

The Power of the Gospel

21

A People of the Cross

Read Matthew 10:37-39

The Cross is not just the way of salvation. It is a way of life. It is the mark of a true disciple of Jesus.

Read Luke 9:23

Jesus' instructions to his disciples involved three steps:

- Deny yourself
- Take up your cross *daily*
- Follow me

Denying yourself is simple to understand. It means denying the rights of comfort and attention that you would normally reserve for yourself. It is not the old self that denies itself, however. It is the new self that denies itself. Only the new creation can take up its cross and follow the Lord.

Notice that you are to take up your cross "daily." Anything that is "daily" falls into the second half of the Gospel. So what exactly did Jesus mean when he told you to "take up [your] cross daily and follow me"?

Three Aspects of the Cross

Before you can take up your cross and follow the Lord, you need to understand what it is that you are taking up. There are, in fact, three distinct parts to the meaning of the Cross as it is used in Scripture:

- The heart of the Cross
- The work of the Cross
- The way of the Cross

Let's take a look at each of these three aspects.

The heart of the Cross

Read Revelation 13:8

The Cross was not something God thought up at the last moment when everything else had failed. The Bible says that Jesus was “slain from the creation of the world.” From the very moment of man’s sin, the plan of the Cross was set into motion.

The Cross is an intrinsic part of God’s nature. The heart of God is a heart of sacrificial love. This quality has always been there, from before the creation of the world right through to the farthest reaches of eternity. God does not change. He has always had “the heart of the Cross,” but this “heart of the Cross” was expressed in the giving of his Son to die an excruciating death upon Calvary.

None of us can fully appreciate what it meant for the Father to give his Son over to death upon the Cross. His was a double pain – the pain of feeling every agonizing moment together with his Son and the pain of having to turn his back on his Son. This is why the Bible says, “For *God* so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...” (**John 3:16**). The heart of the Cross is the heart of the Father.

The Work of the Cross

Read Philippians 2:7-8

When we think about the Cross, we usually think about the physical Cross of Calvary. This was the point in time when the heart of the Cross was outworked in a powerful act of salvation, at once shameful and glorious.

Read Colossians 2:14-15

We have already established that the work of the Cross was a finished work. You cannot add anything to the Cross of Calvary. It is a once-for-all, completed work of salvation, dealing with both the judgment of sin and the power of sin. The work of the Cross is the work of the Son on your behalf.

The Way of the Cross

This is now what we are called to as disciples of Jesus Christ. You cannot do the *work* of the Cross, but you are called to walk the *way* of the Cross. The true disciple of Jesus is a cross-carrier. But take particular note of *whose* cross it is that you are called to take up. It is not the Cross of Christ you are called to carry. It is *your own* cross that you are called to carry.

When the disciples first heard Jesus command them to take up their cross, there was no inkling of any thought that they needed to crucify themselves. This would have sounded preposterous to them, for Jesus did not tell them to *nail* themselves to a cross. He told them to *carry* their cross.

If speaking to a modern crowd, Jesus would have probably used words to this effect:

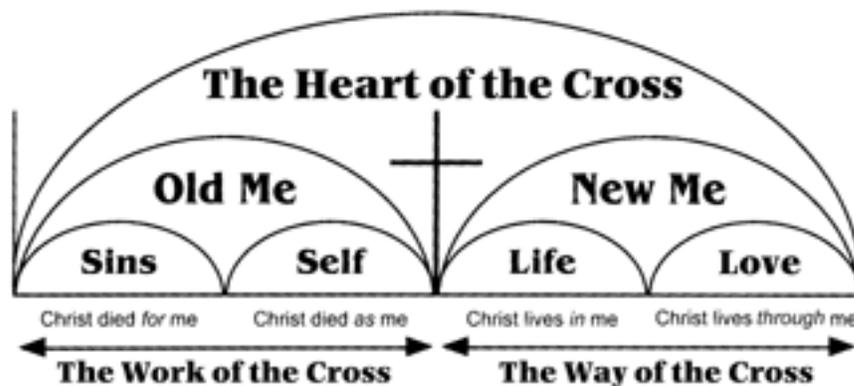
“If you want to follow in my footsteps, you will first need to go out and buy yourself a personal gallows, make sure the noose is ready, then go get a judge to pre-sign your warrant of execution. Then, *and only then*, are you ready to

follow me. For my footsteps will walk down death row in order to preach the Gospel to a world on death row.”

This gives you the feel of what Jesus’ words would have sounded to a first-century crowd. Jesus was, in effect, saying that to follow him meant almost certain death. This was the commitment that any disciple of Jesus would need to be willing to make.

In summary, let’s take another look at the three aspects of the Cross:

- The *heart* of the Cross is the Father’s part, expressed in the giving of his beloved Son.
- The *work* of the Cross is the Son’s part, expressed in his death upon the physical Cross.
- The *way* of the Cross is the Holy Spirit’s part, expressed through the life of the believer on a daily basis.



You can never do the *work* of the Cross, for this is a once-for-all, 100% finished work. But you *are* called to have the same *heart* of the Cross that was in the Father and to walk the *way* of the Cross in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Taking Up Your Cross

Read Ephesians 5:1-2

To take up your cross means to imitate Christ in his walk upon the earth. Just as Jesus took up his Cross by choice, so do we.

Read John 10:14-18

The way of the Cross is a choice. Your salvation does not depend upon it, but the closeness of your walk with God does. Jesus walks the way of the Cross and if you are to follow him, so must you.

Jesus did not take up his Cross for himself. He was not trying to kill himself off.

No, he took up his Cross on behalf of a dying world. In the same way, when you take up your cross, you are not taking it up for yourself, but so that others may hear the good news of salvation. Just as Jesus went to the Cross because of who he is, so we now carry our cross because of who we *already* are in Christ!

One key point that is important to understand is this: When Jesus spoke of taking up your cross, he was not referring to the actual act of crucifixion. He was referring to the stage *before* the crucifixion when the condemned man was obliged to carry his cross through the streets in public view.

For Jesus, carrying his Cross meant four things:

The love of the Cross

Jesus took up his Cross because of love. In the same way, love for God and for others must be your only motivation for taking up your cross. Anything else is spoilt by self-effort and is an affront to Christ, who has already made the supreme sacrifice on your behalf.

Read John 15:12-13

The ultimate expression of love is the laying down of one's life for another. Jesus expressed this depth of love and he intends for this same quality of love to be reflected in your life.

We cannot emphasize this point strongly enough: You do not take up your cross for yourself (to change yourself). Rather, you take up your cross for the sake of others. You are walking the way of the Cross – a way which will take you out of your comfort zone into the suffering zone to reach a needy world.

Read 1 John 3:16

It is interesting how the organization of verses in Scripture has (coincidentally, some might say) created this pattern:

- **John 3:16** – The Father giving his Son to lay down his life on your behalf.
- **1 John 3:16** – The believer now laying down his life for the sake of others.

The obedience of the Cross

Read Hebrews 5:8-9

The willingness of Jesus to carry his Cross was the willingness of obedience. For even as the model New Man, everything within Jesus cried out against going to the Cross.

Read Luke 22:41-44

We must remember that the suffering of the Cross began long before the actual crucifixion. It started in the Garden of Gethsemane, went on through the night at Caiaphas' and Annas' house, and continued through his appearances before Pilate and Herod. Jesus endured hours of standing and sleeplessness, being struck and

spat at, being scourged and mocked before he was actually nailed to the Cross!

The way of the Cross is a path of obedience. It is the response of our hearts, echoing the prayer of the Lord Jesus: "...not my will, but yours be done."

Read 2 John 6

The shame of the Cross

Read Hebrews 12:2

One of the worst things about the Cross was the shame and ridicule a condemned man had to endure. This is also a part of what it means to carry one's cross. Taking up your cross means being willing to suffer shame and persecution for the sake of the Gospel. It may even mean losing your worldly reputation for the sake of the Lord's name.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:12-13

The sentence of the Cross

Read 1 Corinthians 4:9

A person carrying a cross carried a death sentence. As Christians, we also carry a suspended death sentence. If following Jesus means going right to the point of being willing to die for him, our suspended death sentence simply becomes re-activated.*

Read Revelation 12:11

The early Church discovered what it meant to walk the way of the cross – literally. Many of them were martyred for their faith – crucified on crosses, burned as human candles, faced lions in the arena.

Read Hebrews 10:32-34

Read Hebrews 11:32-38

The Experience of Paul

Read Acts 9:15-16

Paul's sole ambition was to preach the Gospel where it had never been heard before (**Romans 15:20; 2 Corinthians 10:15-16**), but in the process of doing this, Paul faced much persecution and suffering. Rather than seeing this as a sign of defeat, Paul saw it as his and his converts' glory (**Ephesians 3:13**).

Read 1 Corinthians 15:30-32

When Paul said, "I die daily," he meant it. He literally put his life on the line for the sake of the Gospel every single day.

* Some Christians worry that they may deny the Lord under the pressure of torture or imminent death. But you need to remember that the entire Christian life is lived by grace. There is a grace – an outworking of God's enabling power – available for every kind of situation, including martyrdom.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

Paul “always [carried] around in [his] body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in [his] body.” But notice that this was not for himself. “So then,” he says, “death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.”

There is a kind of “death” we take on voluntarily so that life might come forth in another. Any mother who has given birth to a child will tell you that this is a kind of “death.” Life is born out of the agony of childbirth.

The Cross held this meaning for Jesus. He was willing to “endure the cross, scorning its shame” for the sake of “the joy set before him” (**Hebrews 12:2**). In the same way, when you voluntarily take up your cross, this is in order that life might come forth in others.

Note Paul’s words in **2 Corinthians 4:15**:

“*All this is for your benefit*, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.”

Read Colossians 1:24

In this verse, Paul declares the path he has chosen to walk. Let’s take a closer look at what he is saying:

- ☞ **“Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you...”** – Paul was able to rejoice because there was a joy set before him, the joy of seeing everyone presented perfect in Christ (see **verse 28**). It was for this reason that he suffered. Note too that Paul said he “suffered *for you*,” and not for himself.
- ☞ **“...and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions...”** – The afflictions that Paul was talking about was not Christ’s death on the Cross, but the *continuing* afflictions that Christ suffers in his Church as the Gospel is extended into hostile territory. Persecution against the Church is seen by Jesus as persecution against himself (see **Acts 9:4-5**). Paul counted it a privilege to take on board his share of the afflictions of Christ.
- ☞ **“...for the sake of his body, which is the church...”** – Paul saw this identification with the afflictions of Christ as being not for himself but for the sake of the Church. None of this was self-motivated or self-focused. This is why Paul was able to say in **Colossians 1:29**: “To this end I labor, struggling *with all his energy*, which so powerfully works within me.”

This sense of selfless sacrificial love for Christ and his Body is illuminated beautifully by *The Message*:

“I want you to know how glad I am that it’s me sitting here in this jail and not you. There’s a lot of suffering to be entered into in this world – the kind of suffering Christ takes on. I welcome the chance to take my share in the church’s part of that suffering.”

Wherever Paul preached the Gospel, he faced persecution and suffering for the sake of the Gospel. Yet he was “not ashamed of the gospel” (**Romans 1:16**) and he willingly bore “the offense of the cross” (**Galatians 5:11**).

Read 2 Corinthians 11:23-33

In the next chapter, Paul speaks of his “thorn in the flesh” (**2 Corinthians 12:7**). Many have speculated that this “thorn” may be some kind of sickness or disability, but the context of Paul’s letter indicates strongly that Paul’s thorn in the flesh was nothing less than the constant persecution he had to face. At one stage Paul cried out to be delivered from this persecution, but God’s response was to declare that his grace was more than sufficient to uphold Paul no matter what the circumstances.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Paul had had such a powerful revelation of Christ’s total identification with him in the *once-for-all* afflictions of the Cross, that now Paul’s ministry was driven by a total identification with Christ in his *daily* afflictions.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:8-11

Read 2 Corinthians 6:4-10

The Fellowship of His Suffering

Read Philippians 3:10

There are two sides to knowing Christ. There is a participating in the power of his resurrection and there is also a participating in his suffering. You cannot truly have one without the other.

Note that it is his sufferings that we are sharing in. Christ has already identified with you in your suffering. Now you have the privilege of identifying with him in his suffering.

There is a special fellowship in suffering. Anyone who has suffered greatly has an automatic bond with someone who has been through similar suffering. There is an understanding, an empathy, which is born in pain.

Read Psalm 42:7

God has great depth and he seeks fellowship with people of similar depth. As unpleasant as it may be at the time, suffering deepens a person’s capacity to fellowship with God. This is the meaning of knowing “the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings.” It is within this fellowship that

Other Scriptures

- **Acts 5:41**
- **Romans 5:3**
- **Philippians 1:29-30**
- **2 Thessalonians 1:5**
- **2 Timothy 1:8**
- **1 Peter 2:21**
- **1 Peter 4:12-16,19**
- **1 Peter 5:8-10**

“deep calls to deep.” And it is within this fellowship that an understanding of God is found greater than that possible when we are experiencing only his blessing.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-7

The Other Side of the Throne

One of the wonders of the Gospel is that we have not just been saved into relationship with God, but the quality of that relationship is of the highest order. We are:

- ➔ Sons of God (**Galatians 4:4-6**)
- ➔ Heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ (**Galatians 4:7**)
- ➔ Sharers of his throne (**Ephesians 2:6**)

But note particularly the following verse:

Read Romans 8:17

You cannot separate the privileges of sonship from the responsibilities of sonship. Jesus – who was *the* Son of God – had every blessing in the heavenly realms, yet he was willing to forgo those blessings in order to participate in the purpose of his Father.

Just like our elder brother, we now have “every spiritual blessing” in the heavenly realms (**Ephesians 1:3**). But like Jesus, we are called to enter into the purpose of our Father.

Read Philippians 2:5-8

When Christ came to the earth, he left the comfort zone of heaven and entered by suffering zone *by choice*. Jesus started carrying his cross long before Calvary.

Jesus willingly relinquished all his rights as the heir to the throne of God in order to come to earth and save wayward humanity. He did not consider the throne rights “something to be grasped” but “humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!”

Jesus never lost his identity as the Son of God, nor did he lose his authority as the Son of God, but he changed his focus from the throne to a lost world (**Luke 19:10**).

In the same way, we lose neither our identity nor our authority as sons of God and heirs of the throne, but like Christ, we leave the comfort zone of our blessings in God and enter the suffering zone *by choice*.

Like Jesus, we have nothing to grasp after. We already have everything in Christ! And now, like Christ, we choose to forgo our rights to comfort and privacy in order to be the hand of Jesus extended to others.

Read Hebrews 13:12-14

This is not just our responsibility as sons of God, but is also our privilege. There is

no way we can repay God for his love, but we have a wonderful way to express our love for all that he has done for us. By walking the way of the Cross, we not only show that we truly love the Father, we also identify fully with the one who identified fully with us.

It is only because we have received the *work* of the Cross as a free gift, that we are now qualified to have the *heart* of the Cross, like the Father, and to walk the *way* of the Cross, by the power of the Holy Spirit.