

JOIN CHRIST IN HIS SELF-DENYING MINISTRY

9 ²Six days later Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John, and brought them up onto a high mountain, off by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. ³His garments became radiant and dazzling white, whiter than anyone on earth could bleach them. ⁴Elijah [together] with Moses appeared to them; and they were speaking with Jesus. ⁵Then Peter responded and said to Jesus, Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three shelters, one for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah. ⁶[He said this] because he did not know how to respond, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud came and cast its shadow over them; and a voice came out of the cloud, [saying,] This is my beloved Son; listen to him. ⁸Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus alone. ⁹As they were coming down from the mountain, [Jesus] charged them not to tell anyone about the things they had seen, until after the Son of man had risen again from the dead. ¹⁰So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning among themselves what the rising again from the dead might mean. ¹¹They asked him, How is it that the scribes say that Elijah must first come? ¹²And he said to them, Elijah, indeed, does come first and restores all things; but why is it written that the Son of man must suffer many things and be rejected? ¹³But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they also have done to him whatever they wanted, just as it is written of him.

¹⁴When they came to the disciples, they saw a large crowd around them, and [some of the] scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵Immediately, when they saw him, the whole crowd was overwhelmed with wonder and came running to greet him. ¹⁶He asked them, What were you arguing about with them? ¹⁷One of the crowd responded, Teacher, I brought my son to you. He is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech; ¹⁸and whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams [at the mouth] and grinds his teeth, and becomes rigid. I spoke to your disciples, requesting them to cast it out; but they were not able. ¹⁹Then [Jesus] answered them and said, O generation that lacks faith, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him to me. ²⁰Then they brought him to [Jesus]. When [the spirit] saw [Jesus], he immediately threw [the boy] into a convulsion; he fell to the ground, rolling around and foaming [at the mouth]. ²¹[Jesus] asked his father, How long has he been like this? And he said, Since [he was] a child. ²²Often [the spirit] has thrown him into either the fire or the water, to kill him; but if you are able to do anything, have compassion on us and help us. ²³Jesus said to him, If you are able! All things are possible for the one who believes. ²⁴Immediately the father of the boy cried out, I believe; help my unbelief. ²⁵When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to him, You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him, and never again enter into him. ²⁶After crying out, and violently convulsing [the boy], he came out. [The boy] looked so much like a corpse that most [of those present] said, He is dead. ²⁷But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him up; and he arose. ²⁸When [Jesus] had come into the house, his disciples asked him privately, How is it that we could not cast it out? ²⁹And he said to them, This kind can only be exorcised by prayer.

(Mk. 9:2-29)

Introduction

In the summer of 1991 Shelly and her family took a vacation out west. They had been traveling for hours through the state of Utah, when Dad finally decided it was time to stop for lunch. They pulled off of the highway into a rest area with green grass, trees, and picnic tables.

There Mom and the kids unpacked their lunch from the cooler and set the table, preparing to enjoy a pleasant lunch amidst the cool mountain breezes and the majestic mountain scenery. Dad, meanwhile, had wandered off in search of bathrooms.

When he came back to join the family, he was not alone. There was a man walking along side of him—a man who looked like a bum. Dad had invited this man to join them for lunch, interrupting their pleasant family picnic!

This unkempt man sat directly across the picnic table from Shelly. He was dirty and smelly. When he greeted her with a smile, she noticed that half his teeth were missing. As they shared their lunch together, Shelly discovered that this unkempt stranger had a name (John), and he had a life story. A long time ago his wife had died; he now had grown children, but he had lost contact with them.

Shelly began to see this stranger in a different light. She tried to imagine him sitting at another table and at another time: a time when John and his family were sitting around their dinner table, a time when they were together. Shelly began to see this stranger as a person: a man with memories and heartaches and sins and the need to meet the Savior and experience His love and mercy.

On that sunny afternoon amidst the mountain beauty of Utah, Shelly would have preferred to have done the comfortable thing: enjoy a quiet, undisturbed lunch with her family. But her father did the right thing: he joined the Lord Jesus in carrying out a self-denying ministry to some poor soul who needed to experience the Savior's love and grace. (*POWER*, 6/5/94, pp.4-6)

Because we, as Christians, have been called to follow Him as faithful disciples, let us, too, join Christ in His self-denying ministry.

I. Join Christ in His Self-Denying Ministry, rather than Remaining on the "Mountain Top" (Mk. 9:2-13)

Jesus takes with Him three of His disciples—Peter, James and John—and together they retreat up into a high mountain. There, atop that mountain, Jesus is suddenly transfigured before their very eyes: His whole appearance was transformed. His garments glistened with a brilliant, heavenly light. His face shone like the sun (according to Matthew 17:2); such was the divine glory that radiated from His countenance.

The disciples now found themselves in a heavenly place. They were alone with Christ, far from the world; and God the Father caused the eternal glory of His Son to come shining through the humiliation of His incarnate human form.

As they behold the wonder of this divine revelation, two men appeared beside the Savior: Elijah and Moses. The appearance of Elijah indicated that the great moment of the fulfillment of the Old Testament era had arrived. Note the prophecy of Malachi 4:5, *"Behold, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of Jehovah comes."* Note, too, Jesus' explanation of that prophecy: *"Jesus replied, 'To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. ... ¹³But I tell you, Elijah has come'"* (Mk. 9:12-13.) Jesus is indicating that John the Baptist was the fulfillment of the promise that Elijah would come to prepare the way for the appearance of the LORD. Together with Moses, the three are discussing Jesus' impending departure to glory via the cross: *"They spoke about his departure [in Greek, his exodus], which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem"* (Lk. 9:31.)

Witnessing this scene of glory, and seeing that Elijah and Moses are about to depart (Lk. 9:33), Peter speaks up: *"Rabbi, it is good for us to be here."* Peter testifies that it is a blessed and desirable experience to be in communion with the Lord and these Old Testament era saints in this heavenly setting. He then offers the suggestion, *"Let us erect three shelters"* (or, *tabernacles*; just as Old Testament Israel had erected a tabernacle for the LORD in the wilderness.) Peter speaks out of ignorance and holy dread (Mk. 9:6); in his opinion, this is the correct thing to do, the pious response to this scene of heavenly glory.

But as Peter spoke these words, God the Father made His presence known (by means of the overshadowing cloud), overruling and correcting Peter's suggestion with the command, *"This is my beloved Son, listen to him"* (Lk. 9:34.) The disciples are instructed to listen to Jesus, and what does He say? Apparently, God the Father is referring us back to the words of Jesus recorded in Mark 8:34, *"Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said, 'If anyone desires to be my disciple, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'" This seems to be confirmed by the fact that as they came down from the mountain Jesus reminded them, "it is written that the Son of man must suffer many things"* (Mk. 9:12b.)

By His example, Jesus leads His disciples down from the mountaintop and back into a world that desperately needs His saving grace. Let us join Christ in His self-denying ministry, rather than remaining on the "mountain top." Rather than isolate ourselves in a "Christian ghetto" in which we are only surrounded by Christian people and never come into contact with the world, we must follow Christ into the world and live for Christ before the world:

... become blameless and pure, children of God without blemish, in the midst of a perverse and depraved generation, among whom you shine like stars in the universe, ¹⁶firmly holding the word of life. (Phil. 2:15-16a)

Let us consider and imitate the testimony of a Christian lady named Jan:

Like many, I had allowed my deep attachments and love for the family of God to isolate me from unbelievers. I had unconsciously joined the “Christian ghetto.” Jesus didn’t submerge Himself in a cloistered Christianity as we do. He mixed easily.

Our church ... was willing to give money to missions, but refused to leave an insulated Christian world. Some Christians fear that associating with unbelievers will drag them down spiritually. They are so afraid the world will taint *them* that they never taint the world.

To climb out of the Christian ghetto, I mapped out the following escape plan; taking a cue from other Christians who had the same intention:

Renew former acquaintances. When Susan decided to widen her circle of friends to include more non-Christians, she telephoned a former co-worker. The woman invited Susan and her children to the public library's story hour every Monday. This gave Susan a chance to re-establish contact with her co-worker and then talk with her about Christ.

Befriend neighbors. When Jeff and Carol moved, they vowed to make friends in the community, not only at church they took time to talk with everyone who stopped to welcome them.

Join a community group. When Denise quit her job to have a baby, she soon realized that she had no friends outside her church. To make friends, she joined a childbirth group, took parenting classes, and joined a food co-op. Her new friends supported her in mothering, and she talks with them about the Lord.

At first Jan thought, “I’m too shy to do any of these things,” but I’ve learned that it doesn’t take an extrovert to make friends. Now I view every new situation, such as a new job, neighborhood, or night class, as an opportunity to meet non-Christians. (*POWER*, 12/4/93, pp.4-6)

II. Join Christ in His Self-Denying Ministry, to Those Oppressed by the Devil (Mk. 9:14-27)

When Jesus and His three disciples descend to the foot of the mountain, they encounter a situation in which the devil is vividly asserting his oppression. A desperate father explains to Jesus the plight of his son: he is possessed by an evil

spirit who throws him to the ground in convulsions and seeks to destroy him; often the child would be cast into the fire or into the water (vs. 22.)

The whole scene is permeated by an atmosphere of hopelessness and despair. For a long time the father has endured seeing his son subjected to this demonic oppression (vs. 21.) The father had sought to have Christ's disciples exorcise the demon, but they were unable to do so (vs. 18.)

Note that in the immediate presence of Jesus the demon does not meekly acquiesce to departing from the child; on the contrary, he throws the boy into violent convulsions (vs. 20.) The devil, being tormented in the divine presence of Christ, viciously expresses his own torment in the body of his poor victim.

Jesus' victory over the demon is not without a struggle and is only accomplished by means of a "death and resurrection" (vs. 25-27.) At the command of Jesus, the demon does come out, but only after screaming in agony and violently convulsing the boy. The demon's departure is so violent that the boy is left like a lifeless corpse, many remark, *"He is dead."* But Jesus *"raised him up"* and *"he arose."*

This is what Jesus and His disciples encounter at the foot of the mountain: lives affected by the awful tyranny and oppression of the devil; an atmosphere permeated by a sense of hopelessness and despair; the violent resistance of the devil to the divine presence of Christ; and spiritual victory that is only secured by means of "death and resurrection." Nevertheless, let us join Christ in His self-denying ministry to those who are oppressed by the devil.

William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, saw a vision one day.

Dark clouds and lightning hovered over a billowing, stormy ocean filled with thousands of people screaming for help, struggling for safety. A huge rock rose up out of the ocean into the clouds.

Around the rock stretched a platform filled with people. A few of them tried to help the drowning ones, using ropes, ladders, and boats. But most of the people on the platform went about their business, oblivious to those in the sea.

Though they heard the cries, the platform people spent their time tending flower gardens, raising families, and begging God for comfort and assurance that they would one day reach security at the top of the mountain.

Like the platform people, many Christians have forgotten their purpose. They are afraid to obey the command to make disciples, fearful that obedience would mean associating with and befriending non-Christians. (*POWER*, 12/4/93, p.4)

III. Join Christ in His Self-Denying Ministry, Relying upon His Daily Supply of Grace to Do So (Mk. 9:28-29)

In Mark 6:7 we are told that the Lord Jesus gave His disciples *“authority over the unclean spirits.”* But now we hear the testimony of the desperate father: *“I requested your disciples to cast out this unclean spirit, and they were not able to do so”* (vs. 18.) The disciples themselves were perplexed and disturbed by their inability to cast out this demon, and they look to Christ for the answer (vs. 28.)

What is Jesus’ reply? *“This kind can only be exorcised by prayer.”* Prayer in this case is nothing other than coming directly to the Lord and soliciting His divine grace and power.

It appears that the disciples were continuing to rely upon a past supply of grace—and that was their mistake. Remembering the divine authority Jesus had given them on a previous occasion (Mk. 6:7), they assumed that they could call upon that reservoir of grace whenever they might need it—but they found that such is not the case. We cannot “stockpile” grace; we need a fresh supply for each new encounter of spiritual combat. We need to stay in continuous contact and fellowship with the Lord Jesus, the divine Dispenser of grace:

Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. (Jn. 15:4-5)

Let us join Christ in His self-denying ministry, relying upon daily supplies of His divine grace. By way of illustration, consider the testimony of a Christian lady named Marlys:

When we slid the new batteries into our daughter’s tape recorder, it worked fine. For two days. Then her recorded voice gradually shrank from a childish soprano to an alto bass, and finally disappeared altogether. The batteries had to go back into the recharger for another energizing.

The next afternoon we loaded the batteries back into the tape recorder. Her voice came out crystal clear—for another two days. Then back into the recharger for another energy boost.

I realized that somehow I’d come to think of my Christian joy [and supply of grace] as a bottomless well when, in fact, it operates almost exactly like a rechargeable battery. I need consistent recharging, just like my batteries.

It took my daughter’s tape recorder to teach me that God equips us with rechargeable batteries, but it’s up to me to plug into my Energy Source often

enough and long enough to transfer His energy into my own life. (*POWER*, 12/15/91, pp.4-5)

Conclusion

What the disciples needed to learn was not only the necessity of Jesus' own self-denying ministry for the sake of our salvation; but also the need to join Him in carrying on such a ministry of grace to others in His name.

Like Shelly, we prefer to do the comfortable thing: enjoy a quiet, undisturbed lunch (or life) with our Christian family amidst serene and heavenly mountain beauty. But, by the grace of God, let us be like her father and do the right thing: let us join the Lord Jesus in self-denying ministry to those poor souls whom God brings across our path and who need the Savior's grace.