

# Take Up Your Cross

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good morning again, and welcome to Church of the Advent. My name is Jeff, and I'm one of the pastors here. And especially if you are new here this morning, if this is your first time joining us, welcome.

We'd love to meet you and say hello after the service. Our gospel reading this morning in Matthew chapter 16 doesn't pull any punches. It gets straight to the heart of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

If you want to know what it means to be a Christian, if you want to know what it means to follow Jesus, to be a disciple, here it is in Matthew chapter 16.

And it's that just as Jesus Christ faced the cross for us, so we must all take up our own cross and follow him. That's what discipleship is, and that's what we see here in this gospel reading.

We're going to look at three parts to this gospel reading. We're going to see the necessity of the cross, the centrality of the cross, and the glory of the cross. The necessity of the cross, the centrality of the cross, and the glory of the cross.

[ 1 : 07 ] So first of all, when it comes to being a disciple and following Jesus, we see the necessity of the cross. Verse 21 says that from that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised.

It took multiple conversations and occasions and moments for Jesus to get through to his disciples that the end goal of his mission involved suffering and death.

And the reason why it took so many conversations is because their expectations were way different for his ministry. They expected Jesus' ministry to be success after success, victory after victory, triumph after triumph.

They saw the graph of Jesus' ministry trending up and to the right. And nowhere do we see these expectations about Jesus' ministry more clearly than in the next verse when we see Peter's response to what Jesus says about the end goal of his ministry.

Peter takes Jesus off to the side and he says, Lord, what in the world are you talking about? Suffering and death? This shall never happen to you.

[ 2 : 23 ] And to which Peter gets the most firm rebuke that he could ever receive from Jesus. Jesus responds to Peter and says, get behind me, Satan.

You are a hindrance to me, for you are not setting your mind on the things of God but on the things of man. If you remember Tommy's sermon last week from Matthew 16, you remember that Jesus calls Peter the rock upon which he will build his church.

And this same Peter, who just a few verses earlier Jesus called the rock upon which he would build his church, Jesus now calls a hindrance, a stumbling block. The rock has become a stumbling block to Jesus' mission.

Jesus' response to Peter could not have been sharper. Why is that? It wasn't just that Peter's theology was a bit off. It was that to deny Jesus' mission towards the cross was to oppose the very center and meaning of his mission to redeem the world.

And this is something that was characteristic of Satan that he would do to oppose Jesus' mission in the world. At the center of Jesus' mission was to die on the cross for the sins of the whole world as a substitutionary sacrifice.

[ 3 : 40 ] There are many rich images and themes for how the Bible talks about salvation and redemption all throughout the Old Testament and New Testament. And we should, as Christians, we should emphasize and talk about all of them and their multifaceted beauty.

But at the heart of it all, at the heart of the gospel and why Jesus came, is substitutionary atonement. Jesus Christ bearing the wrath of God for sin in our place in order to offer us the forgiveness of sins and eternal life with him.

And if you miss the substitutionary death of Christ on the cross for the sins of the world, you miss why Jesus came and you miss the gospel.

And that's why, despite Peter's expectations and the expectations of the disciples, it was absolutely necessary for Jesus to face the cross in order to accomplish his mission.

And that's why his rebuke to Peter is so strong in this passage. Yes, Jesus does talk about how he will inevitably experience the glory of his resurrection being raised on the third day, but not before he faced the shadow of the cross.

[ 4 : 50 ] Every generation, including ours, faces the same temptation and tendency that Peter and the disciples faced, which is to downplay or ignore or perhaps even reject the necessity of the cross.

And there are some versions of Christianity out there that do this, that ignore and downplay the necessity of the cross. Some people like to spiritualize the cross and only see it as just a metaphor of God's love that we abstract spiritual truth from.

And not as a historical event that Jesus came to do. But to do so is to operate by worldly wisdom instead of God's wisdom and to miss the very heart of the gospel.

A crossless Christianity is a Christless Christianity. And that is no Christianity at all. So, first of all, here in this passage, what we learn about being a disciple of Jesus is we see the necessity of the cross for Jesus' mission in the world.

The second thing that we see is the centrality of the cross for every disciple. We see the centrality of the cross. In the next verse, verse 24, Jesus clarifies that bearing the cross is not only necessary for him, but it is central for all who would claim to be his disciples and to follow him.

[ 6 : 15 ] Verse 24, then Jesus told his disciples, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Two thousand years later, we have beautiful images of the cross in our churches, in our artwork. We talk about the cross in reference to redemption and salvation, and rightly so.

But for the disciples, the cross was not a theological concept. It was not a work of art. It was a Roman instrument of execution and torture for some of the worst criminals.

It was one of the most cruelest and most painful and even one of the most shameful ways to die.

And Jesus says, that's where I'm going. I'm going to a place of self-denial and suffering and shame and death.

And if you want to follow me, that is where you must go as well. How does that sound to you?

Who's ready to sign up for that as a disciple of Jesus?

[ 7 : 17 ] And as I was preparing this sermon this week, I was forced to confront my own vision of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus to the vision that we see here in this text.

Am I just going to spiritualize the cross and see it as a metaphor for God's love? Is my vision of following Jesus more like Peter's? Up and to the right, success after success, triumph after triumph, victory after victory?

Or is it more like what Jesus actually says here? Denying myself, taking up my cross, and following him. What does it mean?

What does it mean to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus? Does it mean that we're supposed to live lives of radical asceticism, where we deny ourselves basic necessities for us and for our families?

Some Christians over the centuries have, like the Desert Fathers, have taken this approach and become Christian ascetics. And to be fair, I think that we have a lot to learn from Christians like these, especially in our modern 21st century where we live lives of relative comfort and ease and convenience.

[ 8 : 25 ] But radical asceticism isn't at the heart of what Jesus is teaching here. We know that because in other places in Scripture we see Jesus feasting and celebrating at parties.

In other places in Scripture we're commanded to provide for our households. And all of Scripture, of course, bears witness to the inherent goodness of creation, that the enjoyment of all things in creation is an inherently good thing.

So if what Jesus is saying here doesn't mean radical asceticism, what does he mean when he says we're to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him?

It means a couple things. First of all, it means that we put loyalty to Jesus above everything else, even above our deepest desires, even desires that feel normal and natural.

It means that we put loyalty to Jesus above everything else, even among some of our deepest desires that feel normal and natural to us. We're to deny ourselves, yes, from things that lead us towards sin and away from Christ, but also from desires that we have for even good things.

[ 9 : 33 ] We're to resist inordinate attachments to things like success and money and food and sex. You know, our culture says to us, be true to yourself, follow your desires, follow your heart.

But Jesus says to us, deny yourself, crucify yourself, mortify the passions of your flesh. But this taking up our cross and following Jesus, this isn't just self-denial for its own sake.

This isn't just denying ourselves as a way of self-improvement. It's self-denial for the sake of following Christ, for the sake of being transformed to look more and more like Jesus.

Christian self-denial isn't just about saying no to sin. It's about becoming more like Christ. It's in Him that we truly find ourselves.

It's in Him that we truly find who we really are. It's in Him that we find the deepest fulfillment of our desires. And that's why, generally speaking, when you hear messages in the culture and in media that say, follow your heart and be true to yourself, it's generally pretty terrible advice.

[ 10 : 47 ] It's generally pretty terrible advice because if we want to truly find life, then part of us has to die. Part of us has to be crucified if we want to follow Christ.

To deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus means that we put loyal to Him above everything else, but it also means that we embrace difficulty and suffering as part of our discipleship to Jesus.

That we embrace difficulty and suffering as part of our discipleship to Jesus. Not that we go look for difficulty or suffering or hope for it, but that when it comes, we see it as an opportunity to identify with Christ and His sufferings and to be transformed to look more like Him in our love for God and love for our neighbors.

Everybody who seeks to follow Jesus and be His disciple has a cross to bear. Maybe for you today, it's a certain struggle with sin or an addiction or temptation.

Maybe it's a physical illness or a chronic condition. Maybe it's a difficult relationship or marriage. Maybe it's publicly identifying with Jesus in your school or in your workplace and even being ridiculed for it.

[ 12 : 03 ] For many Christians throughout the centuries, it has literally meant being imprisoned and even being martyred for their faith. And that was true for some of the disciples Jesus is speaking to.

It's even true for some Christians today that to take up their cross and follow Jesus meant ultimately facing martyrdom. And we shouldn't ignore that part of what it means to take up a cross and follow Him.

Every follower of Jesus has a cross to bear, some that may last for a moment or a season, and some that last every single day for the rest of our lives.

And Jesus' words show us this is not an interruption in the Christian life. This is the Christian life.

Self-denial and cross-bearing is the Christian life because that is what Jesus uses to make us more like Himself and to transform us into His image and likeness.

So when it comes to following Jesus and being His disciple, we see the necessity of the cross, we see the centrality of the cross, and finally we see the glory of the cross.

[ 13 : 11 ] The glory of the cross. And here's where Jesus' words take a surprising turn if you're reading this passage. You know, it's interesting. He doesn't motivate His disciples to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Him by just saying, just do it because I said so.

Do it because God said so. Do it because it's the right thing. Do it because it's part of the law. No, actually He motivates them with a sense of reward. He motivates them with a sense of desire and glory.

Verse 25, Jesus says, for whoever would save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?

Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? Do you see what Jesus is doing here? He's actually getting the disciples to do some cost-benefit analysis about the core of their life.

He's saying if you put what the world says is valuable at the center of your life, whether it's money or success or fame, in the end, you're gonna end up losing it all. In the end, you're gonna end up losing everything, including your own soul.

[ 14 : 21 ] And think about the value of your own soul. What could you possibly give in exchange for that? Something as infinitely priceless as your eternal soul. There's no amount of money or success or fame in this world that can compare with the worth of your soul.

But if you put following me at the center of your life, in the short run, it may be very costly. It may look like losing. It may look like failure.

But in the long run, you'll gain everything. You'll gain everything. You'll gain life that is really life. You'll find it. You'll find abundant life.

And so Jesus is getting them to ask the question, what do you really want? What do you actually deeply want most in life? Do you want short-term gain and long-term loss?

Or do you want short-term cost and loss and long-term gain? Do you want short-term gain and long-term loss? Or do you want short-term cost and loss and long-term gain?

[ 15 : 28 ] Any investor on Wall Street worth their salt is going to take the second option. Short-term gain, short-term loss for long-term gain. And that is what Jesus is getting at here.

He's not motivating them by saying, just take up your cross and follow me because it's the right thing. He's saying, do it because it's gonna maximize your reward. And this is what he continues on with verse 27.

He says, for the Son of Man and the final judgment is gonna come with his angels in the glory of his Father. And then he will repay each person according to what he has done.

Jesus is not, to be clear, teaching here salvation by works. But what he is teaching is that for those who follow Christ and bear all kinds of crosses, bear all kinds of costs, bear all kinds of difficulty, bear all kinds of suffering for his sake, there will be glorious rewards for them, some in this life, but ultimately in heaven.

And this reward, this glory, will far outweigh any cost of taking up our cross and following Jesus. The infinite glory of heaven will outweigh any cost that we take.

[ 16 : 40 ] Jesus says, following me and taking up your cross may look like failure and loss in the short term, but in the long term, the glory outweighs the cost.

How can we know that? How can we be assured of that? How can we take Jesus out of his word? How can we trust him when he says that? Because that is what happened when Jesus bore his cross.

Jesus embraced pain and difficulty and suffering in a short term cost, and it led to the eternal life and glory and joy of his resurrection.

And Jesus promises the same for all of those who take up his cross and follow him. And so make no mistake, Jesus is clear here.

Following him is not a life of ease and convenience. Following Jesus is going to be costly. You're going to have to deny yourself, even some of your most natural, deepest desires, and take up your cross and follow him.

[ 17 : 45 ] But the reward is always far more glorious than the cost. The cost of following Jesus doesn't even compare to the glory that follows.

And whatever cross you are facing today, whatever cross Jesus is asking you to bear right now in your life, you can trust him.

You can know that somehow, someday, bearing that cross will always lead to life and joy and glory because that is where it led Jesus. And if you are united to him by faith, then that is where it will lead you as well.

Facing the cross was absolutely necessary for Jesus' mission. Bearing our own cross, therefore, is central to what it means to follow him and to be his disciples and to become like him.

And the reason why we can do that is because the cross, no matter how much it costs, always leads to glory and resurrection. And somebody who knew that on a deep level was the 18th century Anglican pastor and hymn writer, Henry Francis Light.

[ 18 : 58 ] Henry Francis Light was no stranger to what it means to take up his cross and follow Christ. Most of his life, he suffered physically from various respiratory illnesses, which later on in his life became incredibly debilitating.

But even beyond the physical suffering he faced, he had a terrible childhood. He had a wretched father growing up. When Henry was a young child, his father abandoned his marriage and his whole family.

And he sent Henry and his older brother off to boarding school. And later, his father would write him letters. And he would write him letters. And he would sign them, your uncle.

In other words, he would sign them, your uncle. In other words, his father never let him call him father again. He completely abandoned. Can you imagine what that would be like?

And yet, when you look at the hymns that Henry Light wrote, you see that these warm and worshipful references to God as father, because he learned that in Jesus Christ that he had access to a true father, a better father who was unimaginably rich, who was unimaginably loving, who was unimaginably gracious, and that that was more valuable than anything this world had to offer.

[ 20 : 22 ] And that made the cost of taking up his cross and following Jesus pale in comparison with the love of his father, a love that brought him what even the best earthly father could not possibly bring him.

And here's a part of the hymn that he wrote that we are going to sing in a moment. And I want to read it to you. And he penned these words as he thought about taking up his cross.

He writes, Jesus, Jesus, I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow thee. Destitute, despised, forsaken, thou from hence my all shall be.

Perish every fond ambition, all I've sought or hoped or known. Yet how rich is my condition. God in heaven are still my own.

Go then, earthly fame and treasure. Come disaster, scorn and pain. In thy service, pain is pleasure. And with thy favor, loss is gain.

[ 21 : 28 ] I have called thee, Abba, Father. I have stayed my heart on thee. Storms may howl and clouds may gather. All must work for good to me.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, I pray that you would empower us here this morning to take up our cross and follow Christ.

Give us eyes to see that the glory of the reward of following you and knowing you far outweighs any cost of what it takes to follow you.

We pray this in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.