



SESSION 5

A CRUCIFIED PEOPLE

Have you ever wished you could erase your identity and just start all over? In stressful moments, perhaps you've wanted to hit the reset button on life. Who doesn't have regrets? Who doesn't long for a fresh start in some areas? Sometimes it's because of the histories and circumstances of our past and present lives. Other times it's the residue of sin that clings to our hearts.

Our individual histories are cluttered with sin. For some it is a life of sexual sin, for others pride, greed, envy, laziness, apathy, complacency, and on and on we could go. Our closets may be filled with skeletons of varying shapes and sizes, but all of us have them.

When a computer's history is full with some secret sites and destructive documents, you can always hit erase, restore the computer, or just get a new one. But what about when our very hearts and minds are so filled with the virus of sin? The gospel provides an answer because the good news of Jesus Christ provides us with a new identity.

God's People...



Deny Themselves

Most of us are familiar with the discipline of self-denial. Desiring to lose weight, we deny ourselves carbs or calories. Desiring to purchase the new game that just hit the store shelves, we save our money. Everyone practices some form of self-denial, and in this regard, Christians are no different.

But the gospel calls us to a life of constant self-denial. We discipline ourselves for the sake of godliness. We are a people who seek lasting joy by denying ourselves passing pleasure. This is no contradiction.

► Why do you think the Lord calls us to a life of self-denial?

Matthew 16:24–28

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of Me will find it. What will it benefit a man if he gains the whole world yet loses his life? Or what will a man give in exchange for his life? For the Son of Man is going to come with His angels in the glory of His Father, and then He will reward each according to what he has done. I assure you: There are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."

After calling His people to deny themselves, Christ gave another exhortation: Follow Me. When Christ calls us to pick up our own cross, He is calling us to death. A person carrying their cross was a dead man walking. There would be no appeal or a last second stay of execution. To carry your cross was to die. That is the call of Christ.

It demands that we lay down our rights and privileges and serve our neighbors. It exhorts us to crucify our resentment, bitterness, and hatred and instead to love our enemies and pray for them.

► What are some ways we can deny ourselves at home? At school? At church?

You'll Ruin Your Dinner

I am sure you have heard the phrase, "don't eat that; it will ruin your dinner!" I heard that phrase plenty of times in my childhood. I even say it to my kids now. One night when I was about 8 years old, the kitchen smelled of my mom's homemade lasagna. I know you have never had my mom's lasagna, but trust me, it's amazing! With the smell of that delicious lasagna making me hungrier by the second, I didn't know if I could hold out much longer. I couldn't eat the lasagna because it wasn't done cooking, so I went into the kitchen to find something to snack on before dinner. We didn't have much in the way of snacks, so I looked in the fridge to find something to hold me over. The only thing that I could find was some cold sliced ham for sandwiches.

I was so hungry I figured that I could eat a few slices of the ham and still chow down on the lasagna that would be ready soon. The only problem was that I was so hungry that I ate the whole package of ham. By the time I finished it, I realized what I had done. It was too late. I was so full from eating the ham that I couldn't eat any of the lasagna. I missed out on mom's homemade lasagna because I became impatient and settled for sandwich meat instead.

I think of that story every time I read Matthew 16:24-28. Jesus is talking about denying yourself so you can have something better later. Our lives are filled with this exact situation. Following God's way often means denying yourself now for something greater down the road. I should have waited for something better that night at dinner. Of course, this means so much more to our Christian life than a simple dinner. When you think about it, denying ourselves now in order for God's greatness to follow applies to so many areas within our lives.



Die to Certain Desires

Believers are called to follow Christ in radical commitment and to be ruled by the will of God. Because sin has been defeated and we have been released from its tyrannical rule, we are no longer to chase after it but instead to run hard after Christ.

A Happy Story

I am going to share with you a story that has a happy ending, but when I was going through it I did not know how it would end. About six years ago, I could tell there was something going on with a close friend of mine. His mood began to change. He was just so angry all the time. He didn't show up for friendly gatherings anymore, and he wouldn't answer any of my calls. After a few weeks went by, I got a call from his boss saying that he hadn't shown up for work.

After I got off the phone, I drove to my friend's apartment to see where he was. When I walked in, I heard someone crying in the bathroom. It was my friend. He was in the bathroom crying and sick because he was coming down off of all the drugs he had taken the night before.

The happy side to this story is that my friend has now been drug free for five years. I wish I could tell you that it was easy for him to kick the drugs, but it wasn't. He struggled. During rehab, his desire was for drugs, but over time he came to the truth that there are better things. Last year he was sharing his story to a group of high school students and he said, "Sin has a way of making mud taste like chocolate for a while. We don't realize that we are eating mud until God opens our eyes. It is at that moment where change needs to occur—we have to change our desires from mud to something better."

The Bible has much to say about our desires. In 1 Peter 4:1-2, God's Word tells us that our desires need to be changed from what we sinfully want to what God wants. This is such great news, and here is the reason why: God's way is the most desirable way. It's the best. The joy we receive from enjoying God's way and His design makes delight in sin seem like eating mud.

When God calls for us to deny ourselves, He is calling for us to pursue a greater and more lasting joy. He is calling us to drink of better water. God is opposed to our incessant thirst for polluted waters that are unsatisfying and lethal. God is opposed to sin because sin is opposed to the ultimate joy and pleasure found only in His presence (Ps. 16:11).

► In what areas of your life have you experienced this change of appetite?

When the Spirit grants us new hearts and minds in response to the gospel, we are suddenly enabled to hear sin's lies for what they are. Our spiritual taste buds have changed such that we have new loves and find sin disgusting.

1 Peter 4:1–2

Therefore, since Christ suffered in the flesh, equip yourselves also with the same resolve—because the one who suffered in the flesh has finished with sin—in order to live the remaining time in the flesh, no longer for human desires, but for God's will.

► Provide an example of a desire that deceives. Explain how this and other deceitful desires can actually work against your joy and happiness.



Do Good in Suffering

God does not take pleasure in the suffering of His children, whom He loves. At the same time, there is a sense in which our suffering is according to His will. Consider the parents who allow their child to be exposed to chickenpox so that the disease will pass with relative risk compared to later danger. Do they want their child to be sick? In some sense they do, but only because they don't want a more serious sickness down the road.

► What is the difference between suffering in general and suffering for the sake of the gospel?

How is suffering for our good? Part of that answer involves the role of suffering in relationship to God's discipline (Heb. 12:3-11). God disciplines us as a good Father who helps His children. His discipline is never without purpose.

How is our suffering a testimony to the world? "This man really was God's Son!" (Mark 15:39). This was the expression of the centurion overseeing Christ's crucifixion. Having witnessed the execution of an innocent man, the military commander's defenses were overcome. A similar phenomenon has occurred countless times throughout church history. In some strange but beautiful way, the suffering of saints is used by God to open the eyes and ears of others.

1 Peter 4:12-19

Dear friends, don't be surprised when the fiery ordeal comes among you to test you as if something unusual were happening to you. Instead, rejoice as you share in the sufferings of the Messiah, so that you may also rejoice with great joy at the revelation of His glory. If you are ridiculed for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. None of you, however, should suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or a meddler. But if anyone suffers as a "Christian," he should not be ashamed but should glorify God in having that name. For the time has come for judgment to begin with God's household, and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who disobey the gospel of God? And if a righteous person is saved with difficulty, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner? So those who suffer according to God's will should, while doing what is good, entrust themselves to a faithful Creator.

► Are any of these three reasons that God allows suffering difficult to understand or believe? Why or why not?

[illegible]

Sometimes, God allows suffering and pain in our lives. It's not easy. In fact, it can be very difficult. However, as children of God, we can be assured that when suffering does come, our good and gracious Father can and will use it for His glory, for our good, and as a testimony to the watching world around us.

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GOD'S STORY, YOUR STORY

The call to deny oneself contradicts the consumer-driven mentality of our culture. This idea is almost foreign, and yet we are challenged to not merely think less of ourselves but to think of ourselves less.

Why is it good to practice self-denial? What are some areas within your life where you need to deny yourself?

Another important point of application has to do with denying certain desires. Many people haven't realized that desires aren't always good and that some desires deceive us, causing pain instead of true joy. This is why it is important for us to think critically about our desires, knowing that many promise ultimate joy and pleasure but never deliver. By thinking critically about our desires, we also become more aware of ourselves and the areas within our lives where continued grace is needed.

What are some examples of desires that deceive in the end?

What are some deceitful desires you struggle with?

What are some practical ways you might fight against those desires?