

Taking Up Our Cross Daily

In this series of articles—primarily from John 21—we’ve heard some important teaching by Jesus on discipleship. In my previous article we began looking at *suffering as a disciple* which cannot be separated from the words spoken by Jesus, “follow me.” Perhaps the clearest statement of what the phrase “follow me” means is given in Luke’s gospel. “If anyone would come after me, let him *deny himself* and *take up his cross* and *follow me*. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.” (Luke 9:23-24) Notice that discipleship has two primary meanings, the first being *self-denial*. So, then, a genuine disciple will, “deny himself” for Jesus’ sake. Self-denial doesn’t mean that we ignore our daily needs for sustenance and the proper care of our bodies, nor do we ignore our normal duties for ourselves and our families. But at its heart, *self-denial* simply refers to living our Christian lives as if we truly believe that God is on his throne and that God’s ways given in his word must always be our first priority.

A proper understanding of *self-denial* will always include the truth that we can *never* be right with God by our own imperfect obedience. We *deny* that, in and of ourselves, we contribute anything to our right relationship with God. Along with the recognition that we’re not right with God by what we do, *self-denial* is also inclusive of *daily dying to our sin*. Christian statesman, John Stott, writes, “We cannot *follow Christ* without forsaking sin. . . . It is not sufficient to feel pangs of remorse or to make some kind of apology to God. Fundamentally, repentance. . . . is an inward change of mind and attitude towards sin which leads to a change of behavior.” Dying to sin can be thought of as the *negative* side of the equation that will include the *positive* side of being steadfast and faithful in ongoing obedience. This will require that we’re seeking to grow in our knowledge of scripture which guides us in the knowledge of Christ and informs our willing obedience to him.

The next phrase translated, “*take up your cross,*” would, almost certainly, have been more readily understood in the 1st century than it is today. It’s been rightly said that: “If we had lived in the time of Jesus and had seen a man carrying a cross, it would have meant that the man was on his way to a place of execution.” Jesus’ meaning must include this. We’re to follow him *all the way!* This will include following Jesus even to a martyr’s death for some, but it certainly means for all Christians that we’re to follow him all our lives on this earth until our own death.

Even though this is true, it’s often been the case that Christians have thought wrongly about what it means to “take up your cross.” Interestingly, Elizabeth Elliot, wife of Christian martyr Jim Elliot, writes, “I think that there is a great deal of nonsense taught about this business of bearing our cross.” She goes on to say that the idea of “cross” has often been thought to be whatever *negative* thing that someone may be experiencing in the moment or even for a longer period of time. In other words, some have believed that a “cross” is something going on in my life that *cannot be avoided*. For example: my “cross” to bear is the fact that my husband was

killed on the mission field. Other examples of this type of cross bearing may include the fact that my spouse can't seem to get a job that makes enough money to pay the bills. The fact that I have an autistic child or a Down's syndrome child that needs special care and attention is my "cross" to bear, and you could multiply the examples.

In contrast to this Elizabeth Elliot suggests that, rather than our "cross" being something *we can't do anything about*, a biblical understanding is that the "cross" is something that *can* be avoided! We choose, by grace, to avoid ongoing disobedience to God's word. So, then, to "take up our cross" is a *voluntary* acceptance of doing whatever Jesus asks us to do from the principles and precepts of his Word *no matter the cost*. This type of cross bearing logically follows self-denial. In other words, we must say "no" to ourselves in order to continue to say "yes" to Jesus. Our lives should be lived with this in our hearts: "Yes, Lord, if your word given in the Holy Scriptures says that this is what you want, my desire is to obey you." Without any doubt, following Jesus will, inevitably, bring about some type of suffering. Even though living for Christ will bring about the hatred of the world (John 15:19), genuine disciples deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus in willing obedience. We do this, by his grace and for his glory.

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