

"The Way of the Cross"

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Read Matthew 10:32-41; 16:21-28



God takes what is weak and makes it strong; He causes evil to work for good and makes the foolish look wise. The work of the cross is so powerful as to crash and crush the wisdom of this world. The cross introduces an entirely new worldview. When sending out the twelve, He forces them to confront the blunt brutality of the way of the cross (Matt. 10). "The disciples would be familiar with cross-bearing as a figure of speech by reason of the crucifixion of criminals in Jerusalem."¹ He speaks of rejection (vv. 32, 33), violence (v. 34), animosity (v. 35), suspicion (v. 36), partiality and priority (v. 37). All of this marks the way of the cross. In fact, if the believing do not embrace the cross, then they are not worthy of Him (v. 38). It is only in losing one's life that it can be found (v. 39). The cross forms a branding, a stigmata whereby those who bear it, wear it. The challenge laid before His disciples is not for them to seek greater depths or higher heights of personal fellowship or intimate communion, but to understand what it meant and means to follow Him. No one is Christian, a disciple, unless and until they follow Him to His cross.

In Matthew 16, Jesus once more confronts and challenges His disciples. He asks a question of inquiry, "Who do people say I am?" The response is predictable. The next question is more pointed, "Who do you say I am?" The answer is divine, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." From this point on Jesus openly begins to teach of His death, burial, and resurrection (v. 21). This thought completely undermines the prevailing opinion of His disciples as to who and what the Messiah will be and do. In fact, it was down right repugnant to His followers (v. 22).

Jesus immediately corrects their erroneous perspective and declares that not only must He die, but if they would be His followers they would also have to die. "Christ, having shown his disciples that he must suffer, and that he was ready and willing to suffer, here shows them that they must suffer too, and must be ready and willing."² "Our Lord's answer is not in the main a reaffirmation of the necessity that he himself should suffer and die, but rather an emphatic assertion of the consequences which this will involve for the disciples and of the duty which it will impose upon them to follow him along the same pathway of suffering."³ What follows is a description of the way of the cross, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." "This discourse was intended to show Peter and the rest of the disciples the nature of his kingdom."⁴ There are four marks of the cross. First, the way is marked by desire. Second, it is marked by denial. Third, it is marked by death. And finally, it is marked by discipleship. He explains what this means. There is a loss of identity (v. 25), priority (v. 26), and economy (v. 27). All who follow must lose their life in Him, forfeit all they deem valuable for Him, and believe His system of justice through Him. Let us consider these four marks.

First, the way is marked by desire. All who come, come by force of will. None come contrary to their will. God works in such a manner that all who come, come willingly. John Wesley correctly notes how, "None is forced; but if any will be a Christian, it must be on these terms."⁵ "It denotes a deliberate choice, and cheerfulness and resolution in that choice."⁶ Our Lord's appeal is open and specific. It is open to all and it is specific as to what is demanded.

Second, the way is marked by denial. "It is a compounded word, and the preposition **apo** abundantly increases the meaning. A follower of Christ will need to observe it in its utmost latitude of meaning, in order to be happy here, and glorious hereafter. A man's self is to him the prime cause of most of his miseries."⁷ In a context of cultural and economic opulence, those who follow Him must live a life of personal sacrifice and denial. We shun the evil and embrace the good. "That is, let him surrender to God his will, affections, body, and soul. Let him not seek his own happiness as the supreme object, but be willing to renounce all, and lay down his life also, if required."⁸

The pursuit of Christ is to follow where He has already been and is currently leading. His people emanate from the cross, live in the cross, and are for the cross. "If self-denial be a hard lesson, and against the grain to flesh and blood, it is no more than what our Master learned and practiced before us and for us, both for our redemption and for our instruction."⁹

Third, the way is marked by death. "An allusion to a Roman custom, that the malefactor, who was to be crucified, took his cross upon his shoulder, and carried it to the place of execution."¹⁰ The cross represents death: death to sin and death to self. "Let him in all things deny his own will, however pleasing, and do the will of God, however painful."¹¹ To walk the way of the cross is, "To embrace the condition which God has appointed, and bear the troubles and difficulties he may meet with in walking the Christian road."¹² This is the heartbeat of biblical Christianity.

Fourth, the way is marked by discipleship. Jesus very clearly notes, "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple."

Our Lord was accustomed to the mob, the seething mass of humanity pressing upon Him looking for the miracle that would bring them release. They wanted Him for what He could do for their immediate condition, but they did not want Him for who He was. The prevailing opinion was to see Him as a political figure or a humanitarian force, but He is the King, Priest, and Prophet. Those who would align themselves with Him must come behind Him. There is no other way there are no other options. The appeal is unswerving and straightforward. All who come to Him come in this manner. These four marks are true of all who have come. If you know Jesus Christ as your Savior, then you have come the way of the cross. You are marked by desire, denial, death, and discipleship.

In our text we read the statement, "Follow me;" **Follow - me**. Christ is leading; He is directing; He is guiding. He places Himself in front of us to protect and to provide. "A true disciple of Christ is one that doth follow him in duty, and shall follow him to glory. He is one that comes after Christ, not one that prescribes to him. A disciple of Christ comes after him, as the sheep after the shepherd, the servant after his master, the soldiers after their captain; he is one that aims at the same end that Christ aimed at, the glory of God, and the glory of heaven."¹³ "To follow Christ is to take him for our master, our teacher, our example; to believe his doctrines, to uphold his cause, to obey his precepts, and to do it though it leads to heaven by the way of the cross."¹⁴

The invitation is direct and non-negotiable. It is folly to think one is a disciple, if one is not following. He is not my Master if I am not His servant. He is not my Teacher, if I am not His student. He is not my Shepherd, if I am not His sheep. The one attribute qualifying a servant, student, and sheep is determined by the simple word "**follow**."

When we read such statements in the context of our comfortable and convenient circumstances, we fail to feel their pressing significance. "It is easy to show that these uncompromising sayings of our Lord about the denial of self, the renunciation of life are but the sharpest expression with reference to concrete cases of something which everywhere underlies his teaching as an element of universal significance. No, it is not in exceptional cases; it is not in periods of persecution alone that the duty thus described devolves upon the Christian. **Christianity as such in its very essence is a religion of self-denial and cross-bearing and life-surrender.**"¹⁵ No one escapes this, all participate in it.

As Christians we have no rights of our own. Jesus is not simply necessary, He is enough. "What were the disciples thinking about on that dusty road in Caesarea Philippi two thousand years ago when Jesus said, 'Take up his cross'? First century Jewish historian Josephus tells us that eight hundred Jews were crucified in Jerusalem over one hundred years before [Jesus made this statement] (Antiquities 13.14.2). After a revolt following the death of Herod the Great, the Roman proconsul Varus crucified two thousand Jews (Antiquities 17.10.10). Crucifixion was a common practice in the Roman Empire."¹⁶



Oh may God stir within us a passion to pursue the way of the cross. We must not, we cannot see the cross as a simple sidebar or subplot; the cross is the foundation on which and from which the Christian life is lived.

¹ Robertson's *New Testament Word Pictures* on Matthew 16:24.

² *Matthew Henry's Commentary* on Matthew 16:24.

³ "A Sermon on Matthew 16:24-25," Geerhardus Vos, Preached November 22, 1903 at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey. <http://www.kerux.com/documents/KeruxV3N3A1.asp>

⁴ *Adam Clarke's Commentary* on Matthew 16:24.

⁵ *John Wesley's Notes on the New Testament* on Matthew 16:24.

⁶ *Matthew Henry's Commentary* on Matthew 16:24.

⁷ Loc. Cit.

⁸ *Albert Barnes' New Testament Commentary* on Matthew 16:24.

⁹ *Matthew Henry's Commentary* on Matthew 16:24.

¹⁰ *William Burkitt's Notes on the New Testament* on Matthew 16:24.

¹¹ *John Wesley's Notes on the New Testament* on Matthew 16:24.

¹² *Adam Clarke's Commentary* on Matthew 16:24.

¹³ *Matthew Henry's Commentary* on Matthew 16:24.

¹⁴ *People's New Testament Commentary* on Matthew 16:24.

¹⁵ "A Sermon on Matthew 16:24-25," Geerhardus Vos, Preached November 22, 1903 at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey.

<http://www.kerux.com/documents/KeruxV3N3A1.asp>

¹⁶ "Christ Displays His Glory - Winning by Losing: The Paradox of Discipleship," by John MacArthur. All Rights Reserved (A copy of this message on cassette tape may be obtained by calling 1-800-55-GRACE) Matthew 16:24-27 Tape GC 2321. <http://www.biblebb.com/files/MAC/sg2321.htm>