

THE CROSS

Text: Matthew 16:24

Intro: As I prepare to do some messages on living by faith, I felt I should preach on a matter I have not spoken on in some time, but a must crucial subject for the Christian. It is the subject of the cross. Jessie Pounds, a hymn writer has put it like this in his song, "The Way Of The Cross Leads Home."

1. I must needs go home by the way of the cross,
There's no other way but this;
I shall ne'er get sight of the Gates of Light,
If the way of the cross I miss.

2. I must needs go on in the blood-sprinkled way,
The path that the Savior trod,
If I ever climb to the heights sublime,
Where the soul is at home with God.

3. Then I bid farewell to the way of the world,
To walk in it nevermore;
For my Lord says, "Come," and I seek my home,
Where He waits at the open door.

o *Refrain:*
The way of the cross leads home,
The way of the cross leads home;
It is sweet to know, as I onward go,
The way of the cross leads home.

I want you to turn to Matthew 16 for our text. We read verse 24 (read).

Some years ago I wrote a detailed harmony of the four Gospels, and when I had completed that, I put all four Gospels together into one account and then outlined the whole life of Christ from that one account. And I came to five points. The first is the introduction of the Messiah to the World. That is information regarding the Messiah before He was conceived and born. Second is the preparation of the Messiah for the world. That deals with the conception and birth of Christ and His life until He is about 30 years old. Just a few chapters deal with that. The third major section deals with the authentication of the Messiah to the world. Jesus, by His words and his works gives full evidence that He is the Messiah. He healed all kinds of diseases, even raised the dead, and spoke words such as they had

never heard before. He gave ample proof that He was indeed the Messiah who was to come.

The fourth point is the rejection of the Messiah by the world. And why did the world reject the Messiah? As I look back over my experience as pastor, and read the Scriptures, I see one major reason: they loved themselves more than truth! Jesus had given every evidence needed by man to see that He spoke the truth, and that He was indeed the Messiah, and what did man do? Man crucified Him! Jews and Gentiles both had their hand in this.

But, that is not the last point in the Gospels. The fifth and last major point is the victory of the Messiah over the world! He arose from the dead! He was raised out from among the dead! And He gave us every assurance that He is still alive.

Now, in Matthew 16:24, which lies at the very beginning of the fourth section which I called the rejection of the Messiah by the world, one thing has become clear to Christ. He will die. Man hates truth! And in this section that deals with His rejection by the world, as I see it are two sections. The first deals with the preparation of the disciples for His death. Around a dozen times He tells them He is going to die. Never once did they grasp the full import of what He was saying.

Now the Gospel of Matthew has two major sections that begin like this: "From that time Jesus began..." The first says that from that time He began to preach for people to repent (Matt. 4:17). Let us read the second one as we read Matthew 16:24-28).

Now, in verse 24, Jesus gave three brief commands to His disciples. The cross lies just shortly before Him and He is going to instruct them on the way of the cross. And we can say that in addressing them, He is addressing us all for He said, "If anyone desires to come after Me..." These three commands now apply to all who wish to follow Him. First, if you desire to follow Christ, you must deny yourself. Second, you must take up your cross. Third, you must follow Him in life.

I. DENY HIMSELF

So we begin with Jesus' command that His would be followers must deny themselves. Look now at verse 21 (read). Now consider, the disciples had in mind that just shortly Jesus would set up His kingdom, and they had already been vying for positions in that kingdom. And now Jesus said He would die. I think Peter did not realize that Jesus had also said He would be raised again. All

Peter heard is that He was going to die, he rebuked the Lord. He said, "Far be it from You Lord, this shall not be to You!"

Peter could not imagine life without the Lord. He was going to set up the long promised kingdom, and now He says He will die? Oh, how many times do we not think humanly, or fleshly, or according to our desires! And look at how Jesus answers Peter in verse 23 (read).

Jesus said to Peter that Peter was an offense to Him. I do not think He meant He was offended. The word offense is skandalon. We get our word scandal from this word. Let me give you the idea behind this word. It is that of that little trigger or stick that sets off a trap (Ill.). Jesus is saying to Peter that he is like that little stick that will set off the trap.

Well, a trap has bait. What is the bait? For Jesus it was not wanting to die. Jesus did not want to die. And Peter is trying to talk Jesus into not dying. And if Jesus takes Peter's advice, it will be like setting off that trap. And do you know who was speaking to Peter? Well, look at it in verse 23 (read). You see, Jesus did not want to die and Peter was the mouthpiece of Satan to seek to trap Jesus into not doing what God, His Father, wanted Him to do.

And what was Peter's problem? Well Jesus said, "Peter, you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." Peter needed to learn to think differently. And it is then that Jesus gave these three commands. Peter, like all of us who would follow Christ, must first learn to deny ourselves.

So, let me ask, who is by the word 'ourselves'? Let me mention something I have pointed out before. The pronoun 'ourselves' is a reflexive pronoun. You cannot say 'our selves' as two words. It is grammatically impossible to correctly say 'our selves' as two words. Why? Because you cannot own your self, you are yourself. When we use a word like 'myself', it is a reference to the real me, and we call this by the pronoun 'me', or 'I'. It is 'Me!' It is the self-life. The self is the real you. And it is the self that is the king or queen of our lives if the Lord is not our King. And it is the self that Jesus is talking about denying.

Now look at our text. It says if anyone desires to follow Me, let Him deny Himself! Self must abdicate the throne. Let me read for us one of L.E. Maxwells favorite little ditties:

We had a little party
This afternoon at three.
'Twas very small, three friends in all,
Just **I, myself** and **me**.
Myself ate all the sandwiches,
While **I** drank the tea;
'Twas also **I** who ate the pie,
And passed the cake to **me**.

I wonder, do you claim to be a follower of Christ? May I ask you, have you learned to hate yourself? I find it hard to preach on these things when over and over in my life I see how selfish I still am. Let me ask you, do you find comfort in this verse, "He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life"? When we get sick of ourselves, then, and only then can we truly begin to hunger and thirst for righteousness. Only then do we become ready for the cross. Only then are we what Jesus called poor in spirit. Only then do we truly mourn because of ourselves.

F. J. Huegel, in an old book called, "Bone Of His Bone" writes, "We are positively to hate ourselves not pamper, nor to caress, nor to seek, nor to love ourselves, but literally to hate and renounce ourselves, and that daily..." (15). If we would be followers of Christ, we must come to see ourselves, and there is not a person on this earth, who, if he or she truly gets to see him or herself will find a pretty picture. And as long as we see a pretty picture when we see ourselves, we have not yet come to see ourselves.

A while ago my wife and I listened to a CBC lady, who had found the love of her life. She was already older, and thankfully it was a man she found, but a man entered her room. He had a cast on his arm, and was carrying something, and when she saw him she fell in love with him. From the picture I got he did not present a pretty picture at all, nor was there one godly aspect to all she told. And then she said what his name was. His name was 'Snake'. And she fell in love with Snake!

I want to recommend to you, that until we begin to see ourselves as a snake we have never come to truly see Christ! And let me tell you this as well, we have all

fallen in love with this snake; this snake, self. What does Scripture say? "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." And what are we like? What does the Scripture say? "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may you also do good, that are accustomed to do evil." What does the Scripture say? "The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?" Where does the self get all his or her advice and direction? From the heart!

Go to John 3. Jesus, talking to Nicodemus said what is recorded in verses 10-21. Look at verses 12-15 (read). You see when Israel went through the wilderness they were disobedient time and again. And one time God sent little snakes among them, and if they were bitten they died. And then Moses put a brass snake up on a pole, and whoever looked at that serpent was saved, even if they looked after they were bitten. If they looked before they died, they were saved. I believe it was Charles Haddon Spurgeon who got saved when a farmer in a little country church preached on that verse.

And for years I pondered this question: Why a snake? It was Jesus the lamb of God that died on the pole, not a snake. And then it dawned on me. He took my sins and the snake represents me. It was my sin that hung him there. He took my sin and became a snake, just like me. Nothing better pictures me and my heart than a snake. If that seems strange to you, and yourself, check to see if you are really saved.

Go to Psalm 22 (read 1-8). Do you know of whom this is speaking? It is Christ. Did you notice what He said? He said, "Our fathers trusted in You; They trusted, and You delivered them. They cried to You, and were delivered; They trusted in You, and were not ashamed", or not let down. And then He said this, "But I am a worm, and no man; A reproach of men, and despised by the people. All those who see Me ridicule Me; They shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, 'He trusted in the LORD, let Him rescue Him; Let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!'"

Turn to Matthew 27 (read 35-43). Jesus said, "Our fathers trusted in You and You delivered them!" And then He said, "But, I am a worm, and no man." He is saying, "You saved others when they cried out to You, but Me, a worm, no, me You can't save Me. I am not worthy of saving!" Why could God not save Him? He had taken on the task of representing me, and there is nothing in me worth saving. God could

deliver Jesus' forefathers. Why? Because Jesus would not be able to be delivered from death because He represented them too! He became a worm, a snake for me. And until I recognize myself as a worm or a snake, I cannot be saved from my sin. Yes, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, let him deny self, yes, let him deny the snake..."

II. TAKE UP HIS CROSS

Furthermore, Jesus said, "If anyone desires to follow me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross..." You see, you cannot take up your cross until you deny yourself. Until you come to a view where you hate your own sinfulness, there is no taking up of the cross. And the very first denial of self will come when I see my sin, my *snakyness*, and I repent of it. No repentance, no taking up of the cross. No confession of sin? No taking up of the cross.

Now let me tell you a few things about taking up the cross. Nobody, but nobody did that but one who was forced to do so. Today, the cross may hang beautiful from some neck, but very few necks hang from the cross. The cross was no beautiful emblem. It was avoided at absolutely all costs. You see, when you took up the cross, within an hour or two you would be hanging from it. And you were not coming back alive. You see, after some of the most painful hours a man can endure through the inventions of torment by man, one died. It was a death so horrible as to defy description.

And if we would be followers of Christ, this cross we must take up. But we are not forced to take it up; we must take it up willingly. We must choose this method. And if we do not choose this method, we must go to hell. Yes, Christ died for me. We hear much of that. But that I must die with Him, how little do we hear of that? That we are snakes, that we are worms, who tells us of that in our world of positive self-esteem?

You see, the very first step of denying oneself to follow Christ is repentance. I recently listened to Kent Hovund cut down the requirement of repentance for salvation. He claimed it is a work. The serpent's hiss is behind that statement! It is a doctrine that has its source in demons. It seemed he was taking exception with Ray Comfort, whose

position on repentance is right on the mark. Hovund's remarks were very serious doctrinal errors.

My wife was reading in A. W. Tozer's book, "This world: Playground Or Battleground". Tozer lived from 1897-1963, so that is some time ago. And he wrote of how things were in his day. In my early Christian life, although I did not then realize it, the teaching of law and grace was a huge subject. Everything was turning into grace. And Tozer, in this quote is reacting to that teaching. He writes, "In order to make a clear difference between law and grace, a writer argued that if a murderer came to him and inquired how to be saved, he would not say, 'Turn away from murder, and believe on Jesus Christ.' That, said the writer, would be mixing law and grace. All he could say to be scriptural, he reasoned, would be, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." And there is the beheaded Gospel we have heard for the last 80 or 90 years. That is largely why we are where we are today.

Let me say this, there are many people right in this community, numerous of whom no doubt claim to be Christians; if they were brought to see their sin and called to repent, they would sooner die physically. Many who claim to be Christians have never taken up the cross. They have never yet truly seen themselves as a snake. I am not trying to cut down professing Christians. I believe I am telling you how it is, and how I would rejoice if such should be changed. Oh that we might have a revival. It is still possible, though it looks very improbable.

And then, when we truly repent and give our life to Christ and acknowledge Him as our Saviour, then in life we will be granted one opportunity to experience the death dealing blows of the cross after another. But, unlike the crucified person on the cross, we are given the opportunity to bow out. Many would be followers of Christ, in the Gospel accounts bowed out, and walked with Him no more. Many have done so since. The cross is very thorough in its work, and few will follow this path to the end.

Let me read something for you from A. W. Tozer that I haven't read for a long time. It is called, "The Old Cross and The New." Some of you will remember this, and you will be refreshed to listen to it again. Tozer wrote:

Unannounced and mostly undetected there has come in modern times **a new cross** into popular evangelical circles. It is like the old cross, but different: the likenesses are superficial; the differences, fundamental.

From this new cross has sprung a **new philosophy of the Christian life**, and from that new philosophy has come a new evangelical technique -- a new type of meeting and a new kind of preaching. This new evangelism employs the same language as the old, but its content is not the same and its emphasis not as before.

The old cross would have no truck with the world. For Adam's proud flesh it meant the end of the journey. It carried into effect the sentence imposed by the law of Sinai. The new cross is not opposed to the human race; rather, it is a friendly pal and, if understood aright, it is the source of oceans of good clean fun and innocent enjoyment. **It lets Adam live without interference.** His life motivation is unchanged; he still **lives for his own pleasure....**

The new cross encourages a new and entirely different evangelistic approach. The evangelist... preaches **not contrasts but similarities**. He seeks to key into public interest by showing that Christianity makes no unpleasant demands; rather, it offers the same thing the world does, only on a higher level...

The new cross does not slay the sinner, it redirects him. It gears him into a cleaner and jollier way of living and saves his self-respect.... **It is false because it is blind. It misses completely the whole meaning of the cross.**

The old cross is a symbol of death.... The race of Adam is under death sentence. There is no commutation and no escape. God cannot approve any of the fruits of sin, however innocent they may appear or beautiful to the eyes of men. God salvages the individual by liquidating him and then raising him again to newness of life.

That evangelism which draws friendly parallels between the ways of God and the ways of men is false to the Bible and cruel to the souls of its hearers. The faith of Christ

does not parallel the world, it intersects it. In coming to Christ we do not bring our old life up onto a higher plane; we leave it at the cross. The grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die.

God offers life, but not an improved old life. The life He offers is life out of death. The life He offers is life out of death. It stands always on the far side of the cross. Whoever would possess it must pass under the rod. He must repudiate himself and concur in God's just sentence against him.

What does this mean to the individual, the condemned man who would find life in Christ Jesus? How can this theology be translated into life? Simply, he must repent and believe. He must forsake his sins and then go on to forsake himself. Let him cover nothing, defend nothing, excuse nothing. Let him not seek to make terms with God, but let him bow his head before the stroke of God's stern displeasure and acknowledge himself worthy to die.

...let him gaze with simple trust upon the risen Saviour, and from Him will come life and rebirth and cleansing and power. The cross that ended the earthly life of Jesus now puts an end to the sinner; and the power that raised Christ from the dead now raises him to a new life along with Christ....

Dare we, the heirs of such a legacy of power, tamper with the truth? Dare we...alter the pattern shown us in the Mount? May God forbid. Let us preach the old cross and we will know the old power," end quote.

Let me tell you what the cross deals with. It does not seek to get us to believe in Christ. It seeks to slay us. It deals with sin and self. It does not seek to clean up self. It seeks to slay self, so that self can die and be buried. Then the Lord will raise up that self as a new man, a new man that is to live in the power of the Gospel. He is to live under grace, which does not mean; live as you wish, but the power to live as you ought. The new life will give the Christian power to deal with sin and live right.

III. FOLLOW ME

Now look at our text. Jesus said, "If anyone desires to follow Me, let Him deny Himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me!" You see, self must abdicate the throne of that one's life who would follow Christ. And Christ must be allowed on the throne. If I would follow Him, He must be the One I listen to. Then one must take up the cross, and after that, one is to follow Him.

When Jesus gave the words of Matthew 16:24, it was probably within months of when He would die on the cross Himself. You see, if we follow Him it will lead us to the cross. The cross was the end of that proud self and the flesh. You see, if I am not crucified with Christ, the flesh rules. Here is, I believe, the sin nature. And the flesh influences the self. And all unsaved mankind, no matter how morally upright or clean they seem to be, are ruled to a very large extent by that which the Bible calls the flesh.

But if the self is willing to let Christ rule, it will lead to the cross. And if our old self dies, one will of all necessity become a lover of truth. And when one loves the truth and lives it, it will lead to persecution. Paul said, "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution." Why? Because all that is in the world, and the flesh and the devil hate the light. Anyone who is truly light, will suffer persecution. And so the Christian will live the life of the cross. So the songwriter said, "The way of the cross leads home."

You see, the cross marks the end of the road for the old man, the self under the rule of the flesh. If we follow Christ, it will mark the end of one area after another that reeks of the flesh. Let me mark one of those things that will set you out and lead to persecution in your life if you follow Christ. It is our understanding that the Scriptures teach that divorce and remarriage is to live in continual sin. Those who live in that sin, as we understand the Scriptures, are going to hell because they are living in a major sin. Most people today do not want to hear of this subject because it affects almost every family in one way or another.

Now if you follow Christ, and you love the truth, what will you do? Well, you have to justify divorce and remarriage in some way, or you have a very difficult

biblical requirement on your hands. A while ago we were visiting a place and discussing this very serious matter and my wife pointed out from Mark's Gospel that John the Baptist reproved Herod for marrying his brother's wife. If the modern Gospel is right, if Kent Hovund and a myriad other Evangelicals of today are right, John the Baptist did a very, very foolish thing. He should have counseled Herod to believe in Christ and then he would have been OK with the wife he had. Since repentance is a work, according to them, and therefore not necessary, Herod could then go right on living with this woman. But John knew no such a Gospel, nor did Jesus, and John was beheaded for testifying to the truth.

Now consider further with me from 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 that adulterers will not inherit the kingdom of God, and there are other passages. Then consider 1 Corinthians 5:9-11 (read). Now it says we are not to company with people like this. Now I have said before, passages like this or Matthew 18, or 2 Thessalonians 3 are among the most disobeyed passages in the Bible today! Not only do we not separate from such people, but we allow them to marry and even become pastors and teachers in our churches!

And I want you to notice what Jesus said. He said, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me." If we follow Him, we must obey what He told us to do. Do you know what Paul said of his own teaching? In 1 Corinthians 14:37 he said, "If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord." And what did he say to do with those who are living in adultery and call themselves Christians? He said not to mix with them, not to company with them. And I ask you, who follows Christ in this? And I ask you, why do we not follow Him in this? Do you know what some say, "I can't believe it means that." And do you know what they have just done? They have just diagnosed their own problem, unbelief. And when we, as Christians, live contrary to this, what are we doing? We are denying Christ before men.

Listen to Matthew 10:32-39 "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will

also deny before My Father who is in heaven. Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'; and 'a man's enemies will be those of his own household.' He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it."

CONCL: And so, let us conclude. Christianity does not just involve believing in Christ. The very first step in denying self is repentance. It calls for confession of sin to God and to those we have wronged. Repentance is not a work. Let anyone who truly comes under conviction of sin truly repent before the one they have wronged, and experience forgiveness, and if they will be honest, they will acknowledge how free repentance and forgiveness is.

True Christianity involves denying self. To do that, one must become so sick of that snake, self, that one is willing to take up the cross. And then when one has taken up the cross he must follow Christ in life, and that will be a life of following the truth. Time after time we are given the opportunity to die, or to side step the cross. And yet, if we choose death, out of that death comes life; life, again and again.

A.W. Tozer "This World: Playground or Battleground?" It is our belief that the evangelical movement will continue to drift further and further from the New Testament position until its leadership passes from the modern religious star to the self-effacing, saint, who asks for no praise and seeks no place, happy only when the glory is attributed to God, and he is forgotten.

Until such men as these return again to spiritual leadership, we may expect a progressive deterioration in the quality of popular Christianity until we reach the point where the grieved Holy Spirit withdraws like the Shechina from the temple, and we are left like Jerusalem after the crucifixion – God deserted and alone. In spite of every effort to torture doctrine to prove that the Spirit will not forsake religious men, the record reveals plainly enough that He sometimes does. He has in the past forsaken groups when they had gone too far to make a recovery.

It is an open question whether or not the evangelical movement has sinned too long and departed too far from God to return again to spiritual sanity. Personally I do not believe it is too late to repent, if the so-called Christians of the day would repudiate evil leadership and seek God again in true penitence and tears. The big problem – will they? Or are they too well satisfied with religious frolic and froth even to recognize their sad departure from the New Testament faith? If the later is true, then there is nothing left but judgment.

The devil is adept at the use of the red herring. He knows well how to divert the attention of the praying Christian from his subtler but deadly attacks to something more obvious and less harmful. Then while the soldiers of the Lord gather excitedly at the gate, he quietly enters by another. And they return to find the newly baptized and pious enemy in charge of the proceedings. So far are they from recognizing him that they soon adopt his ways and call it progress.

Within the last quarter of a century, we have actually seen a major shift in the beliefs and practices of the evangelical wing of the church so radical as to amount to a complete sell-out- and all this behind the cloak of fervent orthodoxy. With a Bible under their arm and a bundle of tracts in their pocket, religious people now meet to carry on 'services' so carnal, so pagan, that they can hardly be distinguished from the old vaudeville shows of earlier days. And for a preacher or an editor to challenge this heresy is to invite ridicule and abuse from every quarter.