

The cross – what comes to mind when you see it? Well, there are probably a couple of things – Jesus, forgiveness, freedom, punishment, death. The cross has rightfully become the universal symbol for our Christian faith. It is there that Jesus paid the price for the sins of the world and brought peace between God and man. Therefore, crosses hang at the front of our church and on walls in our houses, and from gold and silver necklaces hanging around our necks. They are a sign of our salvation, a source of comfort and peace. While that may be true for us, what did the cross bring to mind for Jesus' disciples as they heard Jesus' words in Matthew 16? For those disciples, a cross was nothing more than a source of pain. It was a place of punishment reserved for only the worst of criminals. It was a place of shame and prolonged suffering. With that picture of the cross in mind, listen again to Jesus words, ***“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”*** Those are some pretty strong words, aren't they? Jesus makes it clear that Christians are called to be ready and willing to sacrifice and suffer as they follow him in faith. Just as these words confronted Jesus' disciples with some serious questions, they also confront us with some questions. First, “Are you ready and willing to take up that cross, to sacrifice and suffer as you follow Jesus?” And second, “Why? Why would I be ready to sacrifice and suffer to follow Jesus?” This morning, turn with me to God's Word as we consider the cost of being a Christian.

As we study these verses, I think it helps for us to understand the type of suffering or cross that Jesus is talking about here. Jesus is not so much addressing the difficulties that naturally come into our lives as a result of living in a sinful world such as sickness, the loss of a job or the death of a loved one. Certainly, those situations bring with them suffering. But in these verses Jesus has a specific type of suffering or hardship in mind. The crosses that Jesus is describing are the hardships and the suffering that come as a direct result of the Christian living their faith. Notice what Jesus says in verse 25, ***“whoever loses his life for me...”*** These hardships are a result of being a committed follower of Christ and living each day as one of his children guided by his Word.

There are really two main sources of these crosses for the Christian. The first is 1) the sinful nature we live with, and 2) the sinful world we live in. Both are going to pose opposition to us as we look to follow our Savior. The opposition that the sinful nature poses to the Christian is indicated in the contrast found in Jesus' words in verse 24, ***“He must deny himself...and follow me.”*** That denial of self is going to be very challenging for us because we live in a society that considers such self-denial as unthinkable and maybe even unhealthy. We live in what many have called the “Me society”. We're told, “If you want, you should have it. If it makes you feel good, you should do it.” Unfortunately, that resounding “I” and “me” is usually the voice of our sinful nature. Jesus says that following him means denying our sinful nature and following what Jesus says in his Word, trusting that his ways are best for us.

That struggle with our sinful nature is a cross that we pick up and carry every single day of our lives. In fact, when looking at the parallel account in the gospel of Luke, notice the word that is added to Jesus' words, ***“He must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me”*** (Luke 9:23). The word “daily” is added. It is a daily fight for the Christian against their sinful nature. The Apostle Paul described it this way, ***“For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing”*** (Romans 7:18,19). Have you ever felt what Paul is describing? It's wearing, isn't it? It can be wearing when to constantly evaluate, “Is this something that my Savior wants me to do or not? Am I doing this out of love or for selfish reasons?” It is a battle when you recognize you have a weakness toward a certain sin – drinking too much, bad language, losing your temper, internet pornography – and your sinful nature continues to nag at you to give in, and yet you continue to battle against that sin, following your Savior. It's hard, a cross the Christian carries each day as they follow their Savior and fight the impulses of their sinful nature.

The crosses can also come from living our Christian lives in this sinful world. The ridicule and loss of a boyfriend or girlfriend when you tell them you won't sleep with them. The looks of “How can you be so stupid?” when you tell someone that you've forgiven your husband or wife for what they've done and

you're going to work at your marriage because that's what God wants you to do. I was talking to a man who when the new president of the company came in a year ago wanted him to do some unethical things that went against his Christian faith. The man told the president that he could not do it and so he resigned from his position after working at the company for 25 years. He's now searching for a job. You think of the labels that are placed on people who say that abortion is murder, homosexuality is a sin or that the Bible is really God's Word.

How good are you at carrying those crosses? Are you ready and willing to sacrifice and suffer, to battle that sinful nature and to stand out in a sinful world at any cost?

A couple of months ago I saw this book, "Christianish". I have not read the book and looking at the subtitle I'm not so sure if it's worth the time. But the title caught my attention, "Christianish". Sometimes you hear people say that they'll be arriving at fivish meaning that they'll be there some time around 5 but not exactly. Christianish seems to indicate people that are Christians, talk about being Christian, but whose actions, decisions, attitudes and words are not exactly Christian. They talk about the importance of God's Word, but they haven't been to a Bible study since their Confirmation 20 or 30 years ago. They have the little fish sticker on the back of their car, but listening to what they just said to that person, not exactly the words Jesus would want them to use. They talk about their faith in Jesus and how much they love him, but when it comes to their actions there always seems to be an excuse for not doing what Jesus wants them to do. Christianish. Have you ever found yourself acting rather Christianish instead of committed follower of Christ?

Each of us has been there. Jesus' disciples had been there. There have been times when we have not chosen to sacrifice popularity, our time, our money, or efforts to be a faithful follower of Christ. There have been times when we have lost the battle against our sinful nature, that we have blended in with our sinful world instead of standing out as a beacon of truth.

Thank God that Jesus was NOT Saviorish, pretty much committed to carrying out God's plan of salvation and paying for most of the sins of the world. No. Jesus was absolutely committed to doing his Father's will. He was perfectly committed to you and your salvation even though he was fully aware of salvation's cost. In the verses leading up to our text, Jesus told his disciples what it would take, **"Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life"** (Matthew 16:21). The cost of our soul's eternal salvation would cost Jesus his life, but that would not deter him from boldly going to the cross and suffering the punishment of our sins. Even though Jesus would personally gain nothing from his suffering and death, he could not be deterred because Jesus understood that this was the only way that you and I could ever be brought to live with him in heaven. To us who have dropped our crosses all too often, failing to follow him, Jesus points us to HIS cross, a cross we could never carry, a cross that does not bring us suffering or pain, but instead announces perfect peace and the eternal joys of heaven. Just look at what Jesus has given to you by his cross!

If someone were to call you up and tell you that they had something to give you which of these two gifts would you probably appreciate more? The first gift you open up is a can of Diet Coke. I like Diet Coke and I would appreciate it. The second gift comes in an envelope. You pull it out and it is the title to a \$2.5 million house on Lake Michigan fully paid for and furnished, ready to move into. Which one would you appreciate more? Wouldn't you appreciate the house more? I would because I can afford \$.50 for the can of coke, but there is no way I could ever afford the house.

When you consider what your Savior has given you and its cost, don't you find the answer to our second question, "Why? Why would we be willing to sacrifice and suffer to follow our Savior and his Word?" Just look at his cross. It's because we know what that Savior has done for us and given to us. He has given us something that none of us could ever gain on our own. He has purchased heaven for us. We know that he loves us. We know that we can trust him. Instead of looking at our crosses, look to his, and you will find every reason you need to keep on following him in faith. Lord help us to do so. Amen.

