

Take Up the Cross of Christ

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Date: 19 August 2007

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[0:00] Please turn with me in your Bibles tonight to the Gospel of Matthew in chapter 16. And to have a fat, lazy coach yelling at you to sprint, to run faster, to push it.

When you know if he tried just one sprint, he'd be over on his knees just sucking air. It's easier, at least it was for me when I was in high school, easier to run for a coach who's fit and occasionally will demonstrate it or frequently will demonstrate it by running with you and even outrunning you. It might be hard for a child to clean his room at mom's command if her house is a mess. It might be difficult for a son to obey his dad who tells him to take out the trash when the dad never gets off his recliner to do any work around the house himself.

It might seem hypocritical for a dad to tell his son to respect his mother when the dad disrespects her all day. This, by the way, is no excuse for disobeying your coaches or parents.

You might find the call to be green and environmentally friendly, ringing a little bit hollow when the celebrities who make that call are burning more energy every day than most of you do in a year.

[1:44] And so when Jesus' disciples heard him say, if anyone would follow after me, would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Maybe some thought, cross? I haven't seen any cross for you, Master. The cross meant certain death, shame, public humiliation, and Jesus hadn't died yet.

And here he is calling for his own disciples to have a life of radical self-denial and suffering and even death for his own namesake. But Jesus isn't requiring something of his disciples.

He's not requiring something of us that he himself wasn't willing to do. To deny himself and to take up his cross. In fact, right here, just before these words, he had predicted his own death.

And let's notice just a few verses. The context here in Matthew chapter 16 tonight. Notice beginning in verse 21 through verse 28 with me. From that time on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law.

[3:00] And that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. Never, Lord, he said. This shall never happen to you. Jesus turned and said to Peter, get behind me, Satan.

You are a stumbling block to me. You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men. Then Jesus said to his disciples, 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. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?

Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels. And then he will reward each person according to what he has done. I tell you the truth. Some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. And so as we've gathered here tonight to observe the Lord's Supper, to remember his death, to obey his commandment until he comes again, we're reminded of Christ and the cross that he took up.

[4:17] Christ who denied himself so that we might prosper. And as we consider the suffering and death of Christ, may it move us to be willing to suffer for him.

To do what's expected of us to take up our cross. And to do it daily. We want to see what it meant for Jesus to take up his cross tonight.

And then we want to see what it means for us to take up our cross. We don't have a Master calling us to do something that he himself wasn't willing to do.

To do something that he himself didn't do. But rather he has set the example for us. He has walked in this path before us. What did it mean then for Jesus to take up his cross?

Or even before that to deny himself? And we've spoken of this here before. Jesus denied himself when he left the glory of heaven. It's what we read of in Philippians chapter 2.

[5:16] When he left the glory of heaven to live in this sin-cursed earth, he denied himself the praises of angels. And instead received the reviling and mocking of wicked, sinful men.

The one whose hands created the world. Submitted himself to be cared for by a woman's hands as a child. To be beaten by men's hands as an adult.

The one who sits enthroned over all. Submitted himself to human authorities. The Son of God denied himself some of the rights and privileges that are part of being God.

And instead endured the limitations of being a man. When he spoke of denying oneself. Nobody could say, but you haven't done that Lord. No, he did.

He denied himself for people like us. But that's not all. He spoke of taking up the cross. If you want to come after me, you must take up your cross and follow me.

[6:16] Well, where is your cross, Jesus? Now he hasn't endured it when he's speaking these words to his disciples, but it's coming. Could anyone accuse Jesus of not taking up his cross?

He's spoken of his suffering and death. And so they know it's coming, but you know that the disciples are slow of heart and slow to believe. And Peter doesn't even want Jesus to take up his cross.

He said, no Lord, you can't suffer and die. And you can only imagine then that Peter himself wasn't very excited about the prospect of suffering and death.

And would just assume that none of them have to take up their cross and follow Jesus in that way. But Jesus himself took his cross. What cross is he bearing?

I hope no one here thinks, what cross did Jesus bear? Who is he to call me to a cross? You know that he did. It meant suffering for him. It's what we remember here tonight.

[7:13] We have the symbols of a body that was pierced, beaten, battered for us. We've got the symbol of blood that was shed for us. We know that Jesus suffered just in what we're reminded of tonight.

He went willingly into the hands of the authorities, even though it meant he would be cruelly beaten. His captors and his accusers spat on him.

Imagine. Jesus, the King of glory, left the glory of heaven to come to earth to be spit on by people like you and me.

They spit on him. Spit in his face. It's an insult today. It was an insult then. Degrading. Our Jesus was willing to endure this. They didn't stop there.

They struck him with their fists. Others slapped him with the open hand. His back laid open. By the flogging that Pilate ordered.

[8:14] He was stripped of his clothes and made to wear a purple robe, mocking his claim to be king. Further mocking that claim, they weaved a crown of thorns. Shoved it into a scalp.

Drawing more of the blood that we remember tonight. Jesus knew what it was to take up his cross to suffer. They spit on him again. They struck him on the head.

For a time, he was forced to carry his own cross towards Golgotha. You ever wondered if some of his disciples may be watching from a distance as Jesus bore the weight of his own cross?

Thought back and said, didn't Jesus say something to us about having to bear a cross? If someone's going to follow after me, he must, what did he say? He must take up his cross and follow me.

Is that what it's going to mean for me? Am I going to have to walk that way that the Savior's walking now? Will I have to bear such an awful load? I can't bear that load.

[9:17] But he didn't just carry his cross. He was nailed to that cross. The cross that he bore now bears him. But it's still his cross to endure.

He hangs on it, laboring for each breath. Before he finally gives up his spirit. To make sure he's dead, a soldier plunges a spear into his side.

From which flows water and blood. And now, there hanging on the cross, blood coming from his hands, his feet, his side, his head, his back. Dripping down on his body and on the ground.

The blood, the very blood that we remember in the cup tonight. Jesus knew what it was to bear the cross. And he not only suffered this physical abuse at the cross.

It's the place, you know, where he bore the wrath of an angry God. Because on that cross, he was bearing our sins. And he was suffering the punishment that our sins deserved.

[10:18] And here we sit tonight, forgiven sinners. We need not fear wrath because Jesus bore that wrath for us in our place on the cross. There was anguish beyond anything we can imagine.

And the cross that Jesus took up. Oh, here at the cross, we see what it means to deny oneself and to take up one's cross. Here we see what Jesus did for us.

And we're ashamed to think of how little we're willing to do for him. No one can accuse Jesus of calling us to do something that he didn't himself first do.

If you would be my disciple, you must deny yourself. Take up your cross and follow me. He did it. And we see the evidence of it in the pages of Scripture.

And we know it to be true, even as the Spirit bears witness in our hearts. It's what we remember tonight. Jesus bore his cross, but what of us then?

[11:19] What does it mean for us to take up our cross? What does it mean for us to deny ourselves? We must deny ourselves. We must do these things. Would we be the follower of the One who did these things Himself?

We must deny ourselves the comfort of what I'll call anonymity. The comfort of being anonymous. The comfort of blending in. If we deny Jesus because we're ashamed of Him.

Just after Jesus says these words in Luke's account, He also says this, but he who disowns me, and it's the same word. He's just said you must deny yourself. And now He says, if you deny me, if you disown me, but he who disowns me, he who denies me before men, will be disowned before the angels of God.

We have to ask ourselves, am I not willing to suffer just maybe a strange look, a little potential embarrassment, a laugh, rejection because I spoke up for Jesus.

Jesus who gave Himself for me, who suffered far more for me than I ever have or ever will for Him. Can I give myself to Him in His service? Can I speak a word for my Savior?

[12:27] Can I endure a little mocking, a little scorn for the One who is scorned in my place? We have to deny ourselves that comfort of blending in so that no one knows who we are, so that we don't have to face such mocking and persecution.

Maybe it goes without saying, we must deny ourselves the comfort of worldly pleasure. If we would be followers of Christ, we can't continue to indulge the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life.

We can't continue to indulge the very things that put Christ on the cross in the first place, our own sins. Those must be denied. And that means if until coming to Christ, your life was all about the surging high that you get from being on drugs, then that must be denied.

If previously you were consumed by the pursuit of illicit, immoral, sexual pleasure, you must deny yourself those real or virtual, fantasized encounters.

If gossip and slander made you tick before coming to Christ, you must be denying yourself those sins. If once you thrived on the approval of men, and found in that your joy and your happiness, you must deny yourself that approval, and find your joy and happiness in Christ.

[13:42] If people approve of you as a follower of Christ, who is righteous and upright and holy, and a bold witness, fine, but if you must compromise your standards to win that approval, then you're not denying yourself.

And here at the root of most of these things is pride. Thinking too highly of ourselves, have you denied yourself that lofty opinion of yourself? If you would be a follower of Christ, you must deny those sins that put Him on the cross, those very things that He suffered for.

How could we, who have been so blessed by what Christ has done, be so unwilling to do something for Him? To deny ourselves just a little pleasure that comes from the sin.

Whatever God forbids, this you must deny yourself, if you would be a follower of Jesus. The question is, are you denying yourself? Can anyone tell by what you allow and don't allow yourself to do, and to say, and to think, and to enjoy?

Can anybody tell by those things that you're a follower of Jesus? This sort of self-denial will be evident to all. And this sort of self-denial will be a lifelong struggle, friends.

[14:49] Walt Chantry reminds us of this. He, that is Jesus, has called you to a life with a cross. The clear Gospel note is so easy to forget in flabby Western society.

With a great chorus of custom, advertisement, and temptation, this world is beckoning you to a life of self-indulgence. Your flesh is drawn to that appeal and will fall in with the world's suggestions, but the Lord of glory has called you to a life of self-denial, to a cross.

A life of self-denial will look very different in a world of self-indulgence, where people will feed their pleasure at any cost. Someone who says no to those pleasures, who denies himself, will look very different.

Denying yourself may involve the loss of legitimate pleasures. Not talking about things that are sinful now. Things that are legitimate and things that we may enjoy. Someone who follows Jesus to the mission field, for example, may have to deny themselves the regular face-to-face contact with their families that they so love and enjoy.

If a legitimate pleasure like athletics or whatever your hobby is, scrapbooking or hunting or working on cars or golf, whatever, all legitimate things, things that may be done and enjoyed, if those things begin to take away from your deepening relationship with Christ or begin to be more important to you than Christ, then it's time to start denying yourself those things.

[16 : 23] But it's not just a life of self-denial that Jesus calls us to. It's a life of cross-bearing. Taking up your cross. The cross meant, as we've said, suffering.

Even death. Public humiliation. Sometimes following Jesus will always bring persecution of one sort or another.

Blessed are you when men persecute you for my sake, the Savior said. And just as Jesus suffered at the hands of sinful men, you may as well. It might take, as we've already said, the form of mocking and derision from those who once considered themselves your friends.

That's a cross you must bear. It may come in the form of being ostracized from your family. If you've had to leave family on our vacation last week, we spent some time with Aaron's two best friends from high school.

And one of them, back in school, high school during those days, was a Roman Catholic. And Aaron and her other friend, under their influence, this girl came to know the Savior. And her family has all but cast her out because of it.

[17 : 31] She's lived for 15 some years with her family hating what she's become. Her family hasn't spoken to Aaron's other friend who still lives maybe a mile away. Her family hasn't spoken to Aaron's friend in 15 years because it was her influence that drew her away from the Catholic Church.

And just recently, thank the Lord, that family has shown a few signs of softening. They did speak to her friend just a couple of weeks ago after 15 years of silence. Who knows what the Lord might do? But she was willing to leave father and mother and siblings to follow Jesus.

Are you? Would you be willing to suffer death itself? Yes, we must figuratively die to ourselves, be disinterested in ourselves, and so on, but in the cross, there was real death for Jesus, for His disciples that were standing there listening to Him, taking up the cross, for most of them would mean execution at the hands of an executioner, someone beheading them, even Peter.

History has it was crucified. A real cross for Peter. Would you be willing to go to the cross or the stake to be burned? Or to the guillotine or to the chopping block or to the lions?

For Jesus. Would you be willing to suffer even as people in this very world are suffering even today? Suffering death and prison and beatings at the hands of those that hate the Gospel?

[19 : 02] Are you willing to bear that sort of cross? What would happen if the freedom of religion that we've enjoyed in this country were taken away from us? Could happen. And they begin persecuting Christians.

Would all of a sudden you not be so eager to claim yourself a Christian? Begin to blend in a little bit more. Begin to look a little bit... Begin to stop denying yourself and begin to indulge yourself more and more.

So nobody knows. Just so you can avoid detection. Jesus says that following Him means taking up a cross. Following Him even to death.

You say, well, that's pretty extreme Christianity. That's a different level. Not everybody is called to that level. That's way up here and I'm right here on the scale right now.

And that's not for everyone. Well, notice carefully the words of Jesus. If anyone would come after me.

[20 : 03] Not if just the really bold ones. Only they have to bear the cross. No, if anyone would come after me. It's for everyone that would follow Jesus. Jesus. The One who has borne the cross

for us.

We must be willing to bear a cross for Him. What's the conclusion then? Unwilling? No thanks, you say.

Too much for you. Remember what Jesus has done. He didn't say no thanks when God sent Him to die in our place to suffer what we deserve. He didn't indulge Himself when He had every right to. He suffered immeasurably. Far more than we can imagine and far more than we will ever suffer. And He did it for us. And we aren't willing to deny ourselves a little pleasure here.

Endure a little suffering there. As we partake of these elements tonight, may we be reminded of what Jesus has done for us. That the One who called us to these things has done them Himself.

[21:08] He denied Himself. He took up His cross. And may we then be challenged to go and live a life of self-denial and cross-bearing for Him. May the thought of Christ crucified for us move us to gratitude, to praise for His immeasurable sacrifice.

And may it also move us to a willingness to sacrifice. Well, what a call this is. A call to self-denial. A call to bearing one's cross. It might seem like a difficult thing. It might seem like an impossible thing. And you say, you know what? If that's the way the Christian life is, I want no part of it.

You like yourself and your pleasures. You just as soon not deny yourself. This talk of suffering makes you want nothing to do with it. But take a moment to look tonight at the One who calls you. If you've never run and trusted in this Savior, if you've never come to Him in repentance and faith, take a minute to look at Him tonight. He's not fat and lazy. He's not a hypocrite calling you to do something He's never done.

[22:14] And the cross to which He calls you, it's nothing like His cross. His cross has taken out all the wrath of your cross.

Your suffering will be short-lived only in this life. You say, well, this life is all I know. Jesus right after this says, you'd be a fool to gain the whole world and yet still forfeit your soul.

Jesus has taken the wrath out of your cross. Your suffering will not be so bitter as Jesus' suffering who endured being abandoned, forsaken by His own Father on the cross.

Do you know that as you bear your cross on the road to heaven, you will never be forsaken? You will never be abandoned. Jesus will walk with you every step of the way. He will hold you up.

And the one who walks with you isn't one who can't sympathize. He's been there. He's walked that road and is able to help you and understand your weakness and your struggles. It's not an easy road, but it's a blessed road.

[23:25] And it leads to life. And it's the only way you'll find blessing in eternal joy and lasting pleasures. It's not found in the world. It's not found in self-indulgence.

It's found in denying yourself and taking up your cross and following after Jesus. And so tonight, we come to partake of the Lord's Supper, the bread and the cup, representing His body and His blood. And we're reminded that Jesus denied Himself and took up His cross. May we be then encouraged to do the same. And if you don't know the Savior, may you come running to Him.

And you'll find Him a sure Savior. And there you'll find true joy. There you'll find true blessedness.

So come, take up your cross, follow Christ, and live your life in the shadow of the glorious cross of Christ.

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