

6.4

**“TAKE
UP YOUR
CROSS AND
FOLLOW
ME”**

**EMBRACING
THE CROSS IN
MISSION**

Optional Lectio Divina Prayer

1. Read Luke 9:23–25.
2. Meditate on the words.
3. Speak to Christ about this passage.
4. Rest and listen in God's presence.
5. Discuss together.

Imagine Jesus looking you in the eye and saying the following words:

Notes

"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23).

"Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:27).

Those are the stark words Jesus spoke to the original disciples. And it floored them. Pick up your cross?

Christians today have a comfortable familiarity with the image of the cross: We have crosses in our churches, some people have crosses hanging in our homes and some even wear crosses as jewelry around their necks. But that was certainly not the case in Jesus' day. In fact, in the first-century Roman world, the whole idea of the cross was completely abhorrent. The cross was the Roman Empire's most dreadful instrument of torture, humiliation and execution. The famous ancient Roman orator Cicero once said, "The very word 'cross' should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears."¹ You didn't even want to *think* about the cross.

That's what makes Jesus' statement so startling. For Jesus to tell his disciples to pick up a cross and follow him would have been as shocking as him telling people in the modern world to pick up their electric chairs or pick up their guillotines and follow him. Of all the images Jesus could have used to depict discipleship, why would he choose this most horrific one? Noah got a rainbow. Moses got a burning bush. The Magi got a star in the sky. Why do Jesus' disciples get a cross?

Because, as we will see, it's only through the cross that we find our ultimate fulfillment in life and experience what we're made for: the total, perfect, self-giving love of God himself.



DISCUSS

Considering this first-century understanding of the cross, what do you think the Apostles were thinking when they heard Jesus tell them that, if they wanted to be his disciple, they had to pick up the cross and follow him? What would you have been thinking? Would this have made you hesitate or reconsider your call as a disciple? Why or why not?

MADE FOR LOVE

When you are on mission for the Gospel, you should expect trials, roadblocks, obstacles, rejection. Don't be surprised when mission requires a lot of your time and energy, when people misunderstand you, when people turn down your invitations or turn away from the Gospel. All this happened to Jesus, so you shouldn't expect anything less. After all, Jesus promised the cross, not comfort. *But why?*

It all has to do with his love. For Jesus, the cross is much more than a form of execution. It's ultimately his fullest revelation of God's inner life, which is all about total self-giving love: "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8). For all eternity, the Father loves the Son and gives himself totally to the Son. The Son in return loves the Father, giving of himself completely to the Father, holding nothing back. And this bond of love between

the Father and the Son is the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. God's inner life as the Trinity is all about perfect, infinite, self-giving love.

But what happens when the Eternal Son of God enters time and space and takes on human flesh in Jesus Christ? He continues doing what he has done for all eternity: giving himself in love totally to the Father. But in Christ, the Son's infinite divine love is now expressed in finite human nature. That's like putting a rubber balloon up to a water hydrant: the balloon is going to explode. When infinite love expresses itself in our limited, finite humanity, it will involve suffering, sacrifice, death: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13).

Through the cross, God reveals himself most fully, his very inner life, which is love. And in the process, he shows us what we're all made for. The God who is love made us in his own image and likeness. We, therefore, are made to live like God, which involves *loving like God loves*. So much did God desire to make this clear for us that he took on human flesh in Jesus Christ and showed us what his perfect love looks like: total self-giving love. That's what we're made for. We are made for the cross. In other words, we are made to give our lives completely as a gift like Jesus did for us on Calvary.

Jesus himself said, "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (Jn 12:24–25).

This is the law of self-giving. Written in the fabric of our being is this great mystery of self-giving love: When we give of ourselves in love to God, to mission and to others, we don't lose anything, but our lives are deeply enriched and we gain so much more, for we are living according to the way God made us. Indeed, we are living like God himself, in whose image we have been created. That's why the Church teaches that "man ... cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself."² In other words, it's only when we

live like the God-man, Jesus Christ, giving our lives to God and to others in sacrificial love, that we will find our true happiness in life.

DISCUSS

Why is self-giving love so important? How have you lived this out in your own life? What were the effects?

THE CROSS: THE NEXT LEVEL OF DISCIPLESHIP

The Gospels tell us that great multitudes came out to see Jesus throughout his public ministry. Many were excited about his dynamic preaching. Many others followed him from village to village because they were amazed by his miracles. Still others sought Jesus because he could heal their loved ones who were sick. But few were willing to commit and remain close to him even when things got hard, when it required radical trust and sacrifice (Mt 8:19ff). The lack of true disciples became clear on Good Friday. While there were large crowds impressed by the many signs and wonders Jesus offered throughout his public ministry, they were nowhere to be seen on Calvary. Only a very small group of followers remained with Jesus in his greatest hour of need. The crowds in Jerusalem on that day instead were shouting out, "Crucify him, crucify him!" (Jn 19:6).

When we first start growing in friendship with God, we, like the crowds, often are attracted to what God does for us — the benefits of living a Christian life (better friends, peace, help with problems, a sense of purpose, etc.) or the graces God gives. But as we mature in faith, God invites us to go to the next level of discipleship, the next level of love. He invites us to give ourselves to him completely, to love him and serve him for his own sake, not just because of what he does for us. He invites us to love like Jesus loves: unconditionally, expecting nothing in return, all the way to the cross. That is the type of discipleship to which we are called.

The devil, however, hates it when Christians start to love in this

radical way, especially when they are committed to the work of evangelization. When he sees souls starting to take that next level of self-giving love and discipleship, he tempts them to pursue instead a *self-seeking* love — to seek what is most interesting, comfortable, enjoyable or advantageous. Instead of living Christlike, sacrificial love and seeking opportunities to truly live for God and for others, the devil tempts us to run away from the cross and live for self.

When we face these temptations of the enemy, it is important to view the challenges in our lives not as problems to be solved or as difficulties to be avoided at all costs, but rather to view them from a supernatural perspective: as opportunities to meet Jesus in those challenges and to grow in love and trust of him. Running from the cross will not only limit our spiritual growth, but it will also make us less effective as leaders and make our mission less fruitful.

DISCUSS

How are you tempted to evade the cross? In what ways do you struggle with self-seeking in mission rather than self-giving?

"GO OUT OF YOUR WAY IN SMALL MATTERS..."

In relationships, the most profound and lasting expressions of love are not found in occasional big things (like fancy dinners, adventures, diamonds or vacations) but rather in the small, consistent acts of kindness — the little sacrifices, the little ways we put our beloved's needs, preferences and interests before our own.

The same is true in our relationship with Jesus. The real test of our enduring love for the Lord is not found in big moments, like how we felt close to him on a certain retreat or sporadic acts of generosity and service. Rather, the real test of a disciple is found in the many little acts of love and sacrifice we can offer our Lord each day.

*Self-denial
... may be
considered the
test whether
we are Christ's
disciples."*

— St. John Henry
Newman



Consider how St. John Henry Newman encourages us to find little opportunities each day to deny ourselves and express our love for Jesus:

*Truly, truly,
I say to you,
unless a grain
of wheat falls
into the earth
and dies, it
remains alone;
but if it dies,
it bears much
fruit.”*

— John 12:24

Rise up early then in the morning with the purpose that (please God) the day shalt not pass without its self-denial ... Let your very rising out of your bed be a self-denial; let your meals be self-denials. Determine to yield to others in things indifferent, to go out of your way in small matters, to inconvenience yourself ... A man says to himself, “How am I to know I am in earnest?” I would suggest to him, Make some sacrifice, do some distasteful thing, which you are not actually obliged to do ... to bring home to your mind that in fact you do love your Saviour, that you do hate sin, that you do hate your sinful nature, that you have put aside the present world. Thus you will have an evidence (to a certain point) that you are not using mere words.³

Someone who grows to the next level of love, to the next level of discipleship, goes out of their way to express love for Jesus each day in small matters. We can, for example, express our love in little acts of self-denial by fulfilling our duties in life: choosing to work on a paper even though we'd rather socialize some more; completing a difficult task in the office even though we'd rather do the easier projects first; stopping what we're doing at home to change a diaper or serve our spouse; being faithful to daily prayer even when we're stressed and busy. Fulfilling our basic commitments, even when

inconvenient or uninteresting, is one crucial way of showing our love for God and neighbor.

We can also practice self-denial in our words: not dominating conversation, not talking about ourselves all the time, not gossiping or criticizing other people, not whining and complaining when things are hard ("I'm so tired"; "I'm hungry"; "I have so much to do!"; "This project is so difficult!"). These are small acts of love for Jesus and others that help strengthen community with others.

We can practice self-denial in our interactions with others. We can choose to be patient when others frustrate us, to forgive when others hurt us and to be generous with our time when others need help. We can practice self-denial at table by fasting on occasion: not eating as much as we'd like, not eating between meals or giving up our favorite food or drink. We can even practice self-denial with our screens: choosing not to waste time looking at our phones late at night or binge-watching our favorite show; choosing instead to give the best of ourselves to others and put our phones away when we're in conversation with them.

These are just a few examples of the many ways we can express our love through little acts of self-denial. The more we pick up our cross daily and follow Jesus, the more we will become like him and love like him. This is how we know that we are truly living as disciples (being "in earnest," as Cardinal Newman calls it): We are willing to embrace the cross.

DISCUSS

What is your attitude toward self-denial? In what ways do you practice self-denial regularly? In what areas of your life do you resist self-denial?

TAKE ACTION

As you seek to take on a new disposition toward self-denial and learn to embrace the crosses in your own life, the first step is to do some reflection. Set aside some time for prayer in which you examine the crosses in your life and reflect on how Jesus might be asking you to respond to them. Consider the following questions:

- In what ways is your spiritual life or your mission still focused on self, rather than on surrendering to Christ?
- Is your mission driven by love or by what you get out of it?
- Do you maintain relationships with those who are different from you or who may misunderstand your faith? Or do you choose to associate with those who are similar to you?
- When you encounter challenges in mission (people don't come to Bible study, people say no to the Gospel or to an invitation), do you get discouraged or tempted to give up? Or do you persevere and offer up the trials for love of souls?
- Do you attempt to hide from persecution or rejection, or do you continue to pursue others with a heart of love?
- Do you pray more for the various situations you want Jesus to change, or do you bring the darkened areas of your own heart to Jesus and allow him to transform them as he desires?

After your reflection, choose one way you can embrace these crosses and set a goal for how you will do that every day.

KEY CONCEPTS

Pick Up Your Cross: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23).

Law of Self-Giving: When we give of ourselves in love to God, to mission and to others, we don't lose anything, but our lives are deeply enriched and we gain so much more, for we are living according to the way God made us.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A Witness to Joy by Servant of God Chiara Corbella Petrillo

CCC 599–618: "Christ's Redemptive Death in God's Plan of Salvation and Christ Offered Himself to His Father for Our Sins"

Notes

¹ Cicero, "In Defense of Rabirius," in *The Speeches of Cicero*, trans. H. Gross Hodge (Cambridge: Harvard, 1952), 467.

² Vatican Council II, *Gaudium Et Spes*, accessed February 12, 2020, Vatican.va, 24.

³ St. John Henry Newman, "Sermon 5: Self-Denial, the Test of Religious Earnestness," *Newmanreader.org*, accessed February 10, 2020, <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/parochial/volume1/sermon5.html>.

Notes

