Good morning, Moon Valley!

We are continuing our sermon series titled, “So You Can Know For Sure.” It is a study through the gospel of Luke.

The text we’re studying today is ▶ Luke 9:23-27. From this text, we are going to learn something about what it takes to live the Christian life and why it is worth it.

Some of the verses we are going to cover are among the most familiar among Christians, and understandably so; they are beautiful and challenging.

I am afraid they are also among the most misunderstood verses. The first verse, ▶ Luke 9:23, is a case in point. It says,

> ESV Luke 9:23 And he [Jesus] said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

A common misinterpretation of this is that Jesus is talking about how to receive eternal salvation. The late, well-known pastor and author, ▶ John MacArthur, is an example. I am hesitant to single out a brother whom I respect and compared to whom I am a nobody in Christendom. But I want you to see how prevalent this view is. MacArthur’s sermon are still widely broadcast today, and many other notables could be cited who agree with him.

In reference to Luke 9:23 and the three verses that follow it, MacArthur says, ▶ “This is a text about how to come after Jesus, how to follow Jesus, how to become a Christian, how to be saved, how to be redeemed and born again; that’s what it’s about.”[1]

[1] MacArthur, John, “The Starting Principle of Discipleship,” November 3, 2002, at The Starting Principle of Discipleship.

I ▶ agree with two fifths of this statement.

1. I believe it is indeed about how to come after Jesus.
2. It is also about how to follow Jesus, which I take to mean the same thing as coming after Jesus.

Those are the two points of agreement. Coming after Jesus and following him are things believers should do as part of the ongoing process of growing up in Christ. The big theological word for it is sanctification. A more popular word for the same thing is discipleship. Sanctification or discipleship involves faithful obedience to the Lord.

But the other ▶ three points are problematic.

3. The text is *not* about how to become a Christian.
4. It is *not* about how to be eternally saved.
5. It is *not* about how to be redeemed and born again.

Becoming a Christian, being eternally saved, and being redeemed and born again are things that happen the moment a person believes in Jesus for eternal life. It is an instantaneous passage from spiritual death to new spiritual life. The big theological word for it is justification. A more popular word is salvation. Believers are justified or saved through faith alone, not by works.

Unfortunately, it is common in Christian circles to conflate or confuse justification and sanctification. It is common to blend or blur salvation and discipleship.

Let me provide ▶ three lines of evidence from verse 23 that support the idea that it is about sanctification or discipleship and *not* about justification or eternal salvation. The lines of evidence are tied to each of three conditions given for coming after Jesus. Much of what I have to say

is adapted from the work of ▶ Charlie Bing in his book, *Grace, Salvation & Discipleship*, which I highly recommend.[2]

The first condition for a person to come after Jesus is to ▶ "deny himself." In the immediately preceding context, in verses 21 and 22, Jesus has just explained to his disciples that he is going to suffer and die. Jesus didn't want to suffer and die. Nobody does. In his humanness, Jesus would even pray to the Father that he might be spared the suffering of the cross.[3] But knowing that it was his Father's will for him to suffer and die, Jesus chose to deny himself, to set aside his own personal preference for avoiding the cross, and to follow his Father's will instead.

This applies to believers in the context of an adoptive relationship we already have with God through faith. As we come to understand more and more of our Father's will for our lives in various areas, we discover that it often involves doing some things we would prefer not to do.

- To love our enemies
- To sacrifice ourselves for the well-being of others
- To give generously at the risk of our own comfort and security
- To forgive instead of retaliating
- To be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger
- To risk rejection for sharing our faith
- To pursue holiness instead of promiscuity
- To rest instead of feeding our compulsiveness
- To lovingly confront instead ignoring a problem that needs to be addressed
- To pursue spiritual disciplines instead of anything we like better
- To refuse to be captivated by anything that is worthless

And the list goes on.

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[2] Bing, Charles C., *Grace, Salvation & Discipleship* (The Woodlands, TX: Grace Theology Press, 2015), 75-76.
[3] Luke 22:42.

In such cases, to deny ourselves is to say "no" to our own desires in order to say "yes" to God's will.

This does not apply to unbelievers who have no relationship with God. If a person has no relationship with God, then they have no means by which to discern his will for their lives. As such, it makes no sense for them to deny themselves for the sake of something they no nothing about.

The second condition for a person to come after Jesus is to ▶ "take up his cross daily." Once again, the context is Christ's own suffering and death. As such, this refers to the willingness of a believer to suffer and even die as a direct result of doing God's will. That is the costly sacrifice of discipleship. And this to happen "daily."

While this is the lofty ideal for discipleship; it cannot be the requirement for salvation because Scripture repeatedly tells us that we are saved through faith alone in Christ alone, not by works. And that happens once and for all, not daily.

Some try unconvincingly to argue that faith actually means taking up one's cross. Again, John MacArthur is an example. In connection with Luke 9:23, here's what MacArthur says,

> ▶ . . . *faith is not an experiment, but a lifelong commitment. It means taking up the cross daily, giving all for Christ each day with no reservations, no uncertainty, no hesitation.* ▶ *It means nothing is knowingly held back, nothing purposely shielded from His lordship, nothing stubbornly kept from His control.* ▶ *It calls for a painful severing of the tie with the world, a sealing of the escape hatches, a ridding oneself of any kind of security to fall back on in case of failure.*

▶ *A genuine believer knows he is going ahead with Christ until death. Having put his hand to the plow, he will not look back. (Luke 9:62).*[4]

If that is the true definition of the faith required to be saved, then we are all in deep trouble. I don't know anyone who lives up to this. I certainly don't.

I am afraid this is another example of conflating or confusing salvation and discipleship. MacArthur has touched on the ideals of discipleship, but they are not the requirements of salvation. We are saved through faith alone, and that faith should be clearly distinguished from works, not redefined to include them.

Here is a definition of faith from the ▶ Free Grace Alliance, with which I agree: "Faith is a personal response, apart from our works, whereby we are persuaded that the finished work of Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection, has delivered us from condemnation and guaranteed our eternal life."[5]

If you have ever had such faith, you are saved. Period.

Taking up our cross daily is not a requirement for salvation. To make it so is backwards. We are saved because Christ died for us, not because we die for him.

Taking up our cross daily is the high cost of discipleship, not salvation. This in no way trivializes the idea of taking up our cross. It entails a courageous willingness to obey the Lord even if it involves the very worst suffering and hardships. And that is a great challenge for every believer in coming after Jesus as a disciple.

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[4] MacArthur, John F. *The Gospel According to Jesus*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 202.
[5] https://www.freegracealliance.com/united-by-grace

The third condition for a person to come after Jesus is to ▶ "follow" him. In first-century Jewish culture, a disciple would commonly follow his teacher, living with him, walking with him, eating with him, studying with him. It involved the disciple giving up his own agenda, his own will, his own ways to adopt those of his teacher.[6]

While the earliest disciples followed Jesus physically, believers today follow him figuratively. Day by day, we decide whose agenda, whose will, whose ways we are going to follow, ours or his. This is a life-long process. As such, this is about the sanctification or discipleship of the believer. It cannot be about justification or salvation because that happens once and for all at the moment of faith and is not a process.

Based on our discussion of the text so far, let me offer a partial ▶ big idea: Salvation is free, discipleship is costly.

Jesus offers the free gift of salvation to anyone and everyone who will simply believe in him for it.

Having believed, Jesus says to us in our text, "If you really want to follow me, if you truly want to come after me as my disciple, it will cost you. You are going to have to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me."

This raises important questions: Why bother? If being a disciple is so costly, why do it? Why not just take the salvation and leave it at that? Is discipleship worth it?

Jesus answers these questions in three ways in the following three verses. Each verse begins with the word, "for" which is a conjunction introducing a reason for being a disciple.

[6] Bing, Charles C., *Grace, Salvation & Discipleship* (The Woodlands, TX: Grace Theology Press, 2015), 76.

As you might guess, the reasons given by Jesus are going to support the expansion of our ▶ big idea as follows: Salvation is free, discipleship is costly, *but oh so worth it*.

The high price of discipleship is totally worth it.

In ▶ verse 24, Jesus gives the first reason, saying,

> ESV Luke 9:24 “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”

Jesus is contrasting two kinds of people.

The first is represented by ▶ “whoever would save his life.” This refers to the believer who wants to save his life from the difficulties of discipleship. It is the believer who does not deny himself, does not take up his cross daily, does not follow Jesus. Instead, he selfishly indulges himself, he seeks all the happiness the world has to offer, he follows his own way.

Jesus says this believer ▶ “will lose it.” The original Greek word for “lose” is ἀπόλλυμι *(ah-PAUL-ooh-me)*. It means to ruin. The believer who selfishly follows the world instead of the Lord will ruin his life. He will miss out on the abundant life God has for him in this life, and he will forfeit rewards in the next. He doesn’t lose his salvation; rather he loses God’s best quality of life.

The second kind of person is represented by ▶ “whoever loses his life for my sake.” This refers to the believer who loses his own selfish way of life by denying himself, taking up his cross daily, and following—all for the sake of Jesus.

Jesus says this believer ▶ “will save it.” That is to say he will gain the abundant life the Lord intends. In John 10:10, Jesus says,

> ESV John 10:10 . . . I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

To the extent that we follow Jesus, we get to experience greater abundance both in this life and the life to come. The abundance of eternal life isn’t defined by castles, cars, cash, and comfort. Instead, it consists of things like:

- a learned contentment;
- an underlying joy;
- an overriding sense of purpose;
- a settled conviction that we are a big part of something bigger;
- an abiding closeness with our Lord in which we get to experience being fully known and fully loved;
- a hope-filled expectation that we will be richly rewarded in heaven for faithfully following on earth;
- and a full assurance that, in following the Lord, no suffering will be wasted, no sacrifice will go unnoticed, and no good thing will be withheld.

Salvation is free, discipleship is costly, but oh so worth it.

In ▶ verse 25, Jesus provides the second reason discipleship is worth it, and it is closely related to the first. He says,

> ESV Luke 9:25 “For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?”

The believer who “gains the whole world” here is the same kind of person who would save his life back in verse 24. It is the believer who follows his

own way in pursuit of worldly perks and comforts instead of following the Lord.

The question Jesus asks is essentially, “What good is it if a believer gains everything this world has to offer, but in the process, misses out on the fullness and meaning of life God created him to have as a disciple?”

The unexpressed-but-unmistakable answer is: It is no good. It is of no real profit. The life of a believer who does not follow the Lord is a wasted life. It doesn’t mean such a believer is any less valuable or any less loved in the eyes of God. But like the prodigal son in Luke 15, he has squandered his life and himself on worthless things that will not last.

Salvation is free, discipleship is costly, but oh so worth it.

In ▶ verse 26, Jesus provides a third reason discipleship is worth it. He says,

> ESV Luke 9:26 “For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.”

The believer represented by ▶ “whoever is ashamed of me and my words” is the same kind person who “would save his life” in verse 24 and the same kind who “gains the whole world” in verse 25.

The original word for “ashamed” carries the idea of not standing up for someone.[7] In this case, it seems to involve a refusal to commend Jesus to others, presumably to avoid the embarrassment or pushback that may come from it. In the extreme, it could also include the believer who deconstructs his or her faith such that they no longer identify as a Christian at all.

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[7] Friberg.

Jesus seems to be saying, “Whoever does not stand up for me, I will not stand up for him. Whoever does not commend me, I will not commend him.”

The time at which this will happen is ▶ “when he (Jesus) comes in his glory.” I believe this is connected to the judgment seat of Christ, where believers will one day stand before the Lord to be judged according to how we lived our lives on earth.[8]

This judgment does not determine whether believers are saved. That issue has already been settled through faith. All believers are heaven bound. At stake is the gain or loss or reward.

This idea is corroborated by the parallel account in ▶ Matthew 16:27, where Jesus says,

> ESV Matthew 16:27 “For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.”

The original Greek term for “repay” carries no inherent sense of good or bad; so it could be positive reward or negative judgment.[9] This cannot be about salvation because salvation is a free gift; it is not a repayment of any kind. This must be about the judgment seat of Christ.

These two gospel writers, Luke and Matthew, report different parts of Jesus’ speech.

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[8] Wilkin, Robert, “Come After Me,” an article in Grace in Focus, November 1, 2016 at "Come After Me" - Grace Evangelical Society.
[9] Bing, Charles, “The Cost of Discipleship,” March 1, 1993, Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society, at The Cost of Discipleship - Grace Evangelical Society.

In the ▶ next slide, I want you to notice what I have underlined and highlighted in yellow: that both Luke and Matthew record the part relating to the glorious return of the Son of Man, Jesus. Everything is there slightly rearranged: The Son of Man is coming in glory and the Father and angels are there. Do you see that?

As shown in the ▶ next slide, what is different is Luke's recording of the part about being ashamed and Matthew's recording of the part about repaying each person for what he has done. That these different parts are in parallel suggests that they are different parts of the same idea. Namely, Jesus being ashamed of a wayward believer is connected to Jesus' negative repayment of that believer at the judgment seat of Christ.

The suggestion is that when the believer who has squandered his life meets an ashamed Jesus who passes negative judgment, there will be a profound sense of regret.

I don't think it will last forever. The tears of this wayward believer are among those Jesus will eventually wipe away.

Nevertheless, tears of profound regret at the judgment seat of Christ remain a sobering possibility that we would do well to avoid.

Salvation is free, discipleship is costly, but oh so worth it.

Jesus ends on an encouraging note in ▶ verse 27, saying,

> ESV Luke 9:27 "But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God."

If you have absolutely no idea what this means or how it relates to what Jesus has been saying, you are in good company. I suspect the disciples didn't either—not in that moment.

Let me try to connect a few dots.

Remember, Jesus has just said he will one day be coming in glory in verse 26. Here in verse 27, Jesus is saying that some of the disciples present are going to get a glimpse of that coming glory even before they die.

Sure enough, as recorded in Luke 9:28-36, eight days later, Jesus takes three of his disciples, Peter, John, and James with him up on a mountain to pray. While on the mountain, Jesus is gloriously transfigured. His face becomes radiant, shining like the sun. His clothing becomes dazzling white. The parallel account in Mark describes the light they see as something that transcends anything that could be experienced on earth. And Moses and Elijah appear with him in glory.

Then the voice of God the Father resounds in glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!"

The Transfiguration is a dramatic confirmation of Jesus' words in our text—words to which we should listen. The Lord is coming in glory, and we believers will share in that glory to the extent we deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. The glory before us transcends anything the world has to offer. The rewards of discipleship are so much brighter than anything we can see on earth. And they shine forever. By comparison, gaining the whole world is but a flash in the pan.[10]

Salvation is free, discipleship is costly, but oh so worth it.

Today we are going to observe two ordinances that picture the truth we have just learned.

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[10] Yates, Ken, "The Glory of the Lord," July 1, 2019, Grace in Focus, at The Glory of the Lord (Mark 9:2-3) - Grace Evangelical Society, and "Promised Glory," May 27, 2025, at Promised Glory (Luke 9:26-35) - Grace Evangelical Society.

The first is the baptism of John Fandialan.

Having believed in Jesus for eternal life, baptism is an important step of faith in obeying what Jesus commanded us to do. Baptism is a public expression of personal faith in Jesus. We believe for salvation. We get baptized as a part if discipleship.

We normally baptize people in our baptistry on stage. But John Fandialan is an outside-the-baptistry-box kind of guy. He wanted to be baptized in a river. So, it was arranged and recorded so you could see it.

As you listen to John' faith story, I want you to notice his recognition of the simplicity of faith. We are saved through faith in Jesus plus nothing.

In grateful response to having received the free gift of salvation, he then chooses to follow Jesus by being baptized.

Let's watch the video.