



“Take Up Your Cross”

Luke 9:23-27

September 16th, 2018

We are going to be in Luke Chapter 9 once again this morning where we will be encouraged to take up our cross.

It was a beautiful Spring at California State University of Long Beach sometime in May in 1994. I had been up super late through many nights in a row writing term papers and cramming for finals. That late morning, I was on my way to take one of those final exams and I might as well have been sleepwalking. I was so tired and could barely keep my eyes open.

Situated outdoors in one of the walkways was a coffee machine. As I walked past it to my class, I wondered why not. I looked at the variety of coffees offered and chose French Vanilla. I put in my money and pressed the button and out came the coffee.

Understand, I was not a coffee drinker up until that point in time. I took a large swig of that coffee that was filled with sugar and loaded with caffeine. It was a very strong coffee drink and after a couple of sips, I said, “Whoa!” It woke me up. Since then, I have had an ongoing positive, beneficial, and maturing relationship with coffee.

I wonder how many of you know what I am talking about when I say that if you are going to have a cup of coffee, you must have a cup of coffee that does something to you. There is nothing worse than a bad watered-down, bland, diluted, poor excuse for a cup of java. You need the kind of coffee that beckons to you from the cupboard. You need the kind of coffee that produces a chemical reaction that changes something inside of you.

I was thinking about the portion of Scripture that we find ourselves in and there is, indeed, something that is worse than a weak cup of coffee and that is weak, watered down, gutless, lifeless Christian religion.

When the message of Jesus Christ is properly communicated, understood, and properly received, it comes with strength and conviction. It is something that is robust. It confronts. It challenges. It speaks the truth and it demands a response. It gets into you. True Christian faith alters, transforms and revolutionizes every life that it grabs hold of.

True Christian faith causes people to be renewed so they are more and more like the image of God—particularly, they are conformed to image of Christ. They begin living in the pattern of Jesus Christ in a life of truth and sacrificial love and service. The Christian faith changes people. This is at the heart of what we are talking about to be followers of Jesus Christ.

It is my prayer this morning as we get into the Word of the Lord there would be a movement from the power of the Holy Spirit from Heaven to send jolts of divine resurrection power. And if anybody is not a Christian, I pray that hearing the truth of Jesus will raise them from spiritual death to spiritual life.

If there is any Christian who knows what it means to slip into the weakness of the flesh and become lethargic, I pray that the voice of the Messiah would be heard by you in such a way that the apathy would be removed and that you would be stirred in to holy zeal as you understand that it is the King of heaven and earth, the Creator of everything, that we follow. We want to have the kind of Christian living that is affective in this world by the power of God in us.

As we enter the scene of Luke's Gospel once again, we see that Jesus had been with His disciples in Northern Galilee for at least a year and a half, if not longer. There were flocks of people that gathered to Him whenever He appeared. He had just gathered His twelve and asked them two very important questions, the second more important than the first.

The first question He asked them was: Who do people say that I am? The disciples responded with various erroneous ideas about Jesus that were being circulated in that First Century world where Jesus ministered. Some said that He was John the Baptist resurrected. Some said that He was Elijah. Some said that He was one of the prophets of old.

Then Jesus asked them the more important second question that gets personal for each and every one of us. He asked: But who do you say that I am? We were reminded last week that we are living in a world where there will always be false notions of Jesus being circulated. This was the case in the First Century in the very place where He was serving, and it is the case even now.

After hearing the claims of Jesus, we must answer His question: Who do *you* say that I am? On behalf of the disciples, Peter answered: You are the Christ of God. You are the one anointed unique King from Heaven. That is who you are.

After that, Jesus absolutely sent a jolt of electricity into them. He made it so that they would have been flabbergasted when He responded by affirming this by using an Old Testament title of the Messiah for Himself. Jesus said: The *Son of Man* must suffer many things. And He must be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and He must be killed, and on the third day be raised.

That was the first prophetic statement from the Messiah of the suffering and the resurrection that he was about to set off to do. But while the disciple's heads were still spinning from what Jesus had just said to them about His suffering, He delivered the next jolt of electric shock as He let them know that He would not be the only one suffering.

To make sure everyone knew the self-sacrificial nature of walking with the Lord Jesus Christ, He then called anyone that was close by to surround His twelve disciples and said: If you want to follow Me, this is what following me is all about—and we read it as we look in to Luke Chapter 9 and Verses 23 through 27:

²³And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. ²⁵For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? ²⁶For 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 and of the holy angles. ²⁷But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.”

I just read one of the most important paragraphs in the New Testament about what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, one of His disciples, one of His adherents. The Christian life is laid out before us here. I know full well that Scripture in its plenary form is all from the Lord, but this is just such an important portion of Scripture and we really need to understand what is here.

So, we are not only going to spend today but also next week exploring all the different statements that Jesus made in this passage with the desire that we not get swept off in to watered down lukewarm Christianity but the desire to have caffeinated Christianity, if you will.

I want us to take a good look at what is here in this portion of Scripture and I pray that the Holy Spirit will be speaking to our hearts as we do. I want to begin this morning by noticing a very important word that is in this text. It is a word that you are familiar with. It is one that you have seen and read and spoken many, many times. It is the word *cross*. Verse 23:

²³And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

What came as great interest to me is that what we just read is the first use of the word *cross* in the Gospel of Luke. However, the first use of the word *cross* is not used in reference to the sacred cross on which our Redeemer died so that our sins can be removed.

Instead, the first use of the word *cross* in Luke from the lips of our Messiah is in reference to the daily cross that each one of His followers is called to take up and carry. That spoke to me as something that should get our attention.

We know that the cross of salvation is primary. We have life because Jesus died. But it should get our attention that Jesus talked about our cross before He specified His cross.

That is something for us to really consider as we think about the nature of the life that Jesus calls us to. We are to die that we might truly live.

As we look at this passage of Scripture, I think that two very important questions can be answered by exploring it. The first one is: What does it mean to take up your cross? The second one is: Why in the world should I or would I take up my cross and follow Jesus? Those are two questions that can be answered by exploring what is in the text.

We are living in a society where most Americans are familiar with a cross, but, for the most part, the cross is a fashion accessory or a memorial tribute. You have seen lots of crosses, plenty of them are on chains people wear around their necks. That's good and fine.

You have also seen crosses in cemeteries. You have seen crosses in churches. You have seen crosses everywhere, but I am certain that something that you have never seen is a large, sturdy, eight-foot cross installed on a street corner in a very public place with a person nailed to it, dying.

However, that is something that these men saw. They were living under the First Century foot of the Roman Empire. Especially close to major cities, there would be people crucified on the streets, dying on crosses. This is the imagery that would come to their minds when Jesus told them to take up their cross and follow Him. So, we must ask the question: What does this mean? What is Jesus expecting of us.

We must think about this in view of the fact that following this statement there was only a tiny percentage of Jesus' follower who had to die by crucifixion. The vast majority of Christians who have ever lived have not taken up a literal wooden cross upon which they died.

It is very clear that Jesus was using a serious symbolism about the nature of Christian living here. This is something that we really need to hear from the voice of Jesus. What does it mean? What was He trying to get across to us when He said to take up your cross and follow me?

The second question is why. Why would we do that? That does not sound pleasant at all, and that is something that I, in my flesh, draws back from. But after understanding what He meant, we must understand why we would heed this calling. The bulk of the paragraph that we just read is Jesus explaining the rationale of what He said.

The call is given in Verse 23. Then the following verses explains the why. There is the what and then the why. We want to understand both of these as serious followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What I have for you is a two-part sermon. This week we will spend all our attention just on Verse 23, and really understand what Jesus is calling us to. Then next week, we will follow up and talk about why we are going to obey Jesus and live this way.

This morning I would like to offer four aspects of a cross-carrying life. Maybe you're a card-carrying member of Costco or Sam's Club or the AARP. There are card-carrying members of certain organization, but what we want to be is a cross-carrying citizen of the heavenly realm that we have been called into.

So, let's look at this text and see: Four Aspects of a Cross-Carrying Life:

The first thing for us to understand at the most basic level is that:

1. It's a Life of Discipleship

This is a life of following Christ. Notice the language of the text on both ends of Verse 23:

²³And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

If you want to come after Me and be a part of My entourage and want to be a part of My gathering, follow Me, so Jesus says. Follow Me. That is the language of a student following a teacher. That is the language of one person living in the example and the instruction of another person's wisdom and authority.

When you take up your cross and follow Jesus, your eyes are on Christ and your ears are open to Him. You see and hear Him, and you emulate a life of self-sacrificial love when you walk in His ways.

It is a life of discipleship. It is a life where you say: I need to learn from the One who is King. I'm not going to go to Him and impress Him with my wisdom. Instead, I am going hear from Him how I am called to live in this world. It is being a follower of Jesus Christ.

This is the Christian life: You follow Christ. You don't follow the majority. You don't follow the minority either. You follow Jesus! You don't follow the powerful people. You don't follow the weak people. You don't follow the in-crowd. You don't follow the out-crowd.

Your eyes are fixed on Jesus Christ, and you follow Him in His pattern. You walk in His ways. You don't follow the Democratic Party. You don't follow the Republican Party. You follow Jesus and you weigh up every other affiliation in this life accordingly to see how they measure up to what His truth says. You follow Jesus. Your eyes on Jesus. He is your affiliation. It is Christ!

Sometimes I am so inspired by my canine, Lydie-Lou. I have a tennis ball that she loves for me to throw so she can run after it. Don't you love it when a dog's ears are forward,

and their eyes are centered in and they are not looking at anything in the peripheral because they are so focused, like Lydie is when I throw that tennis ball?

That's how we are when it comes to Jesus. This is what we are being called to. We follow Christ. By the Holy Spirit doing a work inside of us, we are faithful to Jesus. We love Jesus. We are focused on Jesus. He is the One that we follow after. Can we just start with that?

If we have Christian living that is real, not some deluded imposter-version of Christianity, we must understand that we are going to be zeroed in on Christ and we are going to follow Him.

The cross-carrying life is a life of discipleship. Second:

2. It's a Life of Self-Denial

Did you notice that here in this portion of Scripture? This is where it will start getting more difficult for the person who is imbibing in the spirit of the age, because we are, in fact, living in a society that is increasingly self-absorbed.

There are people who have plenty to say about self-help, self-fulfillment, self-preservation, self-actualization, and self-discovery. We are so self-interested. There is so much self-love and self-rule and autonomy in our world today.

In contrast to that attitude that is going on in the world, can you hear the voice of the Messiah calling to from the pages of Scripture, saying: Get over yourself. Get over yourself!! Verse 23:

²³And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

This is yet another signal to us from the pages of Scripture that within the condition of each human being there is something that is flawed, and that is to put it lightly. There is something in us called *sin*, and this even lingers in the one who has come to living faith in Jesus.

There is still the seed of rebellious Adam in us. There is still the residue of iniquity in us. It is to the extent that if we were to just follow our hearts and do what our flesh wants us to do, we would be living utterly selfish, reckless, and detestable lives because selfishness is totally bound up in the heart of each one of us.

So, Jesus was saying: No, no, no. Listen to Me, deny yourself. This is the path to life. This is the way to be distinct. This is the way to be walking in holiness. Deny yourself. Don't trust your desires. Filter them through the pages of Scripture and do what God tells you to do in the Bible.

Jesus was saying here to be very, very careful about your impulses. They are something to be denied, unless they are caught up in the power of the Holy Spirit where we are to walk in the fullness of the Spirit.

We must have ears to hear this call from Christ to a life of self-denial because it is prophesied that in the End Times, societies of the earth will become so self-absorbed. It will be totally depravity and that is becoming more evident. Listen to what it says about the last days in II Timothy 3:1-5

¹But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. ²For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, ⁴treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.

If that doesn't sound like a depraved society to you, it certainly does to me. What is so very interesting about it is that this starts with self-love, loving the self. We must be careful because there is such a spirit of self-love in the world we are living in that it sometimes can be dizzying and you may ask if it is eschatological—is this End Times stuff?

I saw some commercials on the Disney Channel where there was a young lady essentially telling children watching: You need to celebrate you. You need to follow your heart. You need to look out for you! It was just you, you, you, you! Be careful! This attitude exists everywhere.

I like to surf. Riding waves is something that I enjoy doing a lot. I look at a website called Surfline where it has cameras, so you can check out the waves before you go surfing. The website also has articles and photographs of surf trips. There was this group that recently went down to Mexico to catch a few waves.

It sounded like a cool trip, so I checked it out. There were photographs of the surf trip and each one had a little pithy quote, some little piece of wisdom. There was a pro-surfer lady who said:

Trust yourself. Trust in your path. Do whatever you want to do. It is all about loving who you are. That is where the strength is found.

Lovers of self. However, the Christian life is distinct because we become those who love God first, love others second, and then care for ourselves third. Have you ever heard of JOY? What is the path to joy? Jesus, others, and you!! But the mantra of this world is to look out for number one. Who is number one in JOY? It is Jesus!

Jesus is telling us to deny ourselves and to be careful about the tendency we have not to do that. Listen, the Gospel is not all about you. The Gospel is about Christ being formed in you. It is about being restored to the image of God and that image of Christ in us is an image of self-sacrificial love for other people. This is what we must be careful about in a society that is turning more and more selfish. We must be careful because the distinct Christian life is the life that is lived in love for others.

Thinking about this in a very practical way: A husband has had a super, super long day at work. He is very tired, and he would love to go home and go off by himself, where he can get absorbed in something relaxing to him. But he goes home and denies that impulse. Instead, what he does when he gets home is to be a blessing to his wife and gives attention to his children. He crucifies that desire to be absorbed in himself by giving himself away to others. This is Philippians 2 humble, Christ-like living.

That is just one example of how we can deny ourselves. If you really give this some thought, you will find all kinds of scenarios in life for self-denial. Deny yourself says Jesus. It is a life of self-denial. We continue and, also see that:

3. It's a Life of Daily Devotion

²³And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

Daily! It is an everyday kind of thing. Every day we must remind ourselves that we are to be filled with the Spirit and that we are going to walk in the pattern of Christ-like sacrificial love.

How many of you have mornings routines? I certainly do. I am such a creature of habit. I will get up in the morning either at 6:15 or 6:23, depending on whether or not I hit the snooze button. Then I stumble out of bed and switch the coffee machine that has already been preloaded.

After that, I go and brush my teeth and tame that bedhead hair of mine with a little water. Then I go and open the Good Book and read at least a chapter, hopefully several chapters. After I hear from the Lord, I scramble some eggs for breakfast. Then I get ready for the rest of the day.

That is my morning pattern but reading this verse, I am convicted that in my morning time with the Lord, I need to daily remind myself that my life is all about being a servant to the people that Christ has placed me in the midst of. So, let's take up our cross daily and follow Him—every single day! Every day.

Many of you either have jobs or careers or will have a job or have had a job that requires that you work five or six days a week, with one or two days off each week. In addition to that, you get holidays and vacation time and sick time off. Those are good things to give you some rest.

You get time off from work, but you never get time off from the Christian life. You never have the time where you say that you are so fed up with everything that is going on and get to indulge some of your inner snark and snap at people!

There is never a time when you can say that you are not going to be a Christian today. You can be on vacation. You can be on your day off, but everyday you are walking with Jesus in the Spirit of gracious sacrifice that He has laid out before you every day. Jesus said to deny ourselves daily.

I hope that you will join me in the discipline of not only meeting with the Lord first thing in the morning, but also asking God to, throughout the day, give you a cross-centered vision of the life that He wants you to live, because that is the life that is distinct. That is the life that is set apart. That is the life that Jesus wants to live through you.

The fourth aspect of a cross carrying life:

4. It's a Life of Sacrificial Pain

There is no way around this. We must receive that. Jesus said: Take up your cross. As much as we would like to avoid the fact that there is not going to be pain and suffering involved in Christian living, the fact is that there is going to be such experiences. Jesus let us know this when He said to take up your cross and follow Me.

I don't know about you, but I prefer to avoid pain. Pain isn't for me. Several months ago, on a Friday afternoon, I began feeling some lower back pain. By the time I went to bed that night, I was debilitated. I couldn't move in my bed one way or the other. It was so painful.

In the morning, I could not go do my morning routine that I just shared with you. I could not even get to the restroom. I tried to get out of bed myself and I ended up crawling on the floor yelling for Kristy's help. I had to take about five ibuprofen a few times a day, along with some Tylenol—one was to break the inflammation and one was to help the pain go away.

Do you know bad it is to take that much ibuprofen? But I did not care because I needed to get rid of the pain! We are living in a society that is not tolerant of pain. I don't like pain either. I understand that, but Jesus calls us to a holy life in a world that is darkened with sin and is under the attack of Satan and where people are deceived.

If you and I think that we can move through the Christian life without any pain on the road that we are living, then we are deceiving ourselves. One way to avoid such pain would be to draw back in shame and not be willing to declare that we are followers of Jesus Christ.

However, as we will see next week, Jesus has words of warning for those who would deny Him publicly. We need to be those who are very honest, open, and public about our Christian testimony, and there will be offerings of pain that come with that.

We can be thankful that it's not likely for us at this time in the United States of America that that pain is going to be physical pain or martyrdom, but you never know how fast the tide can change in a society; and it seems like the tide is changing rapidly in ours. You never know when somebody who is a Christian might be called to shed blood.

If that comes upon us, we need to pray that Psalm 46 would be realized in our hearts, where we say to the Lord:

**¹God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
²Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea**

We will still have refuge in our God and He will be our ever-present help to help us stand up, declaring the grace and the love and the truth of Jesus Christ—even if people want to give us a black eye for it.

There may or may not be physical pain involved in your Christian testimony, but it is almost certain that there is going to be emotional and relational pain. I was thinking about this even this morning and, as a result, faces began appearing before me. There are people in this body of Christ who are experiencing emotional turmoil because they are standing faithful for Jesus Christ in the midst of hostile environments.

God bless you! You are taking up your cross and following Jesus. May the Lord bless you and uphold and strengthen you and give you that counterintuitive peace and joy that even comes in the midst of it. By the Spirit's work, may you be like Paul and Silas singing praises to the Lord in the middle of the Philippian jailhouse.

Part of being a Christian is that there is sacrificial pain. Even though we are in a world where we want to do people good, even though they don't recognize it, we stand up and say: I am a follower of Jesus. That is who I am. I'm not ashamed. And if there is any kind of pain, be it physical or emotional or relational, we are going to walk with Jesus. That is part of the Christian life.

Here is something that was such a blessing to me as I was studying the language of this text. It really encouraged my heart: The Greek word used when Jesus said to *follow me* is *akolutho*. This is definitely a word of discipleship where the learner is following the master, but in the Greek lexicon, I read that it also implies a strong nuance of accompaniment. You follow the one who is leading as their attendant, but there is solidarity to it as well. You enter into a partnership of sorts. You are not going at it alone.

Jesus said to take up your cross and follow Him, and the implication is that you are with Him. He is right there with you, and Jesus promised His people, *Surely, surely, I am with you always. Never will I forsake you. Never will I leave you.*

As we get into this next week, we will find the great paradox that as we deny ourselves, that is when God is lifting us up. It is when we die that we truly live. This comes out so beautifully in the opening prayer of the Valley of Vision, a collection of Puritan prayers and devotionals.

**Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly,
Thou hast brought me to the valley of vision,
where I live in the depths but see thee in the heights;
hemmed in by mountains of sin I behold thy glory.
Let me learn by paradox
that the way down is the way up, that to be low is to be high,
that the broken heart is the healed heart, that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing
spirit,
that the repenting soul is the victorious soul, that to have nothing is to possess all,
that to bear the cross is to wear the crown, that to give is to receive,
that the valley is the place of vision.
Lord, in the daytime stars can be seen from deepest wells,
and the deeper the wells the brighter thy stars shine;
Let me find thy light in my darkness,
thy life in my death, thy joy in my sorrow,
thy grace in my sin, thy riches in my poverty, thy glory in my valley.**

Let's close in a word of prayer.