

## Sermon

Grace Street Fellowship, Dr. Jim Burgin, pastor

Sunday, February 25, 2018

SERMON SERIES: **COME TO THE CROSS**

Part 1 – The Freedom of the Cross – Luke 9:23-25

Then he said to them all: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self.

### INTRODUCTION – LESSONS FROM AN ATHEIST

1. This week, one of my colleagues introduced me to the late David Foster Wallace (1962-2008), an American writer and university instructor of English and creative writing. His 1996 novel, *Infinite Jest*, was listed by Time magazine as one of the hundred best English-language novels published between 1923 and 2005. His last novel published posthumously, *The Pale King*, was a final selection for the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2012. The Los Angeles times book reviewer David Ulin called Wallace “one of the most influential and innovative writers of the last 20 years.”
2. Wallace gave a graduation speech at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio at some point, and here are some of the critical points he made.<sup>1</sup>

### LIFE LESSONS FROM DR. WALLACE

1. People are often unaware of the forces which shape them – Wallace tells the tale of two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way who nods at them and says, “Morning, boys, how’s the water? The two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and says, “What in the world is water?” It is possible to be shaped by a worldview or a culture and to be completely unaware of those shaping forces. Two examples come to mind:
  - a. When I work with young couples about getting married – they often are already living together – but they don’t have even the smallest knowledge that this might be harmful to the very life they are trying to build together, much less that it might be outside of God’s will. Living together without a marriage covenant is so pervasive and normal, that it is difficult for many to see their relationship any differently.
  - b. From time to time at Mission Arlington we have people who get frustrated by something and break out into a string of curse words. When we gently bring the language to their attention, many of these beautiful volunteers literally have no idea that the rest of the world might respond differently. It’s how their parents talked, their friends, and so on.

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<sup>1</sup> You can read the full speech here: <http://bulletin-archive.kenyon.edu/x4280.html>

## 2. People Intuitively believe that they are the center of the Universe

- a. Wallace contends that this self-centeredness is a default setting, hard-wired into us at birth. Think about it, he suggests. We have been at the center of every experience we have ever had – something happens in front of us, to the right of us, left of us, and so on.
- b. He illustrates with a real-life story. Suppose you have an average day – get up early in the morning, go to your challenging job, and you work hard for 9-10 hours. By the end of the day, you are tired and stressed out, and all you want to do is to go home, eat a good meal, and unwind for a couple of hours before you go to bed and do it all over again the next day. But when you get home you realized you don't have any food in the house, because who has time to shop when you work all the time. So, you force yourself to get up and go to the grocery store. When you get there, it's packed, because everyone else is doing the same thing. The traffic was horrible, the store is poorly lit, and they are playing Muzak or corporate pop in the background. The store is filled with old people, and spacey slow people, and kids everywhere with ADHD who block the aisle. You grit your teeth, smile, and try to be polite. When the line is long at the checkout stand, you remind yourself not to unload your stress onto the frantic lady checking everyone out. The bottom line becomes that everyone else is in my way.
- c. If you are somewhat self-aware, you say to yourself that the woman screaming at her kids may need help. Perhaps she has been up all night for 3 nights with a sick kid. The guy who cut you off in traffic may have a little child who is hurt or sick in the seat next to him, and he is trying to rush to the hospital – and maybe I am the one in his way and not the other way around.
- d. But even if you are good at work-a rounds like this, we understand that our default setting is to be self-centered. The Bible calls this sin.

## 3. Everyone Worships Someone or Something

- a. For many, what or who they worship is unconscious. They're completely unaware of what drives them, or of their own worldview.
- b. For Wallace, there is no true atheism, because everyone worships something. The only choice you have is what you worship. When the object of your worship isn't god, but something smaller, it will ultimately eat you alive. For example:
  - i. Worship of Money & Things – if you worship money and things – if this is your real meaning in life – then you will never have enough, and you will spend the rest of your life chasing what you can never achieve;
  - ii. Worship of your body, beauty, sexual allure – then you will always feel ugly, and when time and age begin to show in your life, you will die a thousand deaths before you finally are buried
  - iii. Worship of Power – will make you feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay.
  - iv. Worship of Intellect – to be seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. And so on.

4. Your Idols have extraordinary power to enslave & diminish you
- a. In his book Infinite Jest – Wallace asks the question: What if they could create a movie that was so good, it ruins you. Would you watch it?
  - b. Written before the internet age, Wallace posits that an entertainment of this sort would be a kind of “death by candy.” For example, he said that entertainment screens will become more fun than real life. “And the better the images get, the more tempting it is going to be to interact with images rather than other people. Back in 1996, Wallace actually ditched his TV.

### COME TO THE CROSS

1. Let’s look to a story which is communicated in 3 of the 4 gospels.
2. Jesus and His disciples were in the area of Caesarea Philippi. It was an area bursting at the seams with false worship to false gods whose altars and temples filled the landscape.
3. Jesus asks his disciples an all important question – Who do you say that I am? Amazingly, Peter gets it right. He says “You are the Christ, the son of the living God,” and Jesus praises him, recognizing that Peter’s answer could only have been revealed to him by God.
4. Then Jesus explains the meaning of this to them – that at the Christ, he will suffer, be rejected by the religious establishment, then be killed and ultimately come back to life on the third day.
5. Luke leaves out Peter’s rebuke of Jesus which Matthew records, but then he explains to his disciples what it will mean for each of us to follow Christ. We must do 3 things – deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and follow Him. Jesus came to give His life for us, and now we are called to lay down our lives for Him.
6. Tim Keller in his book Jesus the King says that Jesus tells his disciples that “I am a King who came to die on a cross. If you want to follow me, you’ve got to come to the cross.”
7. David Platt, the head of the International Mission Board for Southern Baptists says it like this: “We American Christians have a way of taking the Jesus of the Bible and twisting him into a version of Jesus that we are more comfortable with. A nice middle-class American Jesus. A Jesus who doesn’t mind materialism and would never call us to give away everything we have. A Jesus who is fine with nominal devotion that does not infringe on our comforts. A Jesus who wants us to avoid danger altogether. A Jesus who brings comfort and prosperity to us as we live out our Christian spin on the American Dream.”<sup>2</sup>
8. John Piper says it like this: “I don’t want to be a comfort-seeking, entertainment-addicted, security-craving, approval-desiring Christian.”<sup>3</sup>
9. So, what do we do? We come to the cross.

<sup>2</sup> Here are a few other quotes from David Platt which will challenge our comfortable hearts:  
<https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/9657002-radical-taking-back-your-faith-from-the-american-dream>

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from the sermon section of the Desiring God Website, located here: <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages>.  
 The quote is an excerpt from Piper’s “The Plundering of Your Property and the Power of Hope.”

## HOW TO FOLLOW CHRIST

1. Deny Ourselves - To follow Jesus means we must deny ourselves. The word deny means to "completely disown, to utterly separate from someone." He is calling us to renounce the rights to our life and sign them over to Him. What does this mean?
  - a. We relinquish ownership of our lives to Him;
  - b. We acknowledge that He has purchased the title deed to our lives;
  - c. We now belong to Him. (We have been bought with a price);
  - d. We separate ourselves from the person we used to be. (We are new in Christ).
  
2. Take Up Our Cross
  - a. Sometimes when we are burdened by something we say "I guess that's just my cross to bear." It might be a weight or a burden, and a struggle, but it isn't what Jesus meant by taking up his cross.
  - b. The disciples knew what Jesus was talking about, because the images were burned in their minds. Rome had already crucified between 20 and 30 thousand people.
  - c. It was a call to die to yourself in order to follow Christ. When you take up your cross, 1) you can only face one way; you can't turn back, and you are fully committed.
  - d. T.S. Rendall said "Too many Christians are trying to face in two directions at the same time. They have a divided heart. They want heaven, but they also love this world."
  - e. Dietrich Bonhoeffer remind us, however, that the "cross is not the end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ.
  
3. Follow Him – wherever he leads we will go!
  - a. In January of 1936, the Southern Baptist songwriter B.B. McKinney was leading the music at the Alabama Sunday School Convention which was held that year in the town of Clanton. The featured speaker was the Reverend R.S. Jones, McKinney's friend of many years, who because of ill health had recently returned from missionary service in Brazil.
  - b. The two men were visiting over dinner one evening when Mr. Jones revealed to Dr. McKinney that his physicians would not allow him to return to South America. When asked about his future plans, the missionary said, "I don't know, but wherever He leads I'll go."
  - c. The words stuck in Dr. McKinney's mind, and before the convention's evening session began, he had written both the words and the music of this famous hymn.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Billy Graham, "Wherever He Leads I'll Go" as reported by Tan Bible:  
<http://bulletin-archive.kenyon.edu/x4280.html>.

- (1) “Take up thy cross and follow me,” I heard my Master say;  
 “I gave me life to ransom thee, Surrender your all today.”

Chorus

Wherever He leads I’ll go. Wherever He leads I’ll go.  
 I’ll follow my Christ who loves me so. Wherever He leads I’ll go.

- (2) He drew me closer to His side. I sought His will to know,  
 And in that will I now abide. Wherever He leads I’ll go.
- (3) It may be through the shadows dim, Or o’er the stormy sea,  
 I take my cross and follow Him, Wherever He leadeth me.

### CONCLUSION

Willie Blair was a successful civil engineer who found himself separated from his wife and in Arlington, because of a horrible alcohol addiction. He began to do his community service at Mission Arlington, and he made his way to Grace Street. He attended our celebrate recovery, and our team leader at the time, Chuck Crook began to sponsor him.

Willie was a Master salesman who believed he could talk his way out of anything. Even staying in the life shelter, he always dressed like he was still a successful engineer without a care in the world. He had a way of making a big entrance with a booming voice, a big smile, a quick walk, a big wave and a strong handshake. In his intial conversations with Chuck and me, he said his problem with alcohol really wasn’t that bad. With sheer force of personality, Willie was going to turn things back around.

Though the conversations are confidential, after Willie had begun Celebrate Recovery, he told me one day what Chuck had said to him that made the difference. According to Chuck – the hole Willie’s addiction had brought him into, was a whole lot deeper – it was a long way to the bottom. After a while, Willie and his wife rejoined, and I still remember the day that the two of them reunited in Houston.

Not long after that, she and Willie began a new ministry called the Southwest Glen Mission apartment ministry like Mission Arlington, but in Houston. Willie formed a team, then started loving on inner city children in Houston. He called me constantly wanting to know what to do next, how to form a non-profit ministry, what we would do in these circumstances, etc. They brought their team to Mission Arlington several times, and they also became more and more successful. He still called every few weeks and was always excited about what the Lord was doing.

He passed away this week, and the funeral was on Saturday. I’ve been thinking about him and the hole he was in, so deep he couldn’t get out. He grabbed for the gusto, and it enslaved him, but then he gave himself wholly to Christ, left here to begin again from the bottom, and followed Christ into a full time apartment mission work. Glory to God.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> To learn more about the work of Willie Blair, check out Southwest Glen Missions, Houston: <http://swglenmission.org/>