

Let A Man Deny Himself

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I'd like us to turn back together for a short while to the passage that Neil read in Max Gospel chapter 8. And over the next three weeks, I want us to spend a bit of time looking at one of the most important statements ever made. They're the words of Jesus, and these are words that as a society and a culture today, most people probably don't agree with them. And they're words that as individuals, maybe often we don't want to hear them. But the truth is, these are words that all of us desperately need to listen to. And the words that we're going to look at are Jesus's one sentence summary of what is involved in being a disciple, and what's involved in being a Christian. You ask Jesus to sum it up in one sentence, this is his sentence. It's the words of Mark 8.34. And calling the crowd to him with his disciples,

Jesus said to them, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. And it's that last bit that I want us to focus on especially. And over the next three weeks, we're going to spend one week looking at each different part. Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, to take up our cross, and to follow him. Today, we're going to look at the first one.

If we are following Jesus today, or if you start following Jesus today, we are to deny self. Some of you may have heard of Tim Keller. He was an American pastor and theologian, and he just died last month. He's been very, very helpful and influential over the past 20 or 30 years in his preaching and in books that he's written. So I would recommend Tim Keller's books and sermons to you very much. One of the things that he spoke about was how the gospel connects and confronts with our society. So the gospel connects with our society today, but the gospel also confronts our society today. And I think that's a very, very insightful and helpful statement. And it's definitely true of these four words that we have here. When Jesus says, let a man deny himself, he is most definitely connecting with our society. He's also confronting us. And that's what I want us to think through together today. So starting off with this connect, let's think about that together a wee bit.

Jesus connects very powerfully with our society because he is talking about the self. And that question of self is probably the question of the 21st century Western mind. Today, so many people are driven by a quest to find, to affirm and to express our true selves. You see that all around us. People are looking for some kind of clear and stable sense of identity. In other words, people are just chasing an answer to the question, what am I? Who am I? And the general view of our society is that if you can find the answer to that, if you find, you know, your true self, if you are behaving in a way that's true to yourself, that's where you're going to find wholeness and peace and stability. And that's not necessarily bad. And I'm not sort of throwing it all out at all. But what I want, I just want us to think about that. And one of the things I want us to notice initially is that we're living in this world where there's this kind of search to find self. And yet the more time goes on, there's more and more and more answers being offered. And so when we're trying to think what does it really mean to be a human? What does it really mean to be myself? There's just loads of answers being offered now. And that's why people try to find themselves in an ever more complicated web of opinions or achievements, desires or experiences. And it actually happens to us at every single stage in life. And right through from childhood to old age, we're confronted by questions of who or what we are. So you think of your school days, especially high school days, there's this pressure to be a certain type of person. You have to like or dislike certain things you have to wear or not wear certain clothes, you have to wear those clothes in a certain way.

And, you know, it's so interesting how things changed. When I was young, it's not that long ago, when I was young, you would not be seen dead, literally dead, with trousers that did not reach your shoes. That was like, my goodness, if you wanted to commit social suicide, you went out with trousers like that. I see people today everywhere with trousers like that. Young people are like, what's wrong with you? So there's this pressure. Everybody's got it. So it happens at school. But it's, it's, it continues through the rest of life. You reach the end of school. And there's this like doomsday question, what do you want to be? What do you want to do with your life? Some people know the answer to that question. But many don't. And it leaves them lost. In general, adult life, the pressure is still there. There's pressure to have certain opinions on certain issues. So are you a unionist or a nationalist? Are you a meat eater or a vegan? Are you concerned about climate change or not? Do you support Rangers or Celtic? Or do you hate them both?

[6 : 18] There's pressure to achieve good grades, good university degree, good job, get a promotion, get a nice house, drive a nice car, wear the right labels. There's bigger questions about where we come from. So issues about race, our nationality, our language, our accent, all of these can shape who we are. And today, there's now even bigger questions being asked about sexuality, about gender.

And all of them are connecting very powerfully with this issue of who we are, the whole question of our self. So when Jesus talks about self, he is connecting something with something that's so dominant in our society today. And it affects every single one of us. And to test it, I just want to ask you the question, how would you finish this sentence? I am... What? How would you answer that question? That's a fascinating thing to think about. You think about what comes into your mind instantly. One of the things that's really fascinating is that I think that question proves that we do not live in a culture that's dominated by science. We would maybe think that, you think, oh, 20th century, 21st century, everything's dominated by science. Not through. I doubt very much anybody in here instinctively finished that sentence by saying, I'm a mammal. Or I'm an organism.

And so, yeah, we absolutely respect the role that science has. We love the discoveries and advancements that science has made. But it's not actually the dominant thing shaping society. It's other stuff that we tend to think of. If you stopped somebody in the street and asked them to finish that sentence, they would say something along the lines of, I'm Scottish. I'm a teacher.

I'm a parent. I'm a ranger fan. I'm a student. I'm a galax speaker. I'm a nationalist. I'm a lesbian. I'm a vegan. That's the kind of thing that people look to as the core of their identity. And they're all examples of this complex web of answers that have been offered today for the question of self, that question of who we really are. And the whole thing seems to be getting more and more complicated.

There's loads we could say. There's two fascinating points I want us to notice just briefly. The first I want to notice is that that multitude of answers is actually making things less clear. And it makes things less stable. More answers has led to more confusion. And a quite remarkable example of that in the last 10 or 20 years is related to the whole question of gender. And even just 20 or 30 years ago when I was a child, that wasn't really a question that people asked or discussed or thought about the whole thing seemed quite clear. Not now. So now as a society, we don't even agree what gender really is. So there's this whole, is it a physical thing? Is it a non-physical thing? Is it to do with your body or is it to do with your feelings? We don't even agree on that question. And we don't agree on how many genders there are. People with a conservative mindset would say two. Other people would give a much longer list, sometimes over 100 items on that list. And even if you do go down that road and accept a wide variety of options, there's then the bigger question, well, which one am I? And where do I fit in that? Now whatever your views on that, and I'm not trying to sort of, you'll say anything judgmental on that whole thing at all. I just want to observe the point that whatever your views on that might be, I think we can all agree that the more time goes on, the more complicated the whole thing is getting. So a multitude of answers has led to less stability and less clarity. The second thing I want us to notice and think about is that there's actually a quite astonishing and quite huge irony in all of this. Because one thing I think you can say when you look at our society, and we're like this ourselves, is that in our quest to find our two selves, we are actually massively influenced by stuff outside of us. The quest to find our self is massively influenced by things outside of us. And that's ironic. So there's all this emphasis on looking within, finding your two self, yet in reality, what people identify as their real self is actually hugely connected to stuff that's outside of them. So where you were born, what language you speak, what your job is, who you find attractive, what you earn, what you wear, who you vote for, the team you support, what you like to eat, what you like to listen to, all of that affects our self. It's all outside you. It's all actually separate from you.

[11 : 46] And none of that's necessarily bad. It's just fascinating that so much of the stuff that we hold on to in terms of what defines us is actually simply stuff that has influenced us. And I do it myself. So for example, a big part of what I see as myself, one of the things I will be tempted to put at the end of that sentence is to say, I'm an islander. So that means a lot to me, the fact that I am from Lewis, that I'm an islander. And that's just something that I think of as very important. And yet, when I think about it, so much of that feeling is actually a result of stuff that's outside of me. It's a result of stuff that has little to do with me. And it's actually the result of the stuff that doesn't always add up. So I think to myself, okay, I am an islander. I am an islander. So I think about that. Okay, does that mean that I have to have a stretch of body, a stretch of water around where I live? And then I'm like, okay, that seems a little bit unnecessary. But okay. And then I think, okay, but I definitely prefer the island to the mainland. And then I look at the map and I'm like, I think the mainland is also an island.

It's just bigger. Okay, how does that end up? And then I think, what if Lewis got a bridge or a tunnel? Would I still be an islander? How would that feel? And then I think of it the fact I was actually born in Aberdeen. And I only came here as a baby. And I'm just saying all that to say, well, that's the thing that I, you know, hold on to myself. It's actually inside of my control. I have no control over whether a bridge or a tunnel gets built. I have no control over the fact that I was born in Aberdeen. And, and, and really, you can go to lots of places in the world, and you can find an unjoined stretch of water going around you. It just depends how far you're willing to look.

And ultimately, none of that really matters in terms of my own life. But I think it just shows that that that in terms of our understanding of our true selves, so often, we're hugely influenced by stuff that is completely external to us. And that's just a bit strange when we think about it.

All of it's telling us that when Jesus speaks about self, he's touching on one of the most dominant issues in our society today. And it doesn't just affect our society, it affects us in church as well. We live in that world. We live in that way of thinking in terms of our society, and it affects our thinking. And so if we think about that question of self for us as Christians, as us part of a church, those who are maybe thinking about becoming Christians, how do we define ourselves? What do we think about when we look at this question? Well, there's loads we could say again, but I think that we can summarize how we define ourselves in a couple of different ways, and I'll just go through them briefly, two are quite general, two are quite specific. The general ones are quite simple. We often define ourselves by what we are and by what we're not. So we think of what we are in terms of our jobs, careers, life, whatever. We also think about what we are in terms of a church.

We think of what we do, what we like, what we're used to. And we also define ourselves in terms of what we're not. So we're not this, and we don't like that, and we don't do it that way. And that's very easy for us to define ourselves in terms of what we are and in terms of what we're not. So that's the two general ways. I want to think a little more about the two specific ways that we can try to define ourselves because it's really important to recognize them. The first of these more specific ways is that we define ourselves by thinking about why we are better than others. And that's something that we all do. I think that the island is better than the mainland. I think that dogs are better than cats. And I can think of a hundred other ways in which I have this deep seated sense of, you know, I'm just right and the rest of the world is wrong. We're all often like that. And that's all just an example of me judging other people. And it's something that every single one of us does. And it exposes a danger in our hearts whereby our sense of self, our sense of well-being, our sense of security depends on being just that little bit better than others.

[16 : 25] Psychologists call this the better than average effect. The better than average effect. And it describes a tendency that most people have to think more highly of ourselves and of the things that we like. And one of the ways that we can feed that better than average effect is to compare ourselves to other people who we think are worse. And that often results in us putting these people into the kind of enemy stroke idiot category that we have in our minds. And we've all got that category, whether we admit it or not. We've all got that category. And it usually starts in high school, the founding members of your enemy stroke idiot category are the people in the year below you. That just because they're in the year below you, don't like them. Other people fall into that category. Those people who drive caravans on the A9, lorries that go under 40 between Elaclun and Vernes, people who take motorhomes on the Penfant Road. We all have them. We all do it. We all have this kind of like better than average. And of course, it's all quite silly because you only have to think about it mathematically for a moment to recognize that if most people think that they are better than average, it means that a large chunk of your population is mathematically deluded because you can't have everybody at that average. So we tend to think of ourselves as better.

That's easy done. The second way, though, I think is more damaging and I think very likely to be more common. We define ourselves in terms of why we think we're worse than others. And that can happen so easily. We look at other people and we see things that they can do, that they have, that they've achieved. And we're not like them. And we feel like we are rubbish. And sometimes that can show itself in self pity, where we feel sorry for ourselves. And sometimes we are only happy when we're miserable in a weird kind of way. Other times it can show itself just in a kind of self loathing where instead of feeling sorry for ourselves, we just feel angry with ourselves, frustrated with what we're doing. And I think the truth is most people are a mixture of these things, where in some ways we think we're better. In other ways we think we are worse. The crucial thing I want to recognize is that all of these patterns of behavior represent an over reliance on our own judgment. These patterns of behavior represent an over reliance on our own judgment. The minute we think of ourselves as better than other people, we make ourselves judge. The minute you call yourself awful, you make yourself the world expert on who you are. And neither of those things are wise or appropriate. We're such a complex mixture of getting things right and getting things wrong.

But the passage we read tells us that that tension in our experience is nothing new. You see it in Peter. He goes from being totally right to being totally wrong in just a couple of verses. Jesus asks, who do people say that I am? Peter replies magnificently, you are the Christ. He gets it bang on. Jesus then starts explaining about what's going to happen to him, that he's going to be handed over. He's going to die and he'll rise again. Peter takes him aside and says, that's never going to happen. And of course, in doing so, he gets it completely wrong. And in the moment when he got it wrong, it happened because Peter was relying on his own judgment, on his own idea of how things should be. So all of that's telling us that we live in a society hugely shaped by the question of self. All around us, the world expects us to find ourselves, to express ourselves, to fulfill ourselves.

Jesus talks about self as well. But what does he tell us to do? He tells us to deny ourselves.

And you think, oh, what does he mean by that? Why is he telling us to do that? And this is where Jesus confronts our society. He's telling us that if we're going to follow him, we need to deny ourselves. Why would Jesus say that? Well, in order to understand this, it's crucial that our understanding of self is shaped by what the Bible teaches about humanity. And that biblical teaching about humanity, what we call biblical anthropology, insists on two crucial facts about every single human. One, we are made by God, made in the image of God, made for the glory of God. That makes everyone incredibly special and beautiful and wonderful and capable of amazing things. That's the one, that's the first thing that the Bible teaches about humanity and insists on about humanity. The second truth that the Bible teaches is that we are sinners. We've rebelled against God. We are broken because of sin and every part of our lives is affected by that. And there's two important theological concepts that summarize this. The fact that we are image bearers and the fact that sin has brought us into a condition of total depravity. Now, let me explain these image bearers. Well, I think you understand what that means, that we reflect God, that there is something unique about humanity that is like

[22 : 27] God. We bear his image. But sin has left us in a condition described by theologians as one of total depravity. Now, it's really important to explain that because it's very, very easy to misunderstand that. It's not total depravity in terms of degree. Okay, so it's not saying everybody is absolutely horrific. It's not saying that at all. And we know that that's not the case. It's not saying that we are totally depraved in terms of we're as depraved as we could be. The word total is not referring to degree. It's referring to scope. And what that means is that every part of our lives has been affected by sin. Sin's influence is total. So from my private thoughts in my heart to my public behavior and everything in between, sin spoils that. And from life, from a newborn child right through to our last days in old age, every single step we take is marred by the effect of sin. And so that's the twofold reality that the Bible presents in terms of what it means to be human. And the result of that is that our self is in a state of tension. In fact, more accurately, our self is in a state of conflict. And our experience confirms all this. When you do something amazing in life, when you achieve something positive, whatever that may be, you feel a sense of satisfaction, sometimes even amazement. And you think, I can't believe I did that.

And when we do something stupid, we feel a deep sense of regret and frustration. And we think, I can't believe I did that. And the fact that we experience these things, the joy and beauty of our successes is because of that. And the regret of our stupidity is because of that.

And it all highlights the fact that our self is not this stable, consistent identity that gives us wholeness and peace and purpose. The reality is, our self is a complex mess of beauty and brokenness, wisdom and folly. And this idea that there is a stable, virtuous self within us is a myth.

And the massive danger that we face is that if we make ourselves, if I make myself, the ultimate authority of my life, in other words, if I make an idol out of following my heart or out of finding myself, if I do that, I am building my life on something that is unstable, unreliable, and often un-understandable. And I can prove that this is true, because if you dig into my heart, if you could all dig into my heart today, right now and have a look, you are not going to find the things that I am most proud of. What you're going to find is the things that I'm most ashamed of and that I would never want you to know. So often, self is a dangerous leader, a foolish teacher, and a terrible idol to worship. And it is for all of those reasons that Jesus says, deny yourself. And in saying that, he's telling us that the key to finding peace and security and happiness in our lives is not to make ourselves the most important thing in our lives. He's telling us that what lies within us is not something that we can rely on because our hearts are corrupted by sin, our judgments are skewed, our desires are distorted, our wisdom is limited, our motivations are selfish, our reactions are all too often far too hasty. Self is not a good leader to follow. Jesus says, do not indulge that self. Instead, deny yourself. Leave that self behind. Now, when Jesus says that, it's so important to recognize that Jesus is not saying that you have to abandon your personality or abandon your individuality. Your personality is part of this, what God has made you. Jesus is not saying you have to just become this robot that has no uniqueness or individuality at all. Jesus is not saying to leave behind everything that makes you you. What he's actually saying is leave behind everything that spoils you.

And that's the journey that we experience as disciples of Jesus. I'm running out of time, so I'll just say this very briefly. Paul, one of the early Christian leaders who wrote to the church in Ephesus, explained this very, very powerfully where he spoke about how in terms of following Jesus, we have to put off our old self, which belongs to our former man of life and is corrupted through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of our minds and put on the new self. And this is what Jesus is trying to talk about, that you're putting off an old self, something that's broken, something that's corrupted, something that makes bad decisions, and put on a new self that is far, far, far, far more like what God created you to be in the first place. And that's reminding us that the journey of discipleship is a wonderful journey of transformation, where Jesus is restoring us more and more into what he made us to be.

[28 : 40] Now, time's running out. I've got three brief points in conclusion. Okay. Jesus says, I want you to deny self. There's three things about that that's true. First, this is controversial.

There's absolutely no doubt that that's a controversial thing to say today. Like, there's no denying that, and there's no point pretending it otherwise. It's controversial.

All I would say is, when I turn on the news and see all sorts of awful things that are happening, when I watch TV, and I don't understand all judgment, but when you watch TV and it's just full of utter garbage, when you see people in our society who treat other people so badly, when you see a world that is so full of injustice and inequality, in the name of God, I want a Savior who is controversial. The last thing we want is for Jesus to blend in in all of that.

So it's controversial, but that's a good thing. Secondly, this is challenging. It does challenge us as Christians, that command to deny ourselves.

In terms of that challenge, there's two key things that we need. We need honesty, and we need optimism. If you're trying to deny self and follow Jesus, there needs to be honesty, and there needs to be optimism. So yes, we're honest and recognize my heart is a complicated mess.

[30 : 16] I need to be honest about that, and there's things about me that I actually need to deny, and things that by God's grace, I need to leave behind. So I need to be honest about that. But you also need to be optimistic, because the call to deny self is not a call to be just miserable and gloomy and depressing for the rest of your life. It's actually a call to leave behind everything that makes life miserable and gloomy and depressing. And Jesus has promised to help us, Jesus has promised to be with us and never leave us, and God the Holy Spirit is working in us to make us more and more like Jesus. So yes, we are challenged, but in that challenge, we need honesty and optimism. God can do and is doing and will do an amazing work in us all. And then the last thing I need to say, man, it's 5 past 12. Last thing, this is comforting. You might be thinking, is it? Is it comforting? It is comforting. Why? Well, with all this emphasis on today, on finding yourself, fulfilling yourself, expressing yourself, behind that lies one big problem.

You have to succeed. As the world tells you to find yourself, whether that's in your job, or in your friendship, or in your sexuality, or in your experience, or in your income, or whatever, if that's the pathway to find yourself, you've got to succeed. You've got to succeed. Because if you don't, then you've not found yourself, and you're lost, and your life is a failure. And that's the kind of pressure that society is forcing people into, that you have to find some way of thinking, some sense of fulfillment, some job, some purpose that will make you feel worth something.

That if you just get this right, then you will feel worth something. And society is pouring this pressure into us that you have to find that thing, whatever it is. And if you find that thing, then everything will be fine. But you've got to find it. And there's this massive pressure to succeed. And all the time, God Almighty is standing in front of you, and he's saying, I have loved you forever. I have loved you forever. And I gave my only son to die for you.

And I will pour my love into you. I will fulfill my purposes through you. I will dwell with you by my spirit. And you will never, ever, ever have to prove yourself to me.

And honestly, that is so much better than anything the world around us is offering. So it's a great reminder that these words of Jesus, they might sound controversial.

[33 : 41] They might feel challenging. They're actually amazing.