

## THE CROSS OF DISCIPLESHIP

### **Matthew 16:24**

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In researching for this sermon, I read this: 'We live in a day of 'casual Christianity'...the average church could drop a quarter of its membership from the members' roll and neither the church nor the dropped members would notice any difference. Casual Christians want the forgiveness of the cross of Christ but never intend to carry their own cross. They want the warm fuzzy moments on Sunday morning but offer no commitment to Jesus on Monday mornings.' And this: '...much of current Christianity is about what the people can get out of it. There are those who say Jesus is here to make you healthy, wealthy and happy. Jesus wants you well. He wants you rich.' Is that the gospel? Coming to Jesus does indeed give us unbelievable joy. But there is pain before gain, the cross before the crown, suffering before glory; and sacrifice before reward. That is the clear teaching in our text; Matthew 16:24 *"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."* Now we know that this is a very important aspect of being a disciple of Jesus because he keeps repeating it. Back in chapter 10:37 Jesus said: *"Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me."* The gospel of Mark mentions it, so does John and it is repeated at least three times in Luke. So, what we have here is a principle that is repeated by Jesus. Which means it is extremely important. And because of that Jesus will keep repeating the principle until his disciples get it. It's an issue for us as well. You see, the way it often goes is that when we first commit to Jesus we will be on fire and be willing to make sacrifices. But after a few years we slip back into the old ways. So, this principle, which goes right against our natural grain, needs to be repeated till we get it and keep on getting it. We will never understand discipleship unless we understand this principle.

When we look at the context of our text, we can see what I mean about Jesus needing to repeat the teaching. Jesus has made it clear in chapter 8 that being his disciples is costly, as we saw last week. Now in chapter 16 we see that beautiful confession by Peter when Jesus asked, *"Who do you say I am?"* Peter answered, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* In response Jesus had said to Peter that he would build his church on Peter the rock, on his confession. But a few verses later Jesus strongly rebukes this same disciple. Why? Well Jesus, we are told, (:21): *"began to explain to his disciples that*

*he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things ...that he must be killed...*" Peter had taken Jesus aside and rebuked him (:22): *"Never...this shall never happen to you!"* Why had Peter said that? Well the common understanding of the Messiah at the time was that he would come and defeat the Roman oppressors and bring freedom. The disciples were waiting for that to happen. They were expecting glory, not suffering. Not only did they not understand what Jesus was on about, Jesus sees what Peter says as a temptation by Satan to block what God had in mind. Jesus' response (:23) is very important. *"You are a stumbling block (an offence) to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."* In a sense he says to Peter: 'what you just said offends me because that's the way men think'. How do people think? They think about gain without the pain, the crown without the cross, the glory without the suffering; they just want the good stuff. But God thinks differently; he says the gain comes through the pain; the glory comes through the suffering. Why does it work that way? Because if you genuinely strive to be holy like God and do that in the midst of an anti-God society there will invariably be some form of hostility. We see that so clearly with Jesus. Here was God in his creation, acting in grace and perfection and he was hounded to the cross. That's why 2 Timothy 3:12 says *"...everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted"*. Jesus is saying to Peter, you don't understand God's thinking; the kingdom can only come through suffering. If you put holiness in the midst of an unholy society, there has to be a reaction. So, because of this Jesus reiterates the principle. In verse 24 he comes back to this key issue. It's like he says 'Look, let's go back to that first lesson when I called you. I told you to leave everything, your nets and your family, your livelihood, your lifestyle, your home and come and follow me. Remember I said I would make you fishers of men. Well, let's go back to that original abandonment of everything to follow me and let me remind you that *"if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"*. The lesson for us is: if you come to follow Jesus you do it on his terms. What are those terms? Three things, self-denial, cross bearing and loyal obedience. Let's look at those three.

First, self-denial: *"must deny themselves..."* That's where it starts. To deny means to disown, so 'let him disown himself'. Jesus is referring to our sinful human nature. He means we should deny what it wants. That's the first essential in the Christian life. That's the way we come to Jesus and that's the way we are to live. We disown our natural human self because it is sinful. What it naturally brings up is not good. So, seeing our sinfulness we reach out to Jesus to be saved from our sin. And we strive to follow Jesus by denying our natural way and following his way. Look at Peter here in our text. He rightly recognises Jesus as the Messiah. But then his sinful self is focused on what he can gain from his association with Jesus. He can't cope with a suffering Jesus. He wants gain, not pain. So, denying yourself begins with recognising what your

real self is like, its sinful nature. It is about recognising your need for Jesus. Now, having come to him, having been forgiven, your daily lifestyle is to deny the inclination of your natural sinful self and to follow the lead of the Spirit. For example, we are naturally inclined to want to be seen as first, the best; the most liked in a group. Jesus says, 'the first shall be last', and that we are to be willing to let the other be first, to enjoy their promotion. The reality is that we are inclined to gossip to bring another person down, to belittle them. Some years ago with the Queensland flood a boy drowned as he saved his brother. A little while later there was a newspaper report that the brother who survived got beaten up because people were jealous with all the media attention he received. That reveals our natural inclination. But Jesus says: 'No deny that self, that natural inclination, and "think more highly of others". You should be humble and gentle'. So, first deny yourself: don't see yourself as master of your life, but Jesus as the master. Disassociate from the tendencies to follow the attitudes of your natural self to follow the ways of Jesus.

Secondly, we are "to take up our cross". Now let me remove a misconception here first off. Often, we use the language of cross bearing to mean that we suffer in some general way. A man might complain about his mother-in-law and say she is a cross he has to bear. Or an old lady complains that her arthritis is the cross she bears. Now that is not what Jesus meant. Everybody suffers, whether they are Christian or not. It's a fact of life. But that is not what Jesus was getting at. When Jesus said take up your cross, he was not using an analogy. He meant it literally and the disciples knew what he meant. Don't forget Jesus was using this saying before he went to the cross. So, the disciples were not thinking of the cross of Christ. I'll tell you what they were thinking. A hundred men had been crucified in the local area around the time of the events in our text. One historian estimates that 30,000 crucifixions occurred around the time of Jesus. When Jesus said 'take up your cross' the disciples were thinking of the condemned men marching along the road going to their execution with their own instrument of death strapped to their back. To them the cross meant you are walking to your death. So, Jesus is saying you must perceive following me as putting on the instrument of your own execution. Why? Because the world is going to react against you. It is what happened to the disciples. Many of them died as martyrs. Now it doesn't necessarily mean we will die. But Jesus means you will bear reproach and you will be ridiculed if you live for Christ. There's truth in that isn't there. That's why so many of us find it so hard talking about Jesus. In a sense taking up your cross means that when you come to Jesus you are willing to suffer the indignities and contempt of a condemned criminal, if Jesus calls you to do so. Now in our culture it isn't the case that we could be martyred for Christ. But last century millions of Christians were persecuted and killed for the faith. How many of us are willing to stand up for Jesus even if it meant losing our life?

You see when we come to Jesus, we don't just stick our hand in the air and volunteer a bit of our time. Following Jesus means that if called upon you will sacrifice even your life.

Let's clarify something. Why is it that we suffer, that we bear a cross? It's not because we have behaved badly, and the community is irate and sick of our hypocrisy. Bearing our cross is the suffering that is ours because of our faithful following of Jesus, doing things his way. The thought here is magnificent. It's as if you could see Jesus going along the road moving to his own execution, bearing on his back the cross upon which he will bear the sin of the world. And following him, in his train, are millions of people, all with their crosses, all willing to take his reproach, all willing to cop abuse because they live obedient to Jesus. You get the point: you are not called to Jesus to get the goodies; a ticket to heaven, your 'get out of jail card', and now I can get on with my life. You are called to deny yourself, to abandon yourself in service to Jesus. That's the essence of the gospel. It is the cross that marks the true disciple. Luke in his version of this scene says we must take up our cross "daily". So, it's something we do every day. It is a way of life for us.

The third ingredient is loyal obedience: "and follow me". The text says literally 'let him be following me'. Again, it is a way of life. It is being submissive to the Lordship of Christ in a way that becomes a pattern of living. If we say we belong to Jesus (as 1 John 2:6 says) we will "*walk as Jesus did*", we will put our feet into his footprints, loyal to his divine will. Let me put it this way. When I lecture in Melbourne, I say goodbye to Liz, I pick up my bag and I go on my way to the train station. Same thing here, this is the Christian life: you say goodbye to yourself, you pick up your cross, and you go on life's journey, following in the steps of Jesus.

Now are we implying that the Christian life is one of sacrifice and just losing everything? No. Look at what Jesus says, and here is the paradox of discipleship: if we are willing to give up everything for Christ, we gain. If we want to hang on to everything and not deny ourselves anything, we lose. Verse 25: "*For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for anyone if they gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul. Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul. For the Son of Man is going to come in his father's glory with his angels and he will reward each person according to what they have done.*" You see the point Jesus is making! Imagine someone who has gone beyond Bill Gates and has gained ownership of the entire creation. What good is it to him when his 70-80 years are over, and he is dead? Can he use that vast fortune to buy his life back when he is dead? No! He is dead, and without Christ, eternally dead. So, who ultimately is the biggest loser? Those

who deny themselves nothing, who freely follow the passions of their sinful nature, indulge in anything and everything. Or those who deny themselves and take up their cross, are willing to take on the ridicule and scorn that was put on Jesus and live for him in their daily lives. Jesus tells us he *"will reward each person according to what he has done"*. It will be a reward that makes everything here pale into insignificance.

So, what is your life like? Are you a casual Christian or a committed Christian? If Jesus gave his life for us the only worthy response is to be willing to do the same for him. Let's take up our cross and follow Jesus!