How to Take Up Your Cross?
Scripture: Matthew 16
Code: BQ072913

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."(16:24)

When **Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me,"** they were doubtless reminded of the time He had called each of them. Some two and a half years earlier they had left families, friends, occupations, and everything else in order to follow Jesus.

To unbelievers among the multitudes who were present on that occasion (see Mark 8:34), Jesus' words **come after Me** applied to the initial surrender of the new birth, when a person comes to Christ for salvation and the old life of sin is exchanged for a new life of righteousness. To the believers there, including the Twelve, **come after Me** reiterated the call to the life of daily obedience to Christ.

It is sadly possible for believers to lose the first love they had when they received Christ as saving Lord and surrendered all they were and had to Him (see Rev. 2:4). It is a constant temptation to want to take back what was given up and to reclaim what was forsaken. It is not impossible to again place one's own will above God's and to take back rights that were relinquished to Him. It is especially tempting to compromise our commitment when the cost becomes high. But the fact that believers sometimes succumb to disobedience does not alter the truth that the character of a true disciple is manifest in obedience. Although imperfect obedience is inevitable because of the unredeemed flesh, the basic desire and life-direction of the true Christian is obedience to the Lord.

Discipleship is on God's terms, just as coming to Him is on His terms. The Lord here reminds us that the key discipleship principle of winning by losing involves self-denial, cross-bearing, and loyal obedience.

The first requirement of discipleship is self-denial. A person who is not willing to **deny himself** cannot claim to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. **Deny** is from *aparneomai*, which means to completely disown, to utterly separate oneself from someone. It is the word Jesus used to describe Peter's denial of Him while He was being questioned by the high priest (Matt. 26:34). Each time he was confronted about his relationship to Jesus, Peter more vehemently denied knowing Him (vv. 70, 72, 74). He disowned his Master before the world.

That is exactly the kind of denial a believer is to make in regard to **himself**. He is to utterly disown himself, to refuse to acknowledge the self of the old man. Jesus' words here could be paraphrased, "Let him refuse any association or companionship with **himself**." Self-denial not only characterizes a person when he comes in saving faith to Christ but also as he lives as a faithful disciple of Christ.

The self to which Jesus refers is not one's personal identity as a distinct individual. Every person is a unique creation of God, and the heavenly Father knows each of His children by name. He has every believer's name "recorded in heaven" (Luke 10:20). The self of which Jesus is speaking is rather the natural, sinful, rebellious, unredeemed self that is at the center of every fallen person and that can even reclaim temporary control over a Christian. It is the fleshly body, the "old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit" (Eph. 4:22) and is yet to be redeemed in glorification (cf. Rom. 8:23). To deny that self is to confess with Paul, "I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh" (Rom. 7:18). To deny that self is to have the sincere, genuine conviction that one has nothing in his humanness to commend himself before God, nothing worthwhile to offer Him at all.

The believer is made acceptable before God when he trusts in Jesus Christ, and he stands before the Lord in perfect righteousness, clothed in "the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth" (Eph. 4:24). But as Paul also declared, even after salvation a believer has no more goodness in *himself,* "that is, in [his] flesh," than he had before salvation. To deny self is to "make no provision for the flesh" (Rom. 13:14) and to "put no confidence in [it]" (Phil. 3:3). To deny self is to subject oneself entirely to the lordship and resources of Jesus Christ, in utter rejection of self-will and self-sufficiency.

Jesus proclaimed that the first requirement for entering the kingdom is to be "poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3), to have the spirit of utter poverty in regard to one's own goodness, righteousness, worth, and merit. It is to humbly recognize one's spiritual destitution. It is only the person who realizes how poor he is who will ever know the riches of Christ. It is only the person who realizes how sinful and damned he is who will ever come to know how precious the forgiveness of God is. "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Ps. 34:18). It is the broken and contrite heart that God loves and will never despise (Ps. 51:17). It is not the self-righteous and self-satisfied but the penitent and humble whom God saves. It was not the proud Pharisee who had such a high image of himself, but the brokenhearted tax collector who asked God for mercy, who Jesus said "went down to his house justified" (Luke 18:14).

The whole purpose of the Old Testament, reflected pointedly in the law of Moses, was to show man how spiritually and morally destitute and powerless he is in himself. The law was not meant to show men how they could work their way into God's favor but to show them how impossible it is to live up to God's holy standards by their own resources.

Arthur Pink wrote, “Growth in grace is growth downward; it is the forming of a lower estimate of ourselves; it is a deepening realization of our nothingness; it is a heartfelt recognition that we are not worthy of the least of God’s mercies.”

To be saved calls for a sinner to deny self so as to “consider the members of [his] earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry” (Col. 3:5). It is to “lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and … be renewed in the spirit of [one’s] mind” (Eph. 4:22–23).

The second requirement of discipleship is to **take up** one’s **cross**. This idea has profound meaning which must be understood. Taking up one’s **cross** is not some mystical level of selfless “deeper spiritual life” that only the religious elite can hope to achieve. Nor is it the common trials and hardships that all persons experience sometime in life. A cross is not having an unsaved husband, nagging wife, or domineering mother-in-law. Nor is it having a physical handicap or suffering from an incurable disease. To **take up** one’s **cross** is simply to be willing to pay any price for Christ’s sake. It is the willingness to endure shame, embarrassment, reproach, rejection, persecution, and even martyrdom for His sake.

To the people of Jesus’ day the **cross** was a very concrete and vivid reality. It was the instrument of execution reserved for Rome’s worst enemies. It was a symbol of the torture and death that awaited those who dared raise a hand against Roman authority Not many years before Jesus and the disciples came to Caesarea Philippi, 100 men had been crucified in the area. A century earlier, Alexander Janneus had crucified 800 Jewish rebels at Jerusalem, and after the revolt that followed the death of Herod the Great, 2,000 Jews were crucified by the Roman proconsul Varus. Crucifixions on a smaller scale were a common sight, and it has been estimated that perhaps some 30,000 occurred under Roman authority during the lifetime of Christ.

When the disciples and the crowd heard Jesus speak of taking up the **cross**, there was nothing mystical to them about the idea. They immediately pictured a poor, condemned soul walking along the road carrying (which is an accurate translation of *airo*, meaning “to raise, bear, or carry”) the instrument of his execution on his own back. A man who took **up his cross** began his death march, carrying the very beam on which he would hang.

For a disciple of Christ to **take up** his **cross** is for him to be willing to start on a death march. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to be willing, in His service, to suffer the indignities, the pain, and even the death of a condemned criminal.

Obviously the extent of suffering and persecution varies from believer to believer, from time to time, and from place to place. Not all the apostles were martyred, but all of them were willing to be martyred. Not every disciple is called on to be martyred, but every disciple is commanded to be willing

to be martyred. “Beloved,” Peter wrote to his fellow believers, “do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (1 Pet. 4:12–14).

To come to Jesus Christ for salvation is not to raise a hand or sign a card, although such things may sometimes play a part. To come to Jesus Christ is to come to the end of self and sin and to become so desirous of Christ and His righteousness that one will make any sacrifice for Him.

Jesus had earlier said, “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s enemies will be the members of his household” (Matt. 10:34–36). He had also said, “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. … If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!” (vv. 24–25). Christ was now in effect saying to His disciples that if He, their Lord, would have to “suffer many things … and be killed” (Matt. 16:21), how could they expect to escape the same treatment?

The **cross** represents suffering that is ours because of our relationship to Christ. As Jesus moved unwaveringly toward Jerusalem, the place of execution where He “must go” (v. 21), He had already taken up His cross and was beginning to bear on His back the sins of the whole world. And in His train, millions of disciples, all with their own crosses, have since borne reproach with Him.

Christ does not call disciples to Himself to make their lives easy and prosperous, but to make them holy and productive. Willingness to **take up his cross** is the mark of the true disciple. As the hymnist wrote, “Must Jesus bear the cross alone, and all the world go free? No, there’s a cross for everyone, and there’s a cross for me.” Those who make initial confessions of their desire to follow Jesus Christ, but refuse to accept hardship or persecution, are characterized as the false, fruitless souls who are like rocky soil with no depth. They wither and die under threat of the reproach of Christ (Matt. 13:20–21). Many people want a “no-cost” discipleship, but Christ offers no such option.

The third requirement of discipleship is loyal obedience. Only after a person denies himself and takes up his cross, Jesus said, is he prepared to **follow Me**. True discipleship is submission to the lordship of Christ that becomes a pattern of life. “The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked” (1 John 2:6). “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven,” Jesus declared; “but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). To continue in His Word is to be His true disciple (John 8:31).

Paul calls salvation the “obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5; 16:26). Peter describes God’s sovereign saving work in a life as “the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood” (1 Pet. 1:2). Obviously, obedience is an integral feature in salvation and is as characteristic of a believer as is the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit and the sacrificial saving work of the Son. Peter told the Jewish Sanhedrin that the Holy Spirit is given only to those who obey God (Acts 5:32), and since every believer has the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9), every believer is also characterized by obedience to God as a pattern of life.

“If anyone serves Me,” Jesus said, “let him follow Me; and where I am, there shall My servant also be; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him” (John 12:26).

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