

Christian, Take Up Your Cross!

(Luke 9:18–24) Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, “Who do the crowds say I am?”¹⁹ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life.”²⁰ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “The Christ of God.”²¹ Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone.²² And he said, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”²³ Then he said to them all: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.²⁴ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.

In Christ Jesus, in whose cross we glory, dear fellow redeemed,

How familiar are you with the sign under which you were born? Do you know how that sign shapes and impacts the course of your days, months, and years? I’m not talking about any sign of the Zodiac. The stars can’t influence our lives. No, I’m referring to the sign under which you were born anew – the one we talk about at every Christian baptism when we say to infant and grownup alike: “Receive the sign of the cross on the head and heart to mark you as a redeemed child of Christ.” As one so marked, what do you know about the cross and its meaning for your life? Let’s give this some thought under the theme: Christian, Take Up Your Cross! 1) willingly; and 2) joyfully.

First of all, some definitions are in order. The cross that we probably know best is the cross of Jesus. And yet when we speak of his cross, we should have in mind much more than the two wooden beams to which he was nailed. Jesus’ cross is everything he endured as the Lamb of God in order to take away the sins of the world. He describes his cross in these terms when he informs his disciples: “**The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed...**” (Luke 9:22).

In similar fashion, Jesus defines the cross his followers must bear when he says: “**If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself...**” (Luke 9:23). At its heart and core, the Christian’s cross is a denial of one’s self in favor of Christ and his Word. How hard or heavy could such a cross be? Let’s look at St. Peter. He identifies himself as a follower of Jesus by the way he answers Jesus’ question: “Who do you say I am?” (Luke 9:20). While others didn’t know who or what to make of Jesus, Peter nailed it: Jesus is none other than “**The Christ of God.**” (Luke 9:20). – God’s appointed and anointed Savior. Peter got the answer right, but he didn’t seem ready for what that answer would mean for his life and future. In fact, in Mark’s gospel we learn that Peter reprimanded Jesus for his talk of suffering and dying. It’s Peter’s rebuke that prompted Jesus to bring up the subject of self-denial. Why?

We can understand that Peter wouldn’t want somebody he cared about to be tortured and executed. But Jesus’ words tell us there was more going on in Peter’s head and heart. Of course, there was. It isn’t at all hard for us to imagine that Peter must have also been thinking of himself. Up till now following Jesus had been pretty exciting with all the miracles and the crowds. Jesus was popular, a “rock star” if you will, and his disciples were like the members of his very popular band. This was, no doubt, the reason why Jesus didn’t want his disciples telling others he was the Christ. Because many imagined that the Christ of God would come for no other reason than to improve and enrich their earthly lives. Peter and his fellow disciples must have been influenced,

at least in part, by this same false notion. They must have been wondering where their lives with Jesus would take them—certainly not to a Roman cross. For if that were to be the case, what would that mean for Peter and the others? What would it mean to follow a Jesus who wasn't making everything better all of the time?

You tell me. Be honest. Don't you have some of those same thoughts and concerns? Following Jesus means that you hold to his teachings, all of them, including those that people around us find not just backwards, but appalling. Your natural instinct, one of self-preservation, is to distance yourself from Jesus and his teachings, to swear, as Peter would: "I don't know the man." Am I right? That's my naturally sinful instinct – one that is the very opposite of self-denial when it comes to following Christ and his teachings.

And it's not just his teachings, it's also his example. The Apostle Paul writes in Philippians 2: **"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped (something to be used to his own advantage), ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."** (Philippians 2:5-7). Following Christ means imitating him, not in the sense of mimicking him, but by adopting his way of life as my own. Following Christ means living my life as his servant and the servant of all – my wife, my children, my friends, my coworkers, the people I share the road with, those I stand in line with at the checkout, those who wait on me, all people, all of the time, and always with this goal in mind, that in my service to them they would see Christ, and so, learn to know him always better. This is what it means to follow Jesus.

Having said this, can you guess one of the crosses I carry? Maybe you can. Maybe you carry a similar cross. My cross, one of them at least, is the constant battle that I as a Christian must wage with an ego so self-inflated that it imagines all of you were put here to serve me. This massive ego of mine has a fit when Christ in his Word tells me that I should love and care for you, my neighbor, as I love and care for myself.

By nature I don't want to do that. Neither do you because, like me, you are naturally self-centered and sinful. Like me you know very well that if we take on the role of servant, everybody and his brother is going to take advantage of us in every way imaginable. Is that how you want to live? My old Adam screams, "No way!" And so, our natural impulse is to spare ourselves any embarrassment and every disadvantage that might come from being associated with Christ. Right? We want to save ourselves from what we perceive would be the life of a loser.

What does Jesus say? **"...whoever wants to save his life will lose it..."** (Luke 9:24). Jesus doesn't pull any punches, does he? To live the life our sinful nature wants and craves is to reject Jesus – his person, his teachings, and his saving work. For a time, a very brief time, we may find some satisfaction in gratifying the wants and whims of our sinful nature. We may escape the ridicule of the world and even earn its admiration as we join in its self-absorbed way of life. But in end the very life we had hoped to save, our life, will be forever lost. Those who favor self over Jesus will perish in hell eternally.

Jesus means for his words of warning to cut us to the very core, and they do, don't they? When we think of all the times and ways we have denied Christ by indulging self, we cannot imagine any path of escape from God's anger and the punishment we deserve for our sin. What could we do to set things right? What promise could we make? What vow could we take? What sacrifice could we offer? None! Nothing we could ever do or say would ever be enough. If it were up to us, we would be lost. But thanks be to God, it's not up to us. Because the God of free and faithful grace stepped in and did everything on our behalf. He made the promise and kept it perfectly. He offered the sacrifice that paid our sin-debt fully. He did it all in the person of his only Son who,

“...being found in appearance as a man... humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:8). In perfect humility, Jesus denied himself, took up the cross that had our name on it, and there suffered the wrath of God meant for us. He did it all as our Substitute, promising that everyone who believes this to be true, gets the credit for his holy humility and the benefit of his atoning sacrifice – so that no punishment for sin remains. We are forever saved and safe because the One who died for us lives to keep the promise: **“...whoever loses his life for me will save it.” (Luke 9:24).**

To lose our life for Jesus is once again nothing other than denial of one’s self in favor of Christ and his Word. His Word proclaims us forgiven for the sake of his life, death, and resurrection. Here too we find a cross to carry. Our reason makes no sense of God’s pardon. What about all those shameful things I’ve done in the past, sins from years ago that haunt me still? What about the many more sins I’ll commit before this day is over? It makes no sense to think that God forgives someone as messed up as me. That’s right, it makes no sense. But then again, my forgiveness isn’t based on my sin-darkened reason. It’s based instead on God’s undeserved love and his unbroken promise – a promise so powerful that works in each of us the faith to reject the voice of our reason as we cry out to God: **“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).**

And there you have it – the purpose for every cross God permits us to carry. Whether the pressure to deny Christ comes from within or without, God means to use the cross to focus our attention on him and his promises. This is why, Christian, you can take up your cross willingly. It’s not some penalty you must pay, not at all. Every cross is under the control of the One who loves us and gave himself for us. He uses every cross to teach us that we cannot, we must not rely on ourselves for anything. Each cross we carry is meant to convince us that we are completely dependent on God for everything. Without these crosses in our lives we would soon lose sight of our need for Jesus and his saving gospel. Search the Scriptures to see if this isn’t true. See how many times it happened that God’s people turned from him when everything was going well in their lives. Are we so arrogant as to think we wouldn’t do the same thing? We would forget our God in a heartbeat.

The Scriptures say: **“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:22).** This isn’t a threat. It’s a promise – which is why, Christian, you can take up your cross joyfully. With every cross comes God’s promised help. Never once has he abandoned you. He has brought you to this very day, not in spite of the crosses you’ve borne, but through them, so many of which you can’t even remember. And yet, every one of them has served God’s loving purpose. This is why we can say with St. Paul, **“We...rejoice in our sufferings.” (Romans 5:3)** – not because we take some twisted form of pleasure from our pain, but because we know the good that God is accomplishing through our cross.

Here, of course, is where we can help each other. If you’re like me, your memory of God’s grace is embarrassingly short. I know that God has carried me and my crosses every day till now. And yet, somehow, I fail to let his past grace fill me with new confidence as I face this day’s crosses. They look too heavy. I’m tempted to avoid them at all costs. Remind me, won’t you, that the sign under which I was reborn is not a curse. I have nothing to fear. Remind me, won’t you, that not one of God’s people who are with him in heaven are complaining about any of the crosses Christ laid on them. Let’s remind each other: **“Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is his faithfulness.” (Lamentations 3:22-23).** Amen!