

25 August 2013

Take up your cross and follow the Lord

Today we will take a short break from the two topics we have been covering over the past couple of weeks, “money & riches” and “blessing God”, and consider what it means for a believer to take up his cross and follow the Lord. We will cover two points in this study; (1) deny yourself, and (2) take up your cross and follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us add a little detail to our points:-

1. Deny yourself

Mt 16:24 *Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any [man] will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.*

See also Lk 9:23, Mk 8:34

In our verse from Matthew the Lord Jesus is speaking of a time after His death - *if any man will come after me*, where the believer is to do two things, “deny himself and take up his cross”, and these will be covered over our two points in this study.

This point will focus on the Lord Jesus asking us to deny ourselves and follow Him. This request is not limited to the Lord Jesus during His ministry but is also found in the Old Testament, examples from Christ in the Gospels, and Paul’s epistles, where men who chose to follow God first denied themselves.

For example, consider Moses, the Lord led him to Midian after he smote an Egyptian for killing a fellow Hebrew. In the land of Midian he took a wife, and the Lord appeared to him on Mt Horeb (see Ex.2: 14 - 3: 2). When he obeyed God’s calling he left his wife, and took Aaron to see Pharaoh, and in doing so, he denied what *he* was doing and obeyed the Lord. As the book of Hebrews says, Moses chose to suffer affliction with the people of God, rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season (see Heb.11: 23, 25 & 27). The example of Moses illustrates a saved man’s denial of the pleasures of this world when he follows God.

In the gospels the Lord Jesus called Simon and Andrew to leave their fishing nets and follow him (see Mk.1: 16-18). Verse 18 says they *forsook their nets, and followed Him*. Then we have the most amazing example of Christ who gave up His will for the will of His Father, where He said, *Father, if thou be willing, take this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will be done, but thine be done* (Lk.22: 42). The Lord Jesus did *not* want to go to the cross, but He denied Himself and followed the will of His Father.

Another New Testament example was Saul who became the Apostle Paul to the Gentiles after persecuting the church. As Saul the Pharisee, he received orders from the high priest and elders to go and bind and imprison those who called on the name of the Lord Jesus (see Acts 22: 4, 5). Then when he met the Lord on the road to Damascus he forsook those orders and obeyed the commandments of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 22: 10 & 11). During his ministry he encouraged the church to deny ungodly and *worldly lusts and live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world* (Tit.2: 12).

When did you last deny something you enjoy to obey God?

What do you desire that you would forsake in obedience to God?

When was the last time you denied your body food for a day? That’s right, when did you desire to know what the Lord wanted of you more than your daily desire for food? Let us remember that denying our food or fasting is Bible doctrine (see David’s instruction in Ps.35: 13, the Lord Jesus in Mk.9: 29 and Paul in 1Cor.7: 5). As part of the consequence for David’s sin, the Lord said He would smite the child that was conceived from his union with Bathsheba, and so David fasted and cried before the Lord in hope that He would hearken unto his prayers and save the child (see 2Sam.12: 16-23).

I will now share a story that I have told before, but it fits as an illustration for this point. At Corys I was preaching the gospel to one of my customers and after he had heard what he needed to do to be saved and receive eternal life, he said to me, “I do not want to give up my women, beer and everything else I enjoy.” In making that statement he showed that he *loved darkness rather than light* (Jn.3: 19). What an honest answer from a heathen who appeared to know more about what was required of him when he got saved, than some Presbyterian ministers who put forward their own private interpretation of Scripture to support their sin, and then teach others that such evil is good (see www.nzprotestant.org/Vol5Iss2AprilJune2013.pdf).

You may desire to work for the Lord, you may desire a flash new home or car, but what does the Lord want?.

Earlier this year I desired to get a different job, but rather than getting all worked up about wanting the job, I asked the Lord to open or close the door and said that I would walk if He opened the door. Then I forsook my desire for the job and submitted my CV, and waited on the Lord to open or close the door. When I heard nothing back, there was no point in phoning them to see if I could get an interview because I understood their silence to mean that God had closed the door.

Then there is the calling of a man to preach or teach. The Scriptures say that if a man desires the office of a bishop or deacon it is a good thing, but then the church has to *acknowledge* his gifts and *call* him to the work. In doing so the man who has the desire to do the work, denies himself and his desire, and trusts that God will open or close the doors through the church choosing whether to send him out to do the work or not (see Rom.10: 15).

So next time you want something that the Scriptures makes no mention of, or they say is a good thing, start off by forsaking your desire. Then pray “not my will, but thy will be done Lord”. In doing so we take to the Lord our desires and have a preparedness to deny them, and obey and follow Him. And whether we give up fishing, like Simon, or simply doing what our heart wants, we deny ourselves and follow Christ.

2. Take up your cross and follow Christ

Mt 16:24 *Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any [man] will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.*

See also Mt 10: 38, Mk 8: 34, 10: 21 & Lk.14: 27.

Having come to the Lord with a heart that is prepared to deny our own desires, wants and needs, now we are ready to take up our cross. But what does it mean to take up our cross?

At the cross was where our Saviour the Lord Jesus Christ died, where He was persecuted and mocked (see Lk.23: 36). It was on the cross that He shed His blood for us and surrendered His will to the Father.

For a person to get saved they must first come before the Lord in humility accepting their sin and denying themselves, before He exalts them. They die to their old man who is crucified with Christ, that the body of sin might be destroyed, i.e. dead (see Rom.6: 4), then they are a new creature in Christ (see 2Cor.5: 17). Ruckman points out that Rom.6: 4 is your ‘doctrinal position’, where you “are dead because of your position in Christ” (see *The Book of Romans: The Bible Believer’s Commentary Series*, by Peter S. Ruckman). Hence, we are ‘positionally’ dead to our flesh and sin.

However, following our conversion, the new man is numbered with the transgressors, the sinners, as Jesus was on the cross. And just because we are saved it does not mean that we ‘practically’ cease to sin, as the devil continues to seek to destroy, deceive, delay, and discourage us with the things of the flesh. Perhaps some of the things we struggled with as a heathen, the devil now uses to tempt us, as such things often remain a weakness, whether it be the lusts of the flesh or the eyes, or money or our pride. Hence we are to mortify our bodies (see Co.3: 5). Whilst reckoning ourselves to be dead (see Rom.6: 11) we die daily (see 1Cor.15: 31) to our sin. We are to die to our sin, our flesh, each day, and be raised afresh in newness of life through the Holy Spirit of God. Ruckman calls this daily dying our “practical death” which is also implied in the phrase ‘take up your cross’ (see Matt.16: 24). This ‘practical’ death is where the saved person, the soldier, fights against his flesh, as illustrated in Gal.5: 17.

So a believer is doctrinally dead in Christ to sin, but also dies daily in his struggles with sin. Then when you consider that the cross was also the place where the Lord Jesus was persecuted we have a sense that for a Christian to take up his cross daily, that person prepares to endure persecution for His Saviour (see Jn.15: 20), and will need strength to suffer for His name’s sake (see 1Cor.4: 12). Today we see this reality for many Christians in Muslim lands where they are being persecuted for believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us not forget them in our prayers, and remember that, when we take up our cross and follow the Lord Jesus, we assume a preparedness to be persecuted for His name, and die daily *in* our struggles with sin.

I remember driving along the motorway one day thinking, “why do I have to die to my sin when I am not struggling with sin?” Well, that was a proud thought, that when I look back, that day was the beginning of numerous attacks from the devil through his many devices. God Almighty used those attacks to show me how proud my thought was, and how lowly I need to be as a soldier for Christ. And let me suggest that just when you think you are walking in all uprightness and sinlessness, that is likely to be the time God will prove His word is correct and show you that all your *righteousnesses are as filthy rags* (see Is.64: 6). You will realise the power of getting on your knees and weeping and beseeching the Lord to remove the thorn in your flesh. You will realise that it is only at the cross where we are cleansed, it is only when we come to God and die to our flesh, mortify our *members which are upon the earth* (Col.3: 5), and put off the old man (see Eph.4: 22), that we will *begin* to overcome daily the devil’s devices.

Is that what you do when you struggle with sin, from one week to the next? Do you die to your flesh each day, never giving in to the power of sin? Do you get on your knees and take up your cross each day in prayer, then follow the Lord Jesus Christ in newness of life and strength?

From this point we conclude with an encouragement especially to the young and the weak in the faith, but also to all of our brethren, to die daily to your flesh and to pray for the persecuted in the body of Christ. Remembering that when we take up our cross daily and follow the Lord, there is a sense that we die to our sin and have a renewed

willingness to suffer persecution for His name sake, as Christ Himself was persecuted and suffered affliction (see 2Tim.1: 8).

Having said what we have said, let us say it again. In this study we have looked at what it means to take up our cross and follow Christ, and have covered two points; (1) deny yourself, and (2) take up your cross, in doing so you die to your sin, prepare to suffer persecution, and are better equipped to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen!