

Denying One's Self

Pastor and author A.W. Tozer

September 23, 1956

Again today, I want to take one text and preach two sermons one this morning and one tonight. This does not mean that I preach half the sermon now and finish it tonight. It means that there are two sermons which I preach from the one text. It is the text in the sixteenth of Matthew, a familiar passage, but one that needs to be recovered from its very familiarity. Then said Jesus unto His disciples, if any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it. And whosoever will lose his life for My sake shall find it. For what does a man profit if he should gain the whole world and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man shall come in the glory of his Father with His angels and then He shall reward every man according to his works. Those are the words of Jesus. If any man will come after me.

Now, last week I preached two sermons on the text, come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden. And our Lord is interested, he's inviting, and He is even urging people to come unto Him, but He is not begging. To think that our Lord must be placed in the position of begging people to come to Him is to be guilty of an error equal to those of the heretics of all ages, because thus to think dethrones Christ. Christ must sit on His throne and always Christ must sit on His throne.

I believe and have said, I suppose, to the point of tedium, that the great problem of the day in religious circles is a small God and the dethroned Christ. And the great need of the hour is to see Jesus Christ as He is. And when we see Him not as He is, then we overplay His invitation and we put Him in the position of being on trial again before us as though we sat on the throne, however shaky, and He stands before us handcuffed once more with marks on His back. It's all very poetic, but it's also all very false. For it makes the returning sinner the hero which the Bible never does.

In the book of Psalms, 45:4, it says about our Lord Jesus Christ: gird thy sword upon thy thigh, O most mighty, with thy glory and thy majesty. And in thy majesty ride prosperously because of truth and meekness and righteousness; and thy right hand shall teach thee terrible things.

We have two words here, majesty and meekness. And in His meekness He stands outside the door and says: Behold, I stand at the door and knock. In his meekness, He says, come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden. But He is not all meekness, there is also majesty. And in His majesty He appears this way: and being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks. And in the midst of the seven candle sticks, one like unto the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the foot and gird about with a golden girdle. His head and His hairs were white like wool, as white as snow. And His eyes

were the flame of fire. And His feet like unto fine brass as if they burned in a furnace. And His voice was the sound many waters. And He had in His right hand seven stars and out of His mouth with a sharp two-edged sword. And His countenance was of the sun, shining in His strength. When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. And He laid His hand upon me saying unto me, fear not, I am the first and the last. I'm He that liveth and was dead, and behold, I'm alive forevermore, amen; and have the keys of hell and of death. There's the majesty and the meekness of the Savior. But don't let's overplay the meekness, for someday we'll face the Majesty. If any man will come after Me, He says. And so He passes by if any man will come.

Now, if any man will not come, that man will lose eternally, but Christ will lose nothing at all. But if a man will come, then he shall gain eternally, but Christ will gain nothing at all. Could we not even think as Christians once in a while and remember this? Could we not see Him where He is at the right hand of God the Father Almighty? Could we not see the shining, burnished crowns that are to rest upon His holy head while the ages beat themselves out into nothingness? And can we not know that if a man will not come, he loses forever, but Christ loses nothing at all.

And if the man will come, he gains eternally, but Christ gains nothing at all. He being the Eternal Son who was before the world was, whose creating fiat brought all the creation into being. How then can He gain from me? If I must take it out of His left hand to put it in His right hand? How can He gain from me? If He must give me the strength to worship, then how can He gain anything from me?

No, my brethren, nothing that anyone can do or refuse to do can diminish the glory of the Eternal Son. I wish that men might see this again, and we might begin to preach it again until there was more fear and less frivolity in the church of God, and our approach to Him was with greater reverence and solemn fear instead of the unworthy manner that it now is in too many instances.

In the book of Isaiah 49:5, there is an odd passage, a very odd passage. It says: Though Israel be not gathered, verse five, and now saith the Lord that formed me from the womb to be a servant, to bring Jacob again to Him. Though Israel be not gathered, yet shall I be glorious in the eyes of the Lord and my God shall be my strength.

God sent His Holy Son to gather Israel, but said Jesus through the prophet Isaiah, though Israel be not gathered, yet shall I be glorious in the eyes of Jehovah. Nothing that Jesus did or can do can make Him any more glorious in the eyes of His Heavenly Father. He was with the Father. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him and without Him was not anything made that was made. And He can gain nothing by anything that He can do. As a man, He was elevated and made Lord and Christ. As a man He humbled Himself and was exalted. But as God, He never could be exalted, because He already occupies the apex of all thought and possibility and being.

So that no matter if no one were converted and if nobody was saved and nobody followed Christ in this whole wide world for a generation, still would He be glorious in the eyes of His Father. In meekness He came, but in majesty He reigns, and He will be none the less majestic if the whole world turns against Him.

And if an antichrist reigns and everything that is of God is trampled under feet and every statue and every picture and everything that the cultured world understands that's religious is burned or destroyed, and every church is turned into a garage and every preacher is put in jail and every Christian is hounded to death, He will still be majestic in the eyes of God and all intelligent moral beings.

If any man will come after Me, He says, and He puts it back on the man himself. For always remember we do not rescue Christ by letting Christ rescue us. Always remember that if we come, we come because we ought to come. We've come because we should. We come because every moral argument is on the side that we should come. We come because we hear his voice inviting. But always remember that we do not rescue Him from failure by letting Him rescue us from sin. He will be glorious in the eyes of God if the church fails and all the world turns against Him. If any man will come after Me, He says, let him deny himself.

Now, in the dim light of modern religious notions, it's a very odd thing indeed that Christ should place such an obstacle here before His people, for undoubtedly, this was done as a test. Undoubtedly, the Lord God here caused everyone who's looking His way to pass under the rod. This is the elimination contest. This is the word that tells us whether we go any further or not. If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself. And right here at the beginning, He lays down a condition for following Him, or conditions for following Him. And that which He lays down is exactly contrary to human nature.

I hear it said that we ought to try to harmonize Christianity with human nature. And that seems to be the philosophy of modern times that men are harmonizing Christianity with human nature and showing that the two harmonize dutifully. But at the very door of the Kingdom, the Majestic Savior lays down terms exactly contrary to human nature, terms which run counter to everything that we're taught in school that contradicts the instinct for self-preservation, and erase all the power of self against Him, and cuts down drastically the number of those who will follow our Lord Jesus Christ and almost guarantees the failure of His religion.

Oh, I'm glad heaven isn't going to be like earth. There are some things that I'd settled for. I like some things in this world, very beautiful things indeed. But there are other things that they stem out and bubble and ooze up out of the putrid cisterns of man's iniquity, and I don't like them even when they overflow unto me. And I'm glad that God does things differently.

Now, they tell us how to sell toothpaste and they tell us how to get elected. And the wonderful thing about it is, or the strange thing is, you'll sell toothpaste if you follow them. They have found out how to do it. They have tested the housewives and know just exactly how intelligent they are. And you gals would not be nearly so proud if you knew what they thought of you back in the offices where they think up the advertising slogans that will get you to buy their goods. But that's the way they do it now and it works. They know how business is to be run and it works. They know how to get a man in office, and it works. And they know how to sell and that it all works. And they tell us that we've got to use all those same methods to promote the gospel of Christ.

But have you ever thought that Jesus Christ turned this whole thing upside down and did it backwards? Did you ever stop to think that instead of getting the backing of big businessmen, He was born of a virgin under circumstances which were extremely shady from man's standpoint. Did you know that instead of His being a son of one of the rabbis or the great men, He was the son supposedly of a carpenter, very little-known outside of His own tiny village. That instead of His going to the great and getting them to sponsor Him and help Him, He started out from scratch, a poor man, instead of gathering the mighty, and saying we'll get this PhD over here and we'll make him the first apostle. And we'll get this DD over here and we'll make him apostle number two. And we'll get this man over here who's had a book published and he'll be apostle number three. And we'll get this man who's painted a famous picture, and he'll be apostle number four, and on down the line. He went to the simplest people in the world and took them and said, come and follow Me and He upset the world starting with nothing.

He didn't understand our methods at all. And He didn't now know how you get elected. Jesus Christ could never have gotten Himself elected to any office in Israel. He couldn't have, unless of course, they'd given Him a vote and may have elected Him because He healed them. But He'd never have gotten any place. There's no party who would ever have nominated Him, nobody. They'd have said, He isn't a vote-getter. He's in trouble all the time.

And then when He did that final, holy and solemn act at which angels fold their wings and man looks in wonder. It was to die as a common criminal on the cross, and then send out men to ask the proud world to believe and believe in an executed criminal. They'd have chased Him out of every office in New York City and Chicago. They'd have said, your advertising methods will ruin you. You don't know how to get along. He doesn't do things as man does. He does them backwards to man, because man is wrong and God is right.

Let him deny himself He said. And everything but guaranteed the failure of His religion. And yet, old Napoleon on the island of, where was it? Oh well, they had him somewhere out of circulation. I can't recall the name of the island. It doesn't matter. They had him there and he said to one of his exiled generals with him. He said, General, what do you think of Jesus Christ. The general said, sire,

I prefer not to reply. He knew Napoleon. Napoleon said, well, if you won't tell me, I'll tell you. He said, Caesar, Alexander and I, we have conquered nations, but we've had to do it by blood and tears, and we've had to do it by killing men. And we've had to do it by being present there to give enthusiasm to our troops.

But he said, here is One who never held a sword in His hand. Here is one, this Jesus, who never used force at any time in His whole life. And here is One who died and is gone, and nobody's seen Him for 1900 years. And still today, He has an empire bigger than the combined empire of Cesar, Alexander and Napoleon. And all around the world, there are people that would die for Him at the drop of a hat. No, he said, I don't know what you think of a man like that, but I think He's God.

I'm glad for that testimony from Napoleon, but we didn't need it. Because when God sent the Holy Ghost down from the right hand of the Majesty, He said, God has made this man Lord and Christ and we don't need Napoleon. We're grateful for any testimony, but we're not needing it.

Now, our Lord Jesus Christ simply upset everything here. And I wonder if this is the same Christ I'm hearing about now? I wonder if this is the Christ that we're forced now to excuse and edit and amend and apologize for? I wonder if this is the Christ that now must get on His two knees and coax and beg and plead to gain followers. I wonder if this is the one who sends his people out and say, don't offend anybody or I won't have any following. I wonder if this is the same Jesus that takes every little rock and thorn out of the path of the just now and says don't bump his foot. If he bumps his foot he'll probably backslide. Is this the same Jesus that said, if any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take his cross? Is this the same Jesus that now has to give everything and ask nothing, that smiles and goes along with covetous businessmen and crooked politicians and carnal entertainers and tries to get along with everybody?

Is this the same Jesus? I'm inclined to think there must be two Jesuses. The one who said, if any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take his cross. And the one who mules and whines and whimpers and waits and begs and says, please come, I'm a failure. If you don't come, I need you. I've got to have You. That's degenerate Christianity. I think God just as soon become a Capuchion father as belong to that kind of thing--a Capuchion father. Well, I couldn't be a father, I'm married and got children. But anyhow, I don't know what I just as soon be a monk somewhere and join Tom Martin and have days of silence and live on whatever they get than to follow a Jesus I couldn't have any confidence in.

Oh, brother, the Jesus Christ I'm following, I want you to know that I want him to remain what He is if He has to send me to hell to accomplish it. I want you to know that I don't want Him any less than He is. And that I don't want Him to in any wise yield to this streamlined job they're giving Him. I don't want anybody to say as they're saying of Nixon and Stevenson. Oh, he's a new man now. I don't want any new Jesus. I want the Jesus that could bring an apostle down in a dead faint

by looking at him. I want the Jesus that dare turned His face up to the whole world and say, come and follow Me if you want. They don't want to--well all right, but if you come, you'll have to take your cross and deny yourself. I want that kind of Jesus. And I want the kind of a Redeemer that I don't have to apologize for. I don't have to excuse Him and say, well, He's a wonderful Savior, of course. I don't want any of course when I'm talking about Jesus. I want him to be what He is, but always was and will be forever.

You used to stand the little old Calvinists up in a line, you know, God bless them in the olden days of the early Presbyterians and Covenanters. They would stand a little old Calvinist's kids up and line them up there Sunday morning, and they'd start them out on the catechism. The first word was, what is the chief end of man? And it hadn't gone very long until they said, would you be willing to be damned for the glory of God? And every little liar along the wall said, yes sir. But he didn't know what he was talking about. But that was the answer, you know. That was the answer. But brethren, after you know Jesus Christ, you know what those old Calvinists had in mind. After you ever come to know Him once, you know that you're so jealous for His glory that you'd rather lose everything than to have Him change at all.

Now, what is deny himself mean? Well, let me show you what it isn't first. It isn't to deny something to self. It isn't to deny self luxury, but let luxury live, to let self live. It isn't to deny self food, but let self live. It isn't to deny self sleep, but let self live. It isn't to deny pleasures to self. It isn't to deny freedom to self and go to jail or life to self and die a martyr. Many a murderer has died a selfish man, died in his selfishness. He died but he was still self that died.

Milton says this. God bless the old, eyeless saint. They said he read the Bible so much, though he was a Englishman, he had a Hebrew mind. And listen to this. He says, though ye take from a covetous man all his treasures, he has yet one jewel left, his covetousness. And you can take from a selfish man all that ministers to self. And he says, well, they've stripped me but thank God, I've got self left. And self, naked and hungry and cold and tired, can go proudly on its way.

Jesus said, deny self. He didn't say deny things to self. And Eckhart says that a man can give up a kingdom and a fortune and still have himself. He hasn't given up anything yet. Then he turns it around, thank God, and says, the man gives up self, then you can have a kingdom and a fortune, and he isn't selfish.

Now, self, selfness, expresses itself in two ways. It wants its own way and it wants a reputation. And, first of all, briefly, it wants its own way. Here's what the old theologian says. Now, since the life of Christ is in every way most bitter to nature, and to self and the me, therefore, in each of us nature hath a horror of it. And think of it evil and unjust and a folly and graspeth after such a life as shall be most comfortable and pleasant to herself. Now nothing is so comfortable and pleasant to nature as a free, careless way of life. Therefore, she clingeth to that and taketh enjoyment in

herself and her own powers, and looketh only to her own peace and comfort and the like. And this happeneth most of all, where there are high natural gifts of reason.

Some of you that have high IQs, you're worse than the rest of us. It soareth upward in its own light, he says, in its own power. So, if self can just be allowed to live, he's willing to live in the doghouse. If he just be allowed to stay just willing to sleep on the floor. If you'll just permit him to live, he's willing to wear rags. He's willing to go to Ecuador. He's willing to go to the Baliem Valley. He's willing to eat monkey food. He's willing to do anything if you'll just let him live. There are many missionaries from Ecuador here, don't think I mean you. I was just grasping for someplace far off where people have to go to it.

Now, it just wants its way, that's all. So, it will sacrifice. It'll give. It will work. It will wear old clothes. It'll study and burn the midnight oil. It'll take abuse, just so it can live. And Jesus said, if any man come to Me, let him deny self. And self says, oh, please don't deny me. Don't repudiate me. Discipline me, chasten me, starve me, but don't repudiate me.

And then self wants a reputation. And a desire for reputation is one of the last things to go in a man. And the very last thing to go into man is the desire for reputation among the saints. After we've given up all hope that we'll ever get on the front of Time magazine, we still have some hope on getting on the Alliance Weekly. And after we have given up all hope that the world will ever count us great, we still have a sneaking hope that maybe the church will recognize us. If only we can get a reputation somewhere, self says. If I can't wear the gold crown of public favor, could I not at least wear the little hoop of religious favor.

And in lots of our meetings, lots and I don't mean Alliance meetings, which could happen there. I've been around a little and I've read a little and talked to a lot of people and I'm prepared to say this, that an awful lot of the saints, great numbers of the saints, so called, who have got a reputation, have earned it by being a little queer, a little excessively spiritual, shout a little louder or do something, and they live and bask and revel in their reputation for being great saints.

Some of them will stand up and wave her hand and shout while the preacher is preaching. Everybody will chuckle and say, isn't she a card. She's got a reputation among the saints. I hate to think what they would do with her in some places. But at least in the church, they allow her to live and make a little hero out of it, or him. It could be him just as easily. Self wants to shine. It wants to be allowed to live, willing to live in the doghouse, but wants to live, and wants to have a little reputation, however small, even if it's only among the saints.

And the most refined form of this is a desire to be known as a man of prayer. And the very act that's meant to humble us, becomes an occasion for our exultation. Oh, he's a man of prayer. R.R. Brown pointed that out to me years ago. At the time I didn't believe it, just as some of you don't

believe it now. But usually when Brown comes through with something, afterward, I find out he was right. And he was right on this. He said there's nothing so dangerous as for a man to get a reputation of being a man of prayer or seek it. And just as soon as you get that reputation, dangers come from the inside and from the outside. And the dear people say, if old brother so and so isn't present, they say, I know where he is. He's off praying. He may be asleep, but he's got a reputation. He's off praying somewhere.

Now, here's what we should do. We ought to pray a lot more than anybody knows we pray. And we ought to be men and women of prayer, but not seek a reputation for being men and women of prayer. For Jesus said, you stand on the street corner and you pray and pray. He said you do it to get a reward and you've got your reward. Goodbye, here's a receipt. But he said, If you really want to pray, when you shut the door when nobody knows you're praying, and do your praying there. It's dangerous, I say, to get a reputation or to seek a reputation for being a man of prayer.

Now, take up his cross, and I'm finished. The cross is always God's way of dealing with us--always. Self has to be sentenced. You can't slay self. You can only repudiate self. The word is denied. Denied. A man stood one time, and they were holding Him and captured Him as you capture an FBI wanted man. There he was. There he stood. And they turned to Peter and said, Peter, do you know this man? He said, no sir. I don't know Him. He's stranger to me. I never saw him. He'd been with Him three years. He said I don't know Him. I don't know Him. That was denial. He denied Him. He repudiated Jesus. Thank God, he wept and wept later on when the cock crowed, and Peter got right with God again. It's good not to sin, but if you do it's good to know you can get right again and Peter did.

And that's what repudiation means. You turn on yourself, you, you. All those cute little idiosyncrasies that you have cultivated. And that little reputation that you've built up about yourself, such a nice husband, such a dear daddy, such a thoughtful husband. Such an efficient wife. Such a brilliant man. Such a fine saint. That's our little reputation. It may only be the size of a small grain of rice, but it's ours. It's our little reputation. If we see our name in print anywhere, we glow all over. Our reputation, it's us, it's I.

Jesus said you see that little thing there that you've allowed and around which all your life revolves. That's you, you, a businessman, wonderful fellow. You get slapped on your back until your back's sore. What a wonderful fellow. Jesus said, you know him? Do you know him? And if you say, yes, I know him, that's me, the Lord turns His back. But if you say Lord, I'm sorry, I know him, but I don't want to know him. I repudiate him as of now and henceforth I know not the man. Then you're beginning to be a Christian. Take up your cross He says.

You've got a sentence. God sentenced you long ago. You with all those cute little ways you have. Some of us can even get bald in the cutest manner and enjoy it, enjoy our friend's jokes and all the

rest. Look at our pictures and smile and show them around and say, look at this. Well, I don't mean it's wrong to show your pictures certainly. But I just mean, you know, we can get self there. Self takes the throne. And Jesus Christ said, well, I've got a journey to make, a long, bloody, cross-filled, thorny, rocky journey. You can't go along unless you're ready to deny yourself, take your cross and follow behind me. Are you ready? And a few have said yes, but most have said no.

Most have said as the old theologian has it, I'd rather be comfortable and pleasant, and have a free and careless way of life, because self, to deny self and me and nature is a horrible thing, evil and unjust and folly itself. That's what nature says. But Jesus says, if you're coming, you're going to have to meet my terms.

Now to try to be a success in your Christian field, that builds up the ego. But we're willing to be a failure before your God and to repudiate yourself and to take your cross and follow Christ. So you must come and pass sentence against yourself. No excuse. Nowhere to hide, no cover up, no defense, but let yourself go. For said Jesus, whoever will save his life shall lose it. Whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.

Now, there's Christianity, brethren. That's it. And in case you think that this is just one man's queer notion of it, that's historic Christianity. That's what Luther taught. That's what Wesley taught. That's what John Knox preached. That's what Augustine preached and Chrysostom. That's what Bernard believed. That's what Simpson taught. It's historic Christianity without a doubt, but it's so strange and so foreign in an hour like this.

But if we know what's good for us, we will repudiate everything that hasn't come up to this. Take this and say, Lord, teach me. Teach me to take the cross and deny myself and follow Thee. This is the negative side of the message. There's another side and I give it tonight using the same text. I hope you'll be back for a warm and rousing song service and message.