

## The Cross of Christ, Teacher's Guide

### Lesson 12: Living in Gratitude: Take Up Your Cross

#### Luke 9:23–26

#### Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This is the capstone lesson of the study, and the doctrine at stake is the proper response to the cross: daily cross-bearing discipleship and crucified-with-Christ living, a transformed gratitude expressed in a faithful life. After eleven lessons on what the cross accomplished for us, Luke 9:23–26 turns to what the cross calls forth from us. Jesus makes self-denial, daily cross-bearing, and following him the basic shape of discipleship, not an advanced option. Help the class see that this is the destination of the whole series. The fitting answer to a love that gave everything is a life given wholly back, summed up in Paul's words: I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

Two doctrinal boundaries must be held firmly and pastorally. First, against cheap grace: the New Testament knows nothing of a forgiveness that asks no surrender. Grace is free but never cheap; the same blood that redeemed us claims us entirely. To receive pardon while refusing to follow the crucified Lord is to treat his death as a small thing. Discipleship is costly because the cross was costly. Second, against the presumption of once saved, always saved: Jesus calls for a daily taking up of the cross, a lifelong walk of faithfulness, and Scripture warns plainly that Christians can fall away and must remain faithful. Salvation is preserved through ongoing faith and obedience, not guaranteed apart from it. Reject both the Calvinistic guarantee of perseverance and any cheapening of grace into mere mental acceptance. Hold together, as the New Testament does, the freeness of grace and the necessity of remaining faithful to the end.

Aim the lesson, and the whole study, at transformed gratitude rather than grim duty. The call to deny self and take up the cross is not joyless legalism; it is the most freeing invitation in the world, the losing of the grasping self that has made us miserable and the finding of the life we were made for. The formational target is that after twelve lessons gazing at the cross, students would not merely admire it but be so changed by it that they take up their cross daily and follow the crucified Lord in grateful faithfulness. Keep the tone, as throughout, one of marveling at the love of Christ and offering a wholehearted life in return. He loved us and gave himself for us; the fitting answer is to give ourselves wholly back to him.

#### Question 1

##### Student Question:

*Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (v. 23). What does it mean to deny yourself and take up your cross, and why does Jesus make this the basic shape of following him rather than an advanced or optional step?*

## **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

Begin by letting the call land in full force: if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. Jesus makes self-denial and cross-bearing not an advanced level of discipleship for the especially devout, but the basic entry shape of following him at all. There is no other kind of Christianity than the cross-bearing kind. This guards the class from imagining a discipleship without surrender.

Explain what deny himself means. It is not denying oneself certain pleasures, like giving up something for a season; it is the denial of self as the ruling center of one's life. The disciple says no to the throne of self and yes to the lordship of Christ. The self that demanded to run everything is dethroned, and Christ takes its place. This is the daily, fundamental reorientation of the Christian.

Explain take up his cross. In Jesus' world the cross meant one thing: a man carrying his cross was a condemned man walking to his death. To take up the cross is to embrace the death of the self-ruled life, to follow Christ even when it costs, to die to our own agenda for the sake of his. It is not merely bearing hardship, as people sometimes use the phrase, but dying to self in order to live to him.

Hold the call together with the love we have studied. This is not a cold demand from a distant master; it is the invitation of the One who first took up his cross for us. We deny ourselves and take up our cross in response to the One who denied himself and took up his cross for our sake. The order matters: his cross came first, and ours is the grateful answer to his.

## **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Self-denial and cross-bearing as the basic shape of discipleship, not an option (Luke 9:23; Mark 8:34)
- Denying self as dethroning self and submitting to Christ's lordship
- Taking up the cross as dying to the self-ruled life, not merely bearing hardship
- Our cross-bearing as the grateful response to Christ's cross for us

## **Discussion Prompts**

- What does it mean to deny yourself and take up your cross?
- Why does Jesus make this the basic shape of following him?
- How is our cross-bearing a response to his cross for us?

## **Question 2**

**Student Question:**

*Self-denial sounds harsh to modern ears, yet Jesus presents it as the way to life. What is the “self” he calls you to deny, and where is that self most loudly asserting itself in your life right now?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

This self-examining question presses the meaning of the self Jesus calls us to deny. Modern ears hear self-denial as repression or low self-worth, but Jesus means something different and freeing. The self to be denied is the grasping, self-centered, self-ruling self, the part of us that insists on being god of our own lives, that demands its own way, that organizes everything around its own comfort and glory.

Help students see that this self is not their friend. It is the very self that has made them anxious and discontent, never satisfied, always defending its territory. To deny it is not self-hatred but liberation from a tyrant. We are not denying our true selves, the selves God made and redeemed; we are denying the usurper that has been ruling in God’s place.

Invite honest naming of where this self asserts itself. For one it shows up as the need to control; for another, as the craving for approval; for another, as self-pity, or self-promotion, or the insistence on comfort. The self speaks loudest in the places we most resist surrender. Identifying its voice is the first step to denying it.

Aim at one concrete place of surrender. Ask each student to name where the self is most loudly asserting itself right now, and to practice denying it there this week, yielding that specific territory to Christ. Self-denial is not a vague posture but a daily, particular dethroning of the self in the concrete situations of life.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The self to be denied as the grasping, self-ruling usurper, not our God-given identity
- Self-denial as liberation from a tyrant, not self-hatred (Matthew 16:25)
- Discerning where the self asserts itself most loudly
- Daily, particular surrender of self to Christ

### **Discussion Prompts**

- What is the self Jesus calls you to deny, and what is it not?
- Where is that self most loudly asserting itself in your life right now?
- What specific territory will you yield to Christ this week?

### **Question 3**

**Student Question:**

*Jesus emphasizes taking up the cross “daily.” Why is discipleship a daily, ongoing surrender rather than a one-time decision, and what does this tell us about the nature of the Christian life as a lifelong walk of faithfulness?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

Draw attention to the word daily, which Luke records in Jesus’ call. The taking up of the cross is not a once-for-all act but a daily practice. This single word reshapes our whole understanding of the Christian life. Discipleship is not a decision made once and then assumed; it is a walk renewed every morning, a surrender taken up afresh each day.

Explain why discipleship must be daily. The self does not stay dethroned after a single act of surrender; it climbs back onto the throne overnight. New temptations come each day, new occasions to choose self or Christ. So the cross must be taken up daily, the self denied daily, the Lord followed daily. The Christian life is lived one day at a time, in a thousand small surrenders.

Connect this to the nature of salvation as a lifelong walk. This church rightly understands that following Christ is not a momentary event but a faithful walk that continues to the end. The daily cross-bearing of Luke 9 is of a piece with the New Testament’s consistent call to continue, to remain, to endure, to be faithful unto death. Conversion begins the walk; discipleship is the walk itself, taken up day by day.

Offer encouragement, not just demand. The daily nature of the cross is also a daily mercy. We are not asked to muster a lifetime of faithfulness all at once, only to take up the cross today. Each morning is a fresh start, a new opportunity to deny self and follow Christ, with his grace sufficient for the day. The daily call breaks the overwhelming whole into livable steps.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Discipleship as daily surrender, not a one-time decision (Luke 9:23)
- The self requiring daily dethroning, not a single act
- Salvation as a lifelong walk of faithfulness (Revelation 2:10)
- The daily cross as a daily mercy, with grace sufficient for each day

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Why is discipleship a daily surrender rather than a one-time decision?
- What does the word daily tell us about the Christian life?
- How is the daily nature of the cross also a daily mercy?

### **Question 4**

**Student Question:**

*Be honest about where you are tempted to treat your commitment to Christ as a finished transaction rather than a daily walk. What would change if you approached tomorrow as a fresh day to take up your cross and follow him?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

This self-focused question confronts the temptation to treat conversion as a completed transaction rather than the beginning of a daily walk. Many believers, having once responded to the gospel, settle into a kind of spiritual coasting, assuming the matter is permanently handled and requires nothing further of them day to day. Jesus' daily call cuts against this.

Help students recognize the signs of the finished-transaction mindset: prayer and Scripture grown sporadic, obedience treated as optional, faith assumed rather than exercised, a life that looks little different from before. None of this denies the reality of their initial response; it simply mistakes the start of the journey for its completion.

Show the difference a daily approach makes. To approach each morning as a fresh day to take up the cross and follow Christ transforms the Christian life from a static status into a living relationship. It keeps faith active, obedience fresh, and the heart engaged. The walk is renewed daily, and so it stays alive rather than calcifying into mere membership.

Aim at one concrete renewal. Invite each student to consider where they have been coasting on a past decision, and to take up tomorrow as a fresh day of discipleship, naming one way they will deny self and follow Christ. The Christian life is meant to be walked, not parked; the call is to keep walking, beginning again each day.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Conversion as the beginning of a walk, not a finished transaction (Philippians 2:12–13)
- The danger of spiritual coasting on a past decision
- Daily renewal keeping faith and obedience alive
- Discipleship as a living relationship rather than a static status

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Where are you tempted to treat your commitment to Christ as a finished transaction?
- What would change if you approached tomorrow as a fresh day to follow him?
- What is one way you will renew your daily walk with Christ?

### **Question 5**

#### **Student Question:**

*Jesus states the great paradox: "Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it" (v. 24). How does losing our life for Christ's sake turn out to be the way we truly find it, and why does clutching our own life end in losing it?*

## Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus states the great paradox of discipleship: whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. This is the deep logic of the cross applied to our own lives. The way to find life is to lose it; the way to keep it is to give it away. Clutching our life ends in losing it; surrendering it to Christ is how we truly find it.

Help the class understand the paradox rather than merely repeating it. To save our life, in Jesus' sense, is to make self-preservation and self-fulfillment our highest aim, organizing everything around protecting and pleasing ourselves. This seems like the path to a full life, but it ends in emptiness, because the grasping self can never be satisfied and finally loses even what it clung to. To lose our life for Christ is to surrender that self-centered grip, and in that surrender to discover the abundant life we were made for.

Show why this is true and not merely a clever saying. We were made by God and for God, made to find ourselves in self-giving love, as Christ did. A life curved in on itself contradicts our design and starves the soul. A life poured out for Christ and others fulfills our design and feeds the soul. The paradox holds because it matches the deepest reality of who we are and who God is.

Apply it pastorally and hopefully. This is not a threat but an invitation to real life. The losing Jesus calls for is not the loss of joy but the loss of the very thing stealing our joy, the tyrannical self. Those who have surrendered most to Christ are not the most diminished but the most alive. The way of the cross is the way to life, for him and for us.

## Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The paradox of discipleship: losing life for Christ to find it (Luke 9:24; John 12:24-25)
- Self-preservation as the highest aim ending in emptiness
- Surrender to Christ as the path to the abundant life we were made for
- The paradox grounded in our design for self-giving love

## Discussion Prompts

- How does losing your life for Christ's sake turn out to be the way to find it?
- Why does clutching our own life end in losing it?
- Why is this not a threat but an invitation to real life?

## Question 6

### Student Question:

*Where are you currently trying to "save" your life, holding tightly to comfort, control, reputation, or security, in a way that may actually be costing you the fuller life Christ offers? What would it mean to loosen that grip this week?*

## Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question asks students to locate where they are currently trying to save their lives. The instinct to save our life takes concrete forms: clutching comfort and refusing anything costly, grasping for control over outcomes we cannot govern, guarding reputation at the expense of honesty or witness, clinging to security as the highest good. Each is a way of saving a life that, Jesus warns, we will thereby lose.

Help students see the cost of the grip. The very things we clutch to make our lives full often crowd out the fuller life Christ offers. The grip on comfort keeps us from sacrificial love; the grip on control keeps us from trusting God; the grip on reputation keeps us from confessing Christ; the grip on security keeps us from generous risk. We lose the better life by clinging to the lesser.

Move toward loosening the grip. Jesus does not ask us to despise comfort, security, or good reputation in themselves, but to hold them with an open hand, refusing to let them rule us or compete with him. To loosen the grip is to say that Christ matters more, that we will follow him even where it costs us these things, trusting that what we lose for his sake we truly gain.

Aim at one concrete release. Invite each student to name where they are most tightly trying to save their life, and to loosen that grip this week in some specific way, choosing Christ over comfort, trust over control, witness over reputation, or generosity over security. The open hand is the posture of the disciple who has learned the paradox of the cross.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Saving our life through grasping comfort, control, reputation, or security (Luke 9:24–25)
- The lesser grip crowding out the fuller life Christ offers
- Holding good things with an open hand under Christ's lordship
- Loosening the grip as the posture of the disciple

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Where are you trying to save your life by holding tightly to something?
- How might that grip be costing you the fuller life Christ offers?
- What would it mean to loosen that grip this week?

### **Question 7**

#### **Student Question:**

*Jesus warns, "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?" (v. 25). How does this question expose the emptiness of a life spent gaining things while losing oneself, and how does the cross reorder what we count as gain and loss?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

Jesus drives the point home with a piercing question: what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? He poses life as a transaction and asks about the

bottom line. A person might gain everything the world offers, wealth, success, pleasure, power, and yet, if in the process he loses himself, his soul, his true life before God, he has made the worst bargain imaginable.

Help the class feel the force of the comparison. The world is the largest stake imaginable; the self, the soul, is set over against it and weighed as greater still. Nothing the world can offer is worth the forfeit of oneself. Yet people spend their lives making exactly this trade, pouring everything into gaining what they cannot keep while neglecting the one thing that lasts forever.

Show how the cross reorders gain and loss. By the world's accounting, the disciple who denies himself and follows the crucified Lord looks like a loser, giving up so much. By the cross's accounting, that disciple is the only true winner, having kept his soul and gained Christ, while the one who gained the world and lost himself has lost everything that matters. The cross overturns the world's ledger.

Apply this to the choices students are actually making. Every life is a series of trades, investing our time, energy, and love in something. Jesus' question forces the issue: are we gaining the world at the cost of ourselves, or losing the world to gain Christ and our true life? The answer shapes not only eternity but the meaning of every present day.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The incalculable worth of the soul over against the whole world (Luke 9:25; Mark 8:36–37)
- The folly of gaining what cannot be kept while losing what lasts forever
- The cross reordering the world's accounting of gain and loss
- Every life as a series of trades that reveal what we truly value

### **Discussion Prompts**

- How does Jesus' question expose the emptiness of gaining the world while losing oneself?
- How does the cross reorder what we count as gain and loss?
- What trade is your life currently making, and is it worth it?

### **Question 8**

#### **Student Question:**

*Jesus speaks of not being "ashamed" of him and his words (v. 26). Where are you most tempted to be ashamed of Christ, to stay quiet or blend in, and how does gratitude for his cross give you courage to confess him before others?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

This self-focused question takes up Jesus' warning about being ashamed of him and his words. Jesus says that whoever is ashamed of him and his words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of

when he comes in glory. The temptation to be ashamed of Christ, to stay quiet, to blend in, to hide our allegiance when it might cost us, is real for every believer.

Help students locate where the shame tempts them. For one it is among skeptical coworkers; for another, among family who disapprove; for another, in a culture that mocks faith. The shame rarely announces itself as denial; it shows up as silence, as letting the moment pass, as quietly concealing that we belong to Christ. Naming the specific arena makes the temptation easier to resist.

Show how gratitude for the cross gives courage. The antidote to shame is a heart so gripped by what Christ has done that confessing him becomes a joy and a debt of love, not a burden. The One who was not ashamed to be crucified for us, who endured the shame of the cross openly, deserves that we not be ashamed of him. Gratitude turns confession from a fearful duty into a glad acknowledgment of the One who saved us.

Aim at one concrete act of confession. Invite each student to name where they are most tempted to be ashamed of Christ, and to confess him in some specific way this week, a word, an honest acknowledgment, a refusal to hide. Confessing Christ before others is part of the faithful walk, the natural overflow of a life grateful for the cross.

#### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The call not to be ashamed of Christ and his words (Luke 9:26; Romans 1:16)
- Shame showing up as silence and concealment, not only open denial
- Gratitude for the cross as the source of courage to confess Christ
- Confessing Christ before others as part of the faithful walk (Matthew 10:32–33)

#### **Discussion Prompts**

- Where are you most tempted to be ashamed of Christ or to blend in?
- How does gratitude for his cross give you courage to confess him?
- What specific act of confession will you make this week?

#### **Question 9**

##### **Student Question:**

*Bringing the passage together with Paul's words, "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20), explain how the proper response to the cross is daily cross-bearing discipleship and crucified-with-Christ living, a transformed gratitude expressed in a faithful life. Why does this stand against both cheap grace, which receives forgiveness without surrender, and the presumption of "once saved, always saved," which treats salvation as secure apart from continued faithfulness? How do we hold together the freeness of grace and the call to remain faithful to the end?*

## Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson and the capstone of the entire study, and it must hold together the freeness of grace, the call to cross-bearing discipleship, and the necessity of remaining faithful. Begin by joining Jesus' words to Paul's. Jesus calls for daily cross-bearing; Paul testifies, I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. Together these describe the proper response to the cross: a crucified-with-Christ life, a daily dying to self, a transformed gratitude expressed in faithful, ongoing obedience. This is the destination of the whole series. We have studied the cross not to admire it from a distance but to be so changed by it that Christ lives in us.

Now set this clearly against cheap grace. Cheap grace is the notion that one may receive forgiveness without surrender, claim the benefits of the cross while refusing to follow the crucified Lord, treat grace as mere pardon that asks nothing of the life. The New Testament knows no such grace. Grace is free, costing us nothing to receive, yet never cheap, having cost Christ everything to provide, and laying total claim upon those it saves. We were bought with a price; we are not our own. A faith that receives forgiveness but will not take up the cross is the dead faith James condemns. True grace transforms; it produces the very cross-bearing life Jesus describes. So we reject any gospel that offers pardon without discipleship, not to add human merit to grace, but because the grace of God in truth always changes the one who receives it.

Then set this clearly against the presumption of once saved, always saved. Jesus calls for a cross taken up daily, a following that continues, a faithfulness that endures to the end. Scripture warns repeatedly and soberly that those who have truly been saved can fall away if they abandon that faithful walk. Believers are urged to take care lest they fall, to hold fast to the end, to remain in God's kindness, not to be entangled again and overcome. The branch that does not abide is cut off; the one who endures to the end will be saved. We therefore reject the doctrine that salvation, once received, is unconditionally guaranteed regardless of how one lives. This is not to make salvation a matter of anxious self-effort or to deny the believer's assurance; it is to take seriously the consistent New Testament call to remain faithful. Assurance is real for those who continue in Christ; it is not a guarantee detached from a faithful life.

Hold the balance the gospel holds, for the class must leave with both truths intact. On one side, salvation is by grace from first to last; we never earn it, and our boast is only in the cross. On the other side, this grace is received and kept through a living, obedient faith that takes up the cross daily and remains faithful to the end. These are not in tension when rightly understood. Grace is the ground; faithful discipleship is the path of those who stand on it. We are saved by grace through an obedient faith, and we continue in that grace by continuing in that faith. The freeness of grace and the call to remain faithful are two sides of one gospel, and the cross holds them together.

Show that this faithful life is not grim duty but transformed gratitude. The crucified-with-Christ life is the overflow of a heart undone by the love of the cross. Paul does not bear his cross resentfully; he lives by faith in the Son of God who loved him and gave himself for him. When the cross has truly gripped us, surrender becomes glad, obedience becomes love's response, and faithfulness becomes the natural expression of gratitude. The whole study has aimed at this: not merely informed minds but transformed hearts that give themselves wholly back to the One who gave himself for them.

Close the study where it has been heading all along. The fitting answer to the love we have traced through twelve lessons is a life laid down in return, taken up daily, lived by faith, faithful to the end. He loved us and gave himself for us. We deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him, not to earn what is freely given, but because grace like this can leave no honest heart unchanged. This is living in gratitude, and it is the only response worthy of the cross of Christ.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The proper response to the cross as daily cross-bearing and crucified-with-Christ living (Luke 9:23; Galatians 2:20)
- Grace as free but never cheap, laying total claim on those it saves (1 Corinthians 6:19–20)
- Rejection of cheap grace that receives pardon without surrender (James 2:17)
- Rejection of once saved, always saved: Christians can fall away and must remain faithful (Hebrews 3:12–14; 6:4–6; 2 Peter 2:20–22; Galatians 5:4)
- Salvation by grace through an obedient faith, preserved through continued faithfulness (Hebrews 10:35–39)
- Faithful discipleship as transformed gratitude, not grim duty (Romans 12:1)

### **Discussion Prompts**

- How is the proper response to the cross a daily, crucified-with-Christ life?
- Why does this stand against both cheap grace and once saved, always saved?
- How do we hold together the freeness of grace and the call to remain faithful?

### **Question 10**

#### **Student Question:**

*Look back across this entire study of the cross of Christ, from the heart of God to the call to take up your own cross. Name one specific way the cross has changed you over these twelve lessons, and one concrete commitment you will make to follow the crucified Lord in grateful, daily faithfulness.*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

The capstone question gathers not only this lesson but the entire study and calls for a personal response. Remind the class of the journey they have made: from the heart of God revealed at the cross, through the problem of sin, the prophecy and fulfillment of the suffering Servant, redemption, propitiation, reconciliation, justification, union with Christ in baptism, the triumph over the powers, the table of remembrance, and now the call to take up their own cross. Twelve lessons gazing at the cross have led to this: a life given back in grateful, daily faithfulness.

Invite each student to name one specific way the cross has changed them over these twelve lessons. For one it may be a deeper security in the love of God; for another, freedom from guilt or fear; for another, a new seriousness about sin or a new joy in grace; for another, a hunger to follow Christ more wholly. Encourage them to articulate the change, for naming it helps to root it.

Then ask for one concrete commitment to follow the crucified Lord in grateful, daily faithfulness, a specific resolve carried out of this study into the rest of life. The aim of the entire series has never been merely to inform but to transform, to send students home not only knowing more about the cross but changed by it, taking it up daily and following the One who took up his for them.

Close the study in worship and gratitude. End not on the weight of the demand but on the wonder of the love that calls it forth. He loved us and gave himself for us. To have seen that love clearly is to be unable to remain the same. Send the class out marveling at the cross and resolved, by grace, to live the rest of their days in grateful response to the One who died and rose for them.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The whole study aiming at transformation, not merely information
- Naming the specific change the cross has worked in us
- A concrete commitment to faithful, daily discipleship
- Worship and gratitude as the final response to the cross of Christ

### **Discussion Prompts**

- How has the cross changed you over these twelve lessons?
- What is one concrete commitment you will make to follow the crucified Lord?
- How will you live the rest of your days in grateful response to his love?