

Take up your cross and follow me

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Date: 12 January 2014

Preacher: Philip Wells

[0 : 00] So we're going to look at, as I say, some of the hard things that Jesus said and some of the things that we might be tempted to say we would be an awful lot happier if you could take some scissors in a very discreet way just snip those bits out of the Bible.

And I'm thinking of things like this where Jesus said, take up your cross and follow me.

And that does seem a pretty harsh thing to say. A cross, although we might think in our culture that a cross is an ornament that you wear around your neck, in the time Jesus was speaking it would be like the gallows or like an electric chair, a place where people are executed.

So Jesus would be saying, stand up on the gallows with your neck in a noose next to me or there's a vacant electric chair next to the one they're going to incinerate me.

Just take a seat there. Take up your cross and follow me. So that's what we're going to look at. And in a rather ironic way, I think.

[1 : 20] Well, if we do enough, this is a very uncomfortable text. If we do enough exegesis, perhaps we can make it a bit more comfortable.

Or if we discuss it together, perhaps we can soften the edges of it. And I really hope we don't manage to do any of those things. Because it's not my job really to take the rough edges off scripture.

And it's not our job as a congregation to take the things that Jesus said and sort of tame them and get them down to a more manageable size.

So we can talk about it. And I do want to do a careful look at what he did actually say. But if I've managed to make it comfortable, then I've done a very bad job.

So let's look at what the... We will look at what the texts say. In the Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, those three Gospels, the word cross is used 13 times.

[2 : 25] And a large proportion of them are repetitions of this saying and the words that wrap around it.

So we'll look at all the different texts. But we might as well start somewhere. So let's go to Matthew chapter 16. Matthew chapter 16.

And let me explain what's going on in Matthew chapter 16. Jesus has been teaching, doing stuff.

And he gets to the point of saying to his disciples, well, what have you made of this? What have you understood from this? And in Matthew 16 verse 13, he asks, who do people, you know, what are people saying?

Who do people say that I am? And they say, well, all sorts of different ideas. And then Jesus sort of points the finger and says, but you, who do you say that I am?

[3 : 28] And I don't think he was talking to a big crowd. He was talking to his disciples. So it would be even a smaller group than we're in at the moment. And you could almost have the eye contact thing where Jesus is saying, what do you think then?

And it's very difficult to sort of evade his eye contact on this. And Simon Peter says, you are the Christ, the son of the living God.

So when he says Christ, he's thinking of all the texts that speak about the king. You're the king. You're the great one.

You're the one who has the power and the glory. You're the one who's going to put everything right.

And Jesus deflates Simon a little bit and he says, well, you didn't actually work this out yourself.

This was revealed to you by God. And then it goes on in verse 21. From that time on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

[4 : 43] So that's what he's saying. I'm going to suffer and be killed and on the third day be raised to life. And Peter takes Jesus aside and began to rebuke him.

Never, Lord, he said. This will never happen to you. And Jesus turned and said to Peter, get behind me, Satan.

You are a stumbling block to me. You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men. And Jesus said to his disciples, If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it. And whoever loses his life for me will save it.

What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?

[5 : 54] For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels. Then he will reward each person according to what he has done.

I tell you the truth. Some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. And the next thing you have, of course, is the transfiguration, where something of Jesus' glory is revealed on top of the mountain.

So that thought that, yes, they did, actually in the next few days, see something of the coming of the Son of Man in his kingdom.

So that's the whole text and the context. So the verse we're thinking of is in the middle of it there. If anyone, you see it, verse 24, if anyone would come after me, he or she must deny himself and take up his or her cross and follow me.

That's what it says. Now let's look at the context. The context then is that Jesus is the king, but he is the king who suffers.

[7 : 11] So it's in the context of the person and work of Jesus. Jesus says, you must understand who I am and what I've come to do. I am the king, but I'm not just the king, pure and simple.

I'm the lion who is also the lamb. I am the king who, with the particular sort of kingdom whereby I die on the cross for the subjects of my kingdom.

And a pretty rebellious, obnoxious lot they are too. But I die for them to bring them to me and to make them a beautiful bride.

So there's that. And then you could put it in terms of the sort of shape in terms of time that Jesus says, yeah, I am the king, but first I go to the cross and then I ascend and receive the crown.

So you could put it in terms of the combination of his person and work or you could put it in terms of the sequence, the sort of shape of things that if you will not bear the cross, you cannot wear the crown.

[8 : 27] That Christ wears the cross. No, what am I talking about? He goes to the cross first and then he has the crown. So it's a sort of you only get to there after you've been here.

So it's that sort of thing. And it's you notice that when Peter rejects that so Peter says, no, that's not right, Lord.

Verse 22, this shall never happen to you. And Jesus sees this as a really profound misunderstanding and actually a profound rejection of everything that he is there for.

Do you see what I mean? He says, get behind me Satan, Satan the adversary. You are a stumbling block to me. You know, this isn't helping. This is putting an obstacle in my way.

You do not have in mind the things of God but the things of men. you are thinking about this in a human framework which is the opposite of the way God is seeing things.

[9 : 35] So to reject it is to have a mind, a mindset, a mentality which is not God but just human. And you might say if you wanted to use poor vocabulary it is minding the things of the flesh rather than the things of the spirit.

And having told Peter the shape of his own life and ministry the logic is that if you are going to follow Jesus this shape will imprint itself on the on the life of the follower.

If that is what the master that is the shape the master had in his life this will be the shape that the follower has too. If you are going to follow me then you have got to deny yourself. You have got to take up a cross and follow me.

So thinking of those extra phrases to deny self do you remember that Peter denied Jesus didn't he? He said no connection with this guy don't know who he is nothing to do with me. And I think it is used in the same sort of idea here of oneself.

[10 : 46] So he says you have got to deny yourself instead of saying that is the person I pay most allegiance to that is number one you say no I don't know who that is no connection with that person.

Self is denied and then Jesus is followed. So he says you need to follow me so where I go you go. the steps that I take are the steps that you take in your turn. And then adding some more to it because Jesus adds some more to it he says whoever wants to save his life will lose it.

Whoever loses his life for me will find it. So life here is *peseche* which is used again with a different translation but if you I think what he's saying is if you try and cling to your life and hold on to everything and keep it all intact and don't let God touch it or spoil anything if you do that with your life you actually wreck it you lose your life but if you are prepared to relinquish your life as it says for me whoever loses his life for me so if Jesus we're offering our lives to Jesus saying you can have this I'm not clinging on to this you can have this if we offer our lives to him then we will now it doesn't actually say save does it it actually says find so he's saying here is an attitude in the life of the believer and then yet again he seems to put it in terms of a time frame of the here and now in distinction to the future so verse 26 says what good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world yet forfeits his soul again the word see he and I think this is this is a now and future thing isn't it we gain the whole world now so you've got everything fame fortune health wealth decorative spouse and all those things you've got all the whole world now and what's the point of that if in the future I presume this is a future reference that you have lost your soul and yet again I think he's saying much the same thing when he says for verse 27 the son of man is going to come in his father's glory with his angels and then he will reward each person according to what he has done I tell you the truth there are standing here who will not taste death before they see the son of man coming in his kingdom so he's saying there are consequences and future rewards and the now is the things that people do and the future is the rewards and Jesus links that with glory doesn't he verse 27 the son of man is going to come in his father's glory and he also links it with his kingdom so they will see the son of man coming in his kingdom so

[14 : 41] I've done a little bit of the exegesis there look at the exact words and I'm not sure whether any of that makes it any easier to swallow I suppose it makes it sort of logical and it makes it fit with various things but he still said take up your cross didn't he he says this is the shape of his life and therefore we are to follow him in it we are to deny ourselves and follow Jesus we are to let go of our lives and lay it all at his feet and that's the way to save our lives in this world we're not to cling and get as much as we can but what good would it be to gain all those things if in doing so we'd lost lost out spiritually we'd lost our souls and he says think of it another way the things that you do now will have future consequences and things that you have choices that you have made here will be rewarded in future okay well that's looked at that text we can see whether we can get any comfort from looking at the texts in the other gospels let's look at

Mark so Mark chapter 8 then he began to teach them that the son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders the chief priests and teachers of the law and that he must be killed and after three days rise again he spoke plainly about this and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him but when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples he rebuked Peter get behind me Satan he said you do not have in mind the things of God but the things of men then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said if anyone would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me!

taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power it's pretty much the same isn't it so if we are looking to try and tone it down I don't think we have much help there you notice that there are a few differences Jesus in verse 38 says the issue of whether you are ashamed of me and my words it's worth noticing the link there because we say I love Jesus don't like the Bible very much I want to follow Jesus don't take much notice of what he says Jesus says well you can't do that because if you're ashamed of me if you're ashamed of my words you're basically ashamed of me if I said it it's your job to take it on board if anybody!

is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and there is in chapter 9 verse 1 an explicit reference to power I don't think it's much different let's look in Luke chapter 9 Matthew Mark Luke verse 23 seems very similar Peter is saying you are the Christ of God verse in Luke 9 21 Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone then he said the son of man must suffer many things be rejected by the elders chief priests and teachers of the law he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life then he said to them all so it goes wide like it does in the other readings if anyone would come the inclusion of daily there whoever wants to save his life will lose it whoever loses his

life for me will save it what good is it for a man to gain the whole world and yet lose or forfeit his very self so he doesn't use sikhi he says he have done his self if anyone is ashamed of me and my words the son of man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and with the glory of the father and of the holy angels

I tell you the truth some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the! of! God so much the same there's a little bit more emphasis on glory there so I don't think we find any way of getting out of it there is one other reference which is similar which is in Matthew chapter 10 it's in verse 32 which this is in Matthew chapter 10 Jesus is training up his disciples and they go on a missionary journey and he gives them some principles some of them are just to do with that particular journey others are sort of long lasting principles verse 32 says whoever acknowledges me before men

[21 : 14] I will also acknowledge! before my father in heaven whoever disowns me before men I will disown him before my father in heaven do not suppose I have come to bring peace to the earth I did not come to bring peace but a sword for I have come to turn a man against his father daughter against her mother daughter in law against her mother in law a man's enemies will be the members of his own household if anyone loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me whoever loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me whoever finds his life will lose it whoever loses his life for my sake will find it actually it makes it even worse doesn't it that text because it says this is the rubber hits the road in terms of your relationship to your family because you think well lord my family obviously family is a good thing you know good thing trademark good thing and

Jesus says well actually I even have something to say about that and what I'm going to say is this that I am so special so crucial so of such magnitude that if you put your family before me you're not worthy of me that's pretty tough isn't it but if that's what he says and it's not my job to make him say something else or try and smooth it out so that it's the job is to tell it like it is and that's what it says if you think your family is more important than me you're not worthy of me if when you're working out the priorities of your life it goes da da da da da da da da Jesus and then family above Jesus Jesus says I'm not having that you haven't understood who I am you haven't understood what I've done for you you haven't understood the depth of my claim on your life you haven't understood that I did all that for you and the correct response is all that

I have and all that I am I lay at your feet there's nothing that is excluded from that including your family so the things that we might like to snip out of the Bible it's got some comments and then three or four points to make first comment this is an imperative when we say that we are freed from the law it doesn't mean that we are freed from obedience when we say that we're not saved by works of the law which is absolutely correct we're not saved by things we've done that doesn't mean that Jesus can't demand things of us doesn't mean that the idea of Jesus lordship becomes irrelevant this is not a law but this is to do with our relationship to Jesus and Jesus is saying excuse me

I am a saviour in such a profound way that I am absolutely entitled to insist from you that you take up your cross you deny yourself and follow me you see it's not illogical it doesn't jar it doesn't go from grace to something different this is the sovereignty of grace comment number two could somebody get me a glass of water please because I'm a little bit husky thank you we're not talking about earning salvation by doing something really difficult so in Roman Catholicism not that I'm an expert on it but you can correct me if I'm wrong there's such things as pilgrimages and is that pilgrimage penances so I did hear on the radio somebody who had accompanied some Roman Catholic people on a penance or a pilgrimage where they had to go to such and such a holy island and do the last half mile on their knees over the rough rocks and it was a horrible thing and they you know it was really painful and in that context I think it was trying to earn something but what Jesus is not Jesus is not talking about earning something he's talking about responding and relating to him you know he says I am the Lord Jesus Christ your saviour and if I am Lord then I am entitled to say thank you ever so much I'm entitled to say this is how you relate to me it's about responding and relating and let me also comment that he's not talking about a one off crisis experience so you know back in 1985 or whenever it was and I gave my life to the

[27 : 11] Lord and there was a very intense crisis shall we say and I offered everything to the Lord and at least I've got that out of the way did you notice that although you might have read two of the texts that way the Luke one that says you've got to do it every day it's the way you live every day bit

of a shock really isn't it it's the way you live every day it's the way the Christian relates to themselves and their life and their situation it is just their bread and butter attitude this is the way I do things and think about things and let me also comment what we really fear is that this is something which is dehumanizing so it takes away the richness this is what we fear it takes away the richness and the enjoyment and the goodness of being human and makes it religion instead we fear that it's diminishing to us that really

Jesus is going to take from us things that you know the good things and he's going to make life monochrome and joyless and so on but let me point out that that is not the way the texts are working because Jesus is not saying I want to make sure you lose your life what he's actually saying is I want to make sure you gain your life but I want that to happen long term I'm not trying to rob you of something I'm trying to make sure you get it I want to make sure you gain something do you see now having said that he is saying something isn't he he's saying I think he's saying something in terms of priority I think he's saying something in terms of postponement he's saying there are things that you might maybe the people next to you might grasp now but he's saying the way to have them is to not grasp now and they will be yours in the future

I think there's an issue particularly postponing glory I think there's issues of choices and policy every day denying oneself taking up the cross following Jesus I think that has to show in not least money actually money shows often where our hearts are might not have a lot of money but even if you it's almost more intense when you've got a little bit of money so you've only got a little bit of money so I can't possibly afford to give any to the Lord I've got a lot of money give it to the Lord but it doesn't work like that does it choices and policies and I think he is talking about the willingness to undergo temporary losses and crosses when I say temporary I'm thinking of 70 years or 80 years which is a very small amount of time compared to eternity he's saying you're not grabbing all that you're not trying to win the whole world now because you can't do that and keep your eternal soul so those points of sort of clarification so four final points so I think this is number one a challenge certainly a challenge to nominal

Christianity nominal Christianity is when the Christianity is just in name so nominal means in name so it's just what you put on the census and it never doesn't go any further than that and Jesus says I'm not having that I didn't nominally save people and I don't expect them to nominally follow me I saved people with a total commitment and a limitless expenditure and I don't want you negotiating how much of your life you give to me because it just isn't like that and it isn't half and half

Christianity where we would like to say well this bit of my life is Christian and this bit of my life I'd like to keep in a separate box and the two are quite separate there's a tendency for life to sort of do that and Jesus says I'm not having that at all

I want all or nothing I don't think we can actually resent Jesus saying that can we we say to him anybody going to say to him no you don't deserve to be able to say that so I think he's abundantly proved he's able to say that I don't think no he can say that and that's what he does say and it's a challenge because he doesn't say it's like paying off your mortgage 25 years and then you forget about it after that when you paid off your mortgage you don't have to worry about that Jesus doesn't say there's going to be a period in your life where I want your whole life but then after a while it's all done that you can do what you want then when you retire you can do anything Jesus doesn't say that he says I want your whole life every day for all your days and I'm not settling for anything less than that so I say it's a challenge and I think

[33 : 50] I keep on saying I think it's a bit of a difficult message to bring really isn't it I guess I could easily pin this on I know quite a few of you quite well and I could point the finger at you and say that means such and such in your life but what a hypocrite I'd be because I know that it applies to me too so there's a challenge secondly there's a necessity so there are some things that are in small print so if you've ever installed anything on your computer you get a bit at the beginning which says by ticking this box you agree to all the terms and conditions now the first time I did this I actually read the terms and conditions you might think me a fool but in all the other things that I've installed on my computer terms and conditions yeah and don't read them through there's usually pages and pages

I heretofore acknowledge the copyright licensing conditions of any other telegraphic equipment that I have in my possession but this is not the small print this is not the bit you tick and just carry on as if it didn't matter Jesus doesn't he say something like if you don't do this you can't be my disciple anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me it's not an optional extra it's

the very stuff of being a Christian so if you're sitting thinking I don't think I'm up for this then what you're saying is I'm not up for being a Christian and if you're sitting thinking well I want to be a Christian then this is what it's about you you knew this when you signed up and if you're becoming a Christian had any genuineness about it you fully acknowledge this the question is simply are you still acknowledging it has this sort of come onto your radar recently because Jesus says it's on the radar every day you can have a little think all the plans and all the thoughts and all the things you've accumulated and said this is rather special this is rather precious this is what I'm going to do this is how I relate to various people and Jesus says well you've been doing that very confidently haven't hang on a second have you thought that actually all those things are under my lordship and there isn't a single one of those in which you are not called to deny yourself and take up your cross to put the noose around your neck as it were and follow me so it's not in the small print and it's not an optional extra and then a third comment by way of reassurance you might be thinking actually I've done this for years I've taken I've made choices and decisions which have gradually led me down a very different path to my family and to my colleagues at work and to people of a similar age to myself and I just begin to wonder did I make a right choice because there's quite a stark difference between my life now and people that I went to school with or something like that one of the people I went to school with was on the telly he put it in the Christmas newsletter look at me on YouTube such and such and such and such of the brand new house that I built that was on Grand Designs except it wasn't Grand Designs it was a cheap copy and I thought I'm not really in that league and Jesus I think in a sense reassures and says yeah you made those decisions and every day you took up your cross and followed me might not have done it perfectly but that's the direction you took in your life let me reassure you there was no other option and the thing that you have done is exactly the right thing keep on with it don't turn back from that because one day when I return you will be with me in glory and you won't regret any of those decisions at all reassurance and a promise there will be future rewards

I do like Grand Designs but I think there's a huge danger and I sometimes pity those people with the fantastic million pound triple glazed Nordic glass sliding panels suspended staircases glazed marble huge kitchens that you can hardly see from one end to the other on a clear day not that there's anything wrong in those things but I think that's their life that's the thing that made life worth living for them I actually like the guy who made a house of wood in the new forest because he'd been living in a tent and he made a wooden house out of trees and straw and one of the ladies in the village who kept sheep the same as his by the time

[40 : 32] Kevin came back and visited them they got married and had children and I thought that was really rather sweet but we don't set our store do we on a fantastic house that be the thing worth living for isn't there something in the bible about the person who said that his house was too small or his barns were too small and we tear them down and build bigger ones and God said to him you twit you idiot you fool tonight your life is required of you and where's your great house going to be then what good will that do you there is a promise of future rewards if you like mansions in heaven although I'm not sure whether that's a correct translation beyond our grandest dreams take up your cross and follow me said

Jesus the son of man is going to come in his father's glory with his angels and he will reward each person according to what he has done I tell you the truth there are some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the son of man coming in his kingdom and power and glory well let's sing something together let's sing