

**Basic Discipleship: Self-Denial and Cross-Bearing**

Matthew 16:21-26

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In a hospital emergency room waiting area, one rather self-important man was getting impatient at the long wait. Unwilling to wait any longer, he barged into the triage area and demanded to be seen by a doctor. He shouted to the nurse, "Don't you know who I am?" The nurse calmly went out into the waiting area and asked the other waiting patients, "I have a gentleman here who doesn't know who he is. Can someone please assist him in finding out? Thank you."

We live in a selfish world. We have this sense that the world revolves around us. Ours is a me-first society, and I'm part of a me-first generation. There is so much emphasis on the self: self-absorption, self-actualization, self-advancement, self-assurance, self-improvement, self-interest, self-realization, self-respect, self-righteousness, self-fulfillment. Everywhere you turn, you'll find encouragement to focus on yourself. Marketers appeal to our selfish motives when they advertise their goods--they want me to think of me, and how I will benefit by the use of their products.

We live in a selfish world. It's something that surfaces as soon as we learn to speak. After all, what's one of the first words that a baby learns to say? "Mine."

We live in a selfish world. This isn't a new development in human history; it's as old as the Garden of Eden. In the Garden of Eden, the serpent appealed to selfish motives in tempting Eve to take the forbidden fruit: "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God. . ."<sup>1</sup>

I once heard someone describe our selfish nature by using the term, the Theology of the Sovereign Self. He concludes that the Sovereign Self is pervasive in our culture and is in fact the unspoken presupposition of our pursuit of what we consider to be good in life. The theology of the Sovereign Self tells us to grab all the gusto we can. It proclaims accumulating to be the way to live a truly fulfilled and meaningful life.--whether it's the accumulation of material goods, power, money, influence, status...<sup>2</sup>

And so it's because the Sovereign Self is front and center in our lives, it's because we're so focused on feeding the insatiable appetite of the Sovereign Self, it's because the Sovereign Self is the all-consuming passion of our world, it's because of the Sovereign Self that the words of Jesus are so difficult to accept: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me."<sup>3</sup> His words make us stop in our tracks. His words rub against every fiber of our selfish being: deny yourself, take up your cross.

Denying yourself, and taking up your cross--these are the basic requirements of faithful discipleship. Denying yourself and taking up your cross are about a change in heart that stops turning inward, and begins to look outward, toward Christ and toward our neighbor. Denying yourself is about changing the center of your lives. It's about changing the axis around which your life rotates. It's about changing the center of your universe, so that you are no longer at the center, but instead Christ is at the

center. Instead of worshiping and following the Sovereign Self, to deny ourselves means that we will worship and follow the Sovereign Lord, Jesus Christ.

Denying yourself sounds a lot like what it would mean to live out the two great commands of Scripture: to love God above all else and with all our being, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Unless you deny yourself, how can you be faithful to those two commands? How can you love God if you love yourself more? How can you possibly love your neighbor if all your focus is on yourself? If you're going to be obedient to the first and second greatest commandments, you must deny yourself.

Mother Teresa once heard of a family that was on the verge of starving to death. So she immediately rounded up enough rice for the family to live off of for a week, and she delivered it to the family. While Mother Teresa was with the family, she saw the wife take half of the rice and put it in a bag and start out the door. When Mother Teresa asked the woman where she was going, the woman replied, "There is another family that is also starving; I'm going to take this rice to them." To deny yourself is to take yourself out of the center of your universe, and become aware of others. To deny yourself means to consider others before considering yourself.

But what about taking up your cross? Modern-day people may think that taking up your cross is a fashion statement, as if it refers to wearing a cross necklace or earrings. But for Jesus, and even for his disciples, the cross was a form of execution. For Jesus, taking up the cross meant to die so that others might have life. Jesus gave himself for others.

One of my favorite hymns is When I Survey the Wondrous Cross. In that hymn, there is a verse that helps me understand what it means to take up our cross, as we see what the cross meant for Jesus. The verse goes like this: See, from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingling down; did e'er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Taking up the cross is the intersection of sorrow and love. To take up our cross is to experience in our own lives the same kind of sorrow and love that drove Jesus to the cross of Calvary. In other words, it means that we will face suffering for the cause of Christ, but it also means that the suffering is an outpouring of the love of Christ that is in our hearts.

The call to take up our cross is the call to make sacrifices, to willingly give of ourselves as we follow Jesus. Sometimes it means we will encounter resistance and rejection, because the world is fundamentally at odds with the gospel of Christ. Sometimes it means engaging the unjust and oppressive structures of our world, in the name of Christ. It means fighting for the rights of others, in the name of Christ. It means standing up for truth, in the name of Christ. And so taking up our cross means that we must not shy away from difficult positions just to avoid suffering or inconvenience or resistance; rather, we recognize that as we stand on the side of Christ, we must be willing to make sacrifices, and to give of ourselves in ways that are counter to our selfish instinct.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one who learned first-hand just what kind of sacrifice taking up the cross sometimes entails. Bonhoeffer was a pastor and theologian in Germany during World War II, and he saw it as his Christian duty to work within his own country for the defeat of Adolf Hitler. And so he became a part of the underground resistance movement. He was arrested after a plot to assassinate Hitler was uncovered, and he was executed just before the end of the war.

But here is the irony of the cross: while the cross of Christ was an instrument of unbelievable suffering, it was also Christ's greatest expression of love for us. You see, the cross is our instrument of

redemption, and Jesus went to the cross willingly, FOR US. “No greater love has anyone than this, that they give up their life for their friends.”<sup>4</sup> And so the writer of the hymn is right--“Did e'er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown?”

You see, while the call to take up the cross may--and likely will, at some point, in some way--entail suffering, rejection, and sacrifice, it is something that we take up willingly, out of love. To take up the cross is to express sacrificial love. It is the ultimate expression of denying yourself, for the sake of Christ, for the sake of others.

There was a church that wanted to improve attendance at their major worship services, so they hired a powerful advertising agency to come in, study their situation, and make recommendations. The ad agency did their research and then suggested to the church that they should get rid of all the crosses in the church, because the crosses might send a negative message to prospective young worshippers!

My friends in Christ, a church without the cross is no church at all. The cross is the dramatic symbol of our faith, hope, love, and forgiveness. The cross is the powerful reminder of God's sacrificial and redemptive love for us. And the cross is the constant signal to us of how God wants us to live and love today: We are called to be servants.

A young man was eager to succeed in business. So one day he had the opportunity to spend 15 minutes with a billionaire CEO, and the young man asked the CEO the top reason for his success. The CEO answered without hesitation, “Hard work.” The young man paused for a moment, then he spoke up again. “What's the second reason?”

There are two reasons for successful discipleship, and both are hard work. If you want to be his disciple, you must deny yourself and take up your cross. Are you ready to do that?

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 3:4,5

<sup>2</sup> Philip Bauman, in Lectionary Homiletics, Feb/Mar 2003, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 8:34, NRSV

<sup>4</sup> John 15:13