

Fellowship Of The Cross

Matthew 16:24

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FOCAL Read Together Matthew 16:24 ... **If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.**^{KJV}

Some people call it the "Greatest Story Ever Told". I'm not sure that adequately explains the Bible. From the very first of its pages to the very end of the Book we see something that can only be described as amazing. I'm not talking about the fact that God created everything that we see by speaking it into existence. I would expect God to do godlike things. But what God does throughout the whole of the Bible boggles the mind.

He wants to have a relationship *with us*.

The God Who **"by wisdom founded the earth; and by understanding He established the heavens"** (Proverbs 3:19-20) wants to have a relationship with that which He has created. He walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8), and still loved them when they betrayed Him. **"Every creature is manifest in His sight: all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him"** (Hebrews 4:13). We fail God, we take His Name in vain, we use His bountiful resources, and still He reaches out to us. **He shows us His love in that - while we were yet sinners - mockers - rejectors - He nonetheless sent Christ to give Himself for us** (Romans 5:8). When we were lost and undone - unable to save ourselves - God reached out to us, and reaches out to us now. Christ - in the fullness of time - came to be our Redeemer. No man took His life, but He willing laid it down for us. The Father sent Christ to be the

ransom for our sin. Jesus willingly gave Himself for us, saying:

John 10:17-18 ... I lay down my life, that I might take it again. {18} No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.

He denied Himself to buy us salvation. All we need to do to gain salvation is to deny ourselves, to turn from our sin and our so called goodness, and receive what He has done for us. God did an amazing thing in offering to save us, in offering to enter into a relationship with us. And yet, something more amazing will occur this very day.

God will stoop to save a sinner, but the sinner will not receive that gracious gift of salvation. Some - perhaps in this audience today - will hear of sin and its Solution, and will reject the grace and mercy of God. Some will refuse "**God our Savior**" (1 Timothy 2:3) and choose instead to attempt to save themselves. Some will - even under the conviction of sin - hold their pride to be greater than their need to be saved. **The Grace of God that bringeth salvation has appeared to all men (Titus 2:11).**

Will you not seek the Lord while He may be found? He is the only Solution to our problems.

1. The Problem Of Sin

FOCAL Matthew 16:24 ... If any man will come after

me, let him deny himself ...

ILLUSTRATE Have you ever noticed that you can set up chairs in an auditorium in nice, straight lines on a Sunday night - and that by Wednesday those chairs will be scattered and pushed together in disarray? Have you ever seen fresh poured concrete that didn't have the imprint of a hand, or a scrawled name in it? In every Church building where there is a candy dish have you ever noticed wrappers thrown on the floor following the services? Have you ever thought that the "wet paint" sign on the wall might as well say "please touch here" - because most people can't wait to see if the sign is right?

We all have a problem. We are all born sinners. Sin consumes the human race like rust consumes a junk car. Sin draws each and every person *away* from a healthy relationship with God and with others and puts ME FIRST. When you look at what the Bible defines as sin:

Galatians 5:19-21 ... sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, {20} idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, {21} envy, drunkenness, carousing ... those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.^{HCSB}

Sin places self above all else. It rejects a relationship with God in favor of self gratification. Mankind pursues **sexual immorality** - not because of love for the partner - but because of self gratification. The **thief** steals because he wants what someone else has. The **dissenter** brings

division to the local Church because he wants to control others. Those who are **absorbed in anger** put their own feelings above others - and explode when they are not satisfied. Those who **abuse drugs or alcohol** do so to please themselves, not because they want to please others.

The atheists believe that religion binds the mind. They're wrong. Sin binds the mind. Sin says "I have ever right to what I want when I want it the way that I want it, regardless as to what either God or you want".

God does not want us in sin. He knows that sin is destructive. He knows that sin will always lead to the lowest level possible.

If anyone will have a relationship with God - if he will follow Christ - then he must first deny himself. He must REPENT! Repentance is a denial of self and a recognition of God. Repentance is a recognition of our own sinfulness.

John Ortberg writes¹:

"Every one of us - all we like sheep - have habits we can't control, past deeds we can't undo, flaws we can't correct. ... In the way that glass is predisposed to shatter and nitroglycerin is predisposed to explode, we are predisposed to do wrong when conditions are right. ... We lie and sacrifice integrity for the sake of a

few dollars ("I don't understand, Officer - my speedometer must be broken"). We gossip for the sake of a few moments' feeling of superiority. ... Everybody's weird."

Everybody is weird. Everybody is flawed. **If anyone is going to have a relationship with Christ, he must first deny himself.** Jesus told the religious leaders of His day:

Matthew 21:31-32 ... Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you {Pharisees}. {32} For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not; but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.

Both John the Baptist as well as Jesus preached **repentance and faith in Christ** - yet the Pharisees would have none of it. They trusted in their own innate goodness. They thought, "We keep the Law perfectly. We are *good* people. **We are our own standard.** Yet the Lord said to them, "The prostitutes and tax collectors go into Heaven before you will - for you will not repent!".

To enter the Christian way of life you must *deny yourself*, you must **repent and follow Jesus**. Jesus called two fishermen to salvation, saying "**Repent - turn from your current way of life - and follow Me**" (Matthew 4:17, 19). To the one who was mourning Jesus said, "**Follow Me, and let the dead bury their dead**" (Matthew 8:22). Jesus told the tax collector to leave his money table and "**follow Me**" (Matthew 9:9).

¹ in his book *Everybody's Normal Till You Get To Know Them*, page 16/17, ISBN 0-310-22864-6

To the rich young ruler Jesus said "**sell what you love, and follow Me**" (Matthew 19:21). Jesus was very explicit when He told His disciples that the first step to salvation was to **deny himself**. Turn from who you are to Who Christ is. Turn from what you want to be to What Jesus wants you to be.

We must turn from self enslaving sin and turn from self salvation to Jesus Christ - the solution for our sin!

The Bible says:

Isaiah 53:6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

ALL we like sheep have gone astray. There are no good among us. I cannot save myself. If I could have saved myself then why - in the Name of all that is Holy - would Christ have had to **bear the iniquity of us all**? The Prophet Job spoke rightly when he said:

Job 9:20 If I justify myself, mine own mouth shall condemn me: if I say, I am perfect, it shall also prove me perverse.

Those who justify themselves - who say that they are without sin - in time are condemned by their own lips. Watch someone long enough and you will see that "**all have sinned, and come short of the glory of the Lord**".

Just as a blind man is unable to see color, man apart from God's saving Grace is unable to see righteousness. We must repent - **deny ourselves** - and turn to God. We must, as the Psalmist did, turn to God Who sees all and say:

Psalms 41:4 I said, LORD, be merciful unto me: heal my soul; for I have sinned against thee.

If you think that you can get to Heaven without Jesus - think again. For Jesus:

Matthew 9:12-13 ... They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Jesus Christ came to be the solution for our sins. He came to call the sick sinner to repentance. When you call upon the Name of Jesus, you will be saved. When you **deny yourself**, asking Christ to heal your soul, He will do so. **Jesus Christ is the Light of the world; he that follows Him shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life (John 8:12).** We are not saved

Titus 3:5-7 ... by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; {6} Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior; {7} That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Salvation is not based on what I do, but on what Christ

did. If you do not get past this point in your understanding - if you believe you can be saved on day and lost the next - you will never be what Christ wants you to be in this life. You will hover at the edge of effectiveness, struggling to *keep yourself saved*, rather than releasing your life to God so you can be a blessing to others.

For Christ's sake - for your sake - and for the sake of those you love, **deny yourself. Repent.** Turn from yourselves. **Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou SHALT be saved, AND thy house (Acts 16:31).**

2. The Problem Of Sin, Part 2

FOCAL Matthew 16:24 ... If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross ...

Following the **self denial** that leads to salvation the new believer is told to **take up his cross**. Several liberal theologians theorized a few years ago that these were not actually words that Jesus Christ spoke. I beg to differ. These words are recorded *verbatim* by Mark, in

Mark 8:34 ... Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

as well as by the blessed physician Luke in

Luke 9:23 ... If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.

Luke actually adds a word that both Matthew and Mark miss. Luke writes "**take up his cross daily**".

Why is it that some Christians - saved by faith - wander back into the world? Why do some believers seem to be as bad off as the unbeliever is? It is because many Christians fail to do as Christ commanded. They do not **take up their cross daily**. What does that phrase mean?

First of all, it is a willful act. We are not forced to bear our crosses. Jesus said "**take up**" your cross. You who are saved - who have repented and have turned to Christ - make the conscious decision to "**take up**" the cross. On the Via Delarosa - the Way of God - Jesus Christ carried His Cross. He carried this Cross willingly. At one point the Bible tells us that Jesus grew so weak that the Roman soldiers

Matthew 27:32 ... found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name: him they compelled to bear his cross.

Simon the Cyrene is mentioned here, not because he **took up his Cross**. He was **compelled to bear Christ's Cross**. There is no reward nor benefit in being compelled to carry a Cross. When they got to Calvary the Bible tells us that:

Matthew 27:38 Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left.

These are not men who "**took up their Crosses**". They

were *forced* into carrying their Crosses. They were *forced* into position, and their hands were *forcibly* nailed to these terrible trees. **Sin forced these crosses on these men. The Cross that Jesus spoke of was not *deserved suffering*.** These men, as one thief said:

Luke 23:41 ... receive the due reward of our deeds: but {Jesus} hath done nothing amiss.

The Cross the Christian *must* bear is not a punishment for his bad deeds. The Cross the Christian bears is like the Cross of Christ. This Cross represents selfless giving as opposed to selfish sinning.

Dear friends, God saves the Christian so that he can use that Christian for greater things. You are not saved just so that you can have eternal life. You are saved to serve the Lord Who saved you. You are saved to serve Him **daily**. Thus you **take up your Cross daily**.

Dear believers, we **take up the Cross daily** for this is the way to life victorious! When Peter bore the Cross as he followed Jesus God gave him a great revelation. It was **Peter alone** who said to Jesus:

CONTEXT Matthew 16:16 ... **Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.**

Jesus told Peter:

CONTEXT Matthew 16:17-18 ... **Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not**

revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. {18} And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Peter bearing the Cross is a blessing to his brothers and to the Lord! Yet Peter serving from self is rebuked as a vessel of Satan - unworthy as a disciple!

The Bible tells us that from this day forward - from the time that God revealed the great truth of the Christ to the disciples through Peter - that Jesus began to teach His disciples of His upcoming crucifixion. When Peter heard that He told the Lord:

CONTEXT Matthew 16:22 ... **Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee.**

To which Jesus replied:

Matthew 16:23 ... Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offense unto me: for thou savorest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.

He that was blessed is now he that is a tool of Satan. What changed? Peter stopped carrying his Cross. Peter stopped serving the Lord. Jesus said:

Matthew 10:38-39 And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. {39} He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.

Why does God seem so far away from some Christians? Jesus said **"if you will not do as I say, if you will not take up your Cross daily and follow Me, you ARE NOT WORTHY OF ME"**. I do not have to stay with you in your sin. You may be saved, but you have lost the joy of My Presence.

The solution for sin in the believer is a moment by moment walk with God in Christ.

Dear Christian, the Scripture saith:

Romans 6:20-23 For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness. {21} What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death. {22} But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life. {23} For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

God did not save you so that you could wallow in sin! He did not save you so that you can do nothing. He saved you so that you can **pick up your Cross daily and follow Him**.

ILLUSTRATE During the holidays I noticed that one of the teachers gave each member of his class a bag of oranges. I thought about those oranges for a moment. They were oranges packed in net bags. They weren't

apples, they weren't pears, but they were oranges. Nothing you could do to them could change them from oranges. While these oranges were on the tree they had a relationship with the tree. Once picked, however, though they were still oranges they started to lose flavor, and will eventually decay.

A Church can be filled with Christians who have detached themselves from their Lord. They're still Christians, just like the oranges are still oranges. But because they have refused to **"take up their Cross daily"** they have begun a process of decay. Just as the branches cannot long survive apart from the Vine, the Christian loses life the longer he refuses to serve the Lord. **The wages of sin is death**. That's true for believer as well as unbeliever. Abide in Christ! Grow in your relationship with Him. **Take up your Cross daily, and follow Him**. You were designed - dear believer - for a relationship with Jesus. Remember the Word that He has spoken:

CONTEXT Matthew 16:25 For **whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.**

You can choose to **save your own life**, but in the end you will lose it. The only blessed life is the life lived in a relationship with Jesus Christ. When you **lose your life for Christ's sake you will find it**. The selfish life lived - in time - becomes quite tedious.

How much greater it is to live a life empowered by Sacrificial Love. This type of life cannot be defeated.

The life that **picks up the Cross and follows Christ** doesn't fear death, nor does it fear life.

Those who are of the fellowship of the Cross are world changers and life givers. Those who are of the fellowship of the Cross are God empowered to follow Jesus! We swim in the love of Christ, and want to teach others to swim as well.

The Apostle Paul - misunderstood, beaten, ridiculed. By his own testimony he said:

2 Corinthians 11:24-27 **Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. {25} Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; {26} In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; {27} In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.**

Was Paul defeated? No, for he saw all these things as **taking up his Cross and following Jesus**. Though his family disinherited him the Apostle said:

Philippians 3:8-9 **... I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord:... {to} ... be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is**

through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith:

Paul spent his days - not worrying about tomorrow - but in serving the Lord. **He took up his Cross**, and practiced selfless love. **He took up his Cross**, though all the world mocked him. **He took up his Cross**, relying on what Christ did rather than on his own pedigree. **He took up his Cross**, not demanding his rights but willingly giving up everything so he could know more about Jesus.

3. It's Hard To Sin When You're Following Jesus

FOCAL **Matthew 16:24** **... If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.**

In every instance in the Scripture where believers have taken their eyes off of Christ they have always fallen. When Israel was following Christ her enemy - the armies of Egypt - was drowned in the Red Sea. When Israel took her eyes off of the Lord and began to focus on the enemies she's encounter in the Promised Land, she found herself soundly defeated on the other side of Jordan.

When Adam followed Jesus he lived in a perfect Garden. When Adam followed Satan he acted like a perfect fool. The proper order for the Christian is **follow Jesus, not Jesus follow me.**

We who are saved followed Jesus in order to be saved. We cannot now follow ourselves to be blessed. We must

follow the Lord.

Will you come? Will you give yourselves to Him while you can? Will you commit to what He commands:

To deny yourself - trust only in Him for salvation.

To take up your Cross - imitate His sacrificial love.

To follow Him - live one day at a time in relationship to Jesus.

May God strengthen you through His Word!



