weakness in life and victory in death is not only the work of the savior, but it's also the life of the disciple.

This is our second point this morning: **The Expectation of the Christian.**

Read with me **Luke 9:23-26.**

One thing I've really appreciated about Jesus so far in the book of Luke is that he gives us wonderfully clear pictures of what it means to follow him. The world will always write, and should write, books on what discipleship and following Jesus looks like but the clearest picture should always come straight from Jesus. And he has given us lots of clarity so far.

The clearest statement of what it looks like to follow Jesus is his description of the wise man in Luke 6. In this passage Jesus says this: **Luke 6:47**. So what does it look like to follow Jesus? Three things: come to him, hear his word, and do something with it—apply it to your life.

All three of these themes show up in Jesus words to his disciples today. But if Jesus gave his disciples the ingredients for discipleship in Luke 6, it's here in Luke 9 where he tells us what the flavor will be.

Just as Jesus submitted himself to difficulties, so too are his disciples subjected to difficulties in following him. How does Jesus describe this life? What is the flavor of discipleship? Deny yourself, take up your cross daily, and follow me.

Now, note the distinction. We are called to deny ourselves, but Jesus never needed to. He was perfect. For Jesus to deny himself would be to commit treason, he was through and through, even though tempted and tried as we are, perfect, holy, blessed and beautiful. If Jesus were to deny himself, then we have no hope at all.

But we are to deny ourselves because we have things which should be denied. We have sin that ought to be put down, we have desires that need to be put to death, we have dreams which conflict with the dreams of the Kingdom of God.

Most of us understand the role confession plays in following Jesus. Paul makes this really clear in **Romans 10:9**. If you confess, you will be saved.

But just as Peter shows the centrality of confession, Jesus reminds also of the centrality of denial. It's easy to confess faith in Jesus, but it's harder when that confession also assumes a denial of one's own self.

To confess Jesus as Lord is to deny your own claim to Lordship. This helps us understand what is meant here. Jesus isn't saying anyone who follows him must learn to hate himself. Instead he's telling us what self-denial looks like—it is denying yourself and daily picking up a cross and following him.

In other words discipleship isn't seeing our lives as no value at all, but it's seeing the paradox of greater value in the weakness and burden of the cross. Why? Because the cross is the way of Jesus.

My daughters often build forts on their bunkbeds and invite me into it, but most of the time I don't fit. I'm not their size. The path to salvation is not our natural size, but Jesus gives us his cross, which stoops our shoulders to fit, and calls us to follow him under the burden of what he has already done.

Charles Spurgeon once said, "There will be no crownbearers in heaven who are not crossbearers below."

But again, consider the weight of this. Moments ago was the first time the disciples heard Jesus say that he was going to die, and here he alludes that his death would be on a cross, but it wasn't self-evident to the disciples that the cross was going to be the centerpiece of Christianity.

Today we cannot drive around town without seeing a cross somewhere. It has come to signify so many things in our world. But its significance today is almost entirely stripped of the significance it would have had in that moment for the disciples. The cross was a symbol of absolute shame.

It was a form of death and torture reserved for the lowest, most heinous and ignoble individuals of the day. To carry one's cross, was a glimpse into what these criminals had to do as they were paraded throughout the town as a form of humiliation before others on the way to their death.

There is an aspect of romanticism that stands behind cross-bearing even today, but let's not mistake the hardship Jesus is intentionally attempting to press in on us here. He explains what this might feel like in the following verses: **Luke 9:24-26**.

What does it mean to deny yourself? It looks like picking up the life and public identity of Jesus. It looks like picking up what is weak and foolish to the world. And what will that experience feel like at times?

It will feel like suffering—the forfeiture of all the worldly gain we dream of. It will feel like rejection—to identify with Jesus, to obey his word over the word of the world will lead to a choice between who we want to shamefully identify with, and who we want to vindicate us of our ashamedness. It will feel like death—for it is the call to lose one's life for the sake of Christ in order to gain it.

Jesus isn't here preparing us to suffer natural disasters and sickness common to us all, he's preparing his disciples to face awkward glances, shameful remarks, and death itself for his sake—that is on account of nothing but our allegiance to bear the cross.

And all of this, is to be done daily. The prayer of the Christian is not only for our daily bread, but our daily cross—we need both if we are to endure to the end!

What does this daily denial look like? For many of us it might look like losing sleep to take up God's word and read. I know many people who don't identify as morning people and who have great intentions of reading at bed time, but I know less people who actually do it. There's no greater opportunity to pick up one's cross daily than to make sure it is fixed upon us early in the morning through prayer and Bible reading.

I know for some of us the call to obedience feel like we are turning away from the very thing that promises life. As chaplain for the Griz football team I know the pressure of seeking gain by worldly standards. In athletics the currency of profit is often untethered sexual freedom. For the men and women who seek to follow Jesus and abide by his word regarding the proper placement of sex, they feel acutely the fear of turning away from the world's gain and trusting in Jesus. It is a battle where at every step they feel loss.

I know many others who in business, in education, or in relationships the call to obey Jesus' word leads them directly into the public shame of their co-workers and friends. There is a real threat of shame that lurks over each and every one of us and in our flesh we will want to withdraw into peace with the world and to hide the shameful identification with Jesus.

Rosaria Butterfield was at one point was an openly active, ardent, and accomplished professor, feminist and lesbian. But she came to Jesus, denied herself, and followed him.

Daily her cross was described as this: "Everyone from the lesbian partner I broke up with, to the graduate students in Queer Theory whose Ph.D. dissertations I could no longer supervise, to the LGBTQ+ undergraduate student groups I could no longer support felt the stunning betrayal. I had changed my allegiance...I was disappointing almost everyone I loved because I believed in Jesus — the real Jesus who reveals himself in the Bible. My treachery to my lesbian community was only bearable through my union with Christ."

Following Jesus brings the decision of shame. It really does. It can be as significant as Rosaria's experience. It can be as life threatening as recanting Islam and facing death. It can be as seemingly trivial as the shame of not having your kids play sports on Sunday's because you're prioritizing gathering with the body of believers. That looks shameful!

Just as Jesus suffered, was rejected and died—so too he prepares the disciples for that experience. But there's one difference—Jesus will always bear us further than we bear him.

Because Jesus suffered, we know our suffering will end. Because Jesus was rejected by God, we know we will be accepted by him. Because Jesus rose from the dead we know we too will rise.

That's what I love about the bittersweet warning of **Luke 9:26**. Yes, realize that for those who shrink back from Jesus, Jesus will shrink back from you. But for those who are unashamed, for those whose cross was only bearable as Rosaria was, "through my union with Christ," we receive a welcome. In the face of three fold sorrow, we receive three fold glory: The glory of Jesus, the glory of the Father, the glory of the angels. Everything we wanted was here! Here, hidden in Jesus, we lost nothing.

This is the final point this morning: **The Assurance of the Kingdom.**

Look at how Jesus ends this in **Luke 9:27**.

After Jesus warns of the potential shame of those who do not endure, he gives the wonderful assurance that some of these men will see the kingdom of God before they die.

Now scholars are a little befuddled at what this means. It could very well mean that he's speaking of Peter, James and John who will see Jesus transfigured in the next chapter. It could be the disciples who

stood around the cross and witnessed Jesus say, "It is finished." It could be those who first witnessed the empty tomb. It could be the ones who witnessed and touched the resurrected Jesus. It could have been those who heard Jesus preach and teach and do miracles for over a month after he was raised from the dead. It could have been when Jesus ascended before all of them into heaven. It could be when the Holy Spirit fell on the first Christian church at Pentecost.

What's the point! The point is take your pick of where Jesus proved that glory, glory and glory is guaranteed in the Kingdom of God. Jesus' ministry is the shape and sound of our life of discipleship. Seasons of sorrow, seasons of cross bearing, the end of brilliant and beaming glory.

This Kingdom of God, proven in the Jesus, is the hope to all who wrestle under the uncomfortable weight of the cross that we will be no fools. It is as Paul says in **2 Corinthians 4:8-11**.

Polycarp was one of the first major martyrs of the Christian faith. He was offered salvation from death if he would recant his faith in Jesus, if he would lay down his cross, and remove the shame of the gospel. But listen to what he said: "86 years have I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?"

If you've wondered if Jesus is faithful, look at the cross. He rose, and so too will we. So come to him. Take up your cross daily. This world will ask for your life someday, but today Jesus asks for it today. Where does your cross show up in your life? Where is your life markedly different because your savior is markedly different?

Roger Youderian, was the Montana native who penned that poem I opened with.

He joined four other men from Wheaton College and packed their bags for Ecuador to share the gospel with a remote jungle tribe.

On December 19th, at basecamp he sat with his wife Barb and wrote:

*There is a seeking of honest love,
Drawn from a soul storm-tossed,
A seeking for the gain of Christ,
To bless the blinded, the beaten, the lost.*

*Those who sought heavenly love,
And were filled with joy divine,
They walk today with Christ above...*

He couldn't in that moment think of a fitting last line, so he turned to his wife and said, "Barb, I'll finish it when I get home." Nineteen days later, Youderian died on the banks of the Curaray River at the hands of men he sought to bring the gospel to.

Roger's poem was not finished by its poetic resolve in the meter of rhyme, but by the welcome he received in his homecoming. One described by Paul in **Colossians 3:1-4**.

Dear church, let us hide ourselves, our lives, our shame, our fears, and all we are in the person of Christ. Let us draw from a storm-tossed soul the gain of Christ which is for all who follow him.