

Sermon to the saints of God assembled at Topeka – Sunday, June 23, 2019

And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. - Luke 9:23

This morning, beloved, I would like to spend some time in scriptural analysis of this crucial, yet (I believe) commonly underestimated and oft-misunderstood commandment given by Christ to all of us. I don't know if we can get all the way there in one sitting, but hopefully something said today will begin to move the chains a bit in our understanding of the concept, for those of us who stand in need of such. So please bear with me and come along for the ride, so to speak.

We know what the cross was, in the context of Christ's death – it was the physical instrument of it. A cross, of one sort or another, was used in the most often-applied mode of public executions performed by the Roman government at that time. And we know that scripture prophesies of that specific form of death that our Saviour would endure, in that great salvific act of taking our sin (which is worthy of death) upon himself and dying in our stead in only the way that the God of eternity could do for His own, that is the linchpin of this whole human experiment.

And if a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be to be put to death, and thou hang him on a tree: - Deut. 21:22

Of course that is a type, as Christ committed no sin – He took our sins upon Himself and endured the penalty, and the great shame, for that sin at the cross at Golgotha (Calvary).

Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. – Heb. 12:2

He was made 'sin' for us.

For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. – 2Cor. 5:21

He was made 'a curse' for us.

Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: - Gal. 3:13

The brazen serpent, lifted up in the camp of Israel, brought health and cure within the reach of all who were bitten by serpents. Christ crucified, in like manner, brought eternal life and health to those who He causes to gaze upon the cross in earnest.

And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. 9 And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived. – Nu. 21:8-9

By His death He purchased pardon and complete redemption for those sinners who he hath chosen for that blessed lot.

Before we get to the main meat of the command of our King and Saviour to deny ourselves, take up our crosses daily, and follow Him, perhaps a little more information on that particular form of punishment, as well as some contextual backdrop on that most blessed of all events itself, may be helpful.

So, A little backstory on the Roman form of execution known as crucifixion, which was a particularly painful, slow, gruesome, humiliating and public. Crucifixion was most often performed to dissuade its witnesses from perpetrating similar (usually particularly heinous) crimes. Victims were sometimes left on display after death as a warning to any other potential criminals. The act of hanging someone's body from a high mast after death as a statement of particular import goes way back. In Joshua 8:28-29, we read that *"Joshua burnt Ai, and made it a heap for ever, even a desolation unto this day, and the king of Ai he hanged on a tree until eventide:"* In Genesis 40 we read that the baker who was in prison with Joseph was hanged (but not from the neck) – as a public display of Pharaoh's wrath against him. We read in the book of Esther that Haman was hanged upon the gallows that he had built for Mordecai. The word for gallows in Esther text means 'a staff or stalk of wood or timber' that would be used to very publicly display the humiliating death of Haman, not the way that we have come to predominantly use the term as a 'wild west' form of execution. In the wild west context, a person was hanged by the neck in the same manner that gallows were used as a mechanism to publicly weigh heavy commercial items such as minerals or heavy sacks of grain. That's not at all the same 'hanging' that is generally meant in scripture. While a Roman crucifixion was an execution, it was also a humiliation, by making the condemned as vulnerable and as in constant, publicly-witnessed pain as possible. The word 'excruciating' that we use to describe something being egregious or unbearable to us actually means 'out of crucifying,' so that may help us to understand the gruesome manner of this form of execution. The way that Renaissance artists

depict the crucifixion of Christ is so far from the awful truth of it to be absurd. They depict Him with milky skin, sometimes with a few droplets of blood coming from His hands, feet, thorny crown or side – in all of this they are, of course, worshipping and serving the creature more than the Creator – thinking themselves to ‘holy-fy’ the event with their creative depictions of it. When a person was crucified, he was first beaten horribly, sometimes beyond recognition (which we know from scripture was the case with Christ), so that the body and mind would have already begun to break down to the point of total exhaustion and many of the body’s normal functions would have begun to shut down. As a first-hand exemplar of how tortuous and brutal this form of punishment was, the great Roman senator and orator Cicero (106 BC to 43 BC), described crucifixion as "a most cruel and disgusting punishment" and suggested that "the very mention of the cross should be far removed not only from a Roman citizen's body, but from his mind, his eyes, his ears." He is also credited with saying, "It is a crime to bind a Roman citizen; to scourge him is a wickedness; to put him to death is almost parricide. What shall I say of crucifying him? So guilty an action cannot by any possibility be adequately expressed by any name bad enough for it."

Crucifixion methods varied considerably with location and time period - there wasn’t really just one way that crucifixion was carried out – there were many forms of it. Sometimes nailed, sometimes tied, sometimes actually impaled, sometimes hanging upside down, sometimes upright – and there were several different types of crosses used, as you can see from this crude diagram. Not that it matters, at all, but we are fairly certain that Christ was hung on the #4 variety depicted below, because of the following scripture:



And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. – Luke 23:38

And we know that, since this form of execution was used as much to build fear and deterrence in the minds of the onlookers, it was reserved for those elements of

society who were seen as the most egregious, troublesome and undesirable. Christ was executed along with two thieves – but I don't believe these were seen as common, desperate shoplifter types: rather, these were career plunderers or freebooters (which is the sense of the word translated as 'thieves') who had perhaps affected many in the town and who the Roman government needed to make a harsh example of. So, Christ was executed in the harshest, cruelest, and most publicly notorious way possible and was treated as the worst of criminals and the low-down scum of the earth offscouring of society – cruelly tortured and overwhelmingly humiliated.

Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left. 39 And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads,40 And saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.41 Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said,42 He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. 43 He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God. 44 The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth. – Matt. 27:38-44

The Holy Spirit spake through our beloved brother Paul, emphasizing the point that the crucifixion of our Saviour– and gazing upon the cross of Christ as the centerpiece of his mindshare in faith and in his preaching, is what he was intent on – though he was a man of arts and letters and certainly had much in the way of worldly wisdom:

And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. 3 And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. 4 And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: 5 That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. – 1 Cor. 2:1-5

Now to the crux of our dealings today. We know that the cross symbolizes death – and we know the specific reason – and could rightly speak of the glory of it until our dying breath just as a warm-up – for the death that our Saviour died – that our debt of sin was paid at that moment. Though our sins be as scarlet, we were made as white

as snow, in the eyesight and estimation of God. And we believe that with everything we have and are. And if we don't, then there is a much larger issue afoot. But in that statement of belief, that we know that our Redeemer liveth, we are therefore saying that we will follow him. And of that following, here is what our Christ said in the same oracle where he told his disciples what was about to happen to him, and therefore with them:

And it came to pass, as he was alone praying, his disciples were with him: and he asked them, saying, Whom say the people that I am? 19 They answering said, John the Baptist; but some say, Elias; and others say, that one of the old prophets is risen again. 20 He said unto them, But whom say ye that I am? Peter answering said, The Christ of God. 21 And he straitly charged them, and commanded them to tell no man that thing; 22 Saying, The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be slain, and be raised the third day. 23 And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. 24 For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it. 25 For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or be cast away? 26 For whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he shall come in his own glory, and in his Father's, and of the holy angels. 27 But I tell you of a truth, there be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the kingdom of God. – Luke 9:18-27

The Lord Jesus Christ is speaking to these men, ahead of his own crucifixion – they not fully realizing what all of what he is saying means yet – and it was as if He was saying: “if you want to truly come after me - you have to deny yourself and you have to take up your cross – if you want to follow me”. Mt. 16:24, Mk. 8:34 and Luke 9:23 all say the same thing, ostensibly - and just so that we are crystal clear that this does not refer to a one-time act, the Luke passage adds the word ‘daily’. And if one of them means daily then all of them mean daily, whether explicit or implicit to the text. So, Christ is saying that any person who makes a profession to follow Christ must deny himself and take up his cross daily in following Christ. And the severe implication in that text is that if a person doesn't do that, then they are not really following Christ. And we don't even really need the implication included here, because we have the same concept explicitly stated elsewhere in scripture:

And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. - Mt. 10:38

And here is the amazing context of this massive, expansive, singular oracle in the words of God:

Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves. 17 But beware of men: for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues; 18 And ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles. 19 But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak. 20 For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you. 21 And the brother shall deliver up the brother to death, and the father the child: and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death. 22 And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved. 23 But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come. 24 The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord. 25 It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household? 26 Fear them not therefore: for there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known. 27 What I tell you in darkness, that speak ye in light: and what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops. 28 And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. 30 But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows. 32 Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. 33 But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven. 34 Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. 35 For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. 36 And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. 37 He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38 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.— Matt. 10:16-39

Expressed a little differently but bearing the same conscience of mind and heart, Christ tells us plainly:

And there went great multitudes with him: and he turned, and said unto them, 26 If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. 27 And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. – Luke 14:25-27

Just so that no one trips on that 26th verse, here are some words from Gill that make the meaning plain – both on relations, one's life and one's circumstance of comfort or prosperity:

Gill: *If any man come to me - Not in a corporeal, but in a spiritual way; nor barely to hear him preach; but so come, as that he believes in him, applies to him for grace, pardon, righteousness, life, and salvation; professes to be his, submits to his ordinances, and desires to be a disciple of his; and hate not his father and mother, and wife and children, and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple: not that proper hatred of any, or all of these, is enjoined by Christ; for this would be contrary to the laws of God, to the first principles of nature, to all humanity, to the light of nature, to reason and divine revelation: but that these are not to be preferred to Christ, or loved more than he, as it is explained in Mt 10:37. Yea, these are to be neglected and forsaken, and turned from with indignation and resentment, when they stand in the way of the honour and interest of Christ, and dissuade from his service: such who would be accounted the disciples of Christ, should be ready to part with their dearest relations and friends, with the greatest enjoyment of life, and with life itself, when Christ calls for it; or otherwise they are not worthy to be called his disciples.*

So denying yourself, and taking up (bearing) your cross daily, in following Christ, is of paramount importance, above all other things. Clearly a deal-breaking concept, if not performed.

Denying ourselves and taking up our crosses daily means: a daily refocusing, a re-dedication, a revival of sorts, of our spirits in single-hearted love, obedience and a fresh, deep, intense consideration of our nature outside of salvation; our dependence upon Christ for all things, therefore; and a cost benefit analysis of how we currently live to our never-dying souls. Again, keep in mind that the cross represents death – and death on a cross was horrific. It was painful and humiliating. The implication is that even if and when obedience is painful and humiliating, we should be willing to endure it for Christ. By saying, "Take up your cross and follow Me" Jesus was giving us a word picture of the concept of "death to self," and a complete dedicating, and renewing of that dedication, to Christ with a single heart.

For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? 29 Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is

not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, 30 Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish. 31 Or what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand? 32 Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassage, and desireth conditions of peace. 33 So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple. 34 Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be seasoned? 35 It is neither fit for the land, nor yet for the dunghill; but men cast it out. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. – Luke 14:28-35

Lots of people ‘take up their crosses’ a time or two – but daily? Doesn’t that take quite a bit of time, focus, and energy? I’ve got to get to a meeting in 15 minutes! And these God-forsaken children won’t give me a moment’s peace! But aren’t they so cute! I’ve got to get the floor laid before the cabinets come, and they are coming tomorrow! The grass is too long and not green enough! Damn dogs! My car won’t start! Got to go to the school club function! The game is on! Yes. It does take quite a bit of time, focus and energy to deny yourself and to take up your cross daily. It is a daily rededication. A renewal of your focus upon the cross of Christ. It is an inner revival! It does take time. It does take focus. Damn skippy it does. It takes mindshare and real minutes on the clocks of our miserable lives. The seriousness of our Christ’s commandment, when paired with how easily we see, in our own life experience, that we can backslide from taking up our crosses daily, is all the more reason to take the commandment with utmost seriousness and godly fear. I don’t want to sound like the Wesley brothers, but there is a certain amount of routine, time commitment and self-motivating to taking up our crosses daily, in any real way.

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. – Gal. 2:20

Christ living in you is more than the earnest of your inheritance – it is living in full recognition of this. And that Christ is in our mind and heart – minute by minute, influencing and driving your decisions as to how to interact, what to do, how to spend our time. We live by the faith of the Son of God. Not living our lives and having faith. The faith is the driver, not just sitting on the bus.

We can all say that we are content with our lives – but so can many, many other people in this world. I sit in people’s living rooms, kitchens and back porches every day – and lots of people seem to like their lives – their homes, their kids, their activities, their friends, the things that

their jobs and positions allow them to do, etc. Is the Lord really our portion in our minds and hearts, or is that more down the road kind of thinking? How do we value the here and now against our current valuing of Christ, the cross, and considering the cross afresh in our minds every day? In how much higher estimation do we place Christ, and Him crucified, as a matter of course in our routine, temporal existence? As that ONE THING that we desire and pledge to seek after (Ps. 27:4)? Man, there is so much to pull our minds away every single minute of every single day. We have got to revive our spirits and rededicate ourselves to Christ – denying ourselves and taking up our crosses, daily – else we are not fit for discipleship by the Lord’s own mouth.

When we want to get good at racing, we race – over and over again – we cover the same ground, run the same course. When we want to get better at chess, we take the time to think through our strategies, we learn new ones, we watch others who are good at the game. We take time with it – that same, vain, array of patterned spaces. How much more important is it to specifically set aside the time to revive our spirits, refocus our minds on Christ and rededicate ourselves to His service and to fall deeply in love with Him again – enumerating His excellence in attributes with greater and greater precision and detail as we allow our minds to roll through them time and again. It stimulates our soul to remind ourselves that we are dead to this world and we live in Christ – the only important way to live.

Got to pray by yourself – for yourself. You and God. From the heart. And if we are supposed to deny ourselves and take up our crosses daily, shouldn’t early in the day be the time to start doing that? Before you start facing the world – before you get pulled in 5 different directions? Can’t resetting your focus – rededicating yourself to Christ afresh help how you face the world? How you respond to the 5-direction pull? We spend several minutes each day, before we really get going, just putting stuff on us, brushing around on stuff, and ingesting stuff so that we don’t stink or have bed-head. Think to create a new habit.

Got to look at scripture, on the regular – for ourselves - particularly reminding ourselves of the pitfalls that keep us from denying ourselves and taking up our crosses daily. We have got to look at things that pull our mindshare away from Christ – thinking about Christ with greater and greater regularity.

Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ; - 2Cor. 10:5

We have that casting down to do. We have that discerning to do – in all honesty and humility – upon our beds, in singular communion with God – admitting to those things and people that we

regularly hold in higher esteem than Christ – as a practical matter. He will help us if we bring it to him – if we lack a good thing and desire it in earnest – He will give us wisdom there. But we have to do it in earnest – and it is hard to do anything in earnest toward God if we don't continually seek his face.

Got to portion out the time to have with God in prayer, reading, contemplation – alone. Its got to be part of your routine, or your routine is too full. You wouldn't think of skipping brushing your teeth every day or not changing the kids diapers for a week. Or not mowing the lawn. That is just stuff we build into our schedules. And we have to make and force those opportunities for ourselves and for one another as well. And I am not great at this – I get going so hard and next thing you know, I am drowning. My saving grace is drive time, where I can talk to the Lord and think on His word. If your children get to a certain age, they should be in the word for themselves as a regular thing. If you have a wife and she never has any time for reading, praying or contemplating the things of God because she's always too busy doing for you – and for your children if you have them, then you are not helping her in her walk. Sure, she's denying herself and obeying the Lord in how she does you and your kids, but everybody needs some time to refocus – revive – rededicate – to living our lives by faith in Christ Jesus. This isn't happy talk or Wesley brothers 12 stepping. This is our reality as fellow sojourners in the Lord. If you live largely by yourself, you've got to be self-driven and self-disciplined to tend to this vital part of our walk – as a necessary precursor to doing anything else.

Got to speak of good things together, and not just when we are in a reading group. Got to reach out to one another and speak of the things of the Lord – and rightly divide His word of truth to our situations – and help one another with that work. In a revived, rededicated, refocused way.

Being good with persecution – even severe. With affliction. With being hated of all men. With being looked upon as the lowest of the low. Being good with resisting evil unto death. With people going out from us. With kids, husbands, wives, parents forsaking their profession of faith. With trials. With testings. Patiently putting up with false professors. Girding up the loins of our minds in all this. Putting on the whole armour of God as though we are already in a war (which we are – who wouldn't put the armor on once the enemy is spotted coming toward the wall). Are we not in a war for our very souls? Who else can we turn to but Christ? Who else should we even think to turn to but Christ?

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. – 2Cor. 11:26-27

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. 25 For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. 26 For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? 27 For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works. – Matt. 16:24-27

Finally, beloved, denying ourselves and taking up our crosses daily is commanded in connection with the ultimate reward (and only reward that is worth getting – Ps. 27:4) that the Lord bestows upon His triumphant return. Let us revive ourselves in that sobering fact and therefore disentangle ourselves from the affairs of this world, denying ourselves with greater light applied to it:

JC Ryle: Let us learn, in the last place, that the second coming of Christ is the time when His people shall receive their rewards (v. 27). There is deep wisdom in this saying of our Lord's, when viewed in connection with the preceding verses (v. 24-26). He knows the heart of a man. He knows how soon we are ready to be cast down, and like Israel of old to be "discouraged by the difficulties of the way." He therefore holds out to us a gracious promise. He reminds us that He has yet to come a second time, as surely as He came the first time. He tells us that this is the time when His disciples shall receive their good things. There will be glory, honor, and reward in abundance one day for all who have served and loved Jesus. But it is to be in the dispensation of the second advent, and not of the first. The bitter must come before the sweet, the cross before the crown. The first advent is the dispensation of the crucifixion. The second advent is the dispensation of the kingdom. We must submit to take part with our Lord in His humiliation, if we mean ever to share in his glory.

I love you all dearly.