

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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HE WHO DOES NOT TAKE HIS CROSS

Matthew 10:38-39

For Christians, the cross is the instrument of Christ's atoning death. It is only through the cross of Christ and through the blood of His cross that we have our salvation. Jesus' death on the cross was for all people. However, not everyone is saved. How does His saving work become effective in our lives? A quick answer would be to say that it becomes effective by faith. In this lesson, we will see how this faith is expressed.

Jesus had to bear the cross for man. But He said also that there is another cross, a cross which man is to bear for Him. Let us read Matthew 10:38-39.

*Matthew 10:38. And he who does not take **his cross** and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.
39 He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.*

Some tough questions

The Lord Jesus tells us in this passage that if a person wants to follow Him, he must take his own cross. When I read a verse like this, many questions come to my mind. For instance, if the cross of Christ saves me, why does Jesus say, 'unless a man takes up his cross and follow Me, he is not worthy of Me. He cannot be My disciple – and therefore he is not saved'? Is it His cross that saves me or do I have to take my cross also? How do we put these crosses together in the context of redemption?

Notice. Jesus did not say, 'You have the choice to take up your cross or not. As long as you believe in Me, it doesn't really matter.' Rather, He says, 'You don't have the choice. You can belong to Me as My disciple only if you take up your cross. Whoever does not carry his cross cannot be My disciple.' If this is the case, then we seem to be caught between the cross of Christ and the cross that we are to carry. Where exactly do we stand?

You see, we have learned early in our Christian life that it is the cross of Jesus, and that alone, that saves us. And then, when we come to this passage where Jesus commands us to take up our cross (otherwise we cannot belong to Him), we are confused. If we are saved solely by His death and if it is only His cross that matters, then what is all this talk about taking up our cross? What is the need for me to take up the cross since it is His cross that saves me? We said it before. It is only through the cross of Christ that we have our salvation. Why then do I have to take the cross?

These are uncomfortable but important questions. They are uncomfortable because they challenge some of our most fundamental beliefs as Christians. What do I mean? Well, if I am required

to take up my cross and follow Jesus, does it not follow that my own effort is needed to obtain my salvation? To carry the cross requires a lot of effort! Are we then saved by God's grace or are we saved by the effort of carrying our cross? Am I somehow saved both by God's grace and by the effort that I make in carrying the cross? If that is the case, am I not putting something into God's grace? How then can the grace of God still be grace if I have my own effort in it?

Here is another question. How can I be required to take up the cross if salvation is a free gift from God? For to take up the cross is to give everything we have to God. We give our whole life. We die on the cross. We are crucified with Christ on the cross. Are we then saved by His death or by our death? Or perhaps, we are saved both by His death and our death!

When you read the Bible, do these questions ever come to your mind? These fundamental questions about salvation are very important and we should not be embarrassed to ask them.

Taking, carrying and enduring

Before we try to answer these questions, we need to look at the three different words that the Lord Jesus uses in His teaching in connection with taking up the cross. The first passage is here in Matthew 10:38, 'take his cross.' The word in Greek is the common word for 'take' (*lambano*). It is to take in whatever manner, usually with the hand. If I give you something, you take it. That is the ordinary word in Greek for 'take.' So when Jesus says, 'You need to take the cross,' it means that we have to take hold of the cross. We have to grab it.

A few chapters later, when we come to Matthew 16:24, we notice that Jesus uses another word. In this case, Jesus talks about 'taking up the cross.' So it is not just to 'take' (*lambano*) the cross, but to 'take up' the cross (*airo*). This word means to lift up, to carry something that has been raised up. This is what Jesus asks us to do with the cross. We take it up, i.e., we lift it up. And as we lift up the cross, we put it on our shoulders. This word *airo* is also used in Matthew 27:32 where we read that a man by the name of Simon of Cyrene had to help Jesus to carry His cross. At that point, Jesus was too weak to carry His cross or He walked too slowly for the convenience of the soldiers. So the soldiers forced Simon to assume the load. They 'compelled him to bear (*airo*) Jesus' cross.' The Greek word used here is exactly the same as the one used in Matthew 16:24, to take something upon your shoulders, to lift it up and put it on your shoulders.

So first, we have 'take' the cross, *lambano*. Secondly, we have 'take up' the cross, *airo*. We seem to observe a development, a certain progression from taking hold to lifting up. I say that there is a certain progression because you see, you cannot lift up an object until you first take hold of it. Before you can lift it up, of course, you have to take hold of it.

There is a third word that is being used by Jesus in connection with the command of taking up the cross. It is in Luke 14:27. *Whoever does not carry his own cross.* The Greek word is *bastazo*. It has to do with 'enduring' the cross. 'Whoever does not endure the cross.' This step goes farther off than the two previous ones. You can take hold of the cross and that's about it. The Lord Jesus asks us to do more than that. We put the cross on our shoulders and we carry it away. Now here, Luke 14:27 talks about the suffering of the cross. *Bastazo* has the idea of suffering. Take for example Matthew 20:12 where the same Greek word is used. *You made them equal to us who have borne (bastazo) the burden and the heat of the day.* 'We have borne, we have endured, we have suffered the heat and the toil of the day.' The same word is also used in Matthew 8:17 to speak of the fact that Christ *bore our sicknesses*. He did not just carry them on His shoulders, but He suffered for our diseases, both spiritual and physical. Matthew 8:17 is of course a quotation from the well-known passage in Isaiah 53:4 where it says that He bore our griefs and our sorrows. There He suffered for our transgressions.

A personal experience of the cross

Now we can see a progression in the teaching of the Lord Jesus about the cross. Firstly, we have to take hold of the cross (*lambano*). Secondly, we lift up the cross and we put it on our shoulders (*airo*). And thirdly, we carry that cross to Calvary (*bastazo*). That third word was used of the Lord Jesus in John 19:17 where we read that *He went out, bearing His own cross, to the place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha*. Jesus bore His cross, enduring the suffering caused by the cross, and went to Golgotha, to Calvary.

At what point then do we become a disciple? Is it when we just ‘take’ the cross? Or do we become a disciple only when we suffer with Him? No, discipleship does not begin only when we start to suffer with Him. Matthew 10:38 tells us that the moment we decide to take the cross, the condition for discipleship is already fulfilled. We must have at least the willingness to take hold of the cross. But we understand that when we accept the cross, when we take hold of the cross, it is with the intention to go all the way to Calvary. The moment we accept the cross, we are on the road to dying. We are on the way to losing our life.

This means that I am willing to experience the cross in my own life. Jesus suffered everything for our sins. But He asks of us that we suffer with Him. The cross is not something that only Jesus endures. The cross must be something that becomes truly mine, in my own heart. ‘Unless you are willing to experience personally the cross in your life, you cannot be My disciple.’

Finding life

Let us examine again the questions that we asked at the beginning of this lesson. We saw that the Lord Jesus commands us to take our cross. Are we saved by Jesus’ cross or by our cross? Do I obtain eternal life through my cross, through losing my life? Well, what did Jesus say? ‘He who loses his life for My sake will ... earn it?’ No, He didn’t say that. The beauty of the Lord’s teaching is that there is never one word that is wrong. What did He say exactly? *He who loses his life for My sake will find it*. If you lose your life for Jesus’ sake, you will find it. If you find something, it implies that you could not have earned it. Take for example the parable of the hidden treasure. There was a man who was probably digging in the field and he found a treasure. Did he earn it? No. The value of that treasure was more than anything that he could have earned. He could not earn it but he could find it. In other words, ‘finding’ the treasure is just another way of saying that he got what he could not have earned.

Now consider this. Is eternal life something that we earn? Of course not! Nobody can earn eternal life. Eternal life is God’s life. Unless He gives it to us, we cannot have it. We can only receive it as a gift of God through Christ’s work on the cross. Why does Jesus talk about our cross then?

He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it. This verse is the explanation of the previous one about taking the cross. If you understand why you need to lose your life in order to gain life, you will also understand why the disciple of Christ must take his cross. These two verses share two similar themes: (1) death and (2) reorientation of one’s life. And they both relate directly to the fundamental subject of faith.

Losing our life

Let’s talk about the theme of death. When Jesus used the image of his followers taking up their cross, everybody knew what He meant. They have seen many criminals bearing the cross to the place where they were to be executed. The background of this image is clearly a Roman picture of a criminal sentenced to die for a very serious crime. In spiritual terms, cross-bearing means that one’s independent life – a life lived independently of God’s will – is at an end.

In v. 39, the theme of death is obvious in the ‘lose life to gain life’ saying. *He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.* What does this mean? The Lord Jesus contrasts eternal life and this life to teach us that the Christian life is a paradox: To attempt to save your life means only to lose it. A person who grasps selfishly on to his own life, who only wants to get the best for himself apart from the will of God will in the end lose his life. Not only does that person lose the eternal life offered only to those who accept Christ as Lord and Savior, but he loses the fullness of life promised to those who believe. By contrast, a person who willingly gives up all for Christ finds that he has entered eternal life. This person has given up the right to order his own life, and he now lets Christ control his life. With such an attitude, the things of the world just fade away.

The more we love this life’s rewards (leisure, power, popularity, financial security), the more we distance ourselves from Jesus. And such distancing is disaster. If we want to find life, we have to loosen our greedy grasp on earthly rewards so that we can be free to follow Christ. This means that we must be willing to risk pain, discomfort, conflict, and stress. We must acknowledge Christ’s claim over all the aspects of our life.

Faith: Turning to God

We can see that a fundamental change of attitude is involved here. A totally self-centered attitude toward life is replaced by a willingness to give one’s own life for the sake of Jesus. Therefore orientation to Jesus is a prerequisite for saving life.

This change of orientation is also expressed in the cross-bearing picture. You see, cross-bearing was a public affair that displayed a person’s submission to the state. The criminal rebelled against the state, and so he bore the penalty of punishment from it. By carrying his cross, the prisoner showed his humility before the state. So the basic idea is about submitting to the authority of another. And in the context of the Lord’s teaching, taking up the cross describes a reorientation of perspective towards the things of God.

We observe, therefore, that both the ‘taking up of one’s cross’ and the ‘losing of one’s life’ indicate a fundamental change in the person’s direction of life. This change of attitude is called faith by the apostle Paul. In 1Thessalonians 1:8-9, Paul writes to the Thessalonian church, *Your **faith** toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything. For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how **you turned to God from idols** to serve the living and true God.* ‘You turned to God from idols.’ This new orientation to God is an important evidence of true conversion. It is the evidence of their ‘faith toward God,’ as he says in v. 8. A person turns to God for the forgiveness of sins. He recognizes that he is not to live life as in the past. Therefore he repents and asks for forgiveness. That is faith.

If this change of attitude is about faith, then taking up the cross is about faith too since we mentioned that the cross-bearing picture expresses a change of orientation. And for the same reason, this applies also to the ‘losing of one’s life.’ You don’t turn to Jesus, you don’t lose your life for His sake unless you have faith. So now the question is not whether we are saved by Jesus’ cross or by our cross. The question is whether you have faith. And if you do have faith, you will take up the cross the cross and follow Jesus.

The disciple who follows Jesus in this way will follow Him in an attitude of humility and submission which is illustrated by the cross-bearing picture. The essence of saving faith is a recognition that God must save because we cannot save ourselves. There is a fundamental recognition of allegiance that says, ‘God needs to direct me; I will not and cannot direct myself. My spiritual welfare is to rest in God’s hands.’ God must save us from sin and therefore we are to live in light of God’s offer of forgiveness and life. Salvation does not come on our terms or on our own merits. Later Jesus will call this ‘self-denial,’ a recognition that our life must be given over into God’s care and

protection. He says in Matthew 16:24, *If anyone desires to come after Me, let him **deny himself**, and take up his cross, and follow Me.*

So, am I saved by Jesus' cross? Yes. Do I have a cross to carry also? Yes. Am I under obligation to carry that cross? Yes. Am I saved because I take up my cross? No. You are saved because you have the faith that motivates you to carry the cross. Nobody would take up the cross if he does not have faith. And to believe in Christ crucified is not only to believe that He was crucified, but also to believe that I am crucified with Him. This is to have faith in Christ crucified. Now we understand the relationship between our cross and Jesus' cross.

Cross-bearing: A picture of self-denial

The idea of self-denial that we talked about a moment ago is another fundamental element of the figure of bearing the cross. The cross does not just mean bearing one's particular hardship in life. The cross is always an instrument of death, not just an object to carry. It indicates that the disciple must adopt the attitude of a man condemned to death. A man in that situation considers life in the world to be ended. He has an attitude of self-denial. There is a death that the Christian must experience. He is to deny himself. He says 'no' to self and 'yes' to Christ. He is to let the mind of Christ, the mind of humbling himself to the point of death, be in him and fill his thoughts.

Romans 6:11-13 describes very clearly how the believer dies to self.

Romans 6:11. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts.

13 And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.

This passage tells us that I die to self when:

- (1) I count myself crucified with Christ (Romans 6:11)
- (2) I count myself dead to sin, but alive to God (Romans (6:11)
- (3) I do not let sin reign in my body (Romans 6:12)
- (4) I do not present the members of my body as instruments of sin (Romans 6:13a)
- (5) I yield myself to God – as much as those who are alive from the dead are yielded to God (Romans 6:13b)
- (6) I present the members of my body as instruments of righteousness (Romans 6:13c)

We should remember that hardship itself is not the cross but it can bring a person to the place where the Lord can deal with him. If that person faces his burden with the right attitude, with humility and submission, it is then that the hardship becomes the cross and the denial of self that Jesus is talking about. With an act of faith, the Christian counts himself dead to sin but alive to God. It is an act that can be described as committing all that one is and has to Christ. The essence of discipleship is found in this kind of attitude.