

SERMON - SEPTEMBER 17, 2017 - DENY YOURSELF, TAKE UP YOUR CROSS, AND FOLLOW ME (Mark 8:34-9:1)

What does it mean to deny ourselves? It means that if we have a disagreement with our spouse, we compromise or we give in for the sake of our love for our spouse. Sometimes we deny our own wants for the sake of peace. Our goal in marriage is to achieve oneness and unity in Christ. We realize that striving towards oneness in our marriage is more important than getting our own way. Denying ourselves means that we and our families always give our time on Sunday mornings to God. We do this not only because we love the Lord and the fifth commandment tells us to observe the sabbath, but because we love our children and our families, and we realize that in order for us to be saved and acquire the Spirit of God, we must be in church on Sundays. There is no other way. So we must deny ourselves. Even when we are away from home, we know that attendance in church on Sunday is so vital that it is non-negotiable, and wherever we are, we seek out an Orthodox Church. When we married in the Orthodox Church, we made a solemn decision to invite our Lord to be the third member of our family. We married in Church because we wanted our marriage to be a means by which our souls would be saved. If we are tempted instead to do other things on Sunday mornings, or sleep in instead of going to church, we will instead bring spiritual death to ourselves and to our children. If we love our children and our own salvation, then we will never let this happen.

Denying oneself means not to be too proud to get help when we need it.

Denying ourselves means that when it is a fast day, instead of eating the food that we crave, we eat only what is permitted and we eat less, for the sake of subduing our passions and saving our souls. Denying oneself means to forgo an unnecessary luxury or expense that we don't need and giving our first fruits to God, to support the church and to help the needy.

Denying ourselves means to control our tongues, and not having to win every argument. It means to not judge others, or say unkind things about others behind their backs or to their faces, but to exercise love and graciousness. Denying ourselves means to see Christ in everyone. Denying oneself means to boldly and without shame bear witness and confess our Christian faith and beliefs when asked, regardless of the consequences, even if it means ridicule, or how people think about us, or even if it possibly means having to give up our very own lives for the sake of our Lord and the Gospel. Denying oneself means to understand and practice the Christian Faith in an Orthodox manner. It is to know and follow Christ as He really is, and not how we would like to imagine Him to be. It is to believe in and practice Christianity as the faith was taught and practiced by the saints and the Holy Fathers and Mothers of the Church. Denying ourselves means giving up any desire or temptation that is contrary to the way and teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Gospel. Denying oneself means to force ourselves to keep a prayer rule and to pray each and every morning and evening; before and after meals, by ourselves and with our families and children at home. Denying ourselves means to follow the greatest commandment of all, to love God above all things with all our heart, and all our soul, and all our mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Denying ourselves means to do unto others as we would wish that others would do unto us. As the Lord says, on this depends all the Law and all the prophets (Matthew 22:40).

What does it mean to take up our cross and to follow the Lord? Suffering is part of human life. No one can escape suffering. There are various degrees of suffering and various ways that we suffer. Taking up our cross means to follow in the footsteps of the Lord on the way to Golgotha. Just as the Lord willingly took up His cross and accepted crucifixion, so too must we willingly accept all suffering for the sake of Christ. Suffering cleanses us from our sins. Suffering teaches us patience. Suffering teaches us to love the Lord above all things. Offering our suffering to the Lord affords us the opportunity to share in the redemptive suffering of the Lord for the sake of others. Suffering reminds us that this life is passing away, and that it must be used as a step stone to the eternal life prepared by the Lord for those who love Him. We must not hate or curse those who add to our suffering. Instead we must imitate the the Lord, who, when hanging on the Cross, prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they

do" (Luke 23:34). Taking up our cross means to willingly crucify ourselves to all the passions and to all sin. There is no greater joy, no greater truth, no greater meaning to life than to follow in our Lord's footsteps. Let this be our vision, our motto, our anthem: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Amen!