

Peter was in denial. You see in the Gospel for today, Jesus had to break it to his disciples that he was going to suffer many things and be killed and on the third day rise again. And Peter was in denial. He thought, “This cannot be so.” And so he took Jesus aside and rebuked Jesus and said, “Never Lord, this shall never happen to you.” Now we know how the story plays out. We know that Jesus had to suffer and die on the cross to save us from our sins. We know that he really did rise from the dead three days later. So we are not, like Peter, in denial about Jesus having to suffer and die. We’re not tempted to be in denial about the first part of the passage, the fact that Jesus has to suffer and die. No we’re tempted to be in denial about the second part of the passage. In the second part of the passage Jesus says, **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matt 16:24)** “Wait a minute,” we say. “I understand why he has to carry a cross. But this passage says that you and I have to carry a cross as well.” **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matt 16:24)** Notice that it says, “whoever wants to be my disciple.” No one escapes having to carry a cross. Every single Christian has to carry a cross.

The cross was a symbol of death and pain and humiliation. And so it’s shocking that Jesus says, **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matt 16:24)** Now we obviously won’t be literally put up on a cross. Although I sometimes think, “What if they snatched me away right now. But then what does Jesus mean when he says, **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matt 16:24)** What does Jesus mean when he says that every Christian has to carry a cross? When Jesus says that every Christian has to carry a cross, he means that every Christian has to deny himself. **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matt 16:24)** When Jesus says that every Christian has to carry a cross, he means that every Christian has to deny himself. And there are a couple aspects of self-denial that I would like to talk about with you today.

First, you deny yourself when you want to sin and you say “No” to yourself. For example, maybe your sinful self wants to have sex outside of marriage. Jesus wants you to say “No” to your sinful self. And it may be hard to say “No” to the self, but just consider the alternative. If you don’t say “no” to the self, follow the self, you might have some fleeting and temporary fulfillment, but you’ll also forfeit your soul in hell. Look what Jesus says, **“What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (Matt 16:25)** But you might say, “Pastor, it’s hard to say ‘No’ to the self.” Everyone else is doing it and I have these desires. Yes, it is hard. That’s why it’s a cross. If it were easy, it would not be worthy of the name “cross.”

Or maybe you have a different temptation. Maybe your sinful self wants to take revenge. Maybe someone has wronged you by what they’ve done or said and your sinful self wants to get back at them in some way. Jesus wants you to deny your “self.” Jesus commands “Do not take revenge. Be kind to your enemies and love your enemies.” And it may be hard to say “No” to the self, but just consider the alternative. If you don’t say “no” to the self, follow the self, you might have some fleeting and temporary fulfillment, but you’ll also forfeit your soul in hell. Look what Jesus says, **“What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (Matt 16:25)** But you might say, “Pastor, it’s hard to say no to self.” It’s hard to be kind to my enemies and love my enemies. Yes, it is hard. That’s why it’s a cross. If it were easy, it would not be worthy of the name “cross.” But what about the times when we have followed the self. What about the times when you have given in to sexual temptation or the temptation to take revenge. What do you do then? You repent. You say, “Lord, I’m sorry for my sins. I regret my sins. I’m scared of the prospect of losing my soul. I’m sorry for giving in to self.” And when you repent because you’re terrified by God’s law, then John the Baptist points with his finger to the man at the front of the line and says “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Look the Lamb of God who takes away your sin, who takes away the times when you gave in to your “self.” Jesus on the cross takes away the times when you’ve given in to self. Look to him in repentance and faith and you won’t forfeit your soul. Jesus on the cross saved your soul from hell. Believe in the Lord Jesus

and you will be saved. And knowing that you're forgiven, deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow Jesus. But you might say, pastor, "It's a struggle every day. I repented of this sin a long time ago and I'm still tempted by it and sometimes though I fight against it I still fall into it." Yeah I understand that. Our TV culture has conditioned us to think that every problem can be solved in a half-hour or an hour. But some problems don't get solved. Some problems are just endured until Jesus returns in glory. And you might say, "You mean I might be carrying this burden, I'm going to be carrying this cross until Jesus returns in glory?!" Yes that's what I'm saying. But you know when runners are running a marathon and there's those people on the side that are offering them water and Gatorade. Every Sunday your pastors hold out their hand and say, "Here's water and Gatorade." Every morning you open the Bible or a devotion and Jesus holds our his hand and says, "Here's water and Gatorade." Here's forgiveness for the times you've fallen. And water and Gatorade. God's Word and sacraments strengthen you to pick up the cross and keep going.

Another aspect of self-denial and cross bearing that I would like you to think about today is this: giving up things up to serve others. In Philippians 2 Paul says, "**Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus, Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;**" (Philippians 2:5) The glory of heaven was rightfully his, but he gave up that glory to serve us for our good. "**Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage, <sup>7</sup> rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!**" Jesus gave up the glory of heaven, in order to serve others. And Paul says, "You think the same way: give things up in order to serve others." And so when you give up your time to serve on a board at church or volunteer in some other way, you're imitating what Jesus did. Your giving up something, your time, in order to serve others. In order to do that you need to deny yourself. Because the self says, "I could use that time for other things." But have the mindset that I'm going to give up my time to serve others. Offerings are the same way. The self says, "I could use that money." But deny yourself and have the mindset, "I'm going to give things up to serve others, because Jesus gave up the glory of heaven to serve me."

Have the mindset that the reason for my whole existence is to serve others. That is completely the opposite of the way the self thinks, but it's the way Jesus has revealed to us through the cross. The reason for my existence is to serve others. Parents can serve their children by modeling the Christian life for them. I was reading a book in preparation for this sermon today written by a WELS pastor named Daniel Deutschlander. It's called the *Theology of the Cross*. And there's a part of that book that I simply must read to you. "Let the son see his father pray and his mother quietly reading her Bible. Let the daughter see her father gently hold his wife's hand and let her see her mother yield to her husband's headship. Let our children hear their parents discuss the Sunday sermon at the Sunday dinner table, discuss it with reverence and respect. ... We live to serve. Who better to serve with our time, with patience, with love than our children? ... Let's not forget that Christ was busy with the work of redeeming the world, but he was not too busy to pick up little children in his arms and bless them. Or are we busier than he was?" Parents, serve your children by spending time with them and modeling for them a Christian life. Children, you also serve your parents. How did Luther explain the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment? "We should fear and love God that we do not dishonor or anger our parents or others in authority, but honor, *serve*, and obey them and give them love and respect." Children, how do you serve your parents? Well, after dinner, the self wants to go play videogames right away. But deny your "self" and serve your parents by helping them clear the table and do the dishes. When your parents tell you "No" your self wants to complain until you get your way, but deny your self and realize that your parents know what's best for you. You see how every Christian, young or old, has to deny themselves. **Today Jesus takes us from denial to self-denial.** As we trust in his cross for our salvation and as we deny ourselves to serve others we'll find the life that is truly life. Amen.