On these Sunday mornings in mid-August, we are looking at passages from our Lord that are fairly simple to understand, but almost impossible to carry out. Last week we looked at the first of these three passages, Matthew 6:34, where Jesus said, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." As we saw last week it is very easy to understand, but it is very difficult to keep from worrying. Nevertheless, this is what the Lord has commanded us to do; not to worry about the next day, but to consider the problems of each day one day at a time and deal with them with God’s help.

This morning let us look together at another passage that is made up of very simple words, but the problem is carrying out what our Lord said to do. Look with me at the book of Luke, in the New Testament, at Luke 9, where we have a passage about carrying a cross.

About two years ago, Jessie and I were on a trip out West, and we were in Montana and had a rental car. We were driving down the highway and we passed a man who was dragging a huge cross. I would suppose that the cross was about twice as big as the man was. He had it over his shoulder and he was carrying this cross down the side of the road. It would have been nice if we could have stopped and talked to him, but you know that there is no speed limit in Montana during daylight hours. I always wanted to find out how fast a rental car could go. And that day I found out the upper limits of that rental car, and it would have taken half a mile to slow down enough to talk to this guy.

Nevertheless, we saw him as he was walking down the highway. He was going to the East, so I don’t know if he started in Seattle and was headed for Washington or New York, or someplace like that. But there he was, dragging this gigantic cross down the road. It was a very, very strange sight.

Did you know that there are five places in the New Testament where our Lord told us that we, also, are to take up a cross? That would lead us to believe that this is a very important concept. Not that we literally have to drag a cross around the country beside the road, but there is a spiritual lesson there about taking up a cross. The fact that our Lord spoke of this five times indicates that we should consider this very carefully.

This morning, let us look at the account that is found in Luke, chapter 9. In Luke 9, at the beginning of the chapter, things are going great for Jesus and the Apostles and the Disciples. In verses 1-11, Jesus sent the Apostles out on a commission to spread the
Gospel. Notice verse 6: "Departing, they began going throughout the villages preaching the Gospel and healing everywhere." It was a very, very successful case here of spreading the Gospel. In verse 12, we have the beginning of the feeding of the 5,000. Again, this must have been a very popular event that our Lord carried out, as these people were hungry and they were fed miraculously by Jesus and the Apostles. So things were going great.

In verses 18-22, Jesus asked the Apostles whom people were saying that he was. They gave various answers. We have Peter speaking up in verse 20 and giving the good confession, and that is that Jesus is the Christ of God. In verse 22, it is almost as if things have been going so well that Jesus said I need to warn my followers that it may not always be this way. There will be rough times that will come. There will not always be huge crowds of people who are pleased with the message we will be presenting.

In verses 23-25, Jesus warns his followers, as He warns us today, about some of the dangers that we will encounter if we follow Him as our Savior. Please look at Luke 9: 23-25. "And he was saying to them all, if anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake, he is the one who will save it. For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world but loses or forfeits himself."

Let us go back to verse 23; this is the verse I would like to speak on this morning. Look again at Luke 9:23.

"And he was saying to them all, if anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."

Notice the details of this particular verse. Notice the first thing that Jesus said here that would be required of His followers. He said, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself." It is not very popular today to speak about denying oneself of anything. In fact, we live in an age of pleasure. We live in a time when if people want something, they usually go out and buy it. We live in a time, if people want to do something, they usually end up doing it. It almost sounds like blasphemy today if we say we are to deny ourselves something.

Just a few days ago in the Northwest Herald newspaper, there was an article about the number of couples living together today without being married. The Census Bureau was stunned by the latest report that there are now over 4 million couples in the United States, that is one man male and one female, living together without being married. That is far more than they expected, based on trends over the last few decades. The number is going up much faster than the population is and it is hard to imagine 4 million unmarried couples today, in the U.S., committing the sin of fornication. Why would they be involved in something like this? Because they do not want to deny themselves the pleasures of this life, the pleasures of living together without being married.
I suppose if we could talk to those individuals they would say that they are not hurting anybody, and it is a free country and we can do what we want to do. So the idea of denying oneself, for most Americans, is a foreign idea. It is like something from the Dark Ages. It is like telling people that they need to live the life of some monk in some unheated monastery someplace.

In the United States today, entertainment is the 3rd largest industry in this country. People enjoy pleasure. They enjoy giving in to those pleasures. They enjoy being entertained. And yet the Lord said here that His followers would have to deny themselves. In other words, to follow Christ, the followers that He has will be required to give up something for Christ.

Some people might say that that means giving up cigarettes. Well it might, on one level at least. Or maybe giving up pornography, or giving up alcohol, or cursing or swearing. Those are all lower level things. I think the Lord here is talking about something that goes beyond just cigarettes, and swearing and losing our temper and things like that. He is saying that we have to deny self. He takes it beyond these other sins that I mentioned. He is saying that we have to turn loose of the old way of life and establish a new life. The old way of life is self-rule. He is saying that has to go. It can no longer be self-rule. We have to deny self, and now it has to be Christ-rule. We have to take ourselves out of first place and put Christ in first place.

Removing self from the human heart is not easy to do. We all think that we are special. We think that we know more than Jesus Christ. We think that we are important. We may go so far as to say that we are self-made people. But to deny self means that we will remove our will from our hearts and put the will of Christ there first. It means remembering that He is the one who died for our sins. It means that He is the one who laid down His life and took it up again. It means that the scars are on His hands and not on our hands. It is hard to keep those things in mind.

So many times we are like the character in the nursery rhyme, Little Jack Horner. Remember that rhyme from when we were younger?

Little Jack Horner sat in a corner,
Eating his Christmas pie.
He stuck in his thumb and pulled out a plum,
And said, "What a good boy am I!"

And we say that to ourselves. We say, "what a good boy I am"; "what a good girl I am." It is hard to get rid of that attitude. But we must deny self and say, "Lord, it is not by merit that I am saved, but it is by your blood that I am saved. Therefore, what can I do to obey your will?" To deny self means total unconditional surrender to Jesus Christ. It means the same as what John the Baptist said when he saw Christ. He said, "He must increase, but I must decrease." Have we succeeded in denying self this morning?
Back in the second century A.D., there was one of the so-called church fathers, by the name of Justin Martyr. And the emperor of the day of the Roman Empire was Antonious Pious. He asked Justin Martyr to write a statement defining the Christian way of life. The emperor wanted to know more about this strange religion that he had heard of. We still have the answer that Justin Martyr gave to the Roman Emperor, Antonious Pious. I want to read what Justin had to say on this subject, how do you define the Christian way of life. These were his comments:

"We who formerly rejoiced in uncleanness of life, now love only chastity. We, who formerly used magic arts, have now dedicated ourselves to the good and only unbegotten God. We, who loved the resources of money and possessions more than anything, now actually share what we have and give to anyone who is in need. We, who hated one another and killed one another and would not eat with those of other races, now since the manifestation of Christ, have a common life and pray for our enemies and try to win over those who hate us without just cause."

That is a pretty good statement. That is a pretty good definition of what it means to be a Christian. That is what Jesus is saying here. It means a 180 degree turn in our lives. We deny self and we glorify Christ.

Notice, please, the second part of verse 23. "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily." So not only do we reduce the opinion of ourselves in our hearts and put Christ there, but we have to endure suffering for the sake of Christ. We have to pick up the cross daily and carry that cross. That is an interesting reference to a cross. This was before the crucifixion of Christ. And yet he starts talking about the aspect of being crucified. He had not yet died on the cross. How did His followers, therefore, understand crucifixion? They understood it. They had already seen the Romans crucify a group of rebels in Galilee, early in the first Century. They knew what the Romans did to those who tried to overthrow the Empire. They were also familiar with the Roman practice of making the victim who was going to be executed carry their own cross to the place of crucifixion.

So what did the Lord mean here when He said not only do we have to deny self, but we have to bear a cross daily? Well, sometimes people say that it refers to something like having a handicapped child, that is a cross that some people have to bear. Or maybe it refers to having an aged parent that we have to take care of. Or maybe it refers to some kind of terrible disease we have, or some kind of mental illness. Sometimes today we still say that’s the cross you have to bear. And yet, Jesus was not talking about a handicapped child, or an aged parent, or some physical or mental disease. It was something that will come upon each of us because of our faith in Him. It is some kind of spiritual cross, spiritual burden that we will have to bear simply because we are children of God.

Let me give some examples of this. One would be this. We may have to sacrifice the love of our relatives for the sake of Jesus Christ. There is another place where the Lord spoke about this. Please listen to Matthew 10: 34-37.
"Jesus said, 'Do not think that I came to bring peace on the Earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter in-law against her mother in-law, and a man’s enemies will be the members of his household. He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.'"

About a month ago, some of us were working with a person who was very close to obeying the Gospel. There were tears in her eyes as she listened to the Gospel being preached. And yet she said, "If I am baptized, my mother will hate me because of that." She has, thus far, not responded to the Gospel. It may very well be that some who are here this morning will face that kind of problem. And yet, Jesus said that if that is your situation, that is the cross that you will have to bear. Are you willing to pick that cross up and carry it daily for the rest of your life? Our relatives may indeed hate us for obeying the Gospel. We have some here this morning who have basically been ostracized by their loved ones because of their obedience to the Gospel. That is one cross that some have to bear.

It may be a case of gossip that will circulate about us once we obey the Gospel. This is nothing new. Back in 64 AD, Nero, the Emperor, wanted new buildings in Rome. Therefore, he sent out his followers to burn the city down. And yet, he had to come up with a scapegoat, someone to blame for the burning of Rome in 64 AD. There was this nasty little group of people known as the Christians, and therefore, the rumor was circulated that it was the Christians who had burned the city down.

There were other rumors that were circulating in the first Century about the Lord’s Church. There was the rumor that the Christians practiced incest, because brothers and sisters married each other. Yet, we understand that these were, or course, spiritual brothers and sisters that got married. There was the rumor of cannibalism in the first Century. After all, on the first day of every week, the Christians ate the body and the blood of their Savior. It may be that today when we obey the Gospel, that at work or at school or in the neighborhood that there will be nasty rumors that will circulate about us. Our Lord would say, "Pick up the cross. You have to be willing to bear that kind of cross, that kind of suffering for me. Are you willing to do it?"

It may be some ambition that we have had in life, some great paying job that we will have to give up for the sake of the Gospel. There is the Apostle Paul. I think that this is one of the crosses that Paul had to bear. Before he obeyed the Gospel, he was probably considered the leading Jewish rabbi of the first Century. He had been trained by one of the greatest teachers of the first century, Gamaliel. Paul was highly respected by the Jewish Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. He could have been the leading rabbi of the first Century. He could have had fame, wealth, and most of all, power. And yet, he said that he gave it up when he obeyed the Gospel.

Please listen to these words as Paul describes his cross. This is from Philippians 3: 7-8, where he talked about what he gave up to obey the Gospel. He said,
"But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss, in view of the surpassing value in knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ."

All of that fame, that respect, that popularity, that wealth that he could have received, Paul said it was all loss. "As I look back on it, I consider it rubbish, compared to being a follower of Jesus Christ." That was the cross that Paul had to bear.

It could be that our cross might be giving up a life of ease for the sake of the Gospel. Back when I taught school, there was another Christian, another member of our congregation. He retired several years ago at the age of 50; I still keep up with him. But back when he retired, I met with him and I encouraged him to become a preacher of the Gospel. That man has talent. He has tremendous talent. He was a faithful member of the Church in that town. And here he was at the age of 50, he took early retirement and so many things that he could have done with his life at that point. When I talked with him, he was just not interested -- just not interested.

Whenever we go back to that town, I sort of ask around as to what so-in-so is doing, and the response is, "Well, he paints a house every now and then. And he installs windows occasionally for different people, but mostly he just takes it easy." They sort of laugh about it. I think, how tragic! How tragic to coast out of this life when there are so many things that can be done for the Kingdom of God! When he could attend a school of preaching as I encouraged him to do. He could be preaching the Gospel now. We have a tremendous need for preachers of the Gospel in Northern Illinois and Southern Wisconsin. So many things he could have done with his life. And yet he has chosen the easy way out, the life of ease. The life of just coasting on out, until he departs from this life. How shameful that is! What a waste of talent!

Jesus would say, "Here is your cross. You are needed for certain jobs in the Kingdom. Are you willing to take up that cross daily and follow me?" It is a shame that with many of our denominational friends, their appeal to the world is, "you will have things so easy if you come and worship with us." Here is a card that we received in the mail not long ago. Very slick advertising. It concerns a new denominational church in the area. I want to read their appeal on the back side of this card, their appeal in trying to attract people to this new denominational church. It says, "This church is a new contemporary church in McHenry County. Our services include a live band, contemporary music, drama, and relevant messages from the Bible. We have fun and we have creative children’s programs held during the service, and children’s clubs during the week. Therefore, be our guest this fall." Very positive, is it not? Very attractive, very appealing. On the back there is a picture here. I guess this is the All-American family. The handsome father, the beautiful mother, the two little girls playing in the leaves and so forth. All of the wonderful things that will come about if you just attend their particular group.
Suppose instead that we were to tell the truth to people. We might advertise something like this. "Wanted, Christians to bear crosses. Very low pay. Persecution possible. Rewards guaranteed only in the next life." We would not attract very many. And yet that is what our Lord is saying here. That if we decide to follow Him, there will be some cost. There is no need to compromise with the world and try to get people in by deception. They will be required to deny self, and secondly, He requires us to pick up some kind of cross that we will have and daily carry that cross.

Would you please notice the third part of Luke 9:23. "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." Is it possible to deny self, and then to go on and to be willing to suffer for Christ, to receive ridicule and scorn and still miss salvation? The answer is yes, because there is a third part. The third part is that not only do we deny self and pick up a cross, but we have to follow the commandments of Christ. Do what He says for us to do.

And if you would turn with me over to the book of Matthew, chapter 7, Jesus tells us something here. Matthew 7: 21. He talks about how in the day of Judgment, people will argue with Him on this very point. They will think that they should be saved because they have denied self and taken up the cross. And He said that there is something else here. Notice Matthew 7:21-23.

"Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in Heaven will enter. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from me you who practice lawlessness.'"

Beloved, there are people who are out in the world today who are taking care of orphans in the name of Jesus Christ. There are people around us who are taking care of the sick in the name of Jesus Christ. There are people who are taking care of AIDS patients in the name of Jesus Christ, but they are not following Christ, because they are not holding to the whole Gospel of Christ, the whole council of God. They are not teaching people that they have to be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. They are not teaching about being born again of the Spirit and the water. They are not teaching people to leave denominational churches and be just simple New Testament Christians once again. They are not teaching people to abandon the clergy/laity system and to be just brothers and sisters in Christ.

It is not enough just to deny self and to pick up a cross in the name of Christ and to bear that cross. That is not good enough. He says we must also follow Him. We must commit ourselves to obeying the words of our Savior, doing all that we can to carry out His will wherever His will leads us.

I would ask that each of us examine our lives this morning:
1. Have we denied self and placed Christ first in our hearts?
2. Have we picked up the cross? That is, because of our testimony for Jesus Christ, the way we live, there has been some kind of sacrifice that we have been called on to make. Have we made it and are we continuing to make it on a daily basis?
3. Have we committed ourselves to following the will of Christ, whereever it leads us and do the best we can to obey that Gospel?

If the answer is yes, then may God be with us as we walk through this journey in life. How long are we do deny self, and take up the cross and follow Christ? We are to carry out Luke 9:23 until the stars fall out of the sky and until the rivers run dry and until the sun ceases to shine and until the oceans are no more, and until the Earth is destroyed when the trumpet of the Lord shall sound and time shall be no more. May God be with us as we carry out the words of Christ in this passage.

There maybe some here this morning thinking about obeying the Gospel, and we certainly do not want to present a negative view of the Gospel that goes beyond the Scriptures. The Scriptures also talk about the positive side. They talk about the guilt that is removed at the point of baptism. There is the worldwide fellowship of God’s people that we have access to once we enter the family of God. There is the promise of eternal life. There is peace of mind. There is joy in our hearts that comes from obeying the Gospel. If you are ready to make that decision this morning, we ask that you make it known to us by coming to the front and being seated here while we stand and sing together.