

A cross carrying disciple.

And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:27)

It is only the passage of time that has made the cross acceptable in our society. We unashamedly display it in our churches, our homes and in public places. We even wear it as jewellery. It is respectable, inoffensive.

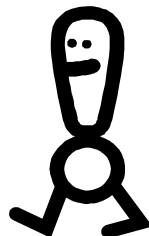
But it was not always seen in such a favourable light. Placing the cross in its historical context, we see that it was a cruel instrument of execution. And it was to this that Jesus referred in teaching about the cost of being his disciple.



Common Misunderstandings

It is not uncommon to hear people speak about the cross the Lord has given them to bear as they endure an unhappy marriage, tolerate a delinquent child, struggle with poor health or worry over a financial crisis.

While sympathy must be given to those for whom life is difficult, this is not the cross Jesus was referring to in his teaching on discipleship.



A Scenario

On a practical level, how do we go about carrying our cross and thereby following Jesus? A scenario: You are happily married, blessed with a lovely wife and family. You have a job that brings fulfilment. Life is going well for you. Your recent conversion to the Lord has brought blessings in abundance and you wonder how you could ever have lived without the Lord in your life.

Then one day, quite by accident, you meet a former girlfriend you have not seen for over ten years. She looks great! And I mean grrreat! 'You haven't changed,' she says, 'you are just the same as when we were last together.' (She is too polite to comment upon those extra pounds that have gathered around your once pencil-thin waist).

The trip down memory lane continues over lunch, recalling old friends and events. Turning the clock back has been fun. No doubt about it, they were good days. But the past cannot be recalled without reference to how you once felt about each other. It was real love. 'I continued loving you even after we broke up,' she says. '

In fact, our meeting only confirms how much I still love you.' Her dreamy blue eyes are moist and she says, 'You know the flame never went out. It still burns for you.'

Flattered and inwardly pleased with this boost to your ego, you are reluctant to bring the conversation to a close. You've been flirting and now you are drifting into dangerous waters.

She extends an invitation to visit her apartment 'anytime'. What is a boy to do!? How are you to handle it? Let's face facts: the temptation to be immoral is very, very strong. Satan is working overtime, filling your mind with an assortment of reasons why you should accept her invitation. You rationalise, but you know you are deceiving yourself.

Even the idea of going back to her place and sharing the news of your recent conversion with her rings hollow. She is not interested in having Jesus in her heart. You know that!

What she wants is you - the husband of another woman! And what you are being tempted with is a sexual encounter with a woman you have no right to have! A civil war is now raging within. Part of you is saying, No! Never! I can't do this! And part of you is screaming, Yes!



Resistance Requires that a Death Occur

There is only one way to conquer this situation - you must crucify the sexual passions and desires that are seeking gratification outside the parameters of God's will. You must die to what you want to do so you can do what God wants you to do.

If resisting such temptation were easy, Jesus would never have spoken of having to put to death, on a daily basis, the sinful desires we sometimes have. He would never have spoken of having to carry our cross. Resisting this sexual invitation involves you in a major battle and the enemy is within.

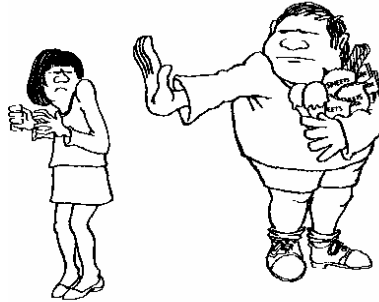
'Resist the devil,' the Bible says, 'and he will flee from you' (James 4:7).

This scripture is filled with a divine guarantee. There is nothing passive about resistance. On the contrary, the word 'resist' brings to mind a fight, a struggle, an act of self-defence against an adversary.

You must resist. You must crucify. You must, by the power of the Holy Spirit, put to death the evil that wants to express itself. You must draw near to God and he will draw near to you. (James 4:7).

The invitation from your former girlfriend (and any other temptation to sin for that matter) can be declined and your marriage vow honoured by making it a daily practice to carry your cross.

This is living the crucified life. Don't live life without it. This is the type of discipleship Jesus taught.



A Life of Self Denial

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me....And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. (Matthew 16:24; Luke 14:27)

Following Jesus involves both self-denial and crucifixion. Jesus could not have made this plainer. He calls for wholehearted devotion to him for life.

Self-denial brings medieval images to mind: mortification of the flesh, hard beds, hair shirts, cold showers, draughty monasteries, celibacy, the absence of fun and creature comforts. Spartan!

Yet self-denial is none of these. Neither is it having low self-esteem, always running yourself down, never rejoicing in the good you accomplish or never laughing.

We can say that self-denial is saying no to what we want to do and saying yes to the will of God.

Here are a few example to help amplify the point.

On the night of his betrayal, Jesus went to the garden of Gethsemane and prayed. Ahead of him lay his arrest, trial and execution. He prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.' Praying a second time he said, 'My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done' (Matthew 26:39,42).

The spirit of self-denial is heard in his words, 'not as I will, but as you will.' Jesus came from heaven to earth, not to do his will but the will of the Father. Through his death he was showing us the real meaning of self-denial.

Another example of self-denial is displayed by Mary. Informed that she would give birth to the saviour of the world she responded, 'I am the Lord's servant ... may it be to me as you have said.' (Luke 1:38)

In these words, Mary echoes the sentiments of the Lord's prayer, 'Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' She would become pregnant, not through sexual intercourse, but through the intervention of the Spirit.

This had never occurred before, so there was no one she could consult who had undergone a similar experience. No support group existed for virgins who conceived miraculously.



And how would she explain her pregnancy to Joseph, the man to whom she was engaged?

These were real concerns, nevertheless she chose to do the will of God. That's self-denial. Among those who worked alongside the Apostle Paul was an outstanding disciple named Timothy. Self-denial was a way of life with him and Paul paid a glowing tribute to his tireless efforts for the Lord Jesus Christ.

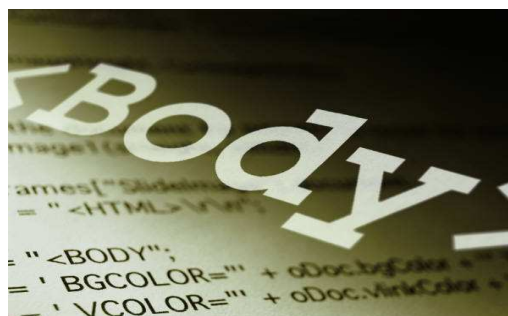
He wrote to the church in Philippi:

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. (Philippians 2:19-22)

Timothy's life of self-denial is captured in the words, 'I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.'

Unlike some who looked out only for their own interests – what's in it for me, how much will this cost me, let someone else do it – Timothy was driven by only one ambition – to do the will of Christ irrespective of the cost to himself. That's self-denial.

The doing of the will of God, rendering obedience to God, saying yes to God is what self-denial is all about. And when the temptation to sin comes our way, and it will, we must practice self-denial. This point is discussed in [A Cross Carrying Disciple](#).



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Offer Your Bodies As Living Sacrifices

Therefore I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - which is your spiritual worship. (Romans 12:1)

The teaching method of the Apostle Paul was to make a presentation of doctrine followed by a practical application to our daily lives. In the first eleven chapters of his epistle to the Romans, he expounded upon the great doctrine of God's mercy. He now moves on to show its ethical implications for our lives.

Paul begins, not with an idea or a suggestion or a request, but with a heartfelt plea to the Jewish and Gentile believers: "Therefore, I urge you..." The word "therefore" brings us back to what has preceded - Paul's extensive treatment of God's great mercy to sinners who deserved nothing but condemnation, but have, by God's mercy, become his adopted sons and daughters.

And he urges the recipients of divine mercy to "offer your bodies as living sacrifices..." This is not the first time Paul has spoken on this subject.

Having shown that God's merciful treatment of sinners is not a licence to continue sinning but that, on the contrary, conversion to Christ makes sinning ethically unacceptable, he says, "Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness." (Romans 6:13)

Paul uses liturgical language when he says we are to offer sacrifices that are (1) living, (2) holy and (3) pleasing to God.

Throughout the Old Testament, the priests offered dead animal sacrifices to God, whereas we offer living, holy sacrifices with our bodies: our hands, our ears, our feet, our tongue, etc.

For example, the Christian mother who cares for her children - bathing them, washing their clothes, tidying up after them, playing with them, reading to them - is doing holy work; she is offering sacrifices that are holy unto God.

And God is pleased. Even our moments of relaxation can be times of worship. To restrict worship to an activity that only happens on a Sunday is to miss the point Paul is making in Romans 12:1.

Peter reminds the saints of (1) who they are and (2) what is expected of them. "You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 2:5)

Every Christian is a priest whose body is the temple of God. (1 Corinthians 6:19)

Wherever there is a Christian, there is a priest who can offer spiritual sacrifices in the temple of God.

Therefore, every day we need to be aware that through our body - hands, feet, eyes, etc. - we are offering to God living and holy sacrifices. And our motivation is the realisation that we are the recipients of God's great mercy.



Transformed by Renewing Your Mind

We can never escape the evil influences that pervade our world. Even after our conversion to Christ, we are confronted by the pressure to conform. Some popular television programmes openly advocate immorality as being perfectly acceptable.

Powerful advertising intimidates us into believing that we must be successful, beautiful and confident. We are judged to be intolerant and judgemental when we take a stand on God's word, and none of us wants to be considered intolerant or narrow-minded.

So the pressure to conform is ever-present. Yet embracing the world's agenda is not an option for a Christian.

God said to Israel as they headed toward the promised land: **"You must not do as they do in the land of Canaan... Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees."** (Leviticus 18:3-5)

In other words, don't conform to their ways. Jesus tells his followers to bear no resemblance to the pagans. **"Do not be like them,"** he said. (Matthew 6:8) Throughout history the people of God have always been instructed to be different from the world around them.



Transformed From the Inside Out

Following on from his extensive teaching on God's merciful dealing with sinners, Paul gives the following instructions: **"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will."** (Romans 12:2)

The word **"transformed"** comes from a Greek word that describes the process of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly, an extraordinary and beautiful transformation. And that is exactly what God does with us.

He changes us from the inside out, making us into the image of Jesus. As we co-operate with him, he changes how we think and behave. It is a divine process that occurs by the power of the Holy

Spirit as God's word lives in our hearts. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly... "is Paul's instruction to the church in Colosse. (Colossians 3:15)

And Jesus tells his disciples of the extraordinary life they will live "[i]f you remain in me and my words remain in you..." (John 15:7) God's transforming work continues as we imitate the person described by the psalmist:

"His delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night." (Psalms 1:2)

"I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds." (Psalm 77:12)

"Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long." (Psalm 119:97)

"I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." (Psalm 119:11)

When our heart is filled with the word of God and our mind meditates on his will, our whole life undergoes a radical change. Because we are thinking differently, we will behave differently. We are continually developing a whole new outlook on life, an outlook that is informed by God's will.

And this transformation is the antidote to resisting the pressure of the world that would have us conform to its agenda. Through being transformed by the renewing of our mind, we are able to know "God's will - his good, pleasing and perfect will."

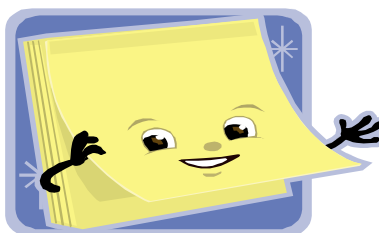
J.B. Phillips captures the meaning of Paul's words in his paraphrase of Romans 12:2: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God remould your minds from within."



Unless You Hate Your Father & Mother

Large crowds were travelling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple.' (Luke 14:25-26)

'Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.' (Matthew 10:34-36)



On A Personal Note

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I was twenty-four when I made my decision to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. I did the unthinkable – I left my Catholic faith, and saw my family divided as a result. I had started to attend a Bible study, which was a new experience for me.

I was drawn to the Word of God, attracted by the truth that the Word never changes; its message is the same in every generation. And the idea of simply following Jesus like those first Christians made sense to me. It was compelling.

For months I wrestled with the decision I knew I had to make. But I knew my family would be devastated. There were times when I wept knowing the hurt I would cause them. I reflected on how good my parents had been and the sacrifices they had made. It seemed that I would be acting in a cruel and ungrateful manner.

But the call of God was too strong to resist. On the 11th of June 1967 after a Sunday night Bible class, I committed my life to the Lord and was baptised. I have never regretted that decision.



On The Positive Side

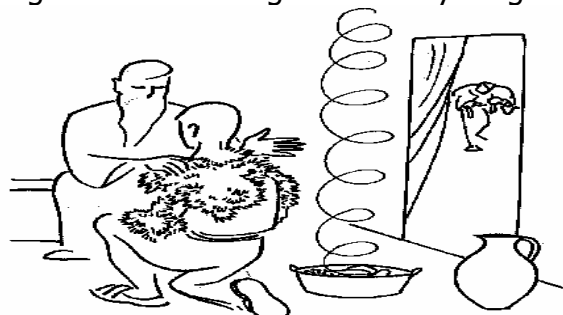
It would be foolish to let the cost of following Jesus overshadow the eternal blessing resulting from obedience. The unpalatable truth is that we are sinners, separated from God and unable to reconcile ourselves to him.

However, what we are unable to do, Jesus did on our behalf. He has shown himself to be indispensable to our spiritual recovery. And when our own family stands in our way, the decision to follow Jesus must take precedent.

Not wanting to cause disruption in one's family is an honourable desire, but if that decision keeps one from becoming a disciple of Jesus, then it is the worst decision one can ever make.

Jesus wants each of us to put him first, to make him the Lord of our life, to have no one else in our heart but him. And he wants this level of commitment so that he can bestow upon us all the rich and wonderful blessings that come from having a relationship with him.

He wants us to give up everything so that he can give us everything.



He gave him his blessing. (Genesis 27.27)

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