

...FOR THOSE SEEKING THE EMPOWERING PRESENCE OF THE *Holy Spirit*

# LutheranRenewal

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## Stop Thinking About Yourself

By Paul Anderson

Is that possible? Not after being dumped on, ignored or insulted, or so it seems. Apparently, the apostle Paul thinks so, because he wrote: *"In humility consider others better than yourselves"* (Phil. 2:3). The reason that we think about ourselves is that we regard ourselves with importance. Truth is we are special, individually crafted by God, but the flip side is that we are a vapor, a puff of smoke, here for a moment, then gone. Is the apostle waxing other-worldly, talking about the unrealistic expectation of focusing on others even in the presence of pain? Listen again for that powerful word "others": *"Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others"* (I Cor. 10:24). Who lives this way?

Jesus gave us four phrases to help us stop thinking about ourselves: *"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 will find it"* (Matt. 16:24,25).

**DENY YOURSELF.** Talk about counter-intuitive. It flies in the face of a culture that sets us on a "pursuit of happiness," that tells us in TV ads to enjoy ourselves, improve ourselves, look out for ourselves. Jesus' teaching completely reverses these affirmative exhortations. Self-denial sounds too monastic for a twenty-first century Christian, too negative for positive thinkers. My, how we have lost touch with reality.

If we called people to be our disciples, we might say, "If anyone would come after me, he will enjoy all kinds of benefits." We at least would sound more upbeat than Jesus. But the Master is not looking for a smile at the starting block but for endurance to the finish line. He is not so insecure as to need a high-five from would-be followers. He skips the pep talk and addresses hard issues, and I wish I followed Him more closely.

So stop thinking about yourself, as if everyone notices, because they don't. Stop thinking about the need for attention or approval. Obey the Scriptures and overlook insults. Your level of offense matches your level of self-importance. Clue: Jesus lived beyond offense.

**TAKE UP YOUR CROSS.** Jesus' second statement didn't ease the command. People knew about crosses in those days. They were invented for torture. Jesus didn't sound anywhere close to self-help books that line the



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bookstore shelves. He took up His cross by thinking of the people who crucified Him. How else could He forgive them? He was thinking of the thief. How else could He have granted him paradise? He was thinking of His mother. How else could He have looked to her needs in the midst of deep anguish?

Not that Jesus wasn't tempted to think about Himself. Why else would He rebuke Peter so strongly for getting in His way? He modeled for us the way we need to come against the tempter and against temptation—immediately and aggressively. We find a phrase repeated in the Matthew 16 passage: *"he must."* When Jesus spoke of His impending death, He told the disciples that *"he must go to Jerusalem and suffer..."* When He then spoke about their need to follow Him, we read: *"He must deny himself and take up his cross..."* He speaks with urgency about two crosses—His and ours. And if His involves hardship, so will ours. Suffering does not usually indicate that we have taken a wrong turn; it may signal that we are taking up our cross. And when we suffer for this reason, Jesus is never closer!



When you wake with a migraine, when a spouse threatens divorce, or when you are misunderstood again, thinking about others rises as an unrealistic expectation. Then consider Paul, who tells us, *"...consider others better than yourself."* He writes from prison, and he planted the church he is addressing out of excruciating pain. He chose not to think about himself when to do so would have been natural (we might even say "necessary"). When we learn not to think about ourselves when life takes a left turn, then God Himself comes into those situations with His love and power, or as R. T. Kendall would say, "We pass over into the supernatural." God promises to draw near to the humble, and one of the clearest ways to show humility is to regard others in the presence of pain.



William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, was expected at a rally. When travel difficulties prevented him, he wired ahead his message—one word: "Others!" I once watched an elder of our church live that word out after reading a scathing letter from a church member. He dropped to his knees and said, "Lord, bless her." That picture is embedded in my mind—a reminder that thinking of others, even when under attack, models the cross of Jesus. We are not required to retreat inside and pity ourselves; we owe the flesh nothing. Responding in the opposite spirit reflects the mark of Calvary.

Jesus was not training medieval monks; He was raising up Kingdom warriors. No more exciting life exists. If it sounds morbid, blame it on our confusing sentimentality with suffering. True God-honoring, self-denying concern for others cannot be beat for adventure because God will show up to manifest His glory. You might be thinking, *"I must think about myself, because no one else does."* You're wrong. You think of others—and watch God think of you!

So try dying when having given your best shot at your company for the past 10 hours, you come home and are called to break up a fight, take out the trash, and then listen to the moans of a daughter transitioning into the world of teens. Something inside says, "You deserve a break." Try dying when you go to work to serve and someone else receives the promotion you deserved. When the going gets tough, we're more in a mood to crucify others than to die to ourselves. So for God's sake, quit feeling sorry for yourself and rise above the mediocre. Anyone can complain, but you're shooting for the favor of God.

Does this apply if a guy dumps his wife for a newer model, and she's reeling under the rejection? Do you tell her to die to herself and follow Jesus? You do if you're inviting her to a place of higher

spiritual authority than she's ever experienced. The deeper the suffering the greater the anointing—for those taking up their cross rather than taking up the offense. You could help her feel pity for her situation, produce a victim—and prolong the pain. Of course, we don't say it with knee-jerk reaction and announce coldly, "Well, all things work together..." You go into the dumps and help her out. Your compassion gives you the invitation to speak truth in love.

**FOLLOW JESUS.** Jesus lived out the mission statement, *"The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (Matt. 20:28). Life flowed from the inside out, not the outside in. We model our lives after Him, not after the non-heroes of our culture. We judge success not by how much we gain but by how much we give. Ouch!

Living unselfishly and above offense models authentic Christianity. Danger: Not recommended for would-be disciples looking for the comfort of home (Luke 9:58) or those more committed to family than to Jesus (vs. 59). Offer it to those who have said, "I want to live like Jesus." If we decide to die, something is being planted that will sprout healthy fruit. Or as someone has said, "If we sow it, God can grow it." But if we choose instead to sow selfishness, we reap disaster. I don't want to simply get into the Word. I want the Word to get into me, especially the strong words of Jesus, the words that tell me to die, the words that can make a difference between life and death—not just mine but theirs. I know I live too selfishly!

**LOSE YOUR LIFE.** I once met someone on the plane whose life was lost in service. She exuded joy every time she walked down the aisle to serve drinks, food, or water, to offer headsets or pick up trays. Finally I asked her, "So what's your secret?" She said, "My parents raised me this way. I thank God for them." She was giving herself away, and it showed with every step. She served us by extending joy. She loved to make others happy. She lived a lost life if I ever saw one, and she lightened up the atmosphere of the whole plane. Sound appealing? Did she have everything going her way? No, she decided to have it going the other way, from the inside out—in a word, "Others!"

Jesus didn't speak only about death. He said *"that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life"* (Matt. 16:21). Paul wrote that *"if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him"* (Rom. 6:8).

So if you're willing to die, look for a resurrection. It follows as surely as Sunday comes after Friday.

*"I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare"*

2 Timothy 2:20

The admonition to stop thinking about yourself invites you to a life of joy, the back door to the highest pleasures. Jesus died for us—call it salvation. We die for others—call it sanctification. Jesus didn't consider this the only way to live. He did say "if:" *"If anyone would come after me..."* But it is the only way to live as a disciple of Jesus. He gives no option: I am either a disciple of Jesus, or I am not. I am either living by dying, or I am not. I am either dying in my marriage, or I am living for myself. We need more people who are good at dying. Don't turn it into a trivial exercise, as if to say, "Okay, go ahead. Dump on me." The flight attendant proved to be anything but morbid.

Paul gave the highest tribute to Timothy when he said, *"I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare"* (2 Tim. 2:20). He contrasted him with everyone who *"looks out for his own interests."* I know some selfless people. They remember the struggles of others, rather than expecting others to remember theirs. It is as if others



are on their mind; they have thrown away the scorecard. When they say that you are in their prayers, you know they mean it, and prayer works for them. They know how to serve without any pushiness or manipulation. Their character exudes beauty, and it seems effortless for them, though you know it takes every ounce of grace God supplies them. By contrast, people who think about themselves give us the feeling that they didn't get the breaks they needed earlier in life, so now they must make up for it. Serving others does not come naturally for them.



One warning: expect a reaction inside. Dying is not fun—never. The fruit produced, however, tastes good. If you say, “But I’m not good at dying,” that’s all right, because Jesus will give you ample opportunities—every day. Where do we die? Not at a conference or at a silent retreat. We die at home, at work, with the mundane, not the glorious; we die in big and small ways, by going second, by keeping our mouth shut, by deferring to others. Dying is public (others do it to me), personal (I feel real irritation), progressive (I must die daily—and the offenses against me are repeated), and painful (if it doesn’t hurt, it is not the cross). I know more about Christ’s cross than about mine. But I do know that my cross is something that brings death to me, something that I must fight through rather than delight in, something that I must live out daily as opposed to a one-time event, something that brings life to others in the process. My cross is the price I pay to obey God. The cross is not something caused by my

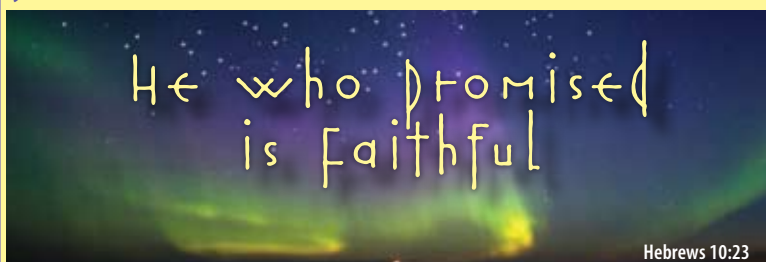
disobedience, by taking a wrong turn and paying the consequences, but by going right and having to live with it.

Apostolic Christianity that centers on the cross dethrones self: self-awareness, self-fulfillment, self-actualization. So if you don’t get the sympathy card, maybe it is because Jesus wants you to focus on someone who needed it more than you did. And self-denial is more than a denial of things—it is I who must go. The cross deals with more than sin; it goes after self.

Does this sound a tad grim? It isn’t—not even close. “Grim” better describes those consumed with their own discomforts, absorbed in their daily disappointments, overwhelmed by life’s injustices, unable to lift their head long enough to see others who are hurting. They are incapable of taking their attention off themselves for more than a few minutes. They know they might need healing, but they can never get over it. But not the flight attendant, not Timothy, certainly not Jesus, nor anyone who takes the words of Jesus literally. So it may not be bad advice after all: **Stop thinking about yourself!**

We are joyfully anticipating all that the Lord is going to do as we gather in August. The Conference has a definite healing emphasis when you consider the main speakers and many of the workshops. At this time, the Lord is increasing a healing anointing at other places around the country. We are praying, “Why not here...why not at the Conference?” We stand in eager expectation to see what He will do here, too! **“Yes, Lord!”**

**Reminder:** You may watch the main sessions “live” by going to: [www.nhlc.tv/](http://www.nhlc.tv/). Click on the “Live Feed” link and you’ll be with us!



**Lutheran Holy Spirit Conference • August 6-9, 2008**  
with main sessions and workshops daily



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Pastor and Author  
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