

Repentance Leads To Christ-like Character

The Sin of Failing To Deny Yourself and Pick Up Your Cross

(THE sin that separates the nominal “Christian” from a true follower of Jesus)

The innate drive within each of us from infancy onward is to gratify the needs and wants that *benefit* us, such as food, warmth, recognition, and intimate relationships, among many others. At the same time we learn early on to avoid people or situations we don’t perceive as a benefit to us.

If parents don’t confront their children and consistently train them to expand their horizons to be concerned with the physical and emotional needs of others, the kids remain captive to self-seeking, basing their decisions and responses solely on “what’s in it for me.”

Pandering to *self-interest* has grown exponentially in recent decades. This focus began particularly after World War II as parents who had suffered through the desperate times of the Depression in the 30s determined that their offspring wouldn’t have to suffer. Those catered-to children became the leaders of the lawless generation of rebellion that marked the 60s and 70s—a trend of *me-centrism* which has escalated to today’s self-idolatry and expectation of entitlement.

Consuming preoccupation with one’s own emotions, interests, or circumstances is the driving motivation all throughout this society. But even more tragic is the epidemic of this same self-serving objective among those who claim to belong to our Lord Jesus.

Faith communities throughout Christendom in this nation have readily

bought into *marketing* their congregational distinctives. They vie to attract and keep individuals who themselves have been trained to pursue and gratify self-benefit. For example, when you ask many churchgoers why they’re in their particular faith community, their response will invariably contain how their congregation has *benefited them* in some way: “The preaching is refreshing and uplifting to me.” “The youth group occupies my kids with wholesome activities and a youth leader they enjoy (relieving me of the responsibility).” “The lively worship takes my mind off my problems at home and at work.” But do you ever hear someone answer this way:

“I’m a part of this faith community to lay my life down to sacrificially serve others. By setting aside any perceived rights to my time and my resources, I’m learning to become more like Jesus through His Spirit. I was drawn to this collective family of Jesus followers because I knew their loving dedication to Lord Jesus would encourage me to not love my own life even unto death but to die to self-interest.”

Does this reason resemble your own motives for being part of a collective faith community? If it doesn’t, you may be sinning against our Lord in your self-gratifying, benefit-seeking purposes. When Jesus calls someone to follow Him as their Lord and Savior, He tells them right up front that that *self-seeking* has no part in His Kingdom. Put yourself among those He addressed with this clear yet obviously unpopular requirement:

“Then [Jesus] called the crowd to Him along with His disciples and said: ‘If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.’

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me and for the gospel will save it.

What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:34-36; see also Matthew 10:38).

Jesus's first condition for following Him means that you are to live with Him as *your Lord*. Lordship signifies that He's your Master and you are His beloved servant/slave, owned by Him (1Corinthians 7:22,23). Through the metaphor of "taking up your cross" He is telling you that you must be willing to *die* to self-ownership, self-interest and self-will. After all, the pathway of His own life involved a cross—an execution stake from which no one returned alive. But the joyous consequence of such a death is the glorious resurrection He experienced and promises His own who endure to the end in Him: saving your life *for eternity* through wholly trusting in Him and walking in obedience to His commands (see John 12:26).

This *death-to-self* is emphasized by Paul through the process of baptism: identifying with Christ's death in a very real way through immersion so that our slavery to sin could be put to death, and rising up to live a new Christ-centered life. (Pause here to read Romans 6:1-12 for a distinct visualization of *dying to yourself* and living to God's will for you in Christ.)

When you are dead to yourself, you have *denied self* as your idol and killed off living a life that benefits you first. Instead, the "new you" puts the interests of your beloved Lord and the interests of others ahead of your own, putting feet to the ground of biblical love. Our Lord calls for those who are in Him to walk in His steps—a daily decision of yielding to His Spirit in whatever ways you might respond in self-sacrificial love.

Religious rituals and weekly services make no demand of *self-denial* as Jesus calls for. In some church systems the leaders are expected to "be holy" on behalf of everyone else. That way the congregants can feel good about meeting their religious obligations and live however they choose the rest of the week. Or, as has become the norm especially in recent decades, you're spoon-fed a pleasant worship/teaching experience so you'll feel good about yourself and want to return each week (with your wallet). Biblical preaching of self-denial in a pleasure-bent society is definitely not a smart marketing scheme!

If you're truly born of His Spirit, our Lord's commands to deny yourself and pick up your cross are received with a grateful heart. Why? Because *love for Jesus* and *wholehearted trust in Him* are what brought you into covenant union with Him in the first place when you responded to Father's call. And in your ongoing pilgrimage to your salvation you are filled with the power of His Spirit within you. The Spirit galvanizes you to fulfill Father's purposes no matter what the cost to you. This heart motive of obedient trust distinguishes the Kingdom-minded who've denied themselves and picked up their cross out of love for Christ from the nominal "Christian" who lives comfortably satisfied in religious complacency.

Consider this sad truth: The *reputation of Jesus* is brought down by those who are "Christian" in name only, what's commonly called "nominal Christians." They try to be "good people" in their own strength, but are living according to their own purposes and goals. Needing to be accepted by people around them, they're careful to blend in with them, making sure they don't offend by bringing their devotion to Lord Jesus or the gospel into

the conversational mix.

Our Father leaves no doubt that He has specific purposes for His children to fulfill during our life on earth (Ephesians 2:10). Each authentic follower of Jesus (not a “nominal Christian”) is *called out of the world’s pursuits*, that is, those goals and values and ways that benefit themselves. Followers of Jesus love Him as their Lord and have the eyes of their hearts turned away from the influence of the world and the demonic prince who exercises power over it.

Through His Spirit they can be prepared vessels for our Father to accomplish His will through them. As our Head, Jesus led the way in living to fulfill His Father’s will: *“For I have come down from heaven not to do My will but to do the will of Him who sent Me”* (John 6:38). In this light Jesus turns to His own to walk in His steps of obedient love: *“This is to My Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be My disciples”* (John 15:8).

To belong to Jesus and follow Him as Lord of your life requires *intentional determination*. From our Lord’s viewpoint, being born again is much like a person leaving civilian life to go into military service during a time of war. As with military service, suffering and hardship are identifying factors of Kingdom life. Is it any wonder Paul reminds Timothy, *“Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus”* (2Timothy 2:3)?

Following Jesus as Lord isn’t intended to be a path of ease in a bed of roses! Paul and Barnabas candidly primed their new disciples to expect suffering as part of new life in Jesus. These new followers absolutely *needed* strength and encouragement to *“remain true to the faith. We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God”* (Acts 14:22). True follow-

ers of Jesus today clearly comprehend the intensity of this call. An entirely different life framework is created when you persist in denying yourself and taking up your cross out of grateful appreciation for the Lord Who has redeemed you at such great sacrifice to Himself.

Contrary to the *self-focus* of much of contemporary Christianity, authentic life in Christ translates into abandoning self-will in order to walk *however, wherever, and whenever* your Lord beckons you: *“To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps”* (1Peter 2:21). No one chooses a life of suffering and hardship *until* they die to themselves in order to love Jesus first. Again, such love requires that they deny themselves, pick up their cross and follow Him.

The person who casts off *self-ownership* for the sake of their Lord and the gospel will enjoy eternity with Him. But everyone who clings to their worldly goals and hides out in nominal Christianity forfeits eternal life. As martyr for Jesus, Jim Elliot, lived by, *“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.”*

- What’s the first thing that crosses your mind when you hear that you must endure sorrow and suffering if you’re to walk as Jesus walked?
- Do you fellowship with others who understand the significance of sorrow and suffering in developing Christ’s character in their lives?
- How supportive are you in helping each other deny yourself and pick up your cross in order to live for God’s glory and praise?

[For more on suffering and perseverance, see our Hebrew Article, *The Gospel of the Covenant Is the Pilgrimage to Salvation: Suffering, The Spirit’s Agency for Change.*]

To follow Jesus as your Lord and Redeemer with all your heart, soul, mind and strength the way He declares means we must deny ourselves so we may become more like Him. In John chapter 15 Jesus calls those who belong to Him *branches abiding in the Vine*, from Whom we draw our spiritual life and through Whom we produce much spiritual fruit. Yet He also made abundantly clear that like Him we will be persecuted and hated, especially by the religious establishment which panders to self-interest and self-perpetuation.

The biblical understanding of the word “Christian” is a person who *follows Christ*, identifying wholly as His own to obey Him in loving trust. But so many today consider “Christian” to mean anyone who just tries to live a moral life, or someone who isn’t a Muslim, a Jew, a Buddhist or an atheist and therefore is probably a “Christian”. From that perspective, being “Christian” translates into a religious philosophy rather than a sacrificial way of life that emanates from an intimate relationship with the Creator of the universe.

Nominal Christianity—a religious philosophy which labels itself “Christian” but has no reality in death-to-self/new life in Christ—focuses on teaching the Bible at an unbelieving world since “Christians” in name only have no indwelling Spirit to empower them. Yet authentic followers of Jesus know that they must first represent *Him* as God in the flesh who took our sin upon Himself so that He might *live in us* through His Spirit (Colossians 1:27).

The core reality of the Good News (the gospel) is *Jesus*, not the Book which carries the message. Because His own are His beloved servant/slaves indwelled by His Spirit, unbelievers need to see *Him* and *His*

way of life in us. His Presence makes all the difference between a philosophy and a relationship of love!

The Bible is a wonderful resource for unbelievers to learn about the relationship followers of Jesus have with Him and how they can have the same self-denying relationship as they repent and are born into His Spirit through trust, forgiven by our Father (1Peter 1:3). Throughout Scripture’s text they can discover the amazing nature of God and His undeserved grace as well as His righteous justice which demands death for *all lawbreakers*—which is every person on earth. That’s the reason we, the once-lost, needed to be found and redeemed by Jesus!

- Do you know how to talk with others about your relationship with Jesus? Do you long in your heart to do this?
- Do others discern His Lordship as your loving motive for why you live as you do?
- Do other people consider your faith practices to be loving expressions of your intimate relationship with Jesus, or religious forms and practices you’ve been taught to observe?
- When an opportunity arises for you to represent your faith, does your mind turn first to Jesus as your beloved Lord or to Bible verses you quote?

If you have purposed to deny your own interests and self-gratification and picked up your cross in death to self-rule, you’ll be eager to speak of Jesus with those who express interest (1Peter 3:15). But that’s the difficulty for countless thousands of nominal “Christians”. They haven’t embraced the self-denial, suffering and hardship which Jesus warns are part of belonging to Him, nor have they ever been trained to. So they’re unable to speak about a relationship they don’t have with Him. Hence a good many find

themselves more comfortable *talking about the Bible* rather than *bearing witness to the Lord* Who brings the Word to life.

Again, consider what Jesus calls the cost of belonging to Him:

*“If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. And **whoever who does not carry his cross and follow Me cannot be My disciple.** For which of you, intending to build a tower, not first sit down first and **count the cost** whether he has enough to finish it? Lest after he has laid the foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish’”* (Luke 14:26-30).

Nominal Christendom is filled with “half-built towers”—many well-intentioned people who are unwilling to suffer the hardship that accompanies belonging to Jesus. The invitation of our Lord to be born again is free; you can’t earn it. But the cost of *accepting His offer* will require you to give up your very life for Him.

The Gulf Between A Nominal Christian and A True Follower of Jesus

*“Though a **man may be wise**, if his words are rejected he will be **deprived of all enjoyment.** When a man is **wise to his own advantage**, the fruits of his knowledge are seen in his own person; when a man is **wise to his people’s advantage**, the fruits of his knowledge are enduring. One **wise for himself** has full enjoyment, and all who see him praise him; one **wise for his people** wins a heritage of glory, and his name endures forever”* (Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) 37:20-22,24,25; see also 1Corinthians10:24; Philippians 2:3,4).

This apocryphal passage describes three situations involving wisdom:

1. Having wisdom that others need, yet listeners disregard the words that would have benefited them. “Though a man may be wise, if *his words are rejected* he will be *deprived of all enjoyment.*” This is the sad plight of many of our Lord’s prophets!
2. Having wisdom for yourself that brings worldly benefit and admiration: “When a man is *wise to his own advantage*, the fruits of his knowledge are seen in his own person... One *wise for himself* has full enjoyment, and all who see him praise him.” Nominal Christendom is filled with people like this who never consider any course of action that doesn’t bring about advantage to themselves.
3. Having wisdom that’s focused on blessing others even if it entails self-denial for a greater intangible gain: “When a man is wise to his people’s advantage, the *fruits of his knowledge are enduring*; one wise for his people wins a *heritage of glory*, and his name endures forever.” This person understands the Kingdom way of living that disregards self-benefit and focuses on the needs of others.

For those who’ve been gifted prophetically by the Spirit as people through whom God shares messages, this Ecclesiasticus passage has special meaning. (Mike): My life in the prophetic has been filled with great sorrow for the past 35 years of walking with Jesus as my Lord. When the Spirit has given me a revelation to share, a word of wisdom if you will, and people refuse to test it as the Bible commands, they rob me of all enjoyment of being my Lord’s blessing to them. Prophecy is an expected part of communal life in Christ: *“Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good”* (1Thessalonians 5:19-21).

**Balkers are often motor-mouth talkers:
*they reveal their refusal to deny self***

All too often people who crave benefiting themselves turn to their rationale when a prophetic word is given to them. Rather than looking to the Spirit, their mind becomes their sole means of deciding whether or not to accept the prophecy. Their first inclination is to balk with a motor-mouth, quickly reciting all the reasons this message won't work for them.

What they're really revealing through their over-talk is how small their concept of God's power is to accomplish His will! Or, since they've never consistently denied themselves out of obedient love for Christ, they moan in reluctance to change *anything* that would disrupt their complacency. Our Lord's words are shown truthful: "*For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks*" (Matthew 12:34).

Later, however, when those who balk encounter the negative consequences of their rejection of His truth and their rebellion against Father's will, the prophet who brought the message experiences emotional pain. Every prophetic word I've ever been given by the Spirit, whether confronting sin or encouraging people to press on, has come from my Father's mercy and compassion for His children.

The saddest part of serving as a prophet is that while people balk because they've never denied themselves and picked up their cross, our Father is prevented from blessing them. Thus He's robbed of their testimony that would have encouraged others to trust in His love and faithfulness.

Jesus commands this and our own experience bears witness: THE path of transformation into Christ's character begins with this step of loving obedience—denying yourself and picking up

your cross. When we interact with individuals, we try to discern if they're burdened purely for the good of others, or if they're also seeking benefit for themselves by their actions.

Kingdom-hearted people give no thought to themselves and how they'll benefit, but only to how they can bless others as the Spirit's instrument. This singular focus on serving our Lord by serving others also gives them the loving courage to not balk at prophetic guidance.

To truly love others as Jesus would, you must deny yourself—your desires for worldly recognition and esteem, for goals outside of Father's will, for values and methods that compromise how Jesus would respond through you. There can be no self-ambition in Spirit love.

**A Spiritual Lesson
From a Deck of Cards**

Another way to view prophetic revelations, or any *rhema* from God for that matter, is like dealing cards out to people. In most instances we've come to realize that people don't usually play with a full spiritual deck unless they've learned the beauty of denying themselves and picking up their cross of death to self-interest. When people have spent a lot of time in nominal Christianity, they've learned to play with a certain limited number of cards—those things in life that *benefit them* (see diagram on page 8). Most don't want to learn that our Lord has other cards, cards of suffering and hardship He'd give them to strengthen their faith and deepen His work of character-building.

Throughout nominal Christendom, people form close relationships with those who play with the same limited number of cards as they have themselves.

When our Lord wants to introduce more cards (personal responsibilities) for them to live by, they don't like it! Think of each new card you're handed (such as a prophetic word) as a new responsibility our Lord wants you to have for His Kingdom work. A prophecy or *rhema* is like God trying to give you more cards to play with in order to fulfill His purposes through you. If you accept each new card, He'll give you the grace to obey it. Out of love for Him and for others, you want all the cards our Lord wants to deal!

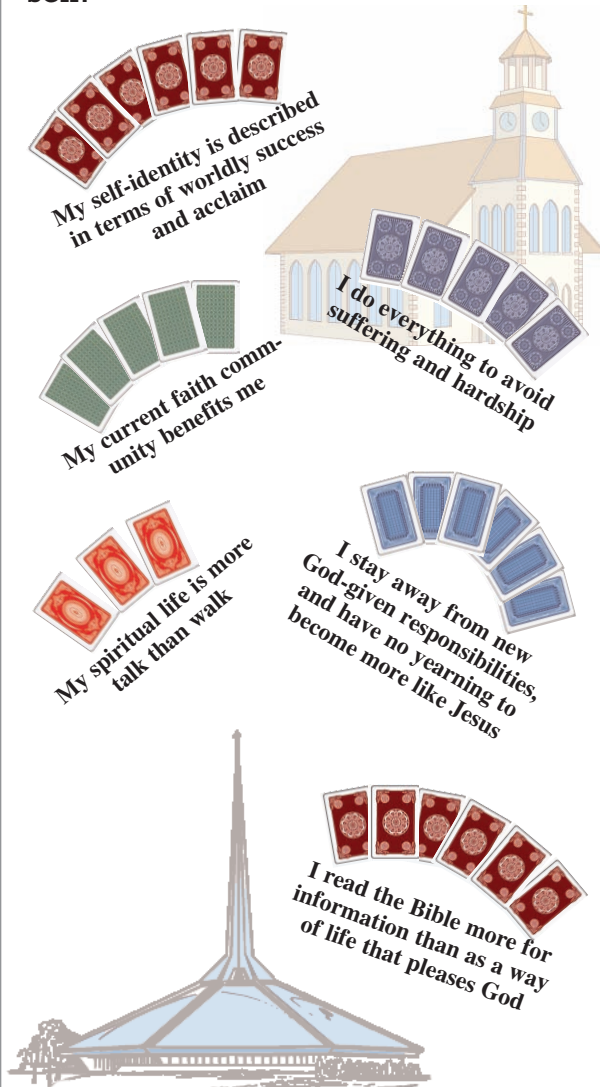
As it is, most people in nominal Christendom are unaccustomed to being dealt spiritual cards of responsibility.

They've been taught by leaders who seek their own benefit and focus their teachings on only those "cards" that will support the *self*-absorbed, *self*-serving lifestyle of their flock. God foresaw this and spoke a warning through His prophet: "*And it will be: Like people, like priests [religious leaders]. I will punish both of them for their ways and repay them for their deeds*" (Hosea 4:9).

Please look closely at the illustrations on the next page and identify which category best describes you. Where do *you* want to be in your relationship with the King and Lord of His called-out ones?

Nominal "Christian"

- declared born again by another individual;
- regularly pursues their own advantage in life;
- avoids uncomfortable responsibilities for family and/or faith family;
- chooses a faith community that benefits self.



A Note of Warning:

You may have left the religious establishment and are now in a house church or home fellowship. This doesn't mean that the pursuit of religious complacency has left you. Religious self-promotion and the need to benefit yourself are "spiritual comfort food" you must diligently flee as you press into Jesus.

A Follower of Jesus

- spiritual rebirth evidenced by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit;
- denies self-focus, picks up their cross out of grateful love and obedient trust;
- walks in the steps of Jesus in serving others;
- chooses a faith community focused on cooperating in extending the Kingdom.



A Note of Encouragement:

If you continue to deny yourself and pick up your cross for the sake of the Lord you love and the gospel, then be confident you're in His Kingdom and assured of eternity with Him. The real issue for you is, how many others will you bring with you?