

There's a Cost to Following Christ

Take Up Your Cross

Matthew 16:24-28

Sunday, August 16, 2020 at The First Congregational Church of
Marshalltown, Iowa

Matthew 16:24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "if anyone desires to
come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow
Me."

Introduction: He's nearly 80 now, but an evangelist named Arthur Blessitt made a career out of carrying his cross. A full cross, with a wheel attached at the base for ease of transport, rolled through every country in the world because of Blessitt. Now doubt, he is very familiar with the key verse for today, but even Mr. Blessitt probably does not take the verse literally. Jesus Himself did not actually carry His own cross, He was too weak from the beating He endured, so a bystander was ordered to take it for Him. (Mark 15:21)

Set the stage

While not literally carrying a cross, the situation was, no doubt, very grave because Jesus is speaking about the cross knowing that He would be facing one soon. According to ancient church tradition, all of the disciples were martyred except for John, and he survived several attempts. Thankfully the barbaric display that is crucifixion is rare today, but the words of our Master deserve careful consideration. What does the cross mean in this passage?

the cross

The cross involved the risks of martyrdom, something Christians around the globe face. There is no doubt that it symbolized rejection from the world, a world that is hostile to Christ and to the Gospel. It involves a rejection of ourselves; to "deny oneself" literally means to "disown oneself". Selfish ambitions are to be left in the dust, and the greatest honor is to be a servant. It also means to reject the world; to reject all that is in culture that exalts humanity in the face of God. Years of experience spoke with Paul when he said, "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I

who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." (Galatians 2:20) Such a person has a certain cynicism of the world that is actually rather healthy. This involves following, or "taking the same road" as Jesus.

Application: seek first the kingdom and its righteousness

The application does not seem to be a masochistic desire for trouble, but a focus on following Jesus Christ no matter what. Several years ago, an Olympic hero named Johann Olav Koss (3 Olympic and world records in speed skating) named a Norwegian bicyclist as his hero, because, despite a debilitating injury, he never gave up his pursuit of the Olympics. The cyclist made it to the Norwegian Olympic team and Koss admired his focus. Following Christ involves a similar focus because there is a cross to bear. The Bible warns that following Christ involves a denial of selfish ambition, we must expect tribulations (Acts 14:22), persecution of some sort comes with the territory (2 Timothy 2:13), we can be falsely accused and punished (1 Peter 2:21), but it is worth it. People who focus on Christ in the midst of trials manifest the life of the Lord in a powerful way (2 Corinthians 4:10). When Jesus hung on the cross, He despised the shame because, I believe, His focus was on us. Our focus is on Christ, and puts any trial in perspective (Hebrews 12:2).

Conclusion

It is ironic that the Lord Jesus told us to take up our cross but literally, someone else carried His. Crosses, even when in actual use, symbolized rejection, from the world, of the self, and to the world. It involves a focus on Christ and in the destiny He offers that is greater than many trials along the way. I am confident that when the spirit of a faithful follower when he hears "well done, good and faithful servant", none of his trials come to mind.