

## Said No One Ever *Matthew 16:21-28* | 9/3/2017

Go back 20 to 25 years ago, and kids and adults were telling "not" jokes. "Mom said you can eat as much Halloween candy as you want. ... NOT!" Today, a similar grammatical construction exists. "Not" has been replaced by "Said no one ever!" For example:

- + "I love the sound of my alarm clock -- said no one ever!"
- + "Your socks look great with your sandals -- said no one ever!"
- + "Women are better drivers than men -- said no man ever!"
- + "You don't have to put on that jacket; it's not that cold outside -- said no mom ever!"
- + "I guess it's time to clean my room -- said no teen ever!"

In today's text, we can imagine three such statements. Here's the first one: "Sure, I would love to live a life of self-denial -- said no one ever!" Yet, this is precisely what Jesus requires of his followers. "Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves ...'" (v. 24.) What, then, does it mean to practice self-denial?

We can't "deny ourselves" without understanding the extent of the egocentric culture in which we live. It's all about "me" and my needs and wants. We live in a country called "Me." When people disrupt life in "Me," "me" gets very upset. Because it is all about "me." It is not about you. It is not about your needs, your feelings, your dreams and goals. It is about me.

Jesus turns this upside down. If we want to be disciples, we must change countries. We must live in the country of "You." You come first. Your needs are paramount. We live to make certain that You are cared for, that You are honored and respected and that You are whole and healthy in every way.

This is what a follower of Jesus does. She denies her citizenship in Me, and embraces a world in which You is the center. It's an other-centric culture now, not an egocentric one. She denies herself and does things the Jesus way.

"Sure, I would love to live a life of self-denial ... said no one ever!" Well, perhaps now, someone is willing to say this -- in order to truly be a follower of Jesus. The apostle Paul acknowledged this necessity: "I die every day," he wrote to the Corinthians in his first letter (15:30). Every day. A death. A denial.

There's a payoff, of course. That payoff is life. "Those who lose their life for my sake will find it," Jesus said (v. 25). Jesus even uses the word "profit" [gasp!] in verse 26: "For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?"

Jesus himself knew that, although he was going to Jerusalem to die -- and that would not be easy -- beyond the cross was a resurrection. When we deny ourselves, although it may be difficult, we will find that happiness and real living ensue. A life of self-denial is an intensely meaningful life. The words of the Prayer of Saint Francis are apropos, especially the last line: "For it is in dying to self, that we are born to eternal life."

Here's another SNOE: "I can't wait to embrace the instrument of my death. Where's my cross? -- said no one ever!"

Now that we've established that following Jesus means we're going to die, we must talk about the *instrument* of our death. That instrument is a cross.

It was the preferred method of execution in the Roman world. Everyone knew this. The cross wasn't a fashion accessory, a piece of jewelry or something pretty. It was a horrible and painful way to die, slowly.

So, what does this mean, "bear a cross"? What would it have meant to Jesus' disciples when they heard Jesus say this? They knew that many, if not most, of the people their Roman oppressors crucified, were compelled to carry the very cross on which they would die to their crucifixion. The disciples, therefore, understood the reference.

But they could not possibly have understood at this time that Jesus' comments were in any way intended to be literal. *They scarcely understood that Jesus himself was going to die on a cross!* They would not -- could not -- have interpreted Jesus' comments literally. Jesus was not asking them literally to find the cross on which they would die and carry it. They understood Jesus' comments in a figurative way. And if they did, we should too.

But what did they think Jesus meant?

Jesus was saying that his followers must embrace those things, those moments that incite the self-denial response we've already talked about. As we've seen, Jesus said two things, "Deny yourself" and "Bear your cross." We could think of the first of these statements as a call to passive self-denial, and the second as a call to active self-denial.

In other words, if we should feel that in our lives *there is no opportunity for self-denial* Jesus is saying, "Well, you better find one." Find that cross. Because unless you practice a life of denial in which God and others are given precedence over yourself, you can't be a disciple.

Find a cross and pick it up. Do you have a hard time loving and befriending a certain person? Love them and befriend them. Is it difficult to give to charity and nonprofits and your church? In other words, is it hard for you to open your bank account so that your financial resources might bless others? Then double your annual giving! Is it hard for you to "bless those who persecute you, and say all manner of things against you?" Bless them, pray for them, write a note of encouragement and slip in a \$10 gift certificate to Starbucks. That's picking up a cross. That is active discipleship.

And listen! The cross is not the illness or chronic physical problem you may have, as difficult as it may be to endure. Cross-bearing is a *voluntary* act of discipleship, not the bearing of something that befalls us in situations over which we have no control or befalls us because of situations we have foolishly brought on ourselves.

Cross-bearing always involves the "picking up" part, or the "taking up" part. The cross is something we choose. We can pass the cross and leave it behind -- and leave Jesus behind as well. Or we can stop, pick up the cross and follow Jesus.

Finally. "Sure, I would love to follow Jesus -- said no one EVER!"

Actually, *many* people have said this. But often *it is spoken before accepting the first two conditions*, self-denial and cross-bearing. We'll just forget about those first two stipulations and we can follow Jesus without denying ourselves and without taking up our crosses. But we can't. We can't follow Jesus without the cross.

Many who begin as followers of Jesus evolve into adopting a theology or lifestyle that is far removed from what Jesus had in mind or who Jesus was. Perhaps this drifting away from Jesus' principles and agenda occurs because we prefer leadership to followership. Is Jesus the leader, or do we want to take his place? When we rebel to go our own way, not only have we stopped being a disciple, we have dropped the cross and -- rather than denying ourselves -- we've denied Jesus.

This is a tough text. But being a disciple is tough. "Being a follower of Jesus is easy -- said no one ever!"

It's not easy. But it is meaningful. And it is, in its own way, rewarding.

*Pastor Keith*