

Carrying My Cross For Jesus



Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. Luke 9:23

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2025

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Matthew 10:37-39, Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

Chapter 10 of Matthew is around a year before Jesus went to the cross, approximately 29 AD. He had just sent the 12 out and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.

Most everyone has heard one of the following expressions spoken by someone they know or knew. “It’s a cross I have to bare.” or “It’s a cross I have to carry.” I even heard Christians state, “I must pickup my cross daily.” And there are several other variations of the same words. Most of the people we hear state one of these type of statements is usually talking about a job they don’t like or a marriage their not happy in. I’ve even hear people say something like this as a derogatory statement.

But what does it really mean? That’s what I would like to try and explain with this study.

Being honest, the language the Lord uses in this sermon is extremely difficult for people to understand. On the surface, Jesus’ words are enigmatic, kind of a puzzle, a brain teaser. I imagine some of the people in the crowd looking at each other with very confused faces, asking questions like, Taking up the cross? What cross? The instrument that is used to kill rebellious slaves?

Today, we can better understand the words of the Lord because of the events that took place later. Actually, there are some scholars who believe that Jesus uttered these words after his death and resurrection. That’s a good possibility because these verses hardly make sense before the crucifixion.

However, it really does not matter when Jesus said this phrase. It doesn’t matter if Jesus said it before or after his crucifixion. The important thing is that the Lord is giving us a lesson on discipleship that invites us to deny ourselves and take up the cross and follow Jesus. Here we have an invitation that makes us ponder on the question, “What will you gain when you lose?” Before we go any further, we need to ponder on the meaning of taking up the cross. First, I want to make clear that taking up the cross is not carrying the things that we don’t like in our lives.

Carrying our cross is not doing the job we do not like. When we take up the cross, we are not carrying the unwanted truths of our reality. It is not like, “my job stinks, but let me take up my cross. Or, my marriage is a mess, but let me take up my cross.”

Your job, neither your marriage, much less your reality is your cross. You can find a new and better job and still you have to take up the cross. Your marriage can be restored, your marital problems can be

resolved, and your reality can take a positive course, yet you have to take up the cross if you want to be Jesus' disciple.

You may be wondering, "if the cross is not the things we don't like, what is the cross then?" The cross was an instrument of death. Slaves died on the cross. The lower class people were put to death on the cross. A Cross and death were almost synonyms in Jesus' time.

In fact, when we speak of the cross we quickly think about physical death. Yet, I want to remind you that those who died on the cross not only lost their lives. The cross snatched from its victims their reputation, pride, arrogance, vanity, superiority, egotism and self-sufficiency.

When Jesus said take up your cross and follow me, we have to look at it from a first century view point. A cross wasn't a pretty piece of décor for your wall. It wasn't a piece of jewelry you would wear. It was a cross on the side of the road leading out of Jerusalem with people being crucified on them. It was a very horrible way to die.

Even after Jesus was crucified, in later years of the first century, carry your cross would leave a bad taste in your mouth. For the first century Christians who heard these words, take up your cross, was not poetic or theoretical language. It was quite literal. Christianity was birthed into a context where the cross was used as the primary means of enforcement and persecution.

Nero, who was Caesar from 54AD to his death in 68AD, was truly sick mentally. He had his own mother and sister executed and made his horse a Senator. In the 60's he turned his paranoia on the new Christians, using the Great Fire of Rome, which historians say he most likely started himself, as a pretext to hunt down Christians. He would impale them on poles and light them on fire to light his gardens at night. He asked to be there when they were lit on fire so he could hear their screams.

From latter 68AD to into 69AD four men ruled. Two of these were killed, and one was by suicide, But in late 69 Vespasian come into power and ruled from 69-70 AD. He was the one who sent Roman troops into Jerusalem to desecrate the Temple, he then killed hundreds and thousands of Jews, many of whom were the first Christians who came to Christ in the first chapters of Acts. He crucified thousands of Jewish Christians on crosses. Christians who would have been in the first audience who heard these things.

Then, there was Domitian, who took persecution to even new levels. It was demonic. For example, he knew Christians would not bow their knee to the Emperor, so would show up to a town like Ephesus, unannounced, and demand that the entire town be brought out to worship him, and whoever did not worship him would be hauled into the Coliseum and fed to the lions. He put Christians into cages or even sewed them up into sacks with wild animals.

That's the context in which this call to "take up your cross" was first heard. My thoughts have always been, if it had not been real and God, Christianity would not have survived. Satan did all he could in the first century to squash Christianity.

So when Jesus refers to taking up the cross, the Lord is not only referring to the sacrifice of giving our lives for the gospel. When Jesus said “You have to take up the cross,” He was asking us was to put to death the pride in our lives. Jesus was asking people to put their ego down. Jesus was telling people to crucify vanity and arrogance and all the other things that destroy the life we were created to have.

Understanding Jesus’ statement more fully requires us to look at the context where Jesus uttered the words, “deny yourself and take up the cross and follow me.” Just moments before Jesus pronounced such words, Peter took the Lord aside and rebuked him because Jesus was talking about the death he was about to suffer. Imagine that, the disciple trying to take the place of the Master. I guess that most of us would love to say that only Peter is guilty of doing that. Yet, the truth is that Peter is not the only one who has attempted to tell God how to behave properly. We all do, some of us daily!

So, as Peter was trying to correct Jesus, the Lord “turned and looked at his disciples, and he rebuked Peter. ‘Get behind me, Satan!’ he said. ‘You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns’”. Immediately after, Jesus gathered the crowd along with the disciples and said to everyone, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”. It is in the context of having in mind the concerns of God vs. having in mind merely human concerns that Jesus said, “deny yourself and take up the cross and follow me”.

So, here are the questions I want us to ponder on. What will we gain if we nail your merely human concerns to the cross? What will we gain if we eradicate the barriers preventing us from getting fully immersed in the life and moving of God in the world?

What will you gain if you nail to the cross the compulsion of being right, along with the subtle ways we use to manipulate people and circumstances? I believe we will gain the courage to deal with conflict in an assertive, constructive and gracious way.

What will you gain if you nail to the cross your failures? I am certain you will receive the grace that reminds you that you are not defined by setbacks and disappointments.

What will you gain if you nail to the cross the fear of failure, that lethal cycle that creates paralysis by analysis? I believe you will gain the confidence needed to take risks and face the future audaciously and faithfully.

What will you gain if you nail to the cross perfectionism? I believe you can gain the joy that comes from a life that strives for excellence. Also, you will understand that the One who began the good work in you and through you is not done yet and will bring it to completion.

What will you gain if you put to death stubbornness, indifference, any sense of entitlement, shame and blame attitudes, shallow niceness, and instant-gratification mentalities? You will gain humility, openness, appreciation, endurance, and authenticity.

The Lord is asking us today, “What will you gain when you lose?” He is also telling us, “whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.” Losing our lives means saying, like John the Baptist in **John 3:30** in reference to Jesus, “He must become greater; I must become less”.

I want to share the following thought. We have heard it said that the reason we display an empty cross, as opposed to one with Christ on it, is that Christ is no longer dead but has risen. I suggest that the reason the cross is empty is because it indicates there is a place for us on that cross. We take our place on that cross in the form of dying to ourselves.

With that context, the phrase, “take up your cross,” meant, Total Self-Surrender.

A person on a cross had given up total control of their lives. They were under arrest. Bound hand and foot, totally powerless to the will of their captor. And as good as already dead. To pick up our cross means a total surrender of our will to Jesus. We die to anything we want, desire, or believe. From that point on, he calls all the shots.

Have you brought all your beliefs captive to his teaching? I ask because I know a lot of people who would say that Jesus is Lord but feel the freedom to decide for themselves what they want to believe. If it's in the Bible and it offends them, or makes them uncomfortable, they have no problem saying, “Well, I don't believe that.” I want to say, “I don't think you understand Lordship.” If he's Lord, I believe what he says because he says it, whether I disagree with it, angered by it, or don't understand it. Listen, there's a lot of things in this book I find difficult to believe. Some are offensive. The question is, “Is he your Lord and Lord of your life?” Have you brought your will, your decisions, captive to his?

Which leads me into the thought of Denying one's Self or self-surrender. So what does it mean?

Denying oneself or self-surrender means relinquishing personal desires, ambitions, and ego to prioritize a higher purpose or authority to the Lord. It's about consciously choosing to forgo personal pleasures, comforts, and desires in favor of something greater, we could say a great reward. It involves rejecting one's own will and submitting to God.

It's not about self-harm or self-abnegation, but rather a focused redirection of one's energy and focus. It means prioritizing spiritual growth and following Jesus' teachings over personal desires.

Self-Surrender is really a deeper concept of self-denial, encompassing the act of completely surrendering oneself to the authority of Jesus and the Father. It involves letting go of control, expectations, and the need to be in charge. It's about acknowledging one's limitations and dependence on God. It can be seen as a path to liberation, peace, and a deeper connection with the divine creator.

In those days, a lot of people followed Jesus because of what he could do for them. He was a miracle

worker, he could heal the sick, calm storms and multiply food. His teachings brought them comfort. Some teachers followed him because it was a way of substantiating their own authority. In those days, if you wanted to gain credibility as a teacher, you attached yourself to other famous teachers. So many followed Jesus for that reason.

Today, many people come to Jesus because they know he can help their marriages, bless their finances, relieve their burdens, sometimes even heal their body. Make them successful. But here's the question: What if obedience to Jesus leads you away from all those things? Is Christianity for you more about comfort or a cross?

Jesus was not into "follow me for your best life now" invitations. He was into "I'm enough for you even if you have the worst life" invitations.

Luke 9:59-60, He said to another man, "Follow me." But he replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Now, this seems harsh. Can't even get my dad in a decent grave. Scholars say this wasn't simply about going to his dad's funeral to pay his respects; it was about going home to obtain his inheritance. He wanted to follow Jesus, but didn't want to give up that inheritance. That was his security for the future, something he had been looking forward to his whole life. Jesus says, "Are you willing to follow me if it means giving up that inheritance?"

Here's the question for you, are there any limits to your obedience? Is there any place where you say, "I can't walk away from that"? More practically, is there anything he's told you to stop doing that you're still doing? Is there anything he's told you to start doing you're not doing yet?

A follower of Jesus has forsaken all that Jesus has forbidden and commenced all that Jesus commanded. It means, you've put down your life for Jesus and said, "All I am, all I have, all I ever hope to be, I now and forever give fully and entirely to you."

Luke 9:61-62, Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family." Jesus replied, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

Again this seems a little harsh. But this was not just "Let me run home and tell my mom I won't be home for dinner so they don't turn in a 'missing person' report" kind of request. Verse 62 shows you that this involved hesitation. Sinful hesitation.

Here's the question you need to ask yourself, are you delaying obedience? You think, "I'll do that later." "When I get older I'll follow Jesus fully." "After I get settled in my career." Jesus says that you can't have him and delayed obedience. It's either full surrender or no surrender.

Many people think they already belong to Jesus. They say, "I accepted Christ when I was 12!" But they think following him fully will happen later. I mean that's like saying, I'm going to get my ticket but I'm going to enjoy this world before I fully commit. Jesus will not have followers who do not submit to following him fully, immediately. When Jesus commands you to do something, do you ask questions like: "Is it safe?" "What will these people think?" "What will it do to my relationships at work?" "What will it mean for my personal life?" "What will it mean for my bank account?" "This is not a good time of life for this commitment. Maybe later in life will be better."

For a true follower of Jesus, there is no such questions, and no hesitation. What Jesus commands, you do. So, take up your cross means "total self-surrender," death to any control you claim over your life.

It's not just passive surrender that Jesus is after, as if you say, "OK, I'll obey any commands you give me" and then going on about your life. The cross was Jesus' instrument of world salvation, so to take it up means actively, proactively, devoting your life to his mission.

I point this out because a lot of people think becoming a Christians means simply obeying all the 10 commandments but then going on with your usual life and career goals unless God appears to you in a burning bush or something. But that's not true. Following Jesus means accepting his mission as your own mission and pursuing it.

I told many people, once you except Christ, you are a worker in God's Kingdom. And just like a real life job, you wouldn't just sit around and not do anything would you. No, because you wouldn't have a job very long if you did that.

Well then, we have plenty to do. A number of places in the Bible spell it out. Do you know what God's word says about the lost?

2 Peter 3:9, The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

2 Thessalonians 1:7-9, This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might

Revelation 20:15, Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

How could we believe the gospel and do nothing? Listen, God didn't make us all the same and he has lots of roles for us in the body of Christ. You are not all like me, doing what I do full time, some of could be and I pray that God raises up lots of men and women for the full-time ministry, but we don't

all have this role. But all of us, regardless of our role, have one thing in common, it's our responsibility to tell the people in our lives about Jesus. The cross demands something of us. Following Jesus means reassessing your gifts and talents and what you've been given in light of the Great Commission.

In **Matthew 4:19** when Jesus called his first disciples He said, "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." Some versions say, "fishers of men." He didn't say, "Follow me and I'll make some of you fishers of men." So if you truly follow him, that's what he has for you. There's no such thing as a follower of Jesus not devoted to the mission.

When Jesus called people to follow him, he didn't mince words. Take up your cross. Hate your father and mother. Renounce everything. It was almost like he wanted to turn people away! But of course, that wasn't his goal! He wanted us to count the cost, to think about what he's asking and not attempt to use Jesus as a fire escape or divine genie to help us through problems. And that's what I want today, also. I want you carefully to count the cost. Because praying a prayer, or raising your hand, or getting baptized, or getting involved in a small group, none of those things is the essence of discipleship. Total surrender and an embrace of the Great Commission is.

Are you ready to pay that price? I realize that we live in a world where few of us will ever experience death for our faith. Some of us might, but it's not the norm for most of us. But that doesn't mean you can be any less surrendered.

John Bunyan, who lived in England in the 17th century, and who wrote the best selling book of all-time other than the Bible, *Pilgrim's Progress*, was told by English authorities that he could not preach any Gospel that differed from the state religion. He refused, and he went right on preaching. So they put him in prison. They told him they would let him go if he would swear on the Bible that he would not preach any more. But he could not. And so he stayed in prison. And it tore his heart out. In his journal, he wrote, "The parting with my wife and poor children has often been to me in this place as the pulling of flesh from my bones. I am aware of the many hardships, miseries and wants that my poor family meets with because of my imprisonment, especially my poor blind child who lay nearer to my heart than anything else on earth The thought of what my precious blind one is going through shatters my heart in pieces! But yet I must venture all with God. Though I feel like a man pulling down his house upon the head of his wife and his children, yet I must do it. I must do it. I must obey Christ.'" "

What about you? If you are in that situation, are you going to be willing to obey Jesus just the same? Just because our time period is different doesn't mean our commitment to the Lordship of Christ can be any less. Are you willing to put obedience to Jesus above everything and obey him no matter the cost? If your answer is yes, does your life demonstrate that kind of radical obedience in every area? Are you willing to stand where he tells you to stand, even if it's unpopular and you have to stand alone? Are you willing to testify to Jesus, and say you belong to him and he's most important to you, even if others make fun of you?

Are you willing to be generous where he tells you to be generous, to go where he tells you to go, to do what he tells you to do? Don't tell me you're ready to go all the way with Jesus if you're not obeying him in the areas where he's already spoken?

Luke 14:27-30, And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

"Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'

Why do so many so-called "Christians" stop following Jesus when it gets hard? The Christian landscape is strewn with the wreckage of derelict, half-built towers, the ruins of those who began to build and were unable to finish, for thousands of people still ignore Christ's warning and undertake to follow him without first pausing to reflect on the cost of doing so. The result is the great scandal of Christendom today, so-called nominal Christianity. 'Christians' get somewhat involved, enough to be respectable but not enough to be uncomfortable. Their religion is a great, soft cushion that protects them from the hard unpleasantness of life but doesn't transform their lives in radical ways. No wonder cynics speak of hypocrites in the church and dismiss religion as the practice of seeking temporary distraction and relief from unpleasant realities, often through activities like reading, entertainment, or daydreaming.

We need to choose, nominal Christianity or real Christianity. Comfort or a cross. We need to recommit to the essential identities of a follower of Jesus.

Commitment to walk with him and be a regular attender of worship. Worship is not only in a church building but anywhere in our daily lives. Be a family member, not just a believer, but belong. Be a part of the family. Being a part of the family means doing things together.

Philippians 2:1-5 says, Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Saying you are committed to Jesus and not an active part of the church family is like saying you're married but never coming home to your spouse at night. You can't love Jesus and only date his church family, you've got to commit.

We must be using your life and your talents for ministry. Committing to using your resources as a part of his mission. Committing to making sure people in your life know about Jesus. And committing to being a part of helping us get this good news from our neighborhoods to the nations. There's no such

thing as a follower of Jesus who is not an active part of that mission. You may not do everything but you'll do something.

This is what Jesus is asking us to do. We need to be committed to the mission of Christ. The context in which Jesus made these demands of discipleship to renounce everything and become so dedicated to Jesus that next to your commitment to him even your most intimate relationships seem like hate.

We are instructed to turn from and renounce ungodliness, we are told to turn from and renounce ourselves. We must train ourselves to reject the pursuit of our own wills, our own desires, our own ambitions, our own agendas, and to fully submit ourselves to Christ's will, Christ's desires, and Christ's agendas. Anywhere in our life where we discover our will and Christ's will at odds with one another, we reject our will and choose his instead.

What Jesus experienced when he carried his cross to his crucifixion site was common in the Roman empire. The purpose of this was two-fold. On the one hand it was a public shaming, and on the other hand it was a symbol for the man that his life and his will were over.

Each of us is called to a kind of faith that would follow Christ unto death. We cannot follow Christ when it is easy and forsake him when it is difficult. Our denial of our own will and adherence to Christ is such that were Christ to call us to die, we would willingly do so.

The idea of "carrying one's cross" is that God will lay before each Christian unique challenges, callings, hardships, and sufferings to bear for the sake of Christ and His Kingdom. There will be times when in order to serve our King, Christ will ask you to endure some hardship. When those moments come, our responsibility is not to flee from the crosses God calls us to bear, but to pick them up, and to carry them as a soldier in Christ's army. For in the carrying of our cross we find our faith deepens, our understanding of Christ thickens, and our obedience to His will over our own is confirmed.

Throughout history some sects of Christianity have mistaken the language of "self-denial" and "cross bearing" to mean that God desires Christians to be ascetics, to essentially abandon and forsake anything and everything that might give us pleasure in this world. This could not be further from the truth. While the life of an authentic Christian is full of many hardships, it is also saturated in joy, and the life that is truly life. Jesus and his disciples were full of joy very often. David leapt for joy before the ark of the covenant. The Christian can confidently read **Psalms 23:6** which reads, Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Before we end this study I want to elaborate on the idea of, "follow Me." When Jesus said these words in each of the verses we used in this study, He wasn't saying just follow the yellow brick road. When He said follow me it means so much more than just follow a path.

Many people out there in this world say I'm following Jesus, but are they really! Or are they just following the yellow brick road?

For example, many boys out there say things like, I want to follow in my father's footsteps. He is a welder and I want to be a welder like him. But you don't just get on the path he's on and you're a welder. You have to learn the trade to be a welder.

One of the things you will find out as you learn the trade of welding is you need the right clothing and gear on depending on what kind of welding you do. If you're welding at a table a lot, you need a good leather apron, if over head a set of leather shoulder covers. A good pair of leather welding gloves and heavy cotton clothing also helps protect you from sparks. Most of all you need the right welding hood that fits good and the right darkness of lens.

You need to learn which rods weld which metals. It takes study, it takes practice, and it take's not giving up when it gets difficult. If you don't do what it take's to be a welder, you can call yourself a welder all you want, but are you really?

The same is true for being a follower of Jesus Christ. When Jesus said deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow Me, there is more to it than just saying I'm a christian. **Matthew 10:38** says, Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. We must learn what is wanted from us. The only way we learn is to read and study the bible. Plus we need to be dressed properly with the full armor of God.

Ephesians 6:13-17 says, Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

So you see it take's more than just talk. Talk is cheap, but a life sacrificed for Jesus speaks volumes.

We might sacrifice much in this life in order to follow Jesus. But, that which we gain, both in this life and the next, is not worth comparing with that which we may have given up. In fact, what we discover on the path of self-denial, is that the very things God calls us to give up, are the very things that are hindering us from deeper intimacy and greater abiding in Christ.

That's what it means in **Luke 9:23** when Jesus says, **Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.**

So as I said in the beginning of this study, are you willing to count the cost and go deeper into a relationship with Jesus? Are you willing to drop everything when someone ask, in other words deny yourself? Do the needs of others come before our own needs? Most of all, are you willing to commit to following Jesus daily? These are the type's of questions we must ask ourselves.

In our day and time, "commit", is an ugly word. Everybody wants the fruit, but few will commit to work the harvest it.

In each set of the verses where Jesus said deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me, he ended each set of verses with the following statements.

Matthew 10:40, Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

Matthew 16:26, 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?

Mark 8:38, If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

Luke 9:26, Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.

Luke 14:35, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

So you see, there is more to it than just to make a commitment, we must act on that commitment.