

A recent college graduate and his wife move overseas the summer after graduation. Their goal is to establish a new home in a very new place so that they can do mission work among a people that is not well-acquainted with Christianity. And they enjoy success, as before long a solid small group of people is regularly meeting in the Americans' tiny apartment to study God's Word together. But it is not without risk. Every meeting brings with it the fear that the police could knock on the door at any minute, bringing both their ministry and their residence in this country to a swift end. The couple knew before they came that there would be an organized hostility towards Christianity, of a kind that they did not experience in the United States. A hostility that could quickly become dangerous for them. But they accepted it as a consequence of their discipleship.

What does the phrase 'carry your cross' mean to you? Many people today use that phrase to describe any of the hard things they have to go through during life on earth. But it actually refers specifically to the hardships of being a Christian. Do you ever find yourself being tempted to avoid the cross in your life? Maybe we do it by hiding the fact that we're Christian. Or, more likely, we do it by living how the world around us lives, rather than how God wants us to live.

In the gospel today (Matthew 16:21-26) Jesus teaches us that we will in fact have cross to bear while on earth. But he also shows us *his* cross, and then what lies behind *our* cross. The Gospel this morning teaches us to...

Be a Follower of Jesus

- 1. He bore the cross for us**
- 2. We bear our cross for him**

The verses that come right before our reading is the Gospel from last week—when Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ. The next thing that Matthew records is how Jesus turned his disciples' focus towards Jerusalem and opened their eyes to what was going to happen to him there.

Matthew wrote, **"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."** That's a lot of information for the disciples to digest. This is the first time that Jesus makes a clear prediction of his death and resurrection to his disciples. But the disciples should have already understood that this was coming—Jesus had made it plain in other ways. Jesus said he *must* do these things. These are the things that the Old Testament prophets spoke about. These are the things God promised would happen in order to save the world. There was no other way to redeem mankind. The psalm-writer wrote, "No one can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for them" (Psalm 49:7). So it had to be Jesus and the cross. Jesus did it willingly, knowing that it would lead to his death.

But Peter wanted to hear nothing about the suffering and death of his Lord. So **"Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!'"** Peter obviously loved Jesus, but he completely missed the significance of Jesus' words. From Peter's reaction, doesn't it seem that all he heard was the part about Jesus' death? It sounds like he missed the part about his rising from the dead. He simply did not understand that Jesus *had* to die. Jesus had to go to the cross because of Peter's sins, and because of our sins. At least at this moment, Peter was not grasping what the Scriptures said about his Savior.

And Jesus' answer shows just how mistaken Peter was. He said, **"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."** Jesus called Peter "Satan"—that seems pretty harsh, doesn't it? But it was appropriate. Because Peter was tempting Jesus to avoid the very thing he came to do. In fact, the devil had tempted Jesus to do the exact same thing 3 years earlier during his 40 days in the wilderness—he tempted Jesus to forego suffering. But Jesus refused. He would not take the easy way out. He was determined to accomplish the purpose for which he was sent. **Jesus bore the cross for you, even when it seemed like foolishness to man. But by that cross he gained eternal life for the world.**

This part of the story can remind us that God's plan is so much better than our plan. Peter *thought* that he knew what was better for Jesus than Jesus did. Jesus' way—a way that led to the cross—led to death for himself, but led

to life for Peter and life for all of us. God said through the prophet Isaiah, **“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”** This is a good passage for us to remember because it’s so easy for us, like Peter, to think we know better than God what’s best for ourselves. But with the faith that the Holy Spirit provides we can take God at his Word and trust that he knows what he’s doing.

This story might also make us think about how we deal with temptation. When Satan or our own sinful flesh hold sin in front of our eyes, what do we do with it? Do we shoo it away, or do we let it linger? Do we push it out of sight, or do we give it room to work? It’s so easy to let sin gain a foothold. And since we are not as strong as Jesus, we give in. Countless times every day we do fall into sin. We put our way over God’s way and fail to live by his commandments. Like Peter, we may think that what we want is right, rather than what God asks of us. What we deserve for these times is the loss of life with God now and eternally.

But when we realize our shortcomings, we can look back to this story and see how Jesus dealt with Peter’s temptation. Peter tempted Jesus to avoid going to the cross. But not even for a moment did Jesus consider giving in. Jesus perfectly obeyed his Father’s will, not only in this story but during his entire life on earth. And remember why he did this. He was taking your place. It’s Jesus’ perfect obedience that took him to the cross. It’s his perfect obedience that redeems you and me from the punishment we deserve. It’s what gives us forgiveness for every time we’ve fallen. By God’s grace, when he looks at us, instead of seeing sin, he sees Jesus’ perfect righteousness. **Be a follower of Jesus, who bore the cross for you to win you life in heaven.**

Jesus bore his cross once for all people. In the second half of the Gospel Jesus switches our attention to a different cross—the cross that he asks his disciples to carry.

In these verses Jesus tells his disciples what it really means to be his “disciple.” He said, **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”** *Whoever* wants to be Jesus’ disciple *must* do this. Not just the disciples standing in front of Jesus that day, but this command is for all Christians of all time. When Jesus said “deny yourself,” he meant that his disciple must surrender his will to God’s will, like Jesus himself did. It means the follower of Jesus must reject the part of himself that wants to follow the desires of the sinful flesh and the sinful world around him. In the second reading today Paul told the Romans, **“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”** To give up the pattern of this world and the pleasures that come with it is part of what it means to deny oneself.

Next Jesus said his disciple must take up his cross. To take up the cross might begin with just accepting the fact that being a follower of Jesus will inevitably involve hardships on earth. The disciple’s cross is the difficulties that come his way specifically because he is following Jesus. Every Christian’s cross will be unique, because we all have different vocations in life. Maybe you carry a cross when you give up a couple hours every week to be connected to your church, and your unchurched friends or co-workers or family just don’t understand why. Maybe you carry a cross when you don’t fit in with the “cool crowd” at the office because you don’t join in with the gossip or the crude jokes. Or maybe you carry a cross if you’re ridiculed by someone for expressing belief in a 6-day creation, or for speaking up for the biblical pattern for marriage as God designed for one man and one woman. Whatever your cross is, you are probably aware of where it shows up in your life.

Then Jesus says, “Follow me.” Jesus invites the disciple to follow his lead. To follow his example of love and selflessness. To follow him even when it’s uncomfortable. But it’s Jesus’ word and invitation that enables us to follow him wherever he goes.

And Jesus explains, **“Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.”** Jesus’ words might first sound like a contradiction: to save your life is to lose it, but to lose your life is to save it? What Jesus means is that for people who want to “save their life” on earth, that is, to save themselves from the trouble or discomfort or ridicule or hardships that come by being a Christian—Jesus says those who try to spare themselves from that by denying Jesus will lose eternal life now and in heaven. But on the other hand, those who lose their life for Jesus, that is, those who give up the comfort of travelling down the “easy path,” those who resist

the temptation to take the path of least resistance, those who refuse to conform to the ways of the secular world which doesn't fear God—Jesus says these people will live both a meaningful and God-pleasing life on earth and will enjoy the blessings of eternal life in heaven. What Paul and Barnabas preached is true: they said, **“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”** And that's true for every Christian.

Finally Jesus said, **“What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”** In this last verse Jesus paints an illustration for the disciples: Even if someone could achieve the impossible and somehow gain the whole world—all the power and money and authority that comes with it—it still doesn't compare to what your soul is worth. Nothing on earth will be yours after death, but your soul is eternal. Your soul is more valuable. Jesus says you can't buy eternal life—or give anything in exchange for your soul—even if you were the king of the world. So with the hymn writer we say, “Take the world, but give me Jesus.”

Jesus asks his disciples to bear a cross for him. Not because we have to, in order to get into heaven, but because he's already given us heaven, and now he asks us to give up earthly pleasures to follow him.

Not to be misunderstood, Jesus is not asking us to give away everything we have. He's not trying to make us feel guilty for enjoying things that money can buy, like a comfortable car or a new TV, or having the leisure to enjoy hobbies or vacation. These are blessings from God and he wants us to enjoy them. What Jesus *is* asking us to do is not to let these things become our life – what is most important to us, what defines us or our happiness. Jesus is asking that we don't let these things cloud our vision of him or prevent us from following him. He's asking that if there were some circumstance where we had to choose either our things or Jesus, we pick Jesus. Paul instructed the Corinthians that **“Those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Cor 5:15).**

What does that look like in your life? Do we give a higher priority to being popular by the world's standards, or to obey God's law, despite the consequences? Do we try to please the people in this world, or God? What do we strive for more? To live a comfortable life here, or to live by God's Word and enjoy the peace that comes from his promises? When we become tempted to “save our life” on earth, we're at risk of losing life with Jesus. And we can all probably look at our own lives and pick out the times we've put the world first. But then we look at how Jesus gave it all up—how he gave up his very life—to save ours. We have life, real life, in Jesus.

Be a follower of Jesus, and carry your cross for him. It's not going to be easy. It's going to hurt at times. When the weight on your shoulders seems to become too much, remember that Jesus is walking beside you, giving you the support you need to follow him and to deal with whatever comes along the way. Jesus bore his cross perfectly and he helps us to bear ours. When you get weary, look at Jesus on his cross. Jesus' cross means that the battle is already won, and no matter what happens on earth, we are headed toward a blissful life with God forever. Your cross is bitter and difficult, but it leads to a life that is worth the wait, and worth every cross-burden step along the way. Jesus told his disciples that he *must* go to Jerusalem to suffer, die, and rise again. And he did. Look at Jesus' cross. It's your guarantee that behind *your* cross is eternal life.

Amen.