

Take up Your Cross: Die to Live
Luke 9:18-23
Sermon prepared for WellSpring Church
March 27, 2011

Luke: 9:23 ...If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.

Introduction

Engage: Words are like knives—they become dull with over use. The cross is such a word. It is so much a part of our Christian vocabulary that it has become dull and harmless. It is more symbolic than real and the symbol without the reality is meaningless. For many of us the cross is really nearly meaningless, it is merely a part of the history of the religion we believe. Listen to the Apostle Paul in I Cor. 1:23 “The cross is a stumbling block to the Jews and Folly to the Greeks.” Do we see the cross as a stumbling block? Do we trip over the fact that the symbol of Christianity is a cross? Do we stumble in our way to belief in the message of the gospel because it includes a cross? Does it seem to us to be folly, stupidity or madness that we embrace the symbol and the reality of the cross? Are we insane to accept that the originator and founder of Christianity, the one that the book of the Hebrews call the author of our faith died on a cross? Do we blush at the word as though an obscenity was uttered? Do we shudder as we consider the horror and torture that it implies? Probably not—and perhaps only when we hear the details of crucifixion during Passion Week—the days leading up to our commemoration of the death of Christ on our way to the celebration of the Resurrection. This was not the reaction that Paul was evoking. He used stumbling block and folly—or madness to describe the reaction to the cross. Why is this? Words like knives become dull with over use. One Roman writer living in the early second century said that “Christians put forward sick delusions and senseless and crazy superstitions which leads to old womanly superstition for the destruction of all true religion . Not least among their monstrosities is the fact that they worship one who has been crucified...their ceremonies center on a man put to death for his crime on the fatal wood of the cross...they are abandoned wretches.” (my paraphrase from Martin Hengel, Crucifixion, page 3). To worship one who had died the death of a common criminal on the cross, could only be regarded as a sign of madness...the cross was a sign of shame, the infamous stake, the criminal wood, the terrible cross and those who died on it died in the most ignominious fashion and were executed in a shameful way. Cicero said that the word cross was such an offense that it was not be heard on the lips of decent people. Does it surprise us then that the most complete and detailed accounts of a crucifixion that we have from the ancient world are the ones preserved for us in the Gospels. It is there that we see that “crucifixion was a punishment in which the caprice and sadism of the executioners was given full rein.” (Hengel p. 25)

This is not what we hear when we hear the word cross. This is not what we see when we see a cross on a steeple, stamped on a bible, or worn as jewelry. Because of the dullness of the word and the reality it symbolizes Jesus' word to us this morning come to us with all the cutting power of a butter knife or a little boy's plastic sword. When we hear the realities of the call of the gospel we do not blush, shudder or draw back in horror. They really mean nothing to us.

Read Text; Luke 9:18-23

Review

Who is this Jesus

What does he require? Self Denial

What is self-denial? It is saying no to my own desires and ways and rights. It is saying disavowing my right to be the ruler of my life and the definer of my own happiness and goals. It is the rejection of the idolatry of self.

Listen to David Powlinson

"If 'idolatry' is the characteristic and summary Old Testament word for our drift from God, then 'desires' is the characteristic and summary New Testament word for the same drift. Both are shorthand for the problem of human beings."

The deep questions of motivation are not 'What is motivating me?' The final question is, 'Who is the master of this pattern of thought, feeling or behavior?' In the biblical view, we are religious, inevitably bound to one god or another. People do not have needs. We have masters, lords, gods, be they oneself, other people, valued objects, Satan. The metaphor of an idolatrous heart and society capture the fact that human motivation bears an automatic relationship to God:

Who, other than the true God, is my god?

When a 'need for security' propels my life or a segment of my life, I am again engaging in religious behavior. Rather than serving the true God, the god I serve is the approval and respect of people, either myself or others. I am an idolater. I am not 'motivated by a need for security.' I am 'motivated by lust for security rather than ruled by God.'" David Powlinson

So last week we saw that we are not denying self when we have anger—this is easily an indictment against God.

have hurt feelings—for our selves and for others-

live with self-pity

experience or express impatience

are quick to express and own and demand our opinions

feel as though we are always right.—Job 40:8

give up because the task is too hard.

Dying To Self

By Bill Britton

When you are forgotten or neglected or purposely set at naught, and you don't

sting or hurt with the insult or oversight, but your heart is happy, being counted worthy to suffer for Christ – that is dying to self.

When your good is evil spoken of, when your wishes are crossed, your advice disregarded or your opinions ridiculed, and you refuse to let anger rise in your heart or even to defend yourself, but take it all in patient, loving silence – that is dying to self.

When you lovingly, patiently bear any disorder and irregularity, any unpunctuality or any annoyance; when you come face to face with waste, folly, extravagance, spiritual insensitivity...and endure it just as Jesus endured it—that is dying to self.

When you are content with any food, any offering, any raiment, any climate, any society, any solitude, any interruption by the will of God — that is dying to self.

When you never refer to yourself in conversation, or to record your own good works, or itch after commendation, when you can truly love to go unknown — that is dying to self.

When you can see your brother or sister have his or her needs met and can honestly rejoice in spirit and can feel no envy nor question God, while your own needs are far greater and in more desperate circumstances — that is dying to self.

When you can receive correction and reproof from one of less stature than yourself and can humbly submit inwardly as well as outwardly, finding no rebellion or resentment rising up within your heart — that is dying to self.

Preview: Today we go even further. Jesus demands that we take for ourselves the cross.

Big Idea: The Christian life is costly and hard. Grace is free and freely given, but it does not come cheap. It is not only the means for forgiveness, restoration with God but also the strength for living out the very hard life that is Christian. Jesus uses the very harsh word, cross, to describe this life.

What the disciples heard—And what we need to hear: Relate yourself to me by taking on my pain and my shame as your own daily reality. What do we hear? Nothing. What should we hear? Life with God means death to self. Life with God means that I am constantly dying to self and constantly putting self to death. Taking up your cross—Suffering and Dying. Jesus doesn't stop with the call to denial, he presses on to the demand of death.

Peter I do not know the man

The Crowd's "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

To be a follower is to be a disciple—to learn to live the life he lived

What are we to understand when we speak of taking up our cross?

It is not every little irritation or trouble that comes into our lives: it is not a whining baby, an irritating mother in law, a cranky car, a nagging allergy, a arrogant boss, a noisy neighbor. It may be these things, but it is not only these things. These are not instruments of shame, torture, and death. This is to trivialize the cross and the suffering of Christ and to drain it of its meaning and power.

There are two aspects, passive active.

Passive:

Suffering for the sake of Christ—When I suffer because I am a Christian

Three cautions:

The naïve willingness or claim to be willing to truly suffer for Christ if the necessity were to come that most of us have is offset and contradicted by our unwillingness to accept any discomfort. (Heat, cold, criticism, rejection, oversights, lack of approval)

The repentance necessary because we've already failed to take on suffering for the cause of Christ. Some of us wouldn't have our jobs today if we were really willing to stand up for and suffer for Christ. There are those among us who have not even "suffered" the time to read the Bible through or to study the things of God.

Do not get suffering for Christ mixed up with suffering because of disobedience or stupidity (being a jerk)

How we suffer for Christ

rejection, loss of relationships, mockery, not being able to socialize because of Christian commitments.

financial lack, job loss, promotion loss, opportunity loss—The salesman, investment in Christian school, misunderstanding for home schooling.

sickness—Young Peter has Malaria.

It is the attitude of the disciples in Acts 4:25, 26

Second kind of passive cross bearing: Suffering for the sake of Christ—is when I suffer because I am a child of the father.

Corrective suffering: There are times when my suffering is meant to correct and change something in me, it is the way God is seeking to get my attention and to call me out of a wrong way of thinking or acting. It is God saying to me—This is Sin, this is evil, this is wicked, this is rebellion and the rebel must be put to death. This is the discipline of God.

Heb. 12:6

Refining suffering—what is suffering but the process God uses to burn out the chaff and dross and impurity in our lives.

Will I learn humility without being humbled?

Will I learn patience without being put in trying circumstances?

Will I learn purity with

Romans 5:1-5 (there would be no need to produce godly character if there was already godly character.) Do we actually think that it is more than wonderful to suffer?

I need to say something here—Taking up our cross means to accept the fact that suffering is the normal Christian life.

Scriptures

Rom. 5:1-5

Gal. 2:20-21

Phil 1:21

Phil 2:1-13

Col. 1:24

II Tim. 3:12

Heb. 12”5

I Peter 2:18-25

I Peter 3:9

I peter 4:12

John 16:33

And finally this: Philippians 1:29—It has been granted to you to suffer. My suffering is a gift from God.

Active: Notice that Jesus does not say “Receive the cross” or “Allow yourself to be put on the cross, be always passive and willing.” He says take up your cross. Stoop down, pick it up and carry it.

Put yourself on the cross to put sin to death. Here is self-denial magnified. This is what meant when we read in Colossians 3:5 “Put to death, therefore, what is earthly in you.” or in the older translations, “Mortify “ The puritan John Owen asks, “Do you mortify? Do you make it your daily work? Be always be at it while you live; cease not a day off from this work; always be killing sin or it will be killing you.” (Mortifying Sin) Much of our passive suffering is a result of our lack of commitment to this active putting to death of sin in our lives. We have in fact chosen to sin rather than to accept suffering. (Job 36:21-23) And one of our sins is that we complain about our suffering. Job cried out to God and said “Why do you treat me like your enemy?” We need to understand Providence and the goodness of God and the way that he treats his children.

Put your self on the cross to mortify or to put to death the flesh. Some of the deepest and most painful suffering you will do will be denying yourself, that is putting to death your own desires, wants, longings, felt-needs, appetites, lusts, and rejecting the idols that you have served. Have you stopped to think that every one of your sins and struggles comes out of self-love? And if it comes out of self-love it comes also out of hatred for God and the things of God? Do we dare minimize out self-love and God-hatred by calling our selves addicts, flawed peopled, merely imperfect? Do we not see that our addictions are the complete giving over of ourselves to our self-love. Why yes you might say. The addict is in love with self. The addict needs to repent of that self love and see it

as sin and repent. OK, How about you? What about your addictions? What about your addiction to self-pity, your addiction to anger, your addiction to being right, your addiction to comfort and pleasure and peace and quiet, your addiction to acceptance from others, your addiction to the approval of man, your addiction to being made much of, your addiction to tasty words of gossip, your addiction to knowledge, your addiction to control, your addiction to procrastination and laziness. What are we going to do with the idols we worship? What are we going to do with the love for self that will not put self on the cross. What will we do with the demand of following Christ?

Do you love your self and your idol and your addiction more than you love the Christ who took up his cross for your salvation?

Do you love your self and your idols and your addictions more than your children who need to see what the demands of discipleship really look like in the home?

Do you love your self and your addictions and your idols more than the church, the community of faith who need to see your progress in the faith so that they too might be encouraged to move forward?

We lose a great part of our understanding of salvation and discipleship here—we are to teach them to obey everything—if I am not obeying, how can I teach others? How will I fulfill the mandate?

Go to the place where there is suffering in order that Christ might be known—Colossian 1:24. Making up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ. People may never see and understand fully the suffering of Christ—but they will see your suffering and your happy response to it and they will be drawn to the savior who means more to you than earthly comfort, ease, health and pleasures. Is there a Moses among us who will despise the pleasure of the season for the joys of eternity? Is there the life of Jesus among us who did not despise the shame of the cross but for the joy set before him endured its pain and shame? Is there an attitude among us that says I will give embrace this temporary suffering so that I might experience eternal joy?

Now what do we know of all this? Surely this is a question, which ought to be asked. A little formal church-going, and a decent attendance at a place of worship, can never be the Christianity of which Christ speaks in this place. Where is our self-denial? Where is our daily carrying of the cross? Where is our following of Christ? Without a religion of this kind we shall never be saved. A crucified Savior will never be content to have a self-pleasing, self-indulging, worldly-minded people. No self-denial--no real grace! No cross--no crown! "Those who are Christ's," says Paul, "have crucified the flesh with its affections and lusts." (Gal. 5:24.) "Whoever will save his life," says the Lord Jesus, "shall lose it; but whoever will lose his life for My sake shall save it." (J.C. Ryle)

Take up your cross—For life and living. Three for's, three arguments or promises to consider as motivations for cross bearing.

For whoever would save his life will lose it. In other words, if you seek to save your life—that is the life that you think you should have, and do not deny yourself and take up your cross daily you will lose your life for all eternity.—Do not be deceived by those who say that this life is all that there is, do not be deceive by those who say that God will save all people after death. There is an eternal losing.

For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul? Jesus says the same thing again. WE look for gain in this world when true gain comes self-denial and taking up our cross daily. The only lasting gain is living for Christ now and putting to death self—Is this not what Paul says in Philippians 1:20?

For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father of the holy angels. Being ashamed of Christ is denying him—Denying Christ comes when I do not deny myself. Being ashamed of Christ comes when I do not take on the shame of the cross—in my own life by taking up my cross daily.

Conclusion: The cross was a cruel form of death—but the gospel without an understanding of the cross is a cruel form of life. Consider:

John Piper: What Jesus Demands of the World “He did not die to make this life easy for us or prosperous. He died to remove every obstacle to our everlasting joy in making much of him. And he calls us to follow him in his sufferings because this life of joyful suffering for Jesus’ sake (Matt. 5:12) shows that he is more valuable than all the earthly rewards that the world lives for (Matt. 13:44; 6:19-20). If you follow Jesus only because he makes life easy now, it will look to the world as though you really love what they love, and Jesus just happens to provide it for you. But if you suffer with Jesus in the pathway of love because he is your supreme treasure, then it will be apparent to the world that your heart is set on a different fortune than theirs. This is why Jesus demands that we deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him.” (page 71)

It is a cruel kind of evangelism and teaching on the Christian life that downplays, ignores or denies the necessities of self-denial, suffering and self-crucifixion. J. I. Packer (From Knowing God) says it is true that the gospel of God brings us forgiveness of sins, peace of conscience, and fellowship with God as...Father—however it is wrong to suggest there will be no troubles, no set-backs, no suffering, and that there will be a clear and easy way through “problems of guidance, self-fulfillment, personal relationships, heart’s desires and such like which had hitherto defeated him completely...it is easy to give the impression that normal Christian living is a perfect bed of roses...and there are

no more problems-and if problems do happen to come we just toake them to the throne of grace and they will just melt away. A concomitant cruelty is to suggest that problems and troubles are a result of sin or a lack of faith.

None of this is meant to mean or to suggest that salvation, forgiveness, and acceptance with God are in any way connected with self-denial and taking up the cross. If your salvation were dependent on your self-denial—then Christ's suffering was in vain. If your salvation depends on your suffering then Christ's death on the cross was a needless and cruel waste. What is means is that the one who has received the gift of the death of Christ on the Cross will evidence it be living that death and gaining life.

None of this is meant to be done in our own strength. We have the example of Jesus and the promised presence of Jesus through the Holy Spirit