

"Take Up Your Electric Chair" **Luke 9:23-26**

INTRODUCTION

Earlier in the service, I read Luke 9:23-26. Those verses contain the words of Jesus and one of the most startling statements that he ever made. That statement is, in verse 23, *"Take up your electric chair and follow me"* and that's what I'm going to preach about today. Turn to that passage please.

SELF ON THE THRONE

Let's start with verse 24 and the phrase *"whoever wishes to save his life."* According to commentator Leon Morris, that phrase refers to *"the man who puts his emphasis on getting the best out of life for himself."* It refers to people who put self on the throne of their person and life in other words.

St. Augustine explained the dynamics of this well. God being God offends human pride. If He is running the universe and getting His way, guess who isn't running the universe and getting their way. We aren't. But we don't like that. So, we simply remove Him from the throne of our person and life and put self in His place. We take our self in practice as God. We make it not Him the reference point of what we are and do. It's what many writers call "self-idolatry."

Self-idolatry is the condition or state of all non-Christians. It is also the condition or state of many professing Christians.

I know that because I've experienced it. When I began practicing the discipline of solitude on a regular basis, the Holy Spirit started showing me what I really was. He made me face many hard facts about myself, the worst of which was my self-idolatry. I looked back over the years and realized how frequently I had taken myself in practice as God.

Take worship services for instance. Until several years ago, I judged worship services by what the congregation thought. That was my deepest concern about them in fact – what the congregation thought. It was because worship services are a reflection on the pastor and I wanted

people to think well of me. For all those years, in other words, I made worship services primarily about me not God. That was a hard pill for me to swallow when the Holy Spirit revealed it to me but it was true.

That little aspect of my life is a microcosm of the human condition. The fact is that most of us put self not God on the throne of our person and life. We take our self in practice as God. We idolize ourselves.

THE SEMINAL SIN

And that is our seminal sin. By "seminal sin," I mean the one that is the root cause of all of the others. People normally do the sinful things that they do because they're taking themselves in practice as God.

Take anger, for instance. Anger begins as a feeling. We feel angry. But instead of letting the feeling quickly pass, we indulge and cultivate it. We do that because our ego has been wounded or our will thwarted. The feeling then becomes a state of being. We "are" angry. You can see that being angry almost always has an element of self-righteousness and pride in it.

Or take addiction. Addiction is normally a feeling phenomenon. An addict is one who has made some feeling that he wants to have supreme. That feeling is more important to him than anything else in his life including family, job, or even God.

Or take abortion. One of Edith Schaeffer's penetrating discussions of abortion pinpoints its cause. That cause is *"the philosophy of living with an underlying motive of doing everything for one's own personal peace and comfort."* That is the case in over 90% of abortions. The child is inconvenient to those involved and thus is killed.

I hope you get the point. Self-idolatry is the seminal sin, the one from which almost all other sins come.

DETHRONE THE SELF

You realize what that means of course. We need to dethrone the

self. We need to remove it from the throne and put God in its place.

Consider Alcoholics Anonymous in that regard. AA is the most successful recovery program ever developed. That's because its Christian founders borrowed almost 100% of its insights and practices from bright spots in the Christian movement. One of those insights is this. Referring to alcoholics, the founders of AA said, *"And first of all, we had to quit playing God"* and then allow God to *"play God."* Notice the words "first of all." That shows us that this is the foundational insight of AA.

I'm fascinated by the title of the authoritative work on AA. That title is *Not-God*. The historian who wrote it explained why he titled it that. He said that "not-God" stands as the most significant hurdle an addicted person must surmount. The addict must acknowledge deep in his or her soul not being God. That is their root problem, thinking they are God, and it must be overcome.

But it isn't just alcoholics and addicts is it? It's all of us. The first thing that all of us need to do is to remove self from the throne and put God in its place. We must acknowledge deep in our soul not being God. We must quit playing God and allow Him to play God. We must take God, not self, in practice as God.

THE SELF KILLED

That's all well and good but how do we, as a practical matter, do that? Self on the throne is the natural state of fallen human beings like us. So how do we dethrone it? Jesus tells us in verse 23. We have to deny our self and take up our cross.

There is no statement of Jesus that is more emotionally laden than this one. He says two disturbing things here. First, we have to deny our self. Nothing is more alien to our current culture than this. Its motto is "indulge yourself." But the motto of Jesus is "deny yourself." Second, we have to take up our cross. The cross was a public instrument of death that first century people witnessed firsthand. Consequently, it elicited

strong feelings in them when Jesus said they should take it up.

It's hard for us to feel what they felt though because the cross isn't familiar to us. But the electric chair is. Like the cross, it's an instrument of death, but one with which we're more familiar. We're familiar enough with it in fact that most of us shudder when we see a picture of one. Which helps us understand what Jesus is calling us to do here. He's calling you and me to take up our electric chair and follow Him. That is an accurate paraphrase of verse 23.

In his classic book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote one of the most dramatic statements I've ever heard or read, ***"When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die."*** He was right. That really is the thrust of verse 23. Jesus is bidding us to come and die, meaning die to self. We must electrocute or kill the self.

We do that in two definitive ways. First, we purposely and consciously reject what we want, when and as we want it. Second, we purposely and consciously pursue what God wants instead.

The opportunities to do that are countless. Notice the word "daily" in verse 23. The fact is that situations constantly arise in our everyday life in which we want something when and as we want it. Each of those situations is an opportunity to kill the self. So that's what we do. We reject what we want and pursue what God wants instead.

About a month ago, my wife and I took our grandsons to the Geauga Lake Amusement Park. We also took two soda cans with us that got us discounted tickets. When we got there, Jill went to the ticket window as I watched the boys. About five minutes or so later, she came over to me and said that the computer wouldn't discount the tickets for some reason. So, we had to go to the office window where, sure enough, there was a long line of people with various problems ahead of us. To make a long story short, it took us about 30 minutes to get into the park.

Well, about 15 minutes into that whole experience, self began to rear its ugly head in my person and life. I felt myself getting annoyed and having the urge to murmur and complain. But knowing what I've

told you today, I didn't. I realized what this was – an opportunity to put self in the electric chair. So that's what I did. I began thanking God for the beautiful, hot, and sunny day that He had given us and for the privilege of just being there in the first place. I then began saying "flash prayers" as people walked by me, asking God to give them a good day.

Anyway, that illustrates what taking up our electric chair daily means. Your spouse uses a nasty tone of voice with you. A driver cuts you off in traffic. A checkout clerk is rude to you. Your mother-in-law criticizes you. A friend flatters you. A competitor of yours succeeds. You've had one Whopper and want two. All of those are opportunities to take up the electric chair and kill the self. So, do just that!

THE SELF SAVED

Now, notice in verses 24 and 25 what happens when we do. The self is saved. What a remarkable statement that is. It is one of the greatest ironies of our existence. When we kill the self, we save it. Let me explain to you what that means.

Listen carefully as I read something that orphanage founder and friend of Jesus George Mueller wrote: *"There was a day when I died: died to George Mueller, his opinions, preferences, tastes, and will; died to the world, its approval or censure; died to the approval or blame even of my brethren or friends, and since then, I have studied only to show myself 'approved unto God.'"*

That shows us what the saved self is. It is a condition or state of being. In it, self-exaltation and the will to have our own way don't dictate what we think, feel, or do. In it, not getting what we want doesn't surprise, offend, or upset us and has no control over us.

Wow! What a wonderful state of being that is. Our competitor succeeds and we aren't jealous. Our existence is threatened and we aren't anxious. We're criticized and aren't offended. We fail and aren't humiliated and on it goes. We have peace and joy instead. This is the

state of being to which killing the self daily eventually leads.

Notice that I said "eventually." At first, we must quite consciously kill the self, often with great effort. We must also look to specific motions of God's grace to be able to do it. But if we persist, there will come a time when the self is saved. At that point, not getting what we want no longer disturbs us, or disturbs us very little at least.

This state of being is the work of the Holy Spirit. You see, He's faithful to us as we kill the self daily in the context of discipleship to Jesus. Doing that places us before Him in a way that He is *able* to transform what we are. He's *able* to transform what we are - and *does*.

That doesn't mean that we won't have any sensitivity to self left. We'll never be above such sensitivity in this life. But the Holy Spirit's transforming work makes a huge difference. The difference is that the degree of our sensitivity to self is dramatically less that it was.

I was sensitive to the self at Geauga Lake. I felt its pull but it wasn't very strong at all. Ten years ago, its pull would have been strong and it would have taken great effort on my part to dismiss it. But a month ago, it took only a little effort. That's because of the Holy Spirit's transforming work in me.

CONCLUSION

That then is the message of Jesus. We must dethrone the self by taking up our electric chair daily and killing it. Ironically, killing the self ends up saving it.

Now, verse 26 put this message in its larger context of eternity. Jesus is coming again someday and one of two things will happen on that day. We will either honor Him or shame Him. What determines that is the person we've become on earth. If self is on the throne, we will shame Him. If God is on the throne, we will honor Him.

So honor Jesus now and forevermore. Decide this day to take up your electric chair and follow Him.