

Taking Up Our Cross

Mark 8:31-38

July 30, 2017

I'm so glad that we're a Christ-centered church. The mission of the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji is to promote the supremacy of Christ. Jesus' death on the cross was absolutely necessary for our salvation. This is how our pardon from sin was purchased. So, the cross is important to us. Our Worship Committee recently made some modifications to our Sanctuary platform. We removed the walls that used to be here to open up a little more floor space. One of our greatest concerns all along was what to do with our wooden cross which used to hang on the wall. It is meaningful to many of us to have the cross in the center of our worship space because it stands at the center of our theology. And, while we need to be careful about letting any one object or symbol become too important to us, the position of the cross in our Sanctuary is worth considering. At first, it felt just a little strange to me. It just seemed a little too easy to walk right up to it. However, the more I've reflected on it, the more I like it right here.

We learned back in Ephesians 3:12 that, "... through faith in [Jesus] we may approach God with freedom and confidence." The cross is a symbol of God's great love for us. So, it's ok for the cross to be accessible and approachable. And, as long as we honor God in our hearts with proper reverence, there really isn't anything we could do to diminish the significance of what this cross symbolizes. Ultimately, it doesn't matter where we position the cross or if we even have a cross in our Sanctuary.

In our modern culture, the cross has become quite popular. Cross necklaces, earrings, and tattoos are quite fashionable. However, I do wonder how many people really understand the symbolism of what they are wearing on their bodies. Wearing the cross is a good thing, just be sure you know what you are actually wearing. Back in the 1st century, "Bearing the cross was not a Jewish metaphor, and Jesus' statement [in Mark 8:34 to take up their cross] must have sounded repugnant to the crowd and the disciples alike. The saying evokes the picture of a condemned man going out to die who is forced to carry on his back the cross-beam upon which he is to be nailed at the place of execution."¹ I would venture to say that very few people in 1st century Palestine had a cross tattoo or a cross necklace, especially not as a fashion statement. Today, we are going to talk about Taking Up Our Cross.

Mark 8:34 says, "Then [Jesus] called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'" This one verse carries 3 imperative verbs. It's a list of 3 things we need to understand about following Jesus. Let's look at them one at a time.

1. We must deny ourselves. This is counter cultural in America. We live in a world of entitlement and extravagance. And, I don't just mean other people. I would include myself and all of us in this room this morning. We have grown accustomed to a lifestyle of comfort. Self-denial is not something you'll see many Americans embrace. In fact, you'll find many more of us embracing self-indulgence, "I DESERVE this!" If we want to be His disciple, Jesus tells us to deny ourselves. Denying ourselves is about letting go of something we think we need or insist that we want. It's about setting aside our own agenda and selfish ways of thinking and doing. We need to ignore our own appetites and embrace the desires of our Lord and Master. In Mark 8:34, Jesus is letting His disciples and the whole crowd know, that following Him is costly.

Luke 14:25-27 says it this way, "Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.'" This does not seem like the way to build a mega-church. It seems that Jesus could have had a MUCH larger following if he had just made it a little easier for people to follow Him.

Perhaps our church should try to make it easier for people to follow Jesus? Hum... let me think, how could we make it easier? We could reduce the tithe to 8%, install Easy Boy recliners in the

¹ Lane, William L., *The Gospel of Mark: The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1974, p. 307.

Sanctuary, and avoid any difficult topics like sin, hell, and judgment. All of these would make following Jesus easier, right? Perhaps we could rename some of our more challenging song titles? Instead of "I Surrender All" perhaps we could have, "I Surrender Sundays & Wednesdays." "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus" could be "I Have Decided I Will Go in Jesus' General Direction... Most of the Time." Obviously, this is ludicrous!

Luke 14:25-27 is a challenging set of verses. It is not an excuse to treat our family poorly. Rather, it's a form of hyperbole meant to get our attention and to get the point across: compared to anything else in our life that we love, we must love Jesus way more. Luke 14:33 goes on to say, "...those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples." These are the kinds of challenging statements in the Bible that make me wonder if everyone who wears cross jewelry or has a cross tattoo really understands what the cross symbolizes: death to self. Jesus calls His followers "to shift the center of gravity in their lives from a concern for self to reckless abandon to the will of God."² The Apostle Paul says it this way in Phil. 3:7-8, "But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ." Jesus calls His disciples to deny themselves.

The 2nd imperative in Mark 8:34 is that...

2. We must take up OUR cross. In Mark 8:34 Jesus says, "...Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up THEIR cross and follow me." I put the words "THEIR" and "OUR" in all caps to help us notice something important. Jesus was not inviting His followers to carry HIS cross. He alone would take up His own cross and pay the punishment for our sin once and for all. It's important that we not get confused about this. We are not called to somehow purchase our own forgiveness by carrying our own cross. Rather, by carrying our own cross, we are identifying with what our Lord and Savior did on the cross for us. Jesus is calling His followers to "complete and confident identification with [Him]."³ Our identity is in Christ. This is why we are called "Christ-ians." We are to be like Christ.

I began serving as a pastor back in 1992 at Robbinsdale Baptist Church. When I first began there, we met in an old dilapidated house that the church owned. Our youth Sunday School met in the living room. I can still remember asking one of the students, Nathan Jensen, if he would fashion us a cross to hang on the wall so that it felt a bit more like a place of worship rather than a place to watch TV. He took some old 2x4s and tied them together and we hung it there. I was committed to beginning my pastoral ministry with a Christ-centered focus. I still have that cross. I wrote on the back of it "Property of Jerry Johnson." I think that's appropriate actually. You see, Jesus did not call me to carry HIS cross, He called me to carry MY OWN CROSS. (Of course, I don't mean we should all literally make our own wooded cross to carry around.) We are called to deny ourselves and take up OUR cross.

Now, we should be prepared to die for our faith; God would not be asking too much from us. But, we should also be prepared to live for our faith. 2 Corinthians 4:10 says, "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body." I mentioned earlier that taking up our cross is a picture of a condemned man carrying his own cross beam to the place of execution. However, what the convict is forced to do, the disciples of Christ willingly do.⁴ WE have a choice in the matter. Whenever I think of this concept of taking up our cross, I can't help but think of something that my dad, Ken, once told me: As Christ-followers, we are on a daily journey of carrying our cross. We could have chosen the wide road, but instead we chose the narrow road;⁵ the way of the cross.

So, we take up our cross on our shoulder and we begin walking along, following the Lord. As we are following, there will be times of pure delight and joy and fulfillment, but also times of struggle and challenge. Some of those challenges will include being teased/ridiculed for



² Lane, p. 307.

³ Lane, p. 306.

⁴ Hendriksen, William, *The Gospel of Mark (New Testament Commentary)*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1975, pp. 329-330.

⁵ See Matthew 7:13-14.

our faith at times. We might be taunted with inappropriate jokes or emails. And, in those moments, we will need to decide, am I going to keep following? Other challenges might include feeling ostracized and not included in various activities. As we choose to live holy and godly lives, we may not get invited to certain gettogethers and parties. We get a rep as a goody goody or a wet blanket. And again, in those moments, we have to decide if we are “all in” as a Christ-follower, or if we are going to put our cross back down and rejoin the rest of the world on the wide road, the easier road.

Since our cross is something we can choose to take up, it is also something we can choose to set down. WE aren't nailed to our cross.⁶ Some challenges to our faith, we can handle more easily than others. But, it's never fun to be labeled as “naïve” or as “intolerant” or to be called a “hater.”

One of the most discouraging things though, is when we are walking along, carrying our cross, following Jesus, and we see something along the side of the narrow road: an abandoned cross. It's a sudden shock to us that someone else has decided to quit following Christ; they've given up. Many of us know of a friend or family member or maybe even a former pastor who has turned back to the ways of this world. Something caused them to give up. It may have been because following Jesus is not always so easy and the persecution becomes too hard. Some people turn back because of the pleasures of this world and the temptations lured them away. Others set down their cross because the pain and evil around us can become pretty overwhelming at times; they don't like the way God is running the universe, Others, have grown weary in their quest to do good. And others have turned back for other reasons.”

The longer we follow Jesus, the more crosses we may see lying by the side of the road. Some of us get the amazing opportunity to come alongside a discouraged brother or sister in Christ, who has laid down their cross, and we minister to them. We get to bring a message of gracious encouragement that causes them to pick their cross back up and press on. That's part of our ministry to one another, mutual encouragement and support when the going gets tough.

Some of us here this morning, well...we may be considering our own cross. How much longer can we hang in there? So, I need to ask you this morning, have you abandoned your cross? Perhaps you're reconsidering whether it's really worth it to press on in your faith. Perhaps you are growing tired and discontent and God seems to be taking too long or He feels too distant. Perhaps you have decided that rather than dying to self, you'd rather live for self for a little while.

Challenges in the Christian life shouldn't surprise us. Our personal cross symbolizes dying to self and also accepting suffering and hardship as part of the journey of following Jesus. 1 Peter 4:14-16 gives us this beautiful encouragement, “If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.”⁷ 2 Corinthians 4:7-10 reminds us, “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.”⁸

Following Christ calls for endurance and perseverance. But we can't sustain that on our own strength. This is why 2 Corinthians 4:7 tells us that “this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” Whatever circumstance you may find yourself in today, The Lord's invitation is the same for us all, “follow me.”

This leads us to our 3rd imperative in Mark 8:34...

3. We must follow Jesus. Christians are often referred to as “Christ-FOLLOWERS.” Following Christ involves belief but also action; there is motion in a particular direction. Is your life oriented with Jesus at the top of your compass? Or, are you traveling in your own direction? Jesus is either the Leader of your life or he's not.

⁶ Consider Romans 12:1-2.

⁷ See 1 Peter 4:12-19 for a broader context.

⁸ See also Philippians 1:29, “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.”

Last year a guy from our church named Mike Schultz went on a short-term mission's trip to Uganda. This is where some of the Eriksson family is right now. Mike shared this saying with some of us: "A ship is safe in harbor...but that's not what ships are for." Mike felt called to follow Jesus to Uganda. In order to do this, Mike had to leave his wife and their 3 kids for ~2 weeks. Was it worth it? Well, you can ask Mike himself, but he'll tell you "yes." There is a great reward in knowing we've done what God has called us to do.

For some of us, following Jesus simply means obediently staying right where we are, because that's where He's led us. We are to press on and serve Him well, right where we're currently planted. Our joy and fullness in life are right here; we are called to remain steady and hold our course.

For others, following Jesus may mean moving from where you are currently. Jesus may even be calling you to follow Him to a place that you DON'T want to go. Following Jesus is about trusting and obeying. And, because He loves us and has great plans for us, Jesus often calls us to do really hard things.

Mark 8:34 says WHOEVER, "**Whoever** wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." The connotation is that some certainly will NOT want to be Jesus disciple. How about you? Perhaps you've been considering following Jesus for a long time but never made the commitment? Are you ready to follow? There's something strangely appealing about finally finding something worthy of giving your whole life to. Jesus is worthy of that!

Where is YOUR cross? If you have not yet taken up your cross to follow Jesus, why not today? Talk with someone about that right away. If you have already taken up your cross and begun following, are you in any danger of setting it back down again? Or, maybe you know you set it down a long time ago and the Lord is drawing you back again. If so, you should talk with someone about that right away. Don't wait any longer.

Let's take up our crosses today and follow Jesus!

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