

The Cross and Self

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"Then said Jesus unto His disciples, If any will come after Me let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" —Matthew 16:24

ERE developing the theme of this verse let us comment on its terms. "If any": the duty enjoined is for all who would join Christ's followers and enlist under His banner. "If any will": the Greek is very emphatic, signifying not only the consent of the will, but full purpose of heart, a determined resolution. "Come after Me": as a servant subject to his Master, a scholar his Teacher, a soldier his Captain. "Deny": the Greek means "deny utterly." Deny himself: his sinful and corrupt nature. "And take up": not passively bear or endure, but voluntarily assume, actively adopt. "His cross": which is scorned by the world, hated by the flesh, but is the distinguishing mark of a real Christian. "And follow Me": live as Christ lived—to the glory of God.

The immediate context is most solemn and striking. The Lord Jesus has just announced to His apostles, for the first time, His approaching death of humiliation (v 21). Peter was staggered, and said, "Pity Thyself, Lord" (v 22 mar.). That expressed the policy of the carnal mind. The way of the world is self-seeking and self-shielding. "Spare thyself" is the sum of its philosophy. But the doctrine of Christ is not "save thyself" but sacrifice thyself. Christ discerned in Peter's counsel a temptation from Satan (v 23), and at once flung it from Him. Then turning to Peter, He said: Not only "must" Jesus go up to Jerusalem and die, but everyone who would be a follower of His must take up his cross (v 24). The "must" is as imperative in the one case as in the other. Mediatorially the cross of Christ stands alone, but experimentally it is shared by all who enter into life.

What is a "Christian"? One who holds membership in some earthly church? No. One who believes an orthodox creed? No. One who adopts a certain mode of conduct? No. What, then, is a Christian? He is one who has renounced self and received Christ Jesus as Lord (Col 2:6). He is one who takes Christ's yoke upon him and learns of Him who is "meek and lowly in heart" (Matt 11:29). He is one who has been "called unto the fellowship of God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor 1:9): fellowship in His obedience and suffering now, in His reward and glory in the endless future. There is no such thing as belonging to Christ and living to please self. Make no mistake on that point "Whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after Me, cannot be My disciple," (Luke 14:27) said Christ. And again He declared, "But whosoever shall [instead of denying himself] deny Me before men [not "unto" men: it is conduct, the walk which is here in view], him will I also deny before My Father which is in heaven" (Matt 10:33).

The Christian life begins with an act of self-renunciation, and is continued by self-mortification (Rom 8:13). The first question of Saul of Tarsus, when Christ apprehended him, was, "Lord, what wouldst Thou have me to do?" The Christian life is likened unto a "race," and the racer is called upon to "lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset" (Heb 12:2), which "sin" is in the love of self, the desire and determination to have our "own way" (Isa 53:6). The one great aim, end, task, set before the Christian is to follow Christ -to follow the example He has left us (1 Pet 2:21), and He "pleased not Himself" (Rom 15:3). And there are difficulties in the way, obstacles in the path, the chief of which is SELF. Therefore this must be "denied." This is the first step toward "following" Christ.

What does it mean for a man to utterly "deny himself"? First, it signifies the complete repudiation of his own goodness. It means ceasing to rest upon any works of our own to commend us to God. It means an unreserved acceptance of God's verdict that "all our righteousnesses [our best performances] are as filthy rags" (Isa 64:6). It was at this point that Israel failed: "For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God" (Rom 10:3). But contrast the declaration of Paul: "And be found in Him, not having mine own

righteousness" (Phil 3:9).

For a man to utterly "deny himself" is to completely renounce his own wisdom. None can enter the kingdom of heaven except they become "as little children" (Matt 18:3). "Woe unto them that are wiser in their own eyes and prudent in their own sight" (Isa 5:21). "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools" (Rom 1:21). When the Holy Spirit applies the Gospel in power to a soul, it is to the "casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor 10:5). A wise motto for each Christian to adopt is "Lean not unto thine own understanding" (Pro 3:5).

For a man to utterly "deny himself" is to completely renounce his own strength. It is to have "no confidence in the flesh" (Phil 3:3). It is the heart bowing to Christ's positive declaration "Without Me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). It was at this point Peter failed: (Matt 26:33). "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall" (Pro 16:18). How necessary it is, then, that we heed I Cor 10:12: "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall"! The secret of spiritual strength lies in realizing our personal weakness: (see Isa 40:29; 2 Cor 12:9). Then let us "be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 2:1).

For a man to utterly "deny himself" is to completely renounce his own will. The language of the unsaved is, "We will not have this Man to reign over us" (Luke 19:14). The attitude of the Christian is, "For to me to live is Christ" (Phil 1:21)—to honour, please, serve Him. To renounce our own wills means heeding the exhortation of Phil. 2:5, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus," which is defined in the verses that immediately follow as that of self-abnegation. It is the practical recognition that "ye are not your own, for ye are bought with a price" (1 Cor 6:19,20). It is saying with Christ, "Nevertheless not what I will, but what Thou wilt" (Mark 14:36).

For a man to utterly "deny himself" is to completely renounce his own lusts or fleshly desires. "A man's self is a bundle of idols" (Thomas Manton, Puritan), and those idols must be repudiated. Non-Christians are "lovers of their own selves" (2 Tim 3:1); but the one who has been regenerated by the Spirit says with Job, "I am vile" (40:4), "I abhor myself" (47:6). Of non-Christians it is written, "all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's" (Phil 2:21); but of God's saints it is recorded, "they loved not their own lives unto the death" (Rev 12:11). The grace of God is "Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world" (Titus 2:12).

This denial of self which Christ requires from all His followers is to be universal. There is to be no reserve, no exceptions made: "Make not provision for the flesh, to the lusts" (Rom 13:14). It is to be constant, not occasional: "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). It is to be spontaneous, not forced, performed gladly, not reluctantly: "And whatsoever ye do, do heartily, as to the Lord" (Col 3:23). O how wickedly has the standard which God sets before us been lowered! How it condemns the easy-going, flesh-pleasing, worldly lives of so many who profess (but vainly), that they are "Christians"!

"And take up his cross." This refers to the cross not as an object of faith, but as an experience in the soul. The legal benefits of Calvary are received through believing, when the guilt of sin is cancelled, but the experimental virtues of Christ's Cross are only enjoyed as we are, in a practical way, "made conformable unto his death" (Phil 3:10). It is only as we really apply the cross to our daily lives, regulate our conduct by its principles, that it becomes efficacious over the power of indwelling sin. There can be no resurrection where there is no death, and there can be no practical walking "in newness of life" until we "bear about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus" (2 Cor 4:10). The "cross" is the badge, the evidence, of Christian discipleship. It is his "cross" and not his creed, which distinguishes a true follower of Christ from religious worldlings.

Now in the New Testament the "cross" stands for definite realities. First, it expresses the world's hatred. The Son of God came here not to judge, but to save; not to punish but to redeem. He came here "full of grace and truth." He was ever at the disposal of others: ministering to the needy, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, delivering the demon-possessed, raising the dead. He was full of compassion: gentle as a lamb; entirely sinless. He brought with Him glad tidings of great joy. He sought the outcast, preached to the poor, yet scorned not the rich; He pardoned sinners. And how was He received? What welcome did men accord Him? They "despised and rejected" Him (Isa 53:3). He declared, "They hated Me without a cause"

(John 15:25). They thirsted for His blood. No ordinary death would appease them. They demanded that He should be crucified. The Cross, then, was the manifestation of the world's inveterate hatred of the Christ of God.

The world has not altered, any more than the Ethiopian has changed his skin or the leopard his spots. The world and Christ are still in open antagonism. Hence it is written, "Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (James 4:4). It is impossible to walk with Christ and commune with Him until we have separated from the world. To walk with Christ necessarily involves sharing his humiliation: "Let us go forth therefore unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach" (Heb 13:13). This is what Moses did: (see Heb 11:24-26). The closer I am walking with Christ, the more shall I be misunderstood (1 John 3:2), ridiculed (Job 12:4) and detested by the world (John 15:19). Make no mistake here it is utterly impossible to keep in with the world and have fellowship with the Holy Christ. Thus, to "take up" my "cross" means, that I deliberately court the enmity of the world through my refusing to be "conformed" to it (Rom 12:2). But what matters the world's frowns if I am enjoying the Saviour's smiles!

Taking up my "cross" means a life voluntarily surrendered to God. As the act of wicked men, the death of Christ was a murder; but as the act of Christ Himself, it was a voluntary sacrifice, offering Himself to God. It was also an act of obedience to God. In John 10:18 He said, "No man taketh it [His life] from Me, but I lay it down of Myself." And why did He? His very next words tell us: "This commandment have I received of My Father." The cross was the supreme demonstration of Christ's obedience. Herein He was our Exemplar. Once again we quote Philippians 2:5, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." In what follows we see the Beloved of the Father taking upon Him the form of a Servant, and becoming "obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." Now the obedience of Christ must be the obedience of the Christian—voluntary, glad, unreserved, continuous. If that obedience involves shame and suffering, reproach and loss, we must not flinch, but set our face "like a flint" (Isa 50:7). The cross is more than the object of the Christian's faith, it is the badge of discipleship, the principle by which his life is to be regulated. The "cross" stands for surrender and dedication to God: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, your reasonable service (Rom 12:1).

The "cross" stands for vicarious service and suffering. Christ laid down His life for others, and His followers are called on to be willing to do the same: "We ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16): that is the inevitable logic of Calvary. We are called to follow Christ's example, to the fellowship of His sufferings, to be partners in His service. As Christ made himself "of no reputation" (Phil 2:7) we must not. As He "came not to be ministered unto, but to minister" (Matt 20:28), so must we. As He "pleased not Himself" (Rom 15:3), no more must we. As He ever thought of others, so must we: "Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves in the body" (Heb 13:3).

"For whosoever will save his life, shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life for My sake, shall find it" (Matt 16:25). Words almost identical with these are found again in Matthew 10:39, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24; 17:33, John 12:25. Surely, such repetition argues the deep importance of our noting and heeding this saying of Christ's. He died that we might live (John 12:24), so must we (John 12:25). Like Paul we must be able to say, "Neither count I my life dear unto myself" (Acts 20:24). The "life" that is lived for the gratification of self in this world, is "lost" for eternity; the life that is sacrificed to self-interests and yielded to Christ, will be "found" again, and preserved through eternity.

A young university graduate, with brilliant prospects, responded to the call of Christ to a life of service for Him in India among the lowest caste of the natives. His friends exclaimed, What a tragedy! A life thrown away! Yes, "lost" so far as this world is concerned, but "found" again in the world to come!