

PAYING THE PRICE TO FOLLOW CHRIST (CONTINUED)

Luke 9:23

II. Sacrifice.

"And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me." In the light of these words, it is very plain that following Christ is not just a sweet sentimental impulse expressed in smooth words and formal religious exercises. Rather, it is a vital, virile, sacrificial faith which leads the true follower of Christ to be willing to live for Him in the face of opposition and hatred. We may as well face the fact that our Lord never intended for it to be an easy thing to follow Him. A cross speaks at once of suffering and death.

The cross of the believer has been widely interpreted as suffering the little trials and vexations of life. Crossbearing is usually regarded as the bearing of burdens or the enduring of trials in Christ's service, or for His sake. But, the cross which the Christian has to bear is not inevitable trouble, such as poverty, sickness or the loss of friends by death. These things would have been in our lot if we had not been Christians. They are sent to us, and not taken by us. The cross is something that is taken up voluntarily; it is within our power to refuse to touch it. We bear it, not because we cannot escape, but because it is a consequence of our following Christ.

When Christ found His disciples expectant of honors in His service, and longing for the places nearest to Him when He should be uplifted in His kingdom, He told them that they little knew what they were asking. His first uplifting was to be on a cross. Would they be willing to share that experience with Him? To them He said, "Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink the cup that I drink?" He was suggesting that it cost something to be His follower. If any man cared more for his life than for Christ, he was unfitted to be one of His disciples.

Simon Peter sought to dissuade Christ from going to the cross, but the Master made it perfectly plain that the only way for Him was that of the cross. In the words of our text, He goes on to make it equally plain that the way of the cross is the only one for the disciple also. Some theologians have attempted to by-pass the cross in their teaching, and many professing Christians have sought to by-pass the cross in their living, with equally disastrous results.

"Take up his cross daily." Note that it says his cross, and not his neighbor's. Pick it up at once. Take it up, and not try to walk around it. Take it up and carry it. One's cross is not one that he makes, but one that he takes. If it be light, he need not try to increase its pressure. Apparently, some people almost seem to think they cannot be righteous unless they are unhappy, and that unless they bear a heavy cross they cannot be well-pleasing to God. Oh, soul, thou hast but to take the cross that is appointed.

The cross, to the Lord Jesus Christ, meant a symbol of sacrifice, an instrument of death. To take up the cross means a daily sacrifice of self; and, if need be, a complete sacrifice. Do we, today, understand what sacrifice means? In our manner of living, self comes first—our desires, our needs and our obligations. Then, if there is any time, energy or money left over, we share with the Lord.

The cross is the symbol of pain, suffering, sorrow and heartbreak. How much pain and suffering have you borne for the sake of Christ? Do you have any scars received in the battle which you have waged against sin? Are the marks of the Lord Jesus Christ on your body?

You have a cross. What are you doing with it? Are you seeking to fling it from you? Are you trying to escape its weight? Are you kicking at it? Are you struggling under it? If so, your life is a misery to yourself and to others.

In the days when our Lord was here in the flesh, it was common to make the condemned person carry to the place of execution the cross on which he was to suffer and die, so the disciples readily understood the Master's statement here. He was going forward like one marching to the crucifixion, appointed to suffering and death. Any one who wished to come after Him must prepare himself for the same experience. We cannot follow the Christ of Calvary any other way than by the way of the cross.

A cross is an instrument of execution, something upon which a crucifixion takes place. In our lives then, our crosses are some circumstances or appointments which give us opportunities of crucifying our old denied selves, something that gives us the chance of killing our old ambitions, preferences and pride.

In every life there is a throne and a cross. If self is on the throne ruling, Christ is on the cross dying. But, if Christ is on the throne ruling, then self is on the cross dying. "Whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it." A life saved from risk, hardship and sacrifice is lost, but if it is spent in sacrifice and service it is saved.

To sacrifice does not mean to patronize Christ. It does not mean merely to approve Him or to acquiesce in all praises accorded Him. It means to venture out with Him, to bank all on Him, to give your life to Him, and to give allegiance to His blessed will. If the alternative of denial of Christ or death presents itself, choose death. If the alternative of riches without Christ or poverty with Christ offers itself, choose poverty.

In "The Cross-Bearer," which is a little book that was published by the American Tract Society, there is a series of illustrations from French pictures showing the right and wrong ways of bearing the cross. One picture presents the disciple as sawing off part of his cross. He would bear the cross, but that particular one was too heavy. Another is dragging his cross behind him with a cord, being ashamed of it. Another is worshipping his cross, crowning it with flowers, instead of bearing it; praising religion, but not practicing it. At last one comes with his Master before him, bearing his cross while the disciple walks in the Master's footsteps and carries his cross exactly as his Master does.

We must not take up the cross reluctantly, complaining of its weight. To follow Christ means to put Him and His claims first. If human love competes with divine love, there is not to be a single moment of weighing. There must be a complete subordination of human relationships to Him. He challenges us to give up the lower that the higher may live, to deny the bad that the good may have a chance, and to relinquish the good in order that the best may take its place. And this should be done willingly and cheerfully. A little girl was dying. Her father said to her mother, "Wife, we must not let God take our child. We must give her to Him." Together they knelt and gave up their baby and their wills.

III. Service.

Christianity will never be popular because it calls for self-denial, sacrifice, suffering and service.

The path Christ trod was one of persecution, misunderstanding, rejection, hatred, suffering, agony and death. To follow Him includes suffering. In life He suffered reproaches. He was called a liar, a deceiver, a devil, a winebibber, a glutton, and

a blasphemer. In His death He had a host of scoffing demons around Him. The atmosphere He breathed was full of fiery indignation. His only refuge was His Father's hidden countenance; His only crown one of thorns; His only throne a cross of wood. Only as the self-life is yielded up to death will there be any fruit for God. And that involves suffering.

In spite of all the frailty of its friends and the fury of its foes, Christianity insists upon a course of life which crosses the wishes, desires and habits of men. It despoils fairest dreams, crucifies deepest affections and scourges the sins of men.

Following Christ's leadership unifies life, as we learn from the life of Livingstone, who, on his next to the last birthday, wrote in his diary: "Lord Jesus, my King, my life, my all, I again dedicate my whole self to Thee." Following Christ's leadership concentrates life, as we learn from the life of Paul, whose motto was: "This one thing I do." Following Christ's leadership conserves life, as we learn from the life of John, who declared: "We beheld, with a satisfying vision, His glory."

To follow Christ means a glad surrender to Him. There was a dramatic moment, a great crisis in the world's history, when General Pershing placed the American army under the command of General Foch, who had just been made commander of all the allied forces. General Pershing said to him: "Infantry, artillery, aviation, all that we have are yours. Dispose of them as you will." Thus we are to give ourselves entirely to Christ, to let Him dispose of us as He will. We should be glad to serve Him in any way He may indicate.

When Garibaldi was going out to battle, he told his troops what he wanted them to do, and they said, "Well, General, what are you going to give us for all of this?" He replied, "I don't know what all you will get, but you will get hunger, cold, wounds, and perhaps death." They stood awhile in silence, and then threw up their hands, saying, "We are the men!"

To follow Christ means to imitate or copy Him, and to do as He did and live as He lived. Discipleship demands perseverance. There is no discharge in this service. It is a life-long compact.

It costs to be a disciple of Christ. It costs the things self prizes and holds dear.

Following Christ calls for the best in us. We should follow Him as scholars follow their teacher, as servants follow their master, as soldiers follow their generals and as imitators follow their model.