

Sermon – 21/08/2011 am

No Cross, No Crown

Study Text: Luke 9:23-27

Many years ago my brother got a 'call up' letter in the mail. He was called up to serve in the army. He was called up because he is a citizen of this country. To refuse this call to serve his nation was looked upon as treason. He would have been asked to 'show cause' why he should remain a citizen of this country. Citizens have duties. They have a duty to give their life for their country when called upon to do so.

Have you ever been 'called up' to serve your country? If you believe in Christ you have received such a call. If you are a citizen of the kingdom of God you have been called to serve King Jesus. If you refuse to leave all and follow Jesus you show that you belong to another kingdom, and that you serve another king, the prince of this world.

What does it mean to be 'called up' by Jesus? What is involved in following Jesus? We know that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone. We are called up because we are already born-again citizens. Jesus was telling his disciples what following him would mean in the days ahead. He did not want them to be under any illusions about what following him would mean. Let us not be under any illusions about what following Jesus means.

1. Self-Denial

When was the last time you denied yourself in some way? Some denied themselves a drink in the recent 'Dry July'. Some churches observe Lent as a time of self-denial. I heard of a woman denying herself chocolate during Lent. Is this the sort of self-denial Jesus was talking about, a short time of giving up something and then feeling proud? No! Jesus spoke of giving up everything, for ever.

A bit drastic do you think? Well Jesus did not think so. In fact he says you will be in great danger, the danger of hell, if you do not deny yourself, take up your cross and follow him (9:23). Jesus said this *to them all* (9:23). He was not just talking to the twelve. He said it to the people and his disciples (Mark 8:34).

After Peter confessed that Jesus is the Christ of God, Jesus went on to tell the twelve that he must suffer, be rejected, be killed and be raised on the third day (9:22). Things were moving fast in Jesus' revelation of himself and his work. Here he goes on to speak about coming again in glory (9:26). The twelve were struggling to keep up and get their heads around all that Jesus was saying.

What Jesus was saying was not just things that would happen to him. It was not just news to be read today and forgotten tomorrow. His disciples were vitally involved in these things. Everyone is vitally involved in these things. We cannot hold these things at arm's length.

'If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me' (9:23). The word 'desire' is variously translated as 'wills', 'wishes' or 'would'. Following Jesus does not come naturally. There is nothing about Jesus to attract us to him (Isaiah 53). We have to *will* to do so. It is a desire stimulated by the Spirit of God.

Jesus says there are two things we must do if we are to follow him: we must deny self and we must take up our cross daily (9:23). Firstly, 'deny self'. To deny means to say 'No'. We must say 'No'

to the desires of our own bodies and emotions. We must say 'No' to the *lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life* (I John 1:16).

We have these desires by virtue of being born human, human sinners. These desires belong to this world. They belong to the citizens of this world, not citizens of heaven. These desires or lusts are not of the Father but of this world (I John 1:16). As we turn away from these desires we turn towards Christ.

Have you heard the phrase 'let go and let God'? It is true to some extent. We are to let go the things of this world that we, by our sinful nature, cling to. We are let go of everything we are, and everything we have (not just chocolates!). To 'let God' sounds very passive which is not how Jesus puts it in this passage? For sure we must trust God and rest in him, but Jesus says we must deliberately take up our cross daily and follow him.

This sounds like tough going. What did Jesus mean by taking up your cross? When we hear the word cross we think of the cross of Jesus. That is okay, but as yet Jesus had not spoken about his cross. What did his disciples understand by these words? They actually saw lots of Jews, insurgents according to the Romans, carrying a beam on their shoulders as Roman soldiers led them off to be crucified.

To carry your cross meant suffering and death. For Jesus this was literal. For his disciples it was more figurative or spiritual, although some would be martyred. Jesus was making it clear that everyone who followed him must be ready to suffer, and die for him – nothing more, nothing less.

The apostle Paul understood what Jesus was saying. He wrote *'I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I will live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me'* (Galatians 2:20). A true soldier pays no regard to his own well being. He gives his all for king and country.

Jesus further explains what it means to deny self and follow him in the next verse (9:24). He speaks about losing your life for his sake. Whoever does so will live. Think of Stephen, the first martyr, or countless other saints down through history. Paul understood these words also. He may have been thinking of them when he wrote *'for me to live is Christ, and to die is gain'* (Philippians 1: 21).

2. Self-Destruction

From declaring what it means to follow him, Jesus goes on to warn of the consequences of not doing so. *Whoever desires to save his life will lose it. What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul* – or is lost or destroyed himself (9:24, 25, Mark 8:36).

The disciples must have struggled to understand what Jesus was calling them to do, but the stakes were high. They could not ignore what he was saying. He spoke about eternal destruction. You may have heard these words before. Do you understand what Jesus means? The stakes are just as high for you as for the disciples!

'The absurdity of the man who secures his own life in preference to participation in the salvation provided by God emphasizes the fateful consequences of denying Jesus even when human life is at stake. When a man has forfeited eternal life, he experiences absolute loss' (Lane).

Jesus was not just talking about serious losses on the stock market. He was talking about the end of the stock market as far as you are concerned, if that is your greatest concern in life. He was not talking about paying all your debts to the bank. He was talking about paying all your debts in hell.

What shall it profit me if I gain the whole world and lose my own soul? That is the question we must all ask.

No amount of money can redeem a soul from death. *To redeem a life is costly – none sufficient price can pay. But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave* (Psalm 49:8, 15). If God in Christ has redeemed your soul from death, from the pit of destruction, why should you be trying to save your life? Why should you be afraid of ridicule and even death for the sake of Christ and the gospel?

Some Christians – many Christians? – think they can have everything this world offers and have Jesus also. Is this what you understand from Jesus words? If so you are very mistaken. Jesus spoke of carrying a cross not driving a BMW. Jesus spoke of being mocked not praised by the world. If you are following Jesus you will be hated by the world (John 15:18).

You are either following Christ or you are following the world and Satan. You either sacrifice yourself to him or you are ashamed of him. If you believe that Christ went to the cross bearing your sin, if you understand the amazing grace of God, then *present your body as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service, and do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind* (Romans 12:1). Again the apostle Paul understood what Jesus was saying in this passage.

Jesus makes it clear that after death comes the judgement. Make no mistake about what awaits you after death – the judgement. Jesus spoke of when he comes in his glory and his Father's glory (9:26). People might turn away from Jesus today but there will be no turning away on judgement day. Jesus may look weak and insignificant today but when he comes again the picture will be very different. If you are ashamed of Jesus and his words today he will be ashamed of you when he comes in judgement.

There are people in the church who are ashamed of things Jesus said and did. Why else do they try to cut them out of the Bible? Why do they want to deny the miracles of Jesus? They do not want to offend the scholars and the scientists of this world. Even being silent when we should be making known the words of Jesus is evidence of shame. Let us confess our sin in this regard and be faithful witnesses and proud soldiers of Jesus Christ.

3. See Christ

Jesus concluded this brief but important message with an assurance that some standing before him would *'not taste death till they see the kingdom of God* (9:27). Some, but not all, would see *the Son of Man coming in his kingdom* (Matthew 16:28). What kingdom event was Jesus referring to? Some think he was referring to the transfiguration, others to Pentecost, and others to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70.

What is the context? Jesus had just referred to his second coming (9:26). This will be the full and final coming of Jesus and the kingdom of God. The kingdoms of this world will not exist after this. Jesus was not saying some standing there would see this because he did not know when he would return. Besides, there will be no dying after Jesus returns.

The coming of Jesus will mean judgement and some of those standing there would get a taste of judgement some forty years later in the terrible destruction of Jerusalem in AD70. But Matthew wrote of *seeing the Son of Man coming in his kingdom*. It was like seeing Jesus in his royal majesty. All three gospels immediately describe how Jesus took Peter, John and James up on the mountain where they saw him transformed into his heavenly glory and speaking to men who are in heaven.

Will you take hold of this vision of the risen Christ in all his glory and keep it before you every day. Will you turn away from looking to yourself and lusting for the things of this world, to looking at Him who went to the cross for you and is waiting for you in his heavenly glory?

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