Taking Up Your Cross

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[0:01] Heavenly Father, thank you that we get to be here this morning to hear from your word and to learn more about you. And so just pray in this time, Lord, would we have our hearts and our ears open to hear what you have to say to us this morning, Lord Jesus. Amen.

So over the last few weeks, we have been going through John Mark Comer's book, Practicing the Way. And we've looked at what it means to be an apprentice to Jesus, following the discipleship goals that John Mark Comer lays out in his book.
To be with Jesus, to become like Jesus, to do as Jesus would do if Jesus was me, and practicing spiritual disciplines.
If you haven't been here for all of those talks, you can catch up online or on Apple Podcasts. I actually really would recommend, there's been some really great sermons, go and listen to them, maybe even this week.
But as we finish this series today, we are looking at one final instruction that Jesus gives us as we apprentice under him.
[1:14] And that is to take up our cross. And for those of you, perhaps, who haven't been around for the other services, let me explain this term, apprentice, here.

Because John Mark Comer explains in his book that he prefers the term apprentice to disciple, as a more accurate description of Jesus' great invitation to us to follow him.
And we're quite used to this idea of apprenticeship in our society today, aren't we? Perhaps you might think of an apprentice in a bakery, which has nothing to do with the fact that I wanted to eat cake whilst I was preparing this talk.
Or maybe it did. But an apprentice in a bakery would shadow a baker. They would watch what they were doing, learn from them. They would copy their methods, copy and do as the baker that they were shadowing was doing.
Until they had mastered the art of baking the finest cinnamon rolls and pan de chocolat in all of the world. In other words, until they are doing exactly as their teacher or supervisor is doing.
[2:25] And in that sense, Jesus, when he invites us to apprentice under him, isn't just inviting us to follow him, but in the following, to watch and learn, to copy, to do as he is doing in the world.

And talking about this concept of apprenticeship, in our midweek focus youth Bible study the other week, I was reminded of this really beautiful Jewish blessing that might be familiar to you that says, may you be covered by the dust of your rabbi.
And I think this is so intrinsic to discipleship or apprenticeship, that we would be walking so closely with Jesus that we're covered by the dust that is kicked up in his very footsteps.
But what does that look like? Well, the final chapter of Practicing the Way is titled, Take Up Your Cross.
Perhaps not the most likely instruction to make you jump out of your seat this morning and go, yeah, this discipleship thing, this apprenticeship thing is easy. But perhaps one that, as we unpack it, hopefully becomes to get a bit more exciting.
[3:45] As I mentioned before, this idea of apprenticeship means watching, learning, copying. An apprenticeship to Jesus is no different. Even in the instruction to take up our cross, to deny ourselves, Jesus did that himself, very literally, before he ever asked us to do it.

And thankfully, the punishment of death by crucifixion isn't one that we are going to have to suffer in this society today, but that doesn't make the instruction any less relevant.
When Jesus says, whoever wants to be my disciple must pick up their cross and follow me, he's telling us that whoever wants to apprentice under him must first die to themselves, and only then can we truly follow him.

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And he isn't saying that every Christian ever to follow him must be killed by crucifixion. But perhaps a challenge for us is that that question still quietly lingers at the foreground, that if it came to it, would we be willing?
To take up our cross and follow Jesus isn't an empty command. It's one that's full of purpose. Because the end of me is the beginning of Jesus.
[5:05] That's why he follows his command with, whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?

Because his heart longs for us to find the fullness of life, real, true life in him. You might be familiar with Jesus' words from John 10.10, that the enemy comes to steal, to kill and destroy, but that he has come that we might have life and have it to the full.
So when Jesus says that whoever loses their life for him will find it, he's not saying anything new. He's actually reminding us that real life is found only in him.
He's saying that when we lay down our lives, when we allow ourselves to come to the end of ourselves, when we say, I don't want to do it my way anymore, I want to do it your way, Jesus, that is when we find life in all its fullness.
That's when we give Jesus the room to come in and show us what real life is, to show us who we really are as sons and daughters of God.
[6:21] And it's important to say here that Jesus isn't saying that real life with him is easy by any means.

And I think I use this verse probably one of every four times that I preach, but Jesus says in John 16.33, In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, for I have overcome the world.
It's not going to be easy. But when we are truly, really living with Jesus, losing our lives and finding ourselves in his kingdom work, suddenly we find that we can have hope.
We can have trust, perspective in the middle of those troubles, those troubles that can be both personal and global issues. And taking up our cross is a choice that we have to make daily, sometimes hourly.
It's a journey that demands one step at a time. There's an old Chinese proverb that says the journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step.
[7:36] And we're invited to follow Jesus in the journey. And as we follow, who knows where he'll take us? See, this is really exciting to me.

And I'm also really, really glad that my life isn't reliant on my own sense of direction, my own internal navigation system. Because if it was, I would be well and truly lost by now.
I think there's probably a few of us that feel the same way. Instead, Jesus invites us to follow him, to follow his lead. How? By remaining close to him.
By following his instruction as laid out to us in his Bible, in his word. By listening to his voice as he guides us. And you know, Jesus' very first instruction to the disciples as he called them was simply, come, follow me.
If you read John Mark Comer's Practicing the Way, and I really, I'd love to encourage you to read it.
[8:44] Get your hands on a copy. It's such a good book. As you read, you might pick up on three things that John Mark Comer hints towards as necessary for us in this taking up our crosses and following him.

And that is to obey, to surrender, and to trust. See, obedience is at the very heart of discipleship or apprenticeship.
And often in church circles, we like to talk about the five love languages, which are physical touch, acts of service, gifts, words of affirmation, and quality time.
But when it comes to God, I am utterly convinced that his love language is obedience. In John 14, 15, Jesus says, If you love me, keep my commands.
And he goes on to reiterate, Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. Obedience is really important to God.
[9:45] And we see this right the way through the Bible. God gives instructions, and when people obey him, there is blessing that endures through generations. But when they disobey or rebel, there's consequence, there's punishment.

Sometimes it's called curse that also lasts for generations. Think of the exile in the books of the prophets. What we notice from our biblical history is that obedience and disobedience have lasting

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effects.
Obedience, however hard, however costly it might be, always results in God's blessing. And when we're obedient to his command, his instruction, his calling, he blesses us because he loves us.
Now, I'm not a parent, but I am now old enough to realise that some of the even most seemingly ridiculous at the time instructions that my parents gave us as children, to myself and my brother Ben, were ultimately for everyone's benefit.
For example, if I stayed up past my bedtime and didn't get enough sleep, I'd get tired and grumpy. And that might still be the case, but no one needs to know whether that's true or not.
[11:05] But it wasn't good for me. It wasn't good for anyone. And if Ben and I sat across, we weren't allowed to sit across the table from each other because we'd kick each other under the table, inevitably there'd be an argument.

Again, not good for me, not good for anyone. And we weren't allowed to use our phones at mealtimes either, which allowed for us to connect and talk as a family. So even though conversation turned to football every single time, honestly, every time, there was no escape.
I learned to, in part, understand my brother and my dad's passion for the sport because I was present in those conversations. And similarly, when God sets out our rules and commandments, they're for our own good.
They're for our relationship with him, even when they mean denying ourselves, picking up our cross and following him. Closely linked to obedience is this idea of surrender, laying down or denying ourselves, our will, our way, our desires, in order to follow him.
When Jesus called us to pick up our cross, he tells us to follow him, to do as he did, and surrender is modelled by Jesus at the very height of our salvation story.
[12:34] The night before Jesus died, he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, and his soul was, as we read in Matthew 26, overwhelmed by sorrow to the point of death.

And then in Luke's Gospel, we read that he was anguished to the point of sweating blood. And so Jesus turns his sorrow to prayer, and he prays, Father, if it's possible, may this cup be taken from me, yet not as I will, but as you will.
Jesus surrendered himself to obedience to God's calling. And I don't think that that was an easy decision at all, but Jesus did it because of his love for the Father, and so he was willing to pick up his cross.
Choosing the Jesus way isn't always easy. We know that. In fact, sometimes we might be asked to surrender the things, the people, the situations that we know, the life that we know and love, in order to walk with Jesus, to walk the Jesus way.
But that's discipleship. That's what it is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And as John Mark Homer puts it in his book, discipleship is a lifelong process of deepening surrender to Jesus.
[13:54] And then we come to trust. If you don't know this about me, I am really into my languages.

I'm currently learning Spanish, but I started with French, and that will always be my first language love. And I find it really interesting to take other words and translate them back into English, because sometimes we find a deeper meaning to the word when we do that.
I don't know if you've ever taken sentences, put them into Google Translate, and then translated them back to English. Sometimes it changes words. It's very weird. But when we take the verb to trust in Spanish, we get confiar, or we might use estar seguro.
And when those are translated back to English, we get confidence, and we get to be sure. And similarly, in French, when we take to trust, we get faire confiance, to do confidence.
And to me, this shows me that trusting in the Lord isn't about passively sitting by and hoping that everything turns out okay. But trust requires me to actively put my confidence in him, to be sure that he has it all under control.
[15:19] I think when we see trust in this way, when we see our part that we play in trusting God, we start to see that picking up our cross and following him isn't quite so blind and scary, because our eyes are fixed on him as we confidently trust that we are safe with him, come what may.

In Impact, our Monday Night Youth Group, we've been shining the spotlight on different Bible characters and seeing what we can learn from their lives. And I can see a young person nodding his head at the back, so that's great.

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I'm glad you've been listening. For example, Gideon. Gideon was called by God. God called him a mighty warrior and told him about his mission to go and defeat the Midianites.
And Gideon was like, oh no, I'm not the right person. But he trusted God. Hannah prayed with all of her heart for a baby. And when she had Samuel, she entrusted his life under Eli's care.
She trusted God with him, even though she'd longed for that baby for years. Similarly, we can read in Hebrews 11 about the heroes of faith who put their trust in God time and time again in weird and wonderful ways throughout biblical history.
[16:42] The writer of Hebrews lists off Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Noah, Moses, Moses' parents. And then he says, what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell you about Gideon and the prophets who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice and gained what was promised.

Who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames and escaped the edge of the sword. Whose weakness was turned to strength. Who became powerful in battle and rooted foreign enemies.
Women who received back their dead raised to life again. And there were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging and even chains and imprisonment.
They were put to death by stoning. They were sawn in two. They were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and ill-treated.
Dot, dot, dot. And I don't know how you feel about all of that. All those different examples of people taking up their crosses, denying themselves in order to follow God.
[17:48] But I think there were some marvellous people in the Bible who we can look to for inspiration of what that commandment means. What it means to deny ourselves, to take up our cross and lose ourselves for the sake of following the Lord and living for his kingdom.

And perhaps this all sounds costly and you'd be right to think so because it is costly and it's a decision that God gives us to weigh up the pros and cons.
Do we really want to do this? But there's also a cost to not following Jesus. See, if we decide against following Jesus as we're free to do if we really want to, we have to sacrifice the joy of the Lord that is our strength, the peace of God that surpasses all understanding, the presence of God that dwells within us, the wisdom and counsel of the one who is above it all.
If we decide that we don't want to say yes to life with Jesus, then we have to let go of his freedom, his adoption to sonship, his unending love that is always known to us.
And I guess that leaves us with the question, is that a price we really want to pay? John Mark Comer puts it in his book, it's not about how much we're willing to give up, but it's about how much of Jesus do we really want to receive.
[19:25] Going back to Hebrews, chapter 11, verse 39, tells us that the heroes of faith were commended for their faith. And then in chapter 12, goes on to encourage us that since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles us and run with perseverance the rice marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith.

In other words, look at all of these people who've gone before us, who've picked up their crosses, died to themselves, denied themselves to follow Jesus. So why don't we too let go of the things that burden us and prevent us from following him freely?
Trust in Jesus. Do confidence. Be sure of Jesus because he is trustworthy. And in the denying of ourselves and the picking up of our crosses and following him, we get to see all of his great things.
And I want to point out here that Jesus isn't expecting us to be the perfect apprentice on day one. Arguably, we'll never be the perfect apprentice.
But that's why we follow, why we watch, we learn, we do as he does. Jesus doesn't expect us to meet him where he's at, but instead he meets us where we're at.
[20:54] He comes to meet us and asks us to follow us from that, to follow him from there. And when we're walking with Jesus, we'll have times when we don't do so well at surrendering, obeying, trusting.

There'll be times when we don't do so great in taking up our crosses, denying ourselves and following him. Times where, honestly, we just fall down. But we've got to remember that God is a God of grace and forgiveness.

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And when we fall, he helps us get back up again. We get to try again and again and again, each time growing more in relationship with Jesus. Because failure is never final.
It's just another chance to learn from the one who says, come, follow me. And so, as we close today, if there's one thing that you take away, let it be that following Jesus is the best decision we could ever make.
All the rest, the denying ourselves, the surrendering to him, the obedience, the trust, it all comes from there. And so, as we go from here this morning, let's be asking Jesus how he is asking us to deny ourselves.
[22:17] how he's asking us to pick up our cross. Where he's asking us to follow him.
Remembering it's not all about how much we're willing to give up, but how much of him we want to receive.

Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life will find it and find it in all its fullness. Amen.
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