

Take Up Your Cross and Walk With Me

Series: Battlefield:
fighting the flesh, the world, the devil
10th April, 2022
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Matthew 6:21-26
Spiritual warfare

This Sunday begins Holy Week: Jesus' journey towards the cross of Good Friday and his resurrection. For years, the church looked at this as one side of a single two-sided event. And this event was Jesus' Victory over sin, death, the flesh and the world.

Today I want to remind us of our own journey to the cross. The cross was not just Jesus dying for us. It was him showing us how we must live. It was a model for the path we must take. God is dead, now it's your turn. That is what happened on Good Friday.

One time Jesus was walking with his disciples and he tells them that to be his disciples meant taking up the cross every day. They knew what he meant and it was not pretty. It was not about necklaces and drawings. They were living under a tyranny that used crucifixion to terrify people. There were crosses outside the city with rotting corpses. The message was clear, this is what happens to anyone who defies Rome.

Jesus' message was also clear. This is what needs to happen to anyone who decides to follow me. The only difference is that theirs will be willing even though still as painful. When you start following Jesus, it is just the beginning of the journey. You walk into the door and He says to you, "Welcome my child, there are crosses on the right, pick yours and let's start going into glory."

And when the disciples hear this they know that there is no beauty about the cross. It is grotesque and ugly and brutal. No wonder some left him. The scandal of the gospel then was how dare one who claims to be God die and die on a shameful cross. Today we are offended that we would be called to die to ourselves too.

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."
Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Matthew 6:21-24

Jesus is looking forward to the cross. Peter tries to convince him otherwise and there comes a harsh rebuke. We have been doing a series on Spiritual Warfare and to Jesus, the way the devil gets into our lives is through our refusal to take up our cross.

At the centre of the way of Jesus is the truth of the cross. Willingly taking up the cross.

Paul, later on, says we are crucified with Christ. It is not just Jesus on the cross of Good Friday but us too. The way of Jesus has this invitation to self-denial in an age of self-fulfilment. That is what taking up our cross is.

The only time our culture encourages self-denial is for selfish and individualistic self-improvement reasons. Fasting to lose weight. Go to the gym to get well-cut. Careerism so that you can have money to afford whatever you want.

The world's vision of the good life is that you should get whatever you want, whenever you want it without which you would not be happy. No one should get in the way of it. If anyone gets in the way of what you want, that is a form of oppression.

Today people worship at the alter of 'Me'. Self is the new god of the age.

And it is not about never doing any of the good things in life. It is denying your self, not denying yourself. God is not a cosmic killjoy. The father cares for you and wants what is best for you. But we must trust that He knows better what is best for us.

Self is the sweet spot in us for the interaction between the lies and deceptive ideas from the devil in our world and the disordered loves in me.

So Paul writes that we are to crucify the flesh and all its desires and passions. We must die to the world, the flesh and the devil. God is dead, now its your turn. He is on the cross, not just for you but to show you how to do it well.

As followers of Jesus, it is sadly common to have someone want to follow Jesus but hold on to something that they will not give up.

There is a legend about the crusaders. That during their baptisms, they would hold up their swords out of the water. Symbolically saying, "God you can have every part of me except this. This is my means of control and making money".

And I wonder how many of us often live the same way? We want to follow Jesus but hold on to another part of our lives. Saying except for this relationship, this browser history, this way of making money, this thought patterns, this habit. You can have everything Lord, but this. And Jesus would look at you and say this

For 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? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

What's the point of keeping that source of pleasure and losing your soul at the end? What's the point of keeping that lifestyle and losing your soul? Can you really compare the value of one night's pleasure with that of your soul? Can you compare that value of a few thousand shillings with that of your soul? Can you really place a price on your soul?

But if you trust me, I know the way to real life. If it is life you are truly after, I am life in all it's fullness.

There are 2 options afforded to us. To deny Jesus and follow self hoping to gain the whole world or To deny your self and follow Jesus. Like with every path, they all lead somewhere.

Option 1 where you deny Jesus and follow yourself is where we make our desires the centre of our life. Our whole life's goal becomes becoming happy and getting what we want.

The thing about desire is that it is insatiable. Appetite is never fully satisfied. Partly because they point deeply to our need for God so nothing else we try to fill ourselves with ever really satisfies.

Bishop Augustine of Hippo, an early centuries church father, said, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God."

The more of anything you get, the more you want. A very wealthy guy was asked just how much money was enough and his answer was, "Just a little more."

So in this option, you end up being miserable and unhappy because you are always in want and you become a slave to your desires. You started out choosing to fulfil your desires and you end up having to.

Over time you become disintegrated, anxious, angry. The life you thought you were getting you no longer have. What is worse is eventually you lose your soul and are separated from God.

There is nothing wrong with desires, they are great motivators. But desires are terrible masters. And all it yields is destruction. It is sad when we are run by desire because then it's all you have. Your glory, your pleasure, your power to entertain yourself and a complete lack of trust in God.

And with a world that has mostly enthroned self, no wonder we feel that the world is generally broken, more anxious and angry. It is what you get when we keep telling people that to be happy they must do whatever the heck they want.

Following Jesus takes us in a different direction. When we follow Jesus, then He is Lord and we are not. Our desires and the push to fulfil them is no longer what runs our lives.

The irony is, when you no longer need to get what you want to be happy, you become aware of the good things in your life and you actually begin to enjoy them. We learn to worship the creator instead of the creation, when we love God above the gifts he gives, we actually begin to enjoy the gifts he gives. You become more satisfied.

Joy seems to be a product of what is happening inside us not what is happening outside us. Happiness is spelt content.

We learn to enjoy the life we have, not the one we want. You become content with your marriage or singleness. You become content with your financial status when your ordinary life becomes enough. But this is a place we can only get to when desire is not at the sit on the throne of our hearts.

When Jesus is King, we end up integrated. Despite the fact that in life there is always a problem. You are always in a crisis or on your way to one. When you solve one problem you know there is something about to go wrong.

Despite the fact that all of us will always live with some unsatisfied desire in our lives. Following Jesus gives us peace despite all that and that leads to wholeness and integration.

This peace comes only when we deny our selves and find our centre in God. We become free from the domination and tyranny of wants. We are liberated from getting what we want to be happy. It is not a call to never desire but an invitation to submit our desire to something else.

Then and only then do we find real life. The life that is our deepest desire. The life that is on offer from Jesus.

There is a cost to discipleship. The cost is the cross of self-denial. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, body and strength. Love always costs us something.

And we are invited to love God with all we are. It will cost you time, money, habits, relationships, it will cost you the world. Any other message would be cheap grace. Getting saved, as we call it, is just the beginning of the journey not the end of it.

Jesus said that no one starts to build without first counting the cost. No one goes to war without first counting the cost. There is a cost to pay. The price of discipleship is self-denial. We must be crucified with Jesus.

And one would think that means following Jesus is not fun. But then according to Jesus, there is a cost to non-discipleship. And the cost is worse. What is the point of gaining the whole world and losing your soul? And we ignore that because it has often sounded more like about the after judgement.

But as you follow your flesh, you become something. We are surrounded by an over-anxious, angry world. At the height of the Me Too movement, the best selling movie was 50 shades of grey. A country where corruption runs the day. A country where 2008 was possible because we have become a people who must get what they want.

The cost of non-discipleship is greater. There are people who you meet in old age that are just not fun to be around. The kind of person they have become is just not worth hanging around. They have lost their souls.

Then there are people at 80 who you meet and they are just a delight to be around. Their words are life-giving. The peace around them is enchanting.

That is the difference between discipleship and non-discipleship. And on a bigger scale then there is heaven and hell. We do not like that language but Jesus used it. And Gehana was an actual place where things were thrown. And Israelites who worshipped other gods would throw their kids there in sacrifice. It was not beautiful, it was all death.

People ask how a loving God could send people to hell. Maybe it is that people choose hell. When you live your whole life with self as King and being run by desire, to live eternity under the rule of Jesus might just be a kind of hell. This is how one ends up losing their souls as they chase the world. At first, you will not follow Jesus as a choice you make, but you end up becoming the kind of person who cannot. That is the real cost of non-discipleship.

So this week as we begin Holy Week, gently headed towards Good Friday and Easter, I am inviting you to this place again. We celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus which together was God's victory we are promised victory in Spiritual Warfare.

There is victory over the devil, the flesh and the world and that is by apprenticeship under Jesus. Following him which means being with Jesus, becoming like him and then living like him doing what he did. But there is a cost to discipleship, the cross of self-denial.

Where are you being invited to take up your cross? Do not despair, the promise is life in return. It may not look like that now, but Jesus promises that the end of it is life and we can trust him. When Paul writes that we should not get tired of doing good deeds, he is not actually talking about just good things like giving to the poor and being kind to people, he actually said it in the context of fighting the flesh. Do not grow tired of crucifying the flesh and its desires, life is coming.

So I finish with the words of Jesus

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?

Let's Pray.