

There are certain events that we never forget. Images are burned in our minds forever. Those who witnessed things like the JFK assassination, Neil Armstrong setting foot on the moon, or the Space Shuttles Challenger and Columbia disasters can remember exactly where they were and the emotions that they felt. It's been 20 years since the most recent of these events, and I remember hearing about the first plane at the end of a chapel service at my school. I then watched the events of the rest of the day unfold in a dormitory lounge with other students.

In the following weeks, church attendance across the nation increased slightly, and we vowed to never forget. It didn't take long for church attendance to return to its previous decline, and eventually everything started to return to normal, or a new normal. Those who witnessed the events still remember them like they were yesterday, but the unity we had as a country seems like ancient history. And that is the fallen nature of humanity. Apart from Christ, there may be fleeting moments of selflessness and sacrifice, but it doesn't take long to return to a place of self-advancement at the expense of others.

What does it mean to deny ourselves?

What does it mean to take up our cross and follow Christ?

When I have some down time, or feel like procrastinating on my studies, I like to sit down in the living room and watch TV. Sometimes it's a Marvel movie or series with the boys or a rom-com with Elise. Other times it's a football game that I usually just fall asleep to. As much as I like action shows, I've really gotten into the new style of documentaries. I watched a docuseries recently about different aspects of music and technology and how they have shaped the music that we listen to today. Just this past week, I started watching a series called 1971: The Year that Music Changed Everything. I wasn't alive yet in 1971, but every song was recognizable to me. My dad's musical influence on me was evident as I watched the first episode, but what struck me was how I had never connected the lyrics of those songs to the events that were going on at the time. Songs like Ohio, Won't Get Fooled Again, Imagine, and What's Going On tell the story of the world and expressed a deep hope for change. Music changed everything, but everything effected the music as well.

One of my favorite Christian artists pre-released a few songs from his upcoming album, and it made me want to listen to some of his former band's older music. One song made me think about how the most popular Christian and worship music has shifted over the past 25 years. Just look at the songs we sang this morning.

Happy Day – released in 2006 – focuses on being saved, free, changed, and the resurrection of Christ. These are all amazing things to sing about.

Oceans – released in 2012 – focused on taking steps of faith and following where the Spirit leads. We call on Jesus, recognized His grace, and trust in Him. Nothing wrong with any of that. And honestly, there is nothing wrong with a lot of the songs that are released today.

Forever – released in 2013 – this song is the Gospel story put to a melody. It magnifies the name of Jesus (even though it never mentions Him by name), and that's what worship ought to do, right?

I Surrender – released in 2011 – there is a deep desire for more of God in our lives, so we take a stance of surrender before Him. My hope is that the words of that song were a prayer coming out of our mouths this morning. Lord, have Your way. Lord, have Your way in

me. It seems that songs of surrender, like this one, aren't produced very often, or they at least don't get the airtime that other songs do.

I took a moment to just look at the top 10 songs on K-Love. Every single one of them was filled with hope, joy, resurrection, or living your best life. It makes sense. That's the kind of thing we are drawn to. CCLI is the company that helps churches manage copyrights to do things like show lyrics on the screen and stream songs that are not public domain or that we haven't written ourselves. They have a list of songs being sung in churches, and the top of the list is filled with more of the same:

Way Maker, Build My Life, Graves into Gardens, Goodness of God, Living Hope, Great Are You Lord, What a Beautiful Name, Who You Say I Am, Raise a Hallelujah, and This is Amazing Grace. These are all wonderful songs, and they glorify God. But just like the music of 1971 both changed the world and was shaped by what was happening in the world, I think the church music being produced today has been shaped by the current state of the Church in America and is also shaping it.

The Gospel of Mark is fast-paced it follows Jesus quickly from place to place, but the pace slows down in Mark 8:27-9:1 as Jesus takes time to teach the disciples on the way from one place to another.

Mark 8:27-30

27 And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" 28 And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." 29 And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." 30 And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.¹

Now, this seems kind of weird right? People know who Jesus is, but it seemed more likely to people that He might be a completely different person than the Messiah. Peter got it right though. He said that Jesus is the Christ (or Messiah). But did Peter really get it right here? Verse 30 is interpreted in the ESV as saying that Jesus strictly charged them (all the disciples) not to tell anyone that He is the Messiah. The word that is interpreted as "strictly charged" is the same word used for "rebuke" later in this passage. In fact, the only two definitions in the Greek lexicon for the word used here are "rebuke" and "punish."

Often, rebuke is used to draw attention to a teachable moment. As one commentary puts it, "The rebuke comes as a challenge to understand and leads to repentance."² So, this rebuke might have been because Jesus still wanted to get some ministry done incognito, but is it possible that He didn't want the disciples spreading a false image of the Messiah?

Think about this for a moment. Maybe Jesus wants them to keep a lid on things a while longer, or maybe their understanding of what 'Christ' means is wrong and needs correction. The disciples were close to Jesus, and it took them a while to start to understand what Jesus came to do. They were still struggling with it until He came to them after rising again. I don't think Jesus would want their faulty opinions of the Messiah as conquering earthly King to proliferate among the crowds, who had less of a chance to understand Jesus' mission.³ The

¹ All Scripture is quoted using English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

² David E. Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 332.

³ Ibid., 324-5.

Jews were trained to see the Messiah as the conquering lion of Judah. They expected Him to topple the government of their oppressors. The disciples, like any of us, saw what they were trained to see rather than what was actually there.

Are we not trained to see Jesus in the same light today? I cannot speak for every congregation in America, but the State of the Church in America based on the biggest churches where most of our music comes from and the most influential Christians on social media does not look healthy to me. Morality and social justice issues are important to the heart of God. We can look at verse after verse that exhorts us to care for the poor and the powerless, the orphans and the widows, the foreigners and the imprisoned. But when a social gospel takes the place of Christ, crucified for the atonement of our sins, and raised again to give us life, it becomes pseudo-gospel. It's just OK news instead of the Good News, and we are being trained to see social justice as the goal instead of eternity.

But that's not the only problem. There's also the "Jesus is my boyfriend who works at Burger King" mentality. You know what I'm talking about. He loves me so much, and meets all my needs, and everything is going to be ok, and I can have it my way too. I call this prosperity gospel 2.0, because it's more than name-it-and-claim-it, give to God and He'll return it tenfold, and all your sickness will be healed. All it takes is faith and your needs will be provided, you'll be delivered from your pain, you'll never face anything you can't handle, and if sickness takes someone's life, then faith will resurrect them. It's the Kingdom now mentality, but they forgot about the not yet part.

Let me be very clear here. Social justice is important to the heart of God, and ignoring it hinders our worship. And I believe that God does want the best for us. I have been on the receiving end of God returning financial blessings when I've trusted Him with my money. I've witnessed miraculous healings like a woman who hadn't walked in a decade getting out of her wheelchair and walking. I have prayed over people and seen their pain disappear. Miracles still happen today, but the story is so much more than the parts like that that we are attracted to and want to celebrate. Unfortunately, that part of the story has become the only part of the story for some, and it has been shaping Christian music. That music has also been shaping much of the rest of the Church in America.

Peter correctly identified Jesus as the Christ, but his concept of "Christ" was too narrow. Has our concept of Christ become too narrow?

Mark 8:31-33

³¹ And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

They were all thinking it. Peter's just the one that thought he could correct Jesus on what it means to be the Messiah. Jesus looked at all the disciples in that moment of rebuke. It was another teaching moment. You see, A disciple must do more than get Jesus' title right. That is only the first step in following Jesus on the way. The disciples needed to learn to focus on the things of God instead of the things of man. Even the good things like social justice, healing, provision, and blessings can be twisted into being only about us.

The rebuke was only among the disciples, but Jesus opened the teaching moment to the entire crowd.

Mark 8:34

³⁴ *And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*

What does it mean to deny oneself? I came across a poem by Bill Britton that I think paints a pretty good picture of what denying oneself looks like.

When you are forgotten, or neglected, or purposely set at naught, and you don't sting and hurt with the insult or the oversight, but your heart is happy, being counted worthy to suffer for Christ.

THAT IS DYING TO SELF

When your good is evil spoken of, when your wishes are crossed, your advice disregarded, your opinions ridiculed, and you refuse to let anger rise in your heart, or even defend yourself, but take it all in patient, loving silence.

THAT IS DYING TO SELF

When you lovingly and patiently bear any disorder, any irregularity, any impunctuality, or any annoyance; when you stand face-to-face with waste, folly, extravagance, spiritual insensibility and endure it as Jesus endured.

THAT IS DYING TO SELF

When you are content with any food, any offering, any climate, any society, any raiment, any interruption by the will of God.

THAT IS DYING TO SELF

When you never care to refer to yourself in conversation, or to record your own good works, or itch after commendations, when you can truly love to be unknown.

THAT IS DYING TO SELF

When you can see your brother prosper and have his needs met and can honestly rejoice with him in spirit and feel no envy, nor question God, while your own needs are far greater and in desperate circumstances.

THAT IS DYING TO SELF

When you can receive correction and reproof from one of less stature than yourself and can humbly submit inwardly as well as outwardly, finding no rebellion or resentment rising up within your heart.

THAT IS DYING TO SELF⁴

You see, denying yourself is not the same as being denied of something. It is not the seasonal practice of giving up meat or chocolate during lent. It is the practice of denying the self itself. It is the opposite of self-affirmation or making a name for yourself. It is giving up our rights rather than claiming rights and privileges. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is one of my favorite theologians, and in *The Cost of Discipleship*, he writes "To deny oneself is to be aware only of

⁴ Bill Britton, "Dethrone the King: Dying to Self," *The Heartbeat of the Remnant* 8, no. 4 (2002): 19.

Christ and no more of self, to see only Him who goes before and no more the road which is too hard for us. Once more, all that self-denial can say is: 'He leads the way, keep close to Him.'⁵

Every day we must open ourselves up to God's initiatives and control. For a few, it may mean leaving job and family as the disciples did. For the proud, it means renouncing the desire for status and honor. For the greedy, it means renouncing an appetite for wealth. The complacent must renounce their love of ease. The fainthearted must abandon the craving for security. The violent will have to abandon the desire for revenge. You know best what hinders you from giving your life over to God.

My default that I must die to is selfish greed and pride. I like things and the false sense of security that money in the bank gives me. Those two things don't really blend well and combined with pride means that that it is easy for the credit card balance to climb. Do you see how these things lead to slavery? When we deny ourselves, we say "no" to the "I" that would enslave us, and we say "yes" to God, and He leads us to life.

What does it mean to pick up our cross and follow Christ? We see the cross all around us, and I think we have become desensitized to it. It's a piece of jewelry that we sometimes wear, but how often do we bear it? Some people think that the cross they bear is some kind of bodily affliction or problem in their family. Militaries around the world adopted the cross as an award for valor or heroism with the Victoria Cross or the Iron Cross. For centuries, Jews were put to death under the sign of the cross by people who claim to be followers of the Jewish Messiah. That's why some Messianic Jews prefer to translate it as "execution stake." The Cross represents the oppression caused by humans who oppose the faith and witness of Christians. It does not refer to patiently bearing the aches and pains of life.⁶ I think it holds a stronger meaning for us when we read it that way too. "If anyone would come after me, let them deny themselves, take up their execution stake, and follow me." Bonhoeffer, who was eventually hanged by the Nazis wrote, "The cross is laid on every Christian... When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."⁷

To take up our cross and follow Christ means to suffer and die. It's the difference between a disciple and an admirer of Christ. He's not looking for admirers. Jesus doesn't offer disciples spiritual experiences, self-help, or intellectual stimulation. He gives them the cross as a way of life. I was really convicted by the way one commentary put it: "Disciples must do more than survey the wondrous cross, glory in the cross of Christ, and love the old rugged cross, as beloved hymns have it. They must become like Jesus in obedience and live the cross."⁸

Jesus doesn't need new PR or good marketing. He needs disciples who are dying to self and living the cross. I said earlier that I like to watch TV and movies. I've really enjoyed The Chosen series. If you haven't watched it, I recommend it. The marketing language that they use is a good example of what I'm getting at here. One of their big slogans is "Binge Jesus." I'm not sure how much they thought that through because I think there is a trigger word in there for some who struggle with drug or alcohol addiction. But to watch that show the way you would

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 97.

⁶ Garland, *Mark*, 334-5.

⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 99.

⁸ Garland, *Mark*, 334.

watch a show on Netflix will probably make you a fan of Jesus. The problem is, we're not supposed to be fans. We're called to be disciples.

Mark 8:35-37

³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶ For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? ³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his soul?

Where it says "life" and "soul," Mark uses the same word. It can mean life, soul, purpose, mind, thoughts, feelings, heart, or being. However, you want to describe it, we try to preserve it at all costs. The problem is that we usually choose methods that are destined to fail, and we lose that which we are trying to preserve.

We are going to hear an old song in a few moments. Released in 1996, it speaks of our propensity to turn away from God and His faithfulness to bring us back to Himself. The chorus is a plea for God to help us deny ourselves and follow Him.

As we come to the table of the Lord together, let's reflect on what the bread and the cup represent. Please hold the bread and the cup until after we sing together and reflect on what it really means. In John 6:36, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." Christ's body, broken for us gives us life, but that's only part of the story. Are we willing to also take the cup? To take His suffering. Are we willing to take up our execution stake and follow Christ to the point of death?

Jesus today has many who love His heavenly Kingdom, but few who carry His cross; many who yearn for comfort, few who long for distress. Plenty of people He finds to share His banquet, few to share His fast. Everyone desires to take part in His rejoicing, but few are willing to suffer anything for His sake. There are many that follow Jesus as far as the breaking of bread, few as far as drinking the cup of suffering; many revere His morality, few that follow Him in the indignity of His cross; many that love Jesus as long as nothing runs counter to them; many that praise and bless Him, as long as they receive comfort from Him; but should Jesus hide from them and leave them for a while, they fall to complaining or become deeply depressed. Those who love Jesus for His own sake, not for the sake of their own comfort, bless Him in time of trouble and heartache as much as when they are full of consolation.⁹

Let's truly follow Him in every situation and circumstance as we go into the world as His disciples. Lord help us to never give up giving up our lives for Your sake. Amen.

⁹ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Ronald Knox and Michael Oakley (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1959), 2.9 (76-77).