

Self Denial Is Not For The Fainthearted

In the 14th Century in what is now Belgium, there lived a Duke named Reginald. He had been born into aristocracy, and had been brought up with the best of everything. Fine clothes. Indulgent lifestyle. And the very best of food. When his father died, Reginald inherited the kingdom. Problem was, Reginald had a younger brother named Edward, who also wanted to rule the kingdom. These two brothers quarrelled for eleven years, until finally Edward captured Reginald and put him in prison in Nijenbeek castle. Now there is something you need to know about Reginald. He was grossly overweight, so much so that his nickname was Crassus, which in Latin means fat. So when Edward put Reginald in prison, he built a special room around him. It had windows, and a normal sized doorway, but no door. Edward said to Reginald "You are free to leave this room and have your kingdom and your property back when you can fit through this doorway." But Edward did a sneaky thing. He sent Reginald huge delicious meals so that Reginald had all the food he could ever want. Reginald only got out of that room when his brother Edward was killed in battle. They had to knock the wall down to get him out. He had been in that room for 10 years, a prisoner to his own appetite. When they did get him out, his health was so ruined he died within a year at 38 years of age. Self denial had never been part of Reginald's vocabulary.

Self denial is essential if we are going to follow Jesus. This is what he said to those who were already following him, and to those who were considering following him.

"Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels." Mark 8:34-38 (NIV)

It's important that we understand why Jesus said this when he did. Just before this, Peter has opened his mouth, and probably said the most profound thing he had ever said up until this point. I'll read what happened.

"Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." (Mark 8: 27-29 NIV)

Peter got it right. Jesus was God in the flesh, standing right there with them. Straight after this, Jesus went on to explain how he was going to suffer, be killed, and then rise from the dead. Peter, who at one moment has just had the most profound revelation of his life, then takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. In that culture, that was an absolute no-no. It was unthinkable that a student would rebuke his Rabbi. But this is no ordinary Rabbi. Peter has just declared that Jesus is God in the flesh, and here he is telling God what he can and cannot do. If you and I believe that Jesus is God in the flesh, then we don't tell him what to do. We are his followers. He is the one who tells us what to do.

So what is Jesus saying to his followers? If we are going to call ourselves disciples of Jesus, what are the things we need to get into our heads so that we are following on his terms and not our own terms? There are three essentials.

1. We need to deny self.

The sort of self denial that Jesus was talking about is not the same going without TV during Lent, or deciding to give up coffee for a month and giving the money you would have spent, to missions. Self denial is not self discipline. It's much more fundamental than that. It's saying "no" to what I want and developing a mindset that automatically says "yes" to what God wants. Self Denial is an attitude that needs to be so deeply ingrained in my thinking and actions that it becomes my lifestyle. I've been in Baptist churches all my life, and for as long as I can remember, we have had a week of "Prayer and Self Denial", usually called Self Denial week. Though now it's not one week, but three weeks. I think it's wrong. How can you have a week of self denial? Or three weeks of self denial? Does that mean for the

other 49 weeks of the year I can follow Jesus and do what I want? The self denial that Jesus was referring to is to say “no” to my self, and “yes” to Christ. When I get that sorted out, it impacts every area of my life. When Jesus says “leave your job and your family and come and serve in my kingdom here”, I have to decide if I’m going to listen to my self, which wants the easy way, or listen to Christ. When I want recognition and status and honour, I have to renounce that. When I get tempted by wealth and power, an attitude of self denial pulls me away from all that. When I get complacent and get tempted to have an easy life, I hear the words of Jesus again saying “deny yourself”. When he calls me to risk, and I want to play it safe, I hear those words again. When I have the desire for revenge, the principle of self denial kicks in again. Those may not be the issues for you, but you will know what they are for you. So often it’s the “self” in my life that gets in the way of what God wants for me.

2. We need to take up our cross.

Sometimes people refer to some calamity that has happened to them as the cross they have to bear. My boyfriend broke up with me. Our teenage daughter is keeping us awake at night. I’ve got this chronic pain that the doctors can’t treat. Our house got flooded and we had no insurance and that’s a cross we have to bear. Taking up your cross isn’t about patiently bearing the aches and pains of life. Everyone listening to Jesus knew exactly what he meant when he talked about taking up a cross. A person taking up a cross was on a one way trip from which there was no way back. No one came back from a crucifixion carrying a cross. If you saw a person carrying a cross, that person was on their way to death. When Jesus calls us to take up our cross to follow him, he is inviting us to die to our old life and live a new life with him. He’s not just asking us to declare, as Peter did, that Jesus is the Christ. He’s not asking for a few minor adjustments in our lives. He’s not asking if we would like to try the cross on to see if it is comfortable for us. He’s asking us to walk in his footsteps and live the way he did. It means walking the way of suffering. It means putting yourself and your faith out there in front of scoffers, taking the abuse and scorn that he took. Taking up your cross and following Jesus is not for the fainthearted.

3. We need to follow Jesus.

I’m told that when a person first becomes an All Black, someone from management sits down with the player and tells them the history of the jersey they are going to wear. If you got selected to play full back for the All Blacks, they are going to tell you about Billy Wallace, who scored 230 points, whose record hasn’t been beaten for over 100 years. They will tell you of George Nepia, Don Clarke, Fergie McCormack, Christian Cullen and Israel Dagg. These are the footsteps you follow in. This is the reputation you have to live up to. This is now who you are.

When we choose to follow Jesus, and take up our cross, we follow in the footsteps of giants who have gone before us, who have faithfully followed Jesus. In 1955, five American missionaries began to take the gospel to an unreached tribe in the Ecuadorian jungle. This tribe was known for their violence toward each other and especially toward outsiders. On January 8th 1956, all five men were speared to death. Yet a few years later, others stepped up to take their place. The wife of one, and the sister of another, went back to live with the Huaorani people, many of whom came to Christ. That story of the martyrdom of those five men went all around the world. As a result in thousands of young men and women from all nations offered themselves for mission service. Following Jesus means walking in the footsteps of giants who have gone before us. Following Jesus is not for the fainthearted.

Here’s another thing. When we follow Jesus, it goes without saying that we follow by being behind him, not in front of him. He is the one who chooses where we are going, not us. He calls us to follow the way he has chosen, not the way we would choose for ourselves. When Jesus said these words about denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following him, there was a context. There was a reason why he said it right there and then. Peter had made the great declaration that Jesus was the Messiah, but when he heard that Jesus was going to suffer, he rebuked Jesus. What was Jesus’ response? **“Get behind me Satan!” (Mark 8:33 NIV)** What was Peter doing? Instead of following Jesus he was getting in front of him, trying to block his way. Whenever we get in front of Jesus, trying to stop him leading us in the way God wants us to go, we are doing the work of the evil one. If we call ourselves disciples, then our place is to follow, not to try and tell Jesus where he should be taking us.

Many people around the world have heard of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He was the first black man to be appointed as Bishop of Johannesburg and then as Archbishop of Capetown. For his efforts to bring peace in Africa, he was awarded the Nobel peace prize. Along with Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu has done much to bring about reconciliation between races in South Africa. Lots of people have heard about

Desmond Tutu. Not so many people have heard of Trevor Huddleston. Trevor Huddleston was an Anglican Priest who changed Desmond Tutu's life through a very simple act of self denial. In the days of apartheid, when a white person met a black person on the footpath, the black person was expected to move aside and walk in the gutter. Trevor Huddleston was walking along a street, and coming towards him was Desmond Tutu and his mother. Desmond was just 9 years old. To his astonishment Trevor Huddleston, the white priest, stepped off the footpath into the gutter to let them pass, and as a gesture of respect, tipped his hat to Mrs Tutu. Years later, when interviewed by the BBC, Desmond Tutu said "When my mother told me that he was an Anglican priest I decided there and then that I wanted to be an Anglican priest too. And what is more, I wanted to be a man of God". When we deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus, we can change the world just by being a little bit more like Jesus.