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A Disciple's Self-Check **Luke 9:18-27**

Here's a riddle to get us started this morning. What's the name of the game show where you can win thousands of dollars without knowing any of the answers to the questions? The question is: What is Jeopardy? The goal of Jeopardy is to ask questions that match the answers on the screen. Like Ken Jennings the all-time champion who won 74 games in a row and earned a cool \$2 ½ million in the process. Jeopardy and Wheel of Fortune have to be the most popular game shows in television history. And I think that's fitting because if there's ever been a culture where we're told to question everything, it's our modern American culture, including things that are foolish to question like: Is it OK to destroy an unborn baby in the womb? And if so, then why make such a big deal about destroying an eagle egg or killing a baby seal? Are animals more valuable than people? I repeat Pastor Rick Warren's statement. "Some people are so open-minded their brains fall out." On Jeopardy for example you might be given the answer: He was the firstborn son of Jacob and Leah. So what would the question be? Who was Reuben? By the way, have you ever noticed that one of the toughest categories for contestants on Jeopardy is the Bible category? Most contestants leave that one until the end because even though most people have a Bible in their home, very few of them take time to actually read it.

For example, Gallup took a poll of American teenagers in 2005 and found that half of them didn't know it was Jesus who turned the water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, two-thirds didn't know Paul's conversion took place on the road to Damascus, and 1-in-10 said Moses was one of Jesus' 12 apostles.

And that's frightening because according to the Bible, the only way to get saved is by knowing and believing the basic facts of the Bible like who Jesus is and what He did for us by His death and resurrection. Paul reminds Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:15, "From childhood you have known the sacred scriptures which are able to give the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus."

What's more, Jesus said apart from the study of His Word, it's impossible to grow as His disciple. He said, "If you continue in My Word, then are you truly My disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free."

So that's where I want to take you again this morning—back to the Bible, this time to Luke chapter 9 starting with verse 18, where Jesus asks the most important question that's ever been asked. Life is filled with important questions, isn't it? Questions like: Where will you go to school? What career will you pursue? Who will you marry? How many kids will you have? And how are you going to save for retirement and your children's education? In fact, in one sense, that's really what life is all about, asking and answering the right questions. Jesus did a lot of that, you'll remember. Thinking they'd finally found a teacher who could answer all of their questions, people asked him everything: Do we have to pay taxes to Caesar? Is it at this time you're going to restore the kingdom to Israel? How can a man be born again when he's old? And what shall I do to inherit eternal life? All of which He answered brilliantly like no one before Him! In fact, at one point the chief priests sent guards from the temple to arrest Jesus because the crowd was beginning to believe in Him as their Messiah. But they weren't able to do it, and why not? What did they say to the chief priests when they returned empty-handed? John 7:46, "No man ever spoke like this man!" But in today's passage, Jesus turns the tables on His disciples and He's the One asking the questions now and the first question He asks is where I want to begin this morning—

1. A Disciple's Confession

Luke 9:18 where he writes: "Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, 'Who do the crowds say I am?' They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life.'" Believing He was John the Baptist makes no sense, of course, because John was the preacher who baptized Jesus, so how he could be both John and Jesus at the same time I don't know. Elijah on the other hand makes more sense because Malachi the last

book of the Old Testament says that Elijah would come before the great and dreadful day of the Lord. Others said he was one of the prophets of long ago who'd come back to life. And I imagine if we took a survey today, we'd get many of the same answers. Who do people say Jesus is? Muslims say he was a great prophet. Jehovah's Witnesses say he was Michael the archangel who took on human form. Mormons say he's the brother of Lucifer, and liberal theologians like Albert Schweitzer say he was a great ethical teacher who never claimed to be God and was wrong when he said, "The kingdom of God is at hand." But that isn't what Jesus said about Himself. He didn't say He was bringing the truth. He said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, whoever has seen Me has seen the Father, I and the Father are One." Or to put it another way: Every-one is betting their life on something. I'm betting my life that Jesus Christ is Lord.

The other thing worth noticing here is where all of this took place. Luke doesn't take time to tell us, but Matthew does in his gospel. Instead of taking place in Galilee or Judea where Jesus normally ministered, it took place in a beautiful and remote spot on the northernmost border of Israel at the foot of Mount Hermon called **Caesarea Philippi**. Philip the tetrarch who was one of Herod's sons and the ruler of that area, named it Caesarea in honor of Caesar Augustus. But there was already **another Caesarea** to the south on the coast, so he added his own name to it and made it Caesarea Philippi, to distinguish it from the other Caesarea. The original name of the place was **Paneus** because it was said that Pan, the Roman god, was born in a cave here. So it was a **Roman area** where idolatry and the worship of the One True God were mixed together. That also says something about the opposition He was facing, doesn't it? That He'd rather take His disciples into **enemy territory** to have this talk with them than risk the wrath of the religious establishment back home. But, then, that shouldn't surprise us! Religious people have always been the biggest opponents of those of us who want a simple relationship with Jesus Christ. Whereas what religious people are all about is keeping people in line through their rules and rituals and religious traditions! When all we want is to love the Lord Jesus Christ with all our hearts, minds, and souls, and our neighbors as ourselves.

It was here, then, in this mish-mash of spirituality that Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do people say I am?" And like today there were all sorts of religious ideas. But he didn't stop there! He went on to ask the personal question that I'm asking you this morning: "Who do you say He is?" Peter gave the answer for every true disciple both then and now. "You are the Christ of God!" Or as Matthew puts it in his longer version of their conversation, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!" So it begins for every true disciple of Jesus Christ. It begins with a confession of faith, "Jesus is my Lord, and my life will never be the same again!" Can you say that? Have you made a confession of faith in Jesus? The Biblical place to do that, of course, is at your baptism where you can tell your family and friends and everyone else who cares to hear it that you believe in Jesus and you aren't ashamed to let it be known. That, if you're taking our self-check this morning, is the first step of discipleship: confessing Jesus as Lord. And because we want to help you in that and every other step in the process, we're going to be offering baptism classes two weeks from today for children, youth, and adults in preparation for the greatest day in the life of our church, Easter Sunday morning when we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we hope to feature baptisms in-between our services giving you a chance to confess your faith in Jesus if you've never been baptized before. That's a disciple's confession. But that's only the beginning. In verse 21 Luke also describes—

2. A Disciple's Commitment

Luke continues, "Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone." Now I wonder why He did that! Two reasons: 1) The opposition was getting intense at this time and He didn't want it to get out of hand and 2) He needed more time to prepare His disciples for the incredible challenge before them. So He told them to keep it quiet for the time being adding: "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." He was warning them that things were going to get worse for Him before they got better because He had a job to do before He took on the role of King and that was to die on a cross to pay for our sins. That's significant especially when you remember what happened right before this. We studied it last week. Jesus fed 5,000 people with 2 loaves and 5 fishes. Actually it was more like 20,000 because Luke says they only counted the men. So when you add the women and children, it was more like 20,000 people He fed. And what was their reaction when he did? John's gospel says, "After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, 'Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.'" But it adds, "When Jesus saw that they were ready to come and make him king by force (Burger King), he withdrew to the mountain by Himself alone."

The crowd was willing to follow Him as long as He filled their bellies with bread. But the moment they learned that He was about to suffer and was calling them to suffer too, John says they turned away from Him because they didn't want to suffer for Christ.

And that's the point here. Verse 23: "Then he said to them all: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?' You know how out of step that is with our culture, a culture that promotes self-love over everything else? Teachers, counselors, spiritual gurus, and life coaches—wherever we turn, we're told that the way to raise healthy, well-adjusted kids is to boost their self-esteem and make them feel good about themselves: "You're so talented and special! You've got what it takes!" to the point where every kid in the country wants to be an American Idol of one kind or another, worthy of adoration and honor! Ours is a culture drowning in awards of every imaginable kind because we wouldn't want any-body to feel bad about himself. Do you know how destructive that thinking is? Not only does it leave our kids unprepared for the harsh realities of life, it also invalidates the gospel we claim to believe! Boosting the self-worth of sinners? Martin Luther, the Catholic priest who launched the Protestant Reformation, said that was the state of affairs of the Roman church when he nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, the 4th of which was this: "Until the sinner comes to hate himself, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God." "No," you say. "Self hate? That can't be right! No, friends, it is right. Jesus said we have to hate our lives if we want to save them and deny our own hopes and dreams and ambitions if we want to be His disciple. "For what good is it to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit your very soul?"

I remember reading that verse as a boy, and it worried me because I thought this world was a pretty nice place and there were a lot of things I wanted to gain for myself in this life. But live a little longer and you learn the world isn't as friendly as you thought. It's a place filled with danger and heartache. Consequently, if we're going to suffer anyway, why not suffer for Christ and enjoy the blessings He promises us? That's what the cross is all about it. It's a symbol of self-renunciation. When a prisoner took up his cross and carried it to the place of crucifixion, his life was over! That's what Jesus is saying about us. Becoming His disciple begins with a confession of faith but it doesn't end there. It's followed by a lifetime of daily denying what you need and want, in order to serve Him better. As my life verse, Galatians 2:20, puts it, "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me, and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me." No one likes the cross because it's a symbol of self-denial and suffering. But there's also freedom in it because it means I no longer have to fight for what I want. All I have to do now is live for Jesus, and He takes care of what I need and much of what I want. And I might add, once you establish a habit of denying yourself and living for Him, it's no longer a big leap to being willing to die for Him like so many believers in the world are doing.

No one knows exactly how many, but according to Amnesty International, the Christians martyred for their faith every year number in the hundreds.

Two of the most recent examples from Voice of the Martyrs are the two Christian college students who were shot to death in Mosul, Iraq 3 weeks ago as a way of intimidating other Christians from voting in the upcoming parliamentary elections. Even sadder is the report of over 100 Christians killed and hundreds of others wounded 6 weeks ago in riots outside a church in Jos, Nigeria.

I don't know about you but when I read about our brothers and sisters in Christ being tortured and even killed for their faith in Christ, it makes me wonder: Would I be willing to do that? Do you ever think about that? Would you be willing to suffer for Christ rather than give up your faith in Him? The answer is probably not, not if we haven't been denying ourselves every day in an effort to serve Him better—dying to our need of sleep to take care of a child who suffers from night terrors, dying to your desire for that \$4 latte twice a week so you can send \$30 a month to Samaritans Purse or some other relief agency, and dying to your plans for that dream house on the water so you can adopt a handicapped baby, care for an elderly parent in your home, or send your grandchildren to a Christian school.

That's what it means to deny yourself and so prove that you really are a disciple of Jesus. It involves a whole new way of looking at life—giving up your hopes and dreams and ambitions and asking Him, "What do you want to do in my life today?" We've looked at a disciple's confession and a disciple's commitment, and finally, one more issue to look at before we finish, and that's—

3. A Disciple's Compensation

Verse 26 concludes like this. Jesus says: "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God." Jesus says there are some who'll reject him because they're ashamed of Him. So I had to ask myself: Why? Why would anyone be ashamed of Jesus? And then I found this verse in John 12:42 which says this: "Many even among the leaders believed in him, but because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they'd put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God." I wonder. Do you think people still struggle with that today—wanting the approval and acceptance of other people more than they want the approval of God? Or maybe I should ask it another way: Is there any greater battle you and I face in this politically correct society than the fear of others disapproving of us because we've dared to step out of line and follow Jesus rather than the world? But Jesus says there's a downside to that because if we're ashamed to confess Him before men, He'll be ashamed to confess us before His Father and the angels of heaven. And who wants that? Who wants to run the risk of having Jesus say to you on that day, "I never knew you. Depart from me you hypocritical evildoer!" I don't know about you, but that's my only source of hope and assurance as I look forward to the judgment of that great day—having Jesus stand up for me and say, "Father, he's with me!"

But what about those of us who do confess Jesus and are willing to deny ourselves and follow Him? Is there any upside for us in that? "After all," you say, "I'm with Paul, if it's only in this life that we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." Peter, you may remember, was of the same opinion. When he thought about all that he'd given up to follow Jesus and the possibility of suffering ahead, he asked Him, "But what about us, Lord? We've left everything to follow you!" How did Jesus answer him? He said, "No one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life." And that's the point here as well. This is the first mention of the Second Coming in the gospel of Luke, and Jesus makes it clear: "When I come again, I won't be coming in humility to die for your sins. I'll be coming in glory to punish those who've rejected Me and to reward forever those who have faithfully served me." Psychologists call this delayed gratification—the willingness to deny ourselves and much of what we want in this life because we know that the glory we're about to enjoy is going to more than overshadow anything we've sacrificed for Him.

One of my heroes is Charles Simeon, pastor in the Church of England from 1782 to 1836 at Trinity Church Cambridge. He was appointed by a bishop against the will of the people who opposed him not because he was a bad preacher but because he was an evangelical. He believed the Bible and called for conversion and holiness and world evangelization. So for 12 years the people refused to let him give the Sunday afternoon sermon. During that time they also boycotted the Sunday morning service and locked their pews so no one else could sit in them. He preached to people in the aisles for 12 years! The average stay of a pastor in America is 4 years. Simeon began his ministry with 12 years of intense opposition— and lasted 54 years!

How did he endure this opposition so patiently? He said: "In this state of affairs I saw no remedy but faith and patience. The passage of Scripture which sustained me was this, 'The servant of the Lord must not be quarrelsome but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition.' It was painful to see the church with the exception of the aisles almost forsaken but I thought that if God would only give a double blessing to those who did attend, there would be on the whole as much good done as if the congregation were doubled and the blessing limited to only half the amount. This comforted me many, many times, when without such a reflection, I should have sunk under my burden."

Where did he get the assurance that if he patiently endured, there would be a blessing on his work that would make up for the frustration of having all the pews locked? He got it from passages of Scripture that promised him God's future blessings and rewards like Psalm 130:5: "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits and in his Word I put my hope." Of course, the blessing doesn't always come in this life. Christians die and sometimes their dreams die with them. But that's when we need to remember that we're going to live forever and that one day we'll be compensated for everything we have given up for Christ's sake. That's His promise and you can take it to the bank. "If we deny Him, He will deny us. But if we endure, we shall also reign with Him."

Conclusion

I finish with the words of a hymn we used to sing at the church I attended when I first began to follow Christ. Some of you may recognize it. I hope it's an encouragement to you. It goes like this—

***Oft times the day seems long, our trials hard to bear.
 We're tempted to complain, to murmur and despair.
 But Christ will soon appear to catch His bride away.
 All tears forever over in God's eternal day.***

***It will be worth it all when we see Jesus.
 Life's trials will seem so small when we see Christ.
 One glimpse of His dear face, all sorrows will erase.
 So bravely run the race till we see Christ.***