

Taking up the cross

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[0 : 00] Let us turn again to the scripture we read in the gospel according to Matthew. Matthew chapter 16 and read again at verse 24. Matthew 16 at verse 24.

Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

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You know, I imagine very anxious to encourage people to become disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. If we have tasted and seen that the Lord is gracious, we want others to share that experience.

So when we try to advertise discipleship, we try to do it in the most attractive possible way. We give assurances to people as to what this experience will yield to them, how it will profit them.

[1 : 16] They'll find in closing in with the offer of salvation through Jesus Christ, through becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ, they'll find that the basic problem of their life is solved.

The guilt that burdens them, the sense of guilt that burdens them in private, however much they try to cover it up in public, that guilt, that burden of sin and guilt that lies upon their consciences so heavily, Jesus will take away.

They'll know the power of his word, that the Son of Man has power upon earth to forgive sins.

They'll come to an experience of life in which they can bear to look into the inner recesses of their heart that they scarcely could bear to examine hitherto.

Moreover, they will have before them the pattern of perfection, the pattern of perfection, of devotion to God and service to man, as it is set by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Not only that, they'll have a sense that there will be a new dimension to their living, a recapture of the celestial dimension.

[2 : 36] For man was made to have fellowship with God. He was made, he was created as God's covenant creature. And he will be restored to that sense of fellowship with God, as it were the heavens opened to him.

All that. A new and celestial dimension in living. All that. In becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ. And all that, we tell them.

All that on the simplest possible terms. All that simply on the basis of believing in the Lord Jesus Christ.

It sounds, indeed it sounds, too good to be true. Peace of mind and peace of conscience. And warmth of fellowship among the faithful here and now, with the prospect of glory hereafter.

And all that just on this simple formula. Only believe. Can it be? Can it be that simple?

[3 : 45] Maybe that in our anxiety to present what is attractive, that we don't communicate the whole truth.

And then there are some people, when they come to, they become acquainted with the bits that we've left out. They come up against some of the difficulties of discipleship.

They take offense. They feel cheated. They go back. As John described, many people in the time of our Lord's ministry, they go back and walk no more with him.

Like the seed that has been sown in stony ground, they have no, they endure for a while, but having no continuance, they soon fall away.

We have to present not only the attractive, not only what is very obviously attractive, but we have to present, people have to come up against the realities of the difficulties of discipleship as well.

[4 : 54] So this believing, this believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, is not simply a matter of slogans, of repeating phrases, even repeating words from Scripture.

This believing is something prodigious in itself. It is a concentration, it is a total and personal commitment to the person of Jesus Christ. And unless we have the Lord himself in focus, we cannot truly believe.

It is right to say, the formula is simple, only believe. But it is something so profound in its reality, something so profound in its application, that it can only be achieved by God's power.

It involves a complete change in our lifestyle. It involves a revolutionary view of ourselves, of the Lord God, of life, and its goal, its purpose, its meaning, its accountability.

and this is part of the emphasis of our text. Our Lord wants us to understand, and he wants us to understand from the beginning, the totality, well, perhaps not the totality, it is impossible, and it wouldn't be, indeed, it might not even be profitable for us to know, at the very beginning, the totality, but at least we ought to know in principle, what is involved in discipleship.

[6 : 36] If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. The Lord indicates here, three things that are necessary.

I don't think it would be right to say, that they are successive stages, in this experience of discipleship. Rather, what we have are concentric circles.

Always the Lord Jesus Christ is in the centre. There can be no following of Jesus, that doesn't involve self-denial, and there's no possibility of taking up the cross, unless we have Jesus, specifically and centrally, in view.

But all the activities, or the elements in this experience, that the Gospel is describing to us, though these are concentric, well, the form of our thinking, in necessitates, that we think of them successively.

And that's what we'll have to do, to think of what is meant by self-denial, what is meant by taking up the cross, by cross-bearing, and what is meant by following Jesus.

[7 : 56] What does our Lord mean when he says that anyone who wishes to follow him, must deny himself? Well, we've seen, reflected a little on the danger of trivialising the Gospel, by concentration, exclusive concentration, on this formula of only belief.

And there's a great danger, that we succumb to the same sort of temptation, when we begin to think of what self-denial is. We think of self-denial, mostly, in terms of giving up, maybe permanently, maybe temporarily, acts of surrender, acts, certain times in our lives, perhaps when we give up this, or we give up that, and we talk about denying ourselves.

There are those who think there's something particularly virtuous, for example, in cutting out something they're fond of for Lent. And they'll ask one another, what are you giving up for Lent? And maybe somebody's giving up chocolate biscuits, and somebody else is giving up Quality Street, or whatever. So, what are you giving up for Lent? And there's this sense of denying oneself. Or maybe, in some cases it goes, it seems to have a better tone than that. People will talk about curbing worldly ambition. And they'll tell you maybe about an occasion, when they were in competition, with some acquaintance for a job, some better job than they had, but you know, I pulled back out of it, because I thought he needed the job more than I did.

[9 : 48] His family responsibilities were greater than mine, and I thought, well, I'd better just deny myself, and let him have it. So, we think of the curbing of our natural appetites, within certain limits.

the curbing of those natural appetites, and the curbing of certain ambitions and desires that we have, all this is self-denial.

And when we have denied ourselves like that, we have a warm glow of virtue. I feel very good. It's been something excellent that I've done.

Something worthwhile. I don't always do it, but sometimes, really today, having given up something, denied myself something, I feel good. I feel a warm glow of virtue.

So, we think in terms of self-denial. Do you think that's what our Lord had in mind? Do you think he had in mind that situation in which we just give up this and that and the next thing, in order to feel good?

[11 : 06] Something that our Lord has in mind is much more radical, much more thoroughgoing, much more difficult. Its atmosphere and its accompaniment is seldom, is seldom that of complacency, seldom that of our own feeling of virtue.

Very often, it's accompanied by a sense of sheer wretchedness. You see, what will happen when we are in, when we are embarked on the course of self-denial that we have mapped out for ourselves, we'll sometimes feel tempted to break, break the regimen, just loosen the discipline a

little, tempted, well if it is chocolate biscuits I've given up, if nobody's looking and, well, what would one?

No, I won't do it, I won't do it, and my pride comes to my help and the very pride strengthens me in order to make me persist in my self-denial and that reveals the true nature of the kind of self-denials that we practice.

They turn out to be not denials of self but rather affirmations of self. We're affirming our own strength of character, we're affirming our own strength of virtue and we're telling people, you know how difficult it is but I manage, I'll do it, you see if I won't do it.

Who said I won't do it? Pride comes to our assistance but the self-denial that our Lord has in mind is precisely as he describes it.

[13:05] It is the denial, the disowning, the repudiation of the self, of the self that loves to have mastery, of the self that loves to be persuaded of its own competence.

It is the denial, it is the denial to the point of the slaying of self so that a new self may emerge by the grace of God.

That is what our Lord tells us in the following verse, whosoever will save his life shall lose it and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.

This denial, this disowning of self means the disowning of self-confidence, self-righteousness, it means the disowning of self-sovereignty, total denial of the natural man's way of life.

For the natural man's way of life lays great store by self-confidence, self-righteousness, self-sovereignty.

[14:19] Self-confidence rules out the need for God. It rules out the sense of absolute and utter dependence upon God.

the man who is self-confident as the natural man is, estranged from God, yet confident that he can manage. The natural man's self-confidence, it makes a place, it may indeed make a little room for God in his life.

God is not necessary, it's not necessary to bring him into every detail of our living. God is there for emergencies. If you get into a real spot, into a real difficulty, it's not a disgrace to, even if you haven't been used to it, it's not a disgrace to pray.

God is useful in emergency, and God is useful as a kind of ceremonial overseer, one whom we recognize on formal occasions, like at marriages and funerals and such like.

but it doesn't break, there is no recognition of absolute dependence. And our Lord tells us, if we are to deny ourselves, this kind of self-confidence has to be repudiated.

[15:50] As has self-righteousness. well, of course, we say the natural man thinks he's good enough. He's not going to claim absolute virtue.

In fact, he thinks there's a virtue in not claiming absolute virtue. He thinks you're going to give him credits for realizing that he hasn't achieved perfection.

self-righteousness, the natural man thinks he's good enough. He's no holy willy, but neither is he another renegade. And so he'll do to be getting on with the kind of virtue that he practices from day to day.

He's quite content with. This contentment has no place in discipleship. Self-righteousness, the sense of that we are good enough, that also has to be disowned.

And self-sovereignty, the right to be one's own man, the right to make one's own choices. This we claim for ourselves.

[17:02] And what our Lord is telling us here, he is asking us, who is willing to give up those freedoms, those imagined freedoms of the natural man? his self-confidence, his self-righteousness, his self-sovereignty?

Who is willing to say, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? You can see in the context here, an illustration of how thorough going is the self-denial that our Lord demanded.

He had told the disciples that he was to go up to Jerusalem and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and be raised again the third day.

Peter was shocked. Peter couldn't tolerate this prospect. He said, be it far from thee, Lord, this shall not be unto thee.

And our Lord turned upon Peter and said, they'd get thee behind me, Satan, thou art an offence unto me. What was Peter doing? Peter was writing out his prescription for the Lord.

[18 : 14] He was asserting his idea of what the Lord's mission should be, the shape that it should take, what he should do, how he should behave.

And our Lord recognises indeed that Peter speaks in the accents of love. He recognises Peter's totally mistaken concept, but he tells Peter it won't do.

Thou savourest not the things that be of God, but the things that be of men. Self-denial and cross-bearing.

Well, just as we have done with the concept of self-denial, we've trivialised it in many different ways, so we have done also with the notion of cross-bearing.

We've come to the point where we think of any crook in the lot, any difficulty or any responsibility or any heavy burden that the person has to bear is spoken of as his cross.

[19 : 27] Perhaps an old person's rheumatism is sometimes spoken, poop, craters that got up, but she has really a heavy cross to bear. A woman who has a drunken husband will be spoken of as carrying a heavy cross.

A young fellow who has a bad speech impediment will be spoken of as having to bear a heavy cross. A man who has a spendthrift for a feckless wife will be spoken of as having to endure and get along with a heavy cross and will shake our heads and recognise that it's a normal do, but that's the way it is.

That's not what our Lord has in mind when he speaks of the cross that we have to bear. Again, he has in mind something much more radical, much more thoroughgoing, much more severe, much more difficult.

What is the cross? The cross is the symbol of condemnation. It's the symbol of condemnation and death.

And the apostle reminds us that as we identify with the Lord Jesus Christ through faith, we are crucified unto the world and the world is crucified unto us.

[20 : 58] What our Lord is telling his disciples here is, if the world has no time for me, if they persecute me, they will also persecute you. What he's telling us is that in normal circumstances, the friendship of the world is not the experience of the people of God.

And that's how John reminds us, John warns us, love not the world, neither the things of the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. We are to go to Jesus bearing his reproach.

The world is crucified unto us. We see nor if the world is crucified unto us, if the world is crucified to us, we feel no obligation to fulfil its mandates, to carry out its desires.

We feel no obligation to work out, to work along with its philosophies. Whatever obligation we have to the world is in a different arena altogether as the disciples of Jesus Christ to bear testimony to his truth, to engage in the work of evangelisation.

salvation, but so far as the world that lies in the wicked one is concerned, we are to see it as condemned. And we are to recognise, on the other hand, that in the eyes of the world, the Christian is condemned.

[22 : 23] That we who follow the Lord Jesus Christ, taking up the cross to follow him, have been condemned with him.

We must be crucified to the world of unbelief. The world doesn't want us and it doesn't want our faith, it doesn't want our testimony. And to this world that lies in the wicked one, we owe no obedience and no respect.

It is condemned in unbelief. if any man will come after me, let him deny himself and let him take up his cross and follow me.

Following Jesus is the secret of it all. Not one of us, we couldn't endure unless we have the motivation that's applied by the vision and by the vision of the attractiveness of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Unless we have the motivation that's applied by the Lord, we wouldn't find it possible to accept this regimen of self-denial and cross-bearing.

[23 : 44] It would become, it would become in our thinking, just a regimen of cruelty. We would chafe under it all the time.

But you know how our Lord, the promise he gave to those whom he invited to come to him. Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest to your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Well, how can the yoke of Jesus be easy? How can the burden be light? how can we make light of self-denial and cross-bearing?

Except we set it over against the worthiness of our Saviour. Except we set it over against the beauty and the attractiveness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[24 : 46] That's where the secret of it lies. And that's how Jesus puts this thought both before and after the thought of self-denial and cross-bearing.

If any man will come after me, well, no man will come after him until he have some vision of the beauty, the glory, the attractiveness, the tenderness of the love, and the fullness of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and let him follow me.

Always the eye, always our vision must be and our eyes must be toward the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is no possibility, as we reflected earlier, there is no possibility of our running the race that is set before us, except as we run with, except as we look away to Jesus.

No one, you may question any disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. Ask, do you repent having followed Jesus? You'll be told not to ask silly questions.

[26 : 03] Did you get the worst of the bargain? Have you had a harder time? What? The thing is, these are stupid questions. Listen to what Paul says.

There were many people who shook their heads over him, over the way that the change of life that had come, the change of prospects that he had accepted. A Pharisee, the Pharisees, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, brought up at the feet of Camelio, a man as they would have said, with the golden prospects.

talents. And what did he become? The things that were gained to me, he says, I count but loss for Jesus Christ.

I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Savior. That's what it is. Jesus himself told us it in two different parables.

it's like the man who digging, plowing in the ground turns up a hidden treasure. For joy of it, he will go and sell all that he has in order that he may possess that field.

[27 : 14] It's like a man seeking goodly pearls. He sees the one pearl of great price. And in order to possess that, he'll give up everything.

He'll surrender, he'll sell up the collection that he spent so much time in getting together. He'll get rid of them all in order that he may possess that one pearl of great price.

That's what it is. Set the eyes upon Jesus himself. Experience, feel something of the graciousness of his love, the tenderness of his compassion.

mark the completeness of his condescension. He that was in the form of God and thought it not robbery to be equal with God and took upon him the form of a servant.

Observe the power that characterizes his work of redemption, the thoroughness, the completeness with which he delivers his people from the power of the enemy.

[28 : 25] Look at him enthroned, have the vision of him enthroned at the right hand of the majesty in heaven and be assured, listen to his promise of participation in his glory.

To him that overcometh will I give to sit with me on my throne even as I also overcame and am sat down with my father on his throne. That's what it is.

That's the secret of it. That's what makes, that's what takes out the sting out of the denial. It's not that we feel good but we feel the goodness, we feel the virtue of the grace of our Redeemer.

That's what makes bearing the cross possible. Look to him. We ought to look and look again. We should look as though we would wear out our eyes with looking.

But it is as we see the worthiness of the lamb that was slain to receive power and wisdom and riches and strength and honor and glory and blessing. It is as we see the worthiness of the lamb that we know that he is the one and the only one who is to be followed.

[29 : 43] And that there is no price too great to pay. Nothing too painful to endure. Only as we see him, only as we are enraptured by the vision of the beauty and comeliness and grace of our Savior, can we endure to deny ourselves, ourselves that we love so dearly, to deny that self that we love so dearly, and to bear the cross and deny, to crucify, to say, I am crucified with Christ.

Nevertheless, I live the life that I live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

Let us pray. may thy good hand be upon us, O Lord our God, that we may know the truth and the liberty that the knowledge of the truth confers, that we may follow thee wheresoever thou leadest, having thy love shed abroad within our hearts by thy spirit given unto us.

Bless us each and all, and enable us to show forth the praises of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvellous light.

For his name's sake. Amen.