LOWER THAN THE LOWEST

Imagine the best automobile you can think of. Think of the best tires and a state-of-the-art engine. Choose any design and any color. Keep thinking of the most hi-tech engineering, most adaptive capabilities, and the sleekest of aerodynamic structures. Undoubtedly, each of us would be thinking of different cars. But regardless of what form and model we may be visualizing, everyone almost certainly envisioned a fast car!

Now imagine this car driving through a very dull, boring, and straight highway. The speed limit is 25 miles or 40 kilometers per hour. There is not a single police officer in sight, and you have hours more to drive. Wouldn’t it be a great temptation to harness the speed intended by this car’s designers to break the law?

Next, imagine a more modest car (more likely the type of car most inVerse readers will be driving). This car is much more practical, economical, and not the latest model. It may not be run down, but it is functional. It comes nowhere close to the capacity of the first car.

If this second car were placed in the same scenario as the first, what would be different? Though the boredom and straightness of the road may entice you with the same temptation to break the speed limit, the magnitude of self-denial to resist would be remarkably different. Tempted the same but in a different way.

Though many Christians may be familiar with the imperative of being humble because Christ was humble, this week we will discover that to say Jesus was humble is an understatement.
Write out Philippians 2:5–11 from the translation of your choice. You may also re-write the passage in your own words, outline, or mind-map the chapter.
**THIS MIND**

Hebrews 4:15 declares, “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.” Some assert that Jesus was tempted literally in every way that every human being has ever been tempted. In some part of Christ’s life that was unrecorded by the Gospel narratives, Jesus was tempted with marijuana, annihilating people with nuclear radiation, internet pornography, drug trafficking, and so on.

On the other hand, some say that this idea is preposterous and that Christ was tempted only in three ways as recorded in Matthew 4 and Luke 4. They aver that Christ was tempted in His own particular way in His own trial, and though He had the victory, this has no bearing on you and me today. The former idea makes Jesus into some mega-de-ranged and abased human, while the latter pushes Him away into the ethereal realm as merely a historical character with no human quality at all.

Philippians 2 presents the solution to this tension. Originally meant to resolve an internal Philippian church dispute, it is what Paul writes about the self-denial and humility of Christ: “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). Jesus was God and fully divine, but He humbled Himself to not only become a human being but also to suffer an ignominious death as a human being. Paul emphasizes that Christ died the death of the cross (v. 8), a manner of execution for the lowest of classes!

Let’s put this into plainer language. As in the inTro analogy, Christ was “in all points tempted as we are,” but in a different way because He was a divine model of a car. When we are tempted with intemperance, we have to decide whether we are going to eat the object in front of us or not. But when Christ was tempted, He had to decide whether He was going to use His creative power to rearrange the atoms of stones into edible bread. That’s just one way of thinking about it. Perhaps, instead, He was tempted to eliminate the hunger hormones in His body; perhaps eliminate the concept of food; perhaps even reorient the universe so that the notion of consumption and necessity were themselves eliminated! Who knows the extent of temptation when experienced by divinity.

While we battle over whether we should use our human capabilities for selfish desires, Christ was also tempted to use His divine capabilities for self—the same, but totally different as well.

Because Christ overcame, “God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name” (Phil. 2:9). On this basis, Christ’s followers are to partake in this name, to humble and deny self for the larger good. In the case of the Philippians, it was a call for two women to get along (Phil. 4:2) and have the “same mind.” In the case of Christ’s disciples of the twenty-first century, how will the mind of Christ be manifest in our lives?
HOW NOT TO BE CHRIST’S DISCIPLE

This quarter’s lessons have looked at a lot of angles of discipleship. From the practices of disciples to the Grow cycle of discipleship, we see the multiple elements that enter into following Christ. But the core attitude that makes discipleship real and authentic is found in Christ’s mindset of humility and self-denial. In particular, the role of self-denial in discipleship is highly accentuated in the fourteenth chapter of Luke. Here, the phrase “he [or she] cannot be my disciple” is repeated three times. For all the chatter about Jesus wanting to call each of us to be His disciples, this chapter seems to diverge and mentions how not to be Christ’s disciple.

The first phrase is found in Luke 14:26, where Christ says, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.” At first glance this sounds harsh, and certainly it is a radical statement. In many cultures, relationships with parents, spouse, siblings, and family are paramount. But rather than the modern connotation of hate, the original Greek word miseo denotes loving less and placing lesser value. In other words, following Jesus is not just an addendum to your life; it is a complete reevaluation and transformation of it. Relationships are completely rearranged, so that Christ is at the center and all relationships stem from that primary one. The beautiful thing is that in keeping Christ at the center, we allow Him to be the means by which the relationship is preserved.

Not only in relationships but also in our own personal lives we are to subjugate and surrender our entire being to Christ as our Master. He continues, “Whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple” (v. 27). It reminds us of Luke 9:23, where Jesus said similarly, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” In this statement, Jesus may have been foreshadowing the death He was going to die. Moreover, He was calling His disciples to be willing to die not only physically, but also dying to self for Him! This cannot be done by our own human strength, but in a discipleship relationship with Him, it will happen! Christ acknowledges that this is such a radical call, it warrants some thinking and preparation. Hence He mentions the need to count the cost before accepting the call.

The last phrase is found in verse 33: “Whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.” This completes Christ’s radical call to discipleship: He asks for all your relationships, all your life and even death, and all that you have. What else is there to the human identity than who we know, who we are, and what we have? This can be boiled down to the three verbs of knowing, being, and having, and God wants all of them to be calibrated to Him for full discipleship.

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What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Galatians 2:20
Luke 17:33
2 Timothy 3:1–5

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with Philippians 2:5–11?

Review your memorized verse from Philippians 2:5–11.
THE SELF-DENIAL OF JESUS CHRIST

Not only is Christ our Lord, our Master, our Teacher, and our Rabbi, but He is also our example. All that He calls us to, He experienced equally. In Luke 22, in the garden of Gethsemane on the night before His crucifixion, He had one of the most difficult conversations ever recorded. In verse 42, Jesus prays, “Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done.” Luke, who was a doctor, is the only Gospel writer who records that Jesus shed blood from His sweat glands. Under extreme moments of stress, the blood vessels near the temples and forehead break and mix with the sweat, giving the appearance of sweating blood. What was the source of this pressure and strain? What caused this level of pressure?

Matthew’s rendition of the story in 26:39–42 depicts something that sheds light on these questions: Christ prayed for the cup to pass from Him—meaning the course of death to be averted. It wasn’t only the physical death but the separation from the presence of the Father that He desired to avoid. This desire was so passionate that He asked again, in verse 42, “O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink, Your will be done.”

Though He had a literal choice of whether He would die or not, there was also the underlying issue of whether He was going to deny self or not. After the first and second time, Christ utters, “Not as I will, but as You will” and “Your will be done” respectively. He completely denies self and gives God His knowing, being, and having; He entrusts the future to God.

Being unwilling to separate from the Father was not a bad thing; if anything, that is the one thing we all should desire. But here Christ was not battling what was moral or not; He was not choosing between good and evil. Here Christ was struggling with whether to follow His desires or the desire of His heavenly Father. The temptation was to use His divinity in a way that could indulge a selfish desire.

The response to both prayers was silence from heaven. This is where Christ was different from the rest of humanity—He undid what Adam had chosen. And now, in Him, we can partake in Christ’s choice, in Christ’s strength, and in Christ’s victory. This is where Christ’s disciples follow Him, and this is the challenge set before us. Discipleship, spiritual development, evangelism, witnessing, and mentorship are elements from which our selfish hearts will naturally recoil. It is possible that if we do not resonate with some elements of this quarter’s lessons on discipleship, it is potentially because we lack self-denial. While we are not called to die for humanity as Christ was, we are called to to deny self in order to partake in preaching of the Man who did die for all and also call others to join in the work.
“It is evident that all the sermons that have been preached have not developed a large class of self-denying workers. This subject is to be considered as involving the most serious results. Our future for eternity is at stake. The churches are withering up because they have failed to use their talents in diffusing light” (Christian Service, 58).

“In order to become acquainted with the disappointments and trials and griefs that come to human beings, Christ reached to the lowest depths of woe and humiliation. He has traveled the path that He asks His followers to travel. He says to them, ‘If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.’ But professing Christians are not always willing to practice the self-denial that the Saviour calls for. They are not willing to bind about their wishes and desires in order that they may have more to give to the Lord. One says, ‘My family are expensive in their tastes, and it costs much to keep them.’ This shows that he and they need to learn the lessons of economy taught by the life of Christ...”

“To all comes the temptation to gratify selfish, extravagant desires, but let us remember that the Lord of life and glory came to this world to teach humanity the lesson of self-denial” (Adventist Home, 381, 382).

“Those who realize, even in a limited degree, what redemption means to them and to their fellow men, will walk by faith, and they will comprehend in some measure the vast needs of humanity. Their hearts are moved to compassion as they behold the widespread destitution in our world—multitudes suffering for food and clothing, and the moral destitution of thousands upon thousands who are under the shadow of a terrible doom, in comparison with which physical suffering fades into nothingness.” (Selected Messages, 2:216).

“Herein lies a most important lesson for God’s people today,—a lesson that many are slow to learn. The spirit of covetousness, of seeking for the highest position and the highest wage, is rife in the world. The old-time spirit of self-denial and self-sacrifice is too seldom met with. But this is the only spirit that can actuate a true follower of Jesus. Our divine Master has given us an example of how we are to work. And to those whom He bade, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men,’ He offered no stated sum as a reward for their services. They were to share with Him His self-denial and sacrifice” (Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, 2:1028).
Denial of Self

Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

What are your feelings when you first hear the phrase “self-denial”?

What is the difference between humility and self-denial?

How does pop discipleship differ from biblical discipleship?

How is spiritual humility different from cultural humility?

What would be the ramifications for the universe if God used His divinity for selfish reasons?

What does denial of self look like on the local church level?

Which of the three calls to discipleship do you resonate with?

Which of the three calls to discipleship do you seem to avoid?

How does self-denial intersect with discipleship?