

**Cross Walk:**

3/5 in Series

**Deny Yourself**

Matthew 16:24-28

03 27 2011 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

**Scripture: Matthew 16:24-28****The Call to Discipline**

On February 11, 2011, Ray Allen broke the record for three-point shots in the National Basketball Association. He surpassed Reggie Miller's eighteen year old record of 2,562 points. The thirty-five year old athlete plays for the Boston Celtics and is a ten-time NBA All-Star.

Allen has a smooth motion with a quick release. He makes shots from beyond the three-point line look effortless. Obviously, he is a gifted athlete with natural talent. However, there are a lot of good athletes in the world. In Ray Allen's career, the difference is discipline.

Celtics' coach, Doc Rivers, said, "*He's just a machine. He shoots every day. He works on it. He runs every day . . . he's the ultimate pro.*"

Allen practices a sacrificial work ethic. He arrives at the arena several hours before each game and shoots until he makes 150 baskets. Every successful game shot is the result of countless shots taken during practice. He practices. And practices. And practices. And then he practices some more! The difference is discipline.

(Material used with permission by Dr. Jamie Jenkins from his 03-07-2011 column in *Monday Morning*, published by the North Georgia Annual Conference of the UMC.)

Today we are continuing our Lenten worship series entitled ***Cross Walk***. The title possesses a dual meaning. *Cross Walk* reminds us of Jesus' journey to the cross. During this season, we are traveling what in Latin is called the *Via Dolorosa*—the *Way of the Cross*. We will witness God's great love for us in the sacrifice of his Son upon the cross.

Christians are also challenged to take our own *Cross Walk*. We hear Christ's command: "*Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.*" Christian discipleship calls us to follow in the footsteps of our Master. Today we focus on Christ's call to "***deny yourself.***" In Christian discipleship, the difference is discipline.

**Deny Yourself**

"*Deny yourself.*" You never see these words appear on bumper stickers, billboards, or ad campaigns. In fact, our culture preaches a contradictory message which declares, "*Spoil yourself!*" We live in a culture of self-indulgence and instant gratification. In a super-size society, bigger is better, and more is a must. The evidence is all about us.

<p>Take the <i>West Michigan Whitecaps</i> for example. The Class A minor league baseball team is affiliated with the <i>Detroit Tigers</i>. Last year (March 2009) a new giant hamburger was introduced at the <i>Whitecaps</i> stadium. The \$20 burger weighs four pounds</p>
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and contains five slabs of beef, five slices of cheese, a cup of chili, sour cream, corn chips, and salsa sandwiched in a one pound bun. For the health conscious, they include lettuce and tomatoes! Any individual who consumes the 4,800 calorie burger gets a free t-shirt—and a guest suite in the local cardiac unit!

God created us as a passionate people filled with physical appetites. Our passions make wonderful servants, but they make terrible masters. Life is a constant struggle to determine whether we control our desires or our desires control us.

The practice of self-denial in our spiritual lives enables spirit to rule over body, emotion, and mind. Paul wrote:

*Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live . . .*  
(Romans 8:12-13)

In devotional practices, this is sometimes called “*the mortification of the flesh.*” Now isn’t that a winsome phrase?!? In Pauline theology, “*the flesh*” doesn’t simply mean our physical bodies. Instead, it refers to our carnal, sinful desires that are contrary to God’s will in our lives. “*Mortification*” means to put to death. Paul calls us to “*put to death the misdeeds of the body.*” Self-denial enables us to bridle our natural urges so that they bring glory to God.

The season of **Lent** reminds us about the important of self-denial. Last week we saw how one of this season’s disciplines is to “*give up*” something for Lent. In turn, we are also called to “*take up*” something as well. Such personal sacrifice not only practices self-denial but also recalls Christ’s sacrifice for us.

**Fasting** is one example of self-denial. This is an ancient practice of devout Christians that takes a variety of forms. Some people choose to fast from particular foods for a season. Others choose to occasionally omit a meal to spend time in prayer and study. Twenty-four hour fasts in which only water is consumed are not uncommon.

Self-denial takes many forms. During Lent, we are reminded that the difference is discipline.

### **The Goal of Self-Denial**

Ultimately, self-denial is a **means to an end**. In our cross walk, the discipline in discipleship enables us to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. We travel from where we are to where God calls us to be.

Jesus said that those who seek to save their life will lose it; but those who lose their lives—for the kingdom’s sake—will save it.

Self-denial means giving up one thing for **something better**. We give up the bad for the good. We give up the good for the better. We give up the better for the best. At the conclusion of 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul wrote about “*the most excellent way.*” This is the path we are called to pursue as Christians. We dare settle for nothing less.

During our stewardship campaign last fall, Phil Schroeder shared a quote from a successful businessman and motivational speaker named Jim Rohn. Rohn said: “***We must all suffer from one of two pains: the pain of discipline or the pain of regret. The difference is discipline weighs ounces while regret weighs tons.***”

Rohn’s words contain both bad news and good news. The bad news is that there’s going to be pain regardless of our choice. In a fallen world, life *is* pain. The good news is that we can choose which type of pain we experience: the pain of discipline or the pain of regret. Discipline costs momentary pain for long-term benefit. Regret purchases short-term pleasure at the cost of long-term pain.

This principle works on so many levels of life.

<b>Discipline</b>	<b>Regret</b>
• Exercise	Flabby muscles
• Diet	Poor health
• Decisiveness	Procrastination
• Tithing	Misspending
• Work	Laziness
• Savings	Insolvency
• Communication	Misunderstanding
• Bible Study	Biblical illiteracy
• Silence	Gossip

Discipline or regret—the choice is ours. However, discipline weighs ounces and regret weighs tons. The difference is discipline.

### **Practice, Practice, Practice**

So how do we learn the discipline of self-denial? Well, there’s an OLD joke about a tourist in New York City who asked a taxi driver, “How do I get to Carnegie Hall?” The driver responded, “Practice, practice, practice!”

There’s an old saying that is true in almost every forum of life: “*Practice makes perfect.*” Discipline is the practice of developing and continuing good habits. It is not easy, but it is essential. You can’t get from here to there any other way.

Ray Allen understands the importance of **practice** in basketball. He spends hours in the gym, arrives hours before the game, and shoots hundreds of shots. Over his career, he has an astounding .400 average for three-point shots. The only secret to his success is hard work. Allen has combined natural ability with practice, practice, practice.

The same principle is at work in Christian discipleship. Self-denial does not come naturally to humans. It’s something that we have to try again and again. And we will fail again and again. Continued repetition is required for the mastery of any subject. Anything that looks effortless reveals that a lot of effort that went into it.

When I moved to Sam Jones eleven years ago, one of my goals was to become a **better preacher**. So I deliberately moved away from the pulpit in order to become less dependent on my notes. Today, people occasionally ask me how I memorize my sermon. I answer in two ways. First of all, I don't completely. I have an entire manuscript right here on the pulpit, and I refer to it often.

Secondly, I practice. And practice. And practice. I rehearse the sermon several times on Thursday. In fact, some of the best sermons I've ever preached have been during the week in an empty sanctuary! I review it Saturday afternoon. I go to sleep preaching it to myself Saturday night. I preach it again on my way to church Sunday morning. I review it one more time in the office. Then I preach it three times at the worship services.

There's no trick here—anyone could do it. It simply requires practice, practice, and practice. The difference is discipline.

Practice makes perfect in every aspect of life:

- Shooting a basket
- Playing an instrument
- Scoring well on a test
- Crafting a piece of art
- Taking a photograph
- Fixing a leaking commode
- Recognizing God's blessings
- Seeing the best in others
- Intentional Prayer
- Daily Bible Study
- Regular worship attendance
- Service

Practice, practice, practice. Practice not only makes perfect, practice also makes it **easier**. There's an old saying, "*Beginnings are hard.*" Starting something new is always difficult. Learning curves are steep and require an inordinate amount of time and energy.

Over time, however, we begin to get the knack. What once felt unnatural and awkward becomes natural and comfortable. The new becomes common practice. Common practice grows into habit. Habit transforms into lifestyle. After long practice, you don't even think about it any more, you just do it. The difference is discipline.

### **The Lord of Life**

Ultimately, the practice or neglect of self-denial reveals who or what controls our lives. I recall a Christian tract from my youth that contained a simple diagram. It portrayed one's life as a circle with a throne in the middle. The picture depicted a simple question: "Who sits on the throne of my life?" What commands my ultimate allegiance and loyalty? To quote an old song by Bob Dylan, "*Ya gotta serve somebody.*"

Last week I talked about the difference between recognizing Jesus Christ as THE Savior and Lord and declaring Jesus Christ as MY Savior and Lord. When Christ is Lord of our lives, we submit every aspect of our lives to the Spirit's control. We love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We love our neighbor as ourselves. We pray for God's will rather than our own selfish will. The difference is discipline.

However, God's grace is always active even in our feeble attempts at faithfulness. The Lord has a long habit of taking the least and last and transforming it into the most and first.

We work in partnership with the Holy Spirit in our lives. It's a bit like **power steering** in automobiles. A slight shift of the steering wheel is mechanically multiplied to change the course of the car.

You cannot change your destination overnight, but you can change your direction overnight. (Jim Rohn) The difference is discipline.

### **Conclusion**

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, King Frederick William III of Prussia faced an economic crisis due to foreign wars and domestic programs. He needed additional funds in order for the kingdom to survive. So he issued a call to all the ladies of the realm. He asked them to donate their gold and silver jewelry to be melted down for the royal treasury. In exchange, they received ornaments of bronze or iron. The medals bore the inscription: "*I gave gold for iron, 1813.*"

The response was overwhelming. In fact, it became unfashionable to wear jewelry, and the new badges of iron became highly prized. These medals declared for all the world to see that these ladies had sacrifice for their king. This was how the **Order of the Iron Cross** was established in what would later become the nation of Germany.

Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Follow Jesus. At the root of Christian discipleship, the difference is discipline.