

Self-denial and Cross-bearing

*“Then said Jesus
unto his disciples,
If any man will
come after me, let
him deny himself,
and take up his
cross, and
follow me.”*
—*Matthew 16:24*

SELF-DENIAL AND CROSS-
bearing are two vital terms
of Christian discipleship. They
are very exacting, so much
that they have served to limit
the number of the true follow-
ers of the Master to a “little
flock.” (Luke 12:32) In brief,
these terms imply the death,

first of all, of human hopes, aims, and ambitions, and finally physical death in devoted service to the Heavenly Father’s purpose. As a compensating portion to encourage us while thus laying down our lives, we have the Master’s own promise, “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”—Rev. 2:10

As has happened with so many of the beautiful teachings of the Bible, the true significance of self-denial and cross-bearing has been largely lost sight of by much of churchianity. Hence to most people today these expressions are applied to the little inconsequential pleasures one may forego from

time to time, and to the experiences of life which are not pleasant to bear. These details are indeed a part of true self-denial and cross-bearing, but they are related to the meaning of these terms only as they add up to the full renunciation of self, and a following in the footsteps of the Master all the way into death. They involve finding each step of sacrifice which the Master took, and then resolutely taking these steps until they lead us to sacrificial death.

Jesus was crucified on a cross. This entailed much suffering, hence it has been natural that the cross should come to be used as a symbol of trials and difficulties. This symbolism is quite proper, and it is comforting to realize that divine grace helps us to bear our daily "crosses." Yet this limited meaning of cross-bearing should not be confused with what the Master meant when he addressed the words of our text to his disciples. It was toward the close of his ministry. In Matthew 16:21 we read, "From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day."

Here we find Jesus explaining to his disciples that his pathway of devotion to the Heavenly Father was leading him to death. This was quite out of keeping with the viewpoint the disciples had of what the ministry of Jesus was to accomplish and the way in which it would terminate. To them he was the Messiah of Israel, sent of God to deliver their nation from the Roman yoke, enthrone it as the leading nation of earth, and through it fulfill the divine promise to bless all people. How could Jesus accomplish

all this if he exposed himself to the animosity of his enemies, permitting them to arrest him and put him to death?

Probably all of the disciples thought that Jesus was making a great mistake, and the impulsive Peter so expressed himself in no uncertain terms. The account reads, "Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee." (Matt. 16:22) Peter, not yet begotten of the Holy Spirit, like all natural-minded people who, no matter how noble or devoted they may be, could not see how anything worthwhile could be accomplished by a course of self-sacrifice such as the Master had indicated he purposed to take.

The Master's reply to Peter was straightforward and full of meaning: "Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offense unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men." (vs. 23) Sacrifice, suffering and death are repugnant to the natural man, and Peter reasoned that if Jesus was the Messiah who had come to bring peace, happiness, and joy to Israel and the world, he was surely going about it in the wrong way. If he had any influence with the Master, Peter would do all he could to change his mind.

How all the disciples must have wondered when Jesus replied to Peter, "Thou art an offense unto me." He simply meant that Peter, despite his good intentions, was advising him contrary to the will of God, hence contrary to the course which he was determined to follow. After Pentecost, when the apostles received the Holy Spirit, they understood why it was necessary for Jesus to suffer and die. Peter himself, in his first epistle, tells us that the

prophets had been inspired to write concerning the “sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow.”—I Pet. 1:11

INVITED TO FOLLOW CHRIST

It was immediately following this dynamic dialogue between Jesus and Peter, in which each rebuked the other, that the terms of discipleship set forth in our opening text were stated. It would seem that Jesus considered the occasion an excellent opportunity to let the disciples know that if they expected to be his true followers, they too would be called upon to suffer and to die. This was not the first intimation they had heard of this. However, being merely natural-minded men, they had not as yet comprehended this thought. In fact, there is no reason to suppose that even then they realized to any great extent what Jesus meant when he spoke of their need to deny themselves and take up their cross.

To “come after” Jesus, as our text says, means to do as he did, to follow his example. This means self-denial and cross-bearing. To know then what these two expressions involve it is but necessary to observe what they meant in the life and death experiences of the Master. Did self-denial in his case mean merely that each day he would deprive himself of some little thing that might be pleasant to him, or otherwise appeal to his natural senses? Did it mean that one day a week he ate vegetables instead of meat? We have no doubt but that Jesus exercised the spirit of a sound mind with respect to all his daily habits of life. However, his self-denial meant much more than this, and also something more

vital than the daily practice of certain austerities, as Christian theology later construed self-denial to mean.

Jesus' self-denial was, just as the term means, a denial of self—not merely withholding from himself a few things which his natural senses might enjoy, but a complete renouncing of all his rights and privileges of a natural, but perfect, man under the Law that was given to the Jews at Sinai. Jesus, the only one who had been able to keep that Law inviolate, had, by keeping it, gained thereby the right to life upon the earth as a natural man. His death on the cross, therefore, implied much more than was the case with others who were thus put to death. With others crucifixion meant merely that they died some little time before they would have had to die in the normal course of events. However, not so with Jesus. He would not have died at all had he remained perfect and not voluntarily given himself up to die.

Jesus' denial of himself, therefore, was the renouncing of that which was properly his under the Law—namely, the right to live forever as a perfect human being. This, which was rightfully his, is what he “denied.” With his right to life as a human being went all the privileges of a natural man. All of this he denied, and concerning it we read that “he was cut off out of the land of the living,” and there was none to “declare his generation.”—Isa. 53:8

The Master's conduct during the three and one-half years in which he was laying down his life was in keeping with his purposed self-denial. He did not seek to get all he could out of his earthly life. Rather, he used his strength, his time, his talents, his all,

in doing the work the Heavenly Father had given him to do. He never considered his own interests paramount to that of the divine ministry. There was a supreme sacrifice to be made at the end of the way, and there were daily sacrifices all along the way. Jesus was faithful in both—faithful unto death. Thus his denial of self was complete.

THE SYMBOLIC CROSS

The wooden cross that Jesus was expected to carry to Golgotha, and which Simon carried instead, because the Master's strength was not equal to the burden, was symbolic of the real cross which he carried from Jordan to his crucifixion. What was this symbolic cross? It was the daily laying down of his life which he continued to do until on the wooden cross he cried, "It is finished."—Matt. 27:32; John 19:30

Crucifixion was the method of capital punishment under the Roman law, and it was customary for the condemned criminal to carry the cross from the Judgment Hall to the place of crucifixion. Thus, for anyone to be seen carrying a cross meant that he was on the way to death. How significant, then, are the words of our text explaining that the terms of Christian discipleship call for the taking up of a cross and following the Master. Peter had tried to dissuade Jesus from taking a course which would result in his death. However, instead of heeding this advice he rebuked Peter for giving it, and added, by using the symbol of cross-bearing, that his disciples also would be expected to die by voluntarily following in his footsteps.

As incidental items in the one larger experience of death, all the daily trials and persecutions which

came upon Jesus constituted a part of his cross-bearing. Being perfect in the flesh, he would have had no trials of weakness, sickness, and pain, but he was caused to suffer by his faithfulness in the ministry. He was the world's light-giver, but the world hated the light and persecuted the giver, even unto death. (John 1:5; 3:19,20; 8:12) Thus he voluntarily put himself in a position where he had to carry a cross "daily" until the end of the way was reached in death.—Luke 9:23

The Master's denial of himself as a man and the renouncing of his earthly life-rights was not the entire will of God as it had been outlined for him in the "volume of the book." (Ps. 40:7; Heb. 10:7) It was not only necessary that he thus relinquish his claim to all things earthly, but in addition to this his zeal for the doing of his Father's will required that he should actively engage in the work of God. (John 5:36; 9:4) This brought upon him the enmity of those who sat in darkness, which finally resulted in his death. Thus, not only did Jesus deny himself, but he took up the symbolic cross of sacrifice and service each day—even unto death.

WE FOLLOW THE MASTER

When Jesus spoke the words of our opening text, he meant that self-denial and cross-bearing for us would be the same in principle as experienced by him. We, of course, do not have perfect human life to deny or renounce as was the case with Jesus. Nevertheless, the Scriptures show that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us, making our standing before the Heavenly Father the same as his. (Rom. 4:3,20-25; 5:1) This means that the voluntary

sacrifice of what little remains of our earthly existence at the present time is a part of our self-denial. It also means that our restitution life of the future is given up in order that we may be a true disciple of Christ.

With us, even as with the Master, the doing of the whole will of God means more than merely a passive willingness to sacrifice earthly rights and privileges. If we are to be true followers of Jesus, we must also take up our cross; that is, our zeal for the work of God must lead us in the pathway of willing sacrifice and service, even unto death. Thus seen, cross-bearing is a step further in doing God's will than is self-denial. Self-denial is our acquiescence to the terms of the narrow way which call for the sacrifice of earthly rights, while cross-bearing is the actual sacrificing.

When we keep in mind the full significance of cross-bearing, the Apostle Paul's several references to being crucified with Christ are most significant. In Romans 6:6, for example, the apostle says, "Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him." The "old man" here referred to is our earthly life and privileges. It is said to be crucified with Christ because through the merit of his blood the Heavenly Father has made it possible for us to be planted together in the likeness of his sacrificial death. (Rom. 6:4,5) It is in harmony with this thought that the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 15:44 describes the Christian's change of nature from earthly to spiritual, saying, "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body."

In Galatians 2:20, Paul says, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ

liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” Here we have the same thought, that to be crucified with Christ means that we renounce our earthly life, with its rights, receiving instead a new life which is ours now only by faith in Christ. That Paul understood the terms of discipleship, as set forth by Jesus in our text, is further evident from his statement in Galatians 5:24, which reads, “They that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts.” That is, they have taken up their cross to follow Jesus even unto death.

The full symbolism of the cross and of crucifixion is death and dying, and not merely our daily and sometimes petty trials and annoyances. This is further shown by Paul’s statement recorded in Galatians 6:14, which reads: “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.” Here the apostle is telling us, by using the word “crucified,” that the world had become dead to him, and also that he had become dead to the world. The will of God in Christ had completely separated Paul from the world and its spirit, for the purpose of presenting his body a living sacrifice unto death.

Those who have intelligently entered the narrow way of sacrifice by denying themselves and taking up their cross to follow the Master, cannot afford to turn back. In the verse following our text, Jesus points out the consequences of any desire or attempt on our part to save that which has been offered in sacrifice. We quote: “For whosoever will

save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.” (Matt. 16:25) Not only would a turning back be displeasing to the Heavenly Father, but such a course, if continued, would result in not receiving the crown of life. This is shown by the apostle where he quotes the words of the Lord from the Old Testament relating to the life of faith, saying, “If any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him.” (Heb. 10:38; Hab. 2:4) Let us, who have taken up the cross, resolve afresh to continue carrying it to the very end of the way. ■