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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“WALKING TO GOLGATHA”

Luke 23:26-46; Matthew 16:24-27

Maybe I do not know the cross of Jesus as well as I think I do.

I’ve heard the story since childhood. I have sung the Lenten hymns and seen many Jesus movies.

Not only have I read the Gospel accounts hundreds of times, I have preached them again and again. I am familiar with the history, techniques and bodily effects of crucifixion. I have a solid grasp of – and firm commitment to – the biblical and theological truths surrounding Christ’s substitutionary death.

But what impact does the cross have on my daily life? Beyond intellectual belief and verbal confession and generally living in obedience to God, **what does it mean for me to** {Mt 16:24} **“deny [myself] and take up [my] cross and follow [Jesus]”**?

Sometimes I am confident of the answer(s). But sometimes I wonder: How well acquainted am I with the cross of Jesus? What about you?

■ In **Matthew 16:24** Jesus says, **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”**

Let’s start by clarifying what this cross is not.

📖 “A cross to bear” is an English-language idiom. It refers to any heavy burden of responsibility or problem, especially one that the individual must cope with alone.

⊗ That is not what Jesus is talking about! The cross of discipleship is not suffering in general.

⊙ Job dissatisfaction, someone’s annoying habits, and personal irritations (such as computer glitches or a flooded basement) are not your cross (unless they are a consequence of following Jesus).

⊙ Loneliness and other social difficulties are not your cross (unless...)

⊙ Sickness, pain and disability are not your cross (unless...).

⊙ Financial hardship is not your cross (unless...).

⊙ Conflicted relationships, broken marriages, and disobedient children are not your cross (unless...).

⊙ Grief over the death of a loved one is not your cross (unless...).

→ That is not to say those problems do not *feel* excruciating, or that they are unimportant to God! They can do serious damage. On the other hand, God is well able to use all things {Ro 8:28, 29} **“for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose,”** so that we might **“be conformed to the image of his Son”** Jesus.

☑ Nevertheless, a Christ Follower’s cross does not consist of common human burdens. {Bonhoeffer, *Meditations*, p 13} **“The cross is not adversity, nor the harshness of fate, but suffering coming solely from our commitment to Christ.... [It] is not the suffering tied to natural existence, but the suffering tied to being Christians.”**

I believe that Bonhoeffer got it right. When Jesus says that we **“must... take up [our] cross”** he is speaking of struggles that are specific to discipleship.

Which brings us back to the question: what does it mean for you and me to {Mt 16:24} **“deny [ourselves] and take up [our] cross and follow [Jesus]”**?

✝ For some insight into that, let’s look at the form of the cross itself.

To be clear, The Romans used several different styles. (This kind [✝] is called a “Latin Cross.”) Jesus’ cross might, or might not have, looked precisely like this one. But many crosses had two beams: one vertical, and one horizontal.

⇕ The vertical beam is evocative of our relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It points to our struggle to love God by submitting to Christ’s Lordship.

Remember Jesus in Gethsemane! It required strenuous effort for him to say: {Mt 26:39, 42} **“Yet not as I will, but as you will....if it not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”** “You control my life”

{Heb 5:8} **“Son though he was,”** even Jesus had to “[learn] **obedience from what he suffered**” during his incarnation. If it was necessary for the holy, sinless co-creator of the universe to learn obedience, how much more essential is it for us?

It is relatively simple to say “Christ is Lord.” It is not so easy to actively, aggressively submit to his lordship over our attitudes, beliefs, relationships, time, work, money and possessions.

→ Aren’t we in the same boat as Paul, who confessed: **“I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing”** {Ro 7:19}? Paul did a great deal of good; however, his old sin nature was still fighting to control his heart and mind. It was not about to go quietly.

That is the crux of the matter, isn’t it?

☑ I am reminded of the song “Letting Go”

{Francesca Battistelli}:

**I’m letting go
Of the life I planned for me
And my dreams
I’m losing control
Of my destiny
It feels like I’m falling and that’s what it’s like
to believe
It feels like I’m falling and this is the life
for me
So I’m letting go**

Submitting to Christ’s Lordship is fundamental to taking up our cross. The vertical beam points to that struggle. (Of course, it is a struggle only when I am taking practical steps to yield myself to the Lord.)

⇔ The horizontal beam is evocative of our relationship with people. It points to our struggle to love others by serving them.

⊕ Much of this occurs within the Church.

It can be hard to love churchgoers, can't it? I should know; I am one of those irritating people. ☺

This is nothing new. Hear the word of the Lord.

- Galatians 6:1-2: **“If someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”** This word translated “sin” does not mean willful rebellion, but the kind of fall that happens on an icy road. *Αγαπε* love allows us neither to kick the fallen while they are down, nor to apathetically disregard the slip up, but to do what we can to help the fallen Christ Follower get back up on their feet.

- Romans 15:1: **“We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.”** Paul is responding to a heated disagreement about debatable topics. **“The weak”** are nitpicking moralists who want to impose their list of do’s and don’ts on the whole church. The **“strong”** rightly reject those standards and live in liberty – but they are tempted to flaunt their freedom. Paul sides with the strong, but reminds them that *αγαπε* love obligates us to be patiently considerate toward brothers and sisters who hold different convictions.

- Colossians 3:11-13: **“Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other...”** This is especially relevant when cultural and p

personality quirks trigger anxiety, irritation, or hurt feelings. It is easy to assume that one’s own preferences are spiritual, unbiased, and right; but *αγαπε* love obliges us to keep things in proper perspective and treat other Christ Followers as God’s chosen people.

All three passages echo the same principles: humility, kindness, self-denial, and a sharp, strong focus on God and others.

⊕ Our struggle to love others by serving them also takes place in the world.

Sometimes, we are our own worst enemies outside these walls. But not always! {Php 3:18} **“Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.”** {1 Co 1:18} **“For the message of the cross is foolishness to the perishing.”** Jesus warns: {Jn 15:18-19} **“the world... hated me first That is why the world hates you.”**

☑ Did you notice the common thread of rejection? As Bonhoeffer put it: {Meditations, p 11}

Suffering and rejection are not the same thing.... Suffering, as tragic suffering, could... bear within itself its own value, its own honor, its own dignity. Jesus, however, is the Christ who is rejected in suffering.... Death on the cross means to suffer and to die as someone rejected and expelled.... ¶ Just as Christ is Christ only in suffering and rejection, so also [we] are his disciples... in suffering and rejection ¶ the cross always ...means rejection... Being expelled,

despised, and abandoned by people in one's suffering...is an essential feature of the suffering of the cross.

We have been shielded from the extreme rejection experienced by the Church in much of the world. Whether that is evidence of special blessing or our tendency to blend in with North American culture, is subject to debate.

I suspect that we will become better acquainted with this side of the cross. The proclamation of Jesus as {Jn 14:6} "**the way and the truth and the life**" is already snubbed as "intolerance." I will not be surprised if this escalates to social oppression or even official persecution of the Church within my lifetime.

My prayer is that you and I will stand firm in our commitment to love God by submitting to Christ's Lordship and to love others by serving them – even those who hate us! For {Bonhoeffer, [Meditations](#)}

Those who are not prepared to take up the cross ...who are not prepared to give their life to suffering and rejection by others, lose community with Christ, and are not disciples. The opposite of discipleship is to ...take offense at the cross. But those who lose their life in discipleship, in bearing the cross, will find it again in discipleship itself, in the community of the cross with Christ.

Serving others is fundamental to taking up our cross. The horizontal beam points to that struggle. (Of

course, it is a struggle only when I am taking practical steps to love others.)

■ Jesus still says: "**Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.**"

Speaking for myself, I know enough truth about the cross. I just need more practice carrying it.