

## FOLLOWING CHRIST

Matthew 16: 21-28

Taking up a cross. Do you bear a cross? Think of a person who has a crippling disease. Or a wife who patiently puts up with an abusive husband. Or an employee who works hard to bring home a paycheck to feed the family. Or parents who deal with a troubled child. Aren't these people who bear a cross?

Jesus says, "If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me." Jesus didn't say "bear" a cross, but "take up" a cross. When we bear a cross, it is something that happens to us. We aren't looking for it. It is something put on us. We are passive. But if we "take up" a cross, we make a choice. We are active. If we follow Jesus, then we are deciding each day to take up that cross. If I develop cancer or have a cruel spouse or a difficult child or a handicap, those are things that have happened to me. I didn't choose those things. They happened. And I can have those problems whether or not I follow Jesus. So what is the cross we "take up"?

Jesus was telling this to His disciples. He had just asked them, "Who do you say I am?" They answered, "Elijah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, or one of the prophets." Then when Jesus asked them, "Who do you say I am?" Peter replied. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Then Jesus told them He was going to be arrested and crucified. When Peter heard this he said, "This cannot be." But Jesus quickly quieted Peter and said, "If anyone comes after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me. Whoever wants to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for My sake will gain it."

For Jesus' disciples the cross meant exactly that. Peter, according to tradition, was crucified up-side-down. Others were stoned or flayed alive. St. Paul was probably spared crucifixion because he was a Roman citizen. Most scholars believe he was beheaded. But we live in a society in which we won't be executed or even put in prison because we follow Jesus. What cross do we have to take up?

A car hit a pedestrian on a road in Hartford, Connecticut. That car and two others that passed the man kept going. Then for two minutes nobody stopped to help him until a police car came. We might think, "That wouldn't happen here in Iowa."

In 1964 an even worse incident took place. A woman named Kitty Genovese was brutally stabbed to death for a period of over 30 minutes in New York, even though 38 other neighbors witnessed it.

After the incident people asked, "How could this happen?" One main theory that came out was the claim that in this impersonal, complex world people have to keep to themselves to survive. Think of what would happen if we got personally involved in all the bad news we hear on TV. We'd go nuts. So to survive people have to be like the Pink Floyd song says, "Comfortably Numb."

That all sounded good until researchers at Columbia University studied the “bystander problem.” They put a student in a room with others. This student faked an epileptic seizure. If only one person was in the room with that student, the person would rush to help 85% of the time. But in a group of four, only 31% of the time they responded. The scientists also did an experiment with smoke coming under a door. 73% responded by themselves, but only 38% with a group. The researchers concluded that it wasn’t the severity of the crisis, the degree the person screamed for help, the character of the witnesses—black, white, young, old, male, female. What mattered is how many witnesses there were.

In our world we hear of so many agencies that help people. And we pay so much in taxes to support the government. So it is easy to say, “Let someone else do it.” If there is a cross for us to take up today, it is the cross of doing something with our faith in the midst of all the watching crowds.

Will we take up that cross? In the ancient world the Church brought a stop to the killing of infants, liberated slaves, and created hospitals, orphanages, and schools. In the middle ages the Church kept classical learning alive and formed universities. In the modern world the Church led the way in the development of science and political and economic freedom. But what will we do today?

Jesus didn’t just bear a cross. He took it up. He came to this world not just to be the Son of God, but to take upon Himself the sin of the world. No one forced Him to do that. No, He willingly took up His cross for you and me.

And that is what leads us to take up our crosses. We may think there are other people to help those in need. But the reality is that so many are alone or are convinced they are. Older people are forgotten by their families in nursing homes. Retired neighbors are in a jam because they didn’t plan for their benefits to support them in the rising cost of living now that they are late into their eighties. Over half of our children are raised at least part of their childhood with only one parent. They need adults to help mentor them.

A former missionary to Nigeria, Africa told about a Nigerian man named Chinedu who he met in the US. Chenidu asked for his help saying, “I am terribly confused about Christianity. I thought I knew what it was six months ago when I came here, but now I’m not so sure.” He went on, “I came from a pagan family. My father was a priest, but ten years ago we became Christians. We understood Christianity as a change in loyalty. We always believed that spiritual things were first in life, but we realized we were loyal to the wrong gods. We place the Triune God as the center of our lives. But after being here I am confused. Christianity seems to be not a change in loyalty, but a change in paradigm.

Now the missionary was confused. He asked, “What do you mean Chenidu?”

Chenidu replied, “In Africa we take for granted that spiritual things are at the center of life. Here spiritual things are taken out of the center and put at the edge of life. The new model *SPECL*.

“What is *SPECL*?” the missionary asked.

Chenidu answered, “*SPECL* stands for success, progress, education, collecting, and leisure.”

The missionary realized that Chenidu needed a Christian who was transparent, someone who could show that Chenidu’s view, not the view often present in our culture, is the true view of Christianity.

That is the cross we can take up today, the cross of showing the world what it truly means to follow Jesus.