
THE COUNTER-INTUITIVE WAYS OF GOD

by Daniel A. Brown PhD

Pastors love catch phrases! They preach well; they explain things to people without the bother of explaining them in our own words. They are handy to pass out when people look to us for explanation, “God moves in mysterious ways” or counsel, “Deny yourself.” The catch, however, with catch phrases is that they often miss the real point of the passages from which they have been extracted—especially when the English connotation of certain words is a far cry from their biblical usage.

For instance, *mysteries*, suggests things inexplicable, hidden, and a touch mystical or spooky. It implies things unknowable and unpredictable—as though we serve a “quantum god” who moves about in erratic, random and “*who knows why*” ways. Biblically speaking, nothing could be further from the truth. God’s mysteries may be hidden to the unsaved, but they are intentionally revealed to us (Matthew 13:11; Ephesians 1:9). In fact, almost every mention of mystery in Scripture comes in the context of revelation.

In other words, His mysteries are not mysterious to us! They are confidential pieces of information, insider knowledge that He shares with us. A *mystery of God* is like a PIN number—not a complicated algebraic equation, but a simple, *easy to remember* number giving us access to His account. His mysteries remain mysterious to the “wise and intelligent” who try to access His riches with their own smarts (Matthew 11:25), but He wants us to learn His *mystery ways*, to use the revealed PIN numbers.

And that leads us to the oft-misunderstood theological quickie, “Deny yourself,” found in this passage in Matthew:

“Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.’” ~Matthew 16:24-25

The context is critical for our understanding of His words. Jesus has just asked about people's take on Him—what the consensus is about His identity. The world's conclusions contrast starkly with Peter's. Jesus makes sure the disciples understand it was revelation, not natural thinking, that led Peter to the truth. Almost immediately, however, Peter lapses back into natural assumptions about what that truth means for Jesus' life because he cannot reconcile his logic with Jesus' predictions about suffering, rejection, and death in Jerusalem.

Jesus seizes the moment to explain this most basic of Kingdom truths: the mysterious ways of God are not ways that naturally occur to us (*Isaiah 55:8-9*). They are counter-intuitive. Remembering back to His temptation in the wilderness, when Satan offered Jesus a more reasonable and less costly route to His future, Jesus recognizes the counsel coming from Peter is contrary to God's way of doing things. So, He says,

"...For you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." ~Matthew 16:23

That expression can be better translated, "You are thinking as men think, not as God thinks." Jesus censures Peter's basis of reasoning and thinking. It's as though Jesus says, "I will not subordinate God's leading to man's advice." Jesus will not allow Himself to be deterred from revelational understanding and obedience. But notice, as well, Jesus' concern for His followers, His desire to assure that we will be able to stay with (behind) Him: He says in verse 24;

"If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself..."

He doesn't mean we should deny ourselves that extra piece of chocolate cake. "*Deny yourself*" in this context means to "go against, disavow, contradict" natural reasoning. Jesus warns that earthly thought processes are usually opposite from God's ways. Few people will naturally conclude that the best way to save their life is to lose it! Or, that the last will end up first. And, the path to greatness goes through the servant's quarters. Such truths go against everything life teaches us! Believing and following such truths is only possible when we set aside or *deny* our ordinary inclinations.