



Gospel Living

Sample

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Unit 3. Looking Back: to the Cross

Looking to the cross for our model

To be a disciple is to follow Jesus. It involves imitating Jesus, or being 'Christlike' (1 Thessalonians 1:6). Indeed, to the Romans Paul says, "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Romans 13:14). Yet clearly we are not to imitate Jesus in every respect. On the one hand, he was an unmarried Jewish male and an itinerant preacher in first-century rural Palestine. On the other hand, he was the Son of God, who accomplished the salvation of the world. Both in the specifics of his human vocation, and in his divine nature and salvific role, we clearly cannot follow him. What, then, does it mean to follow Jesus?

In Luke 9:23 Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." Following Jesus means following the way of the cross. Later in Luke's Gospel, Jesus says, "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27).

The call to follow Jesus is a call to die. For some, this may mean literal death — persecution and martyrdom. For us in the West, the reality of the call to die is distant, though it is still a reality. Even in our context, converts from a Muslim background have received threatening phone calls, both to them personally and to their families. They weigh up baptism carefully, knowing the consequences it could entail.

For some it is a call to die in martyrdom, but for all of us it is a call to die to self. This is not the calling of a few, but rather the stamp of every Christian's life. Jesus says we are to take up our cross *daily*. Following the way of the cross is a daily activity.

To follow the way of the cross means to imitate Jesus in his sacrificial love, submission to God, willingness to suffer, and service of others. Sacrifice, submission, suffering, service: this is our calling and our model. This is what it means to follow Jesus.

Sacrificial love, submission and service characterised the entire ministry of Jesus, but they were seen supremely in the cross, and so the essential mark of Christian discipleship is the cross of Jesus Christ. Thus when Paul says we are to be imitators of God, he spells this out by saying that we are to "be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (Ephesians 5:1-2; see also Philippians 3:10; 2 Corinthians 4:10-11; 1 Peter 2:21). Christ's love for us, in his sacrificial giving of himself, is our model as we seek to live "a life of love" (Ephesians 5:2, NIV).

In the writings of John, discipleship is primarily seen in terms of love expressed through obedience (John 13:34; 15:12; 1 John 4:21; 2 John 5). Yet significantly for John, love is defined in terms of the cross (John 15:12-13; 1 John 3:16-18; 4:9-11). The phrase "that someone lay down his life for his friends" or "our lives" (John 15:13; 1 John 3:16) implies giving up one's life; this can be worked out not only in death, but also in a life of service.

Exercise

Read John 13:1-17.

- Describe this event as if it had taken place in your contemporary context. What is today's equivalent of foot-washing?
- What three things does John say that Jesus knew (vv. 1, 3, 11)?
- How do they undermine excuses we might make for not serving others?
- The foot-washing points to the cross. How do we see Jesus undermining those same excuses on the cross?
- How does Jesus apply this incident in verses 12-17?

One of the striking things about the New Testament is the way it applies the pattern of the cross to every area of life. What does following the way of the cross mean when:

- Someone wrongs me?
“Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:32)
- I am tired and someone asks me for help?
“Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all.” (Philippians 2:17)
- I see an opportunity to impress with my Bible knowledge or Christian service?
“Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves ... Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:3, 5-8)
- I start asking, how will this affect me?
“Let each of you look not... to his own interests, but... to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,... he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:4-5, 8) (Adapted from the Greek text³)
- My family asks why I have not pursued a career like other people?
“But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” (Galatians 6:14)

³ For more on why it has been adapted see Bockmuehl, M., *Epistle to the Philippians* (Continuum, 2006, first published 1997), 113.

- I open my wallet?
“See that you also excel in this grace of giving ... For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:7, 9, NIV UK)
- Friends urge me to join them in sinful behaviour?
“Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, ... With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you.” (1 Peter 4:1,4)
- I receive threatening phone calls because of my allegiance to Christ?
“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.” (1 Peter 4:12-14)
- I find other Christians difficult to get on with?
“Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” (Romans 15:7)
- I get in a position of power?
“And Jesus called them to him and said to them, ‘You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’” (Mark 10:42-45)
- I see other Christians in need?
“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?” (1 John 3:16-17)
- The washing up needs doing at home?
“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” (Ephesians 5:25; see also 1 Peter 2:18-3:7)

The point is not to learn the list, but to learn the habit so it becomes a reflex and instinct. Self-denial, putting others first, looking to serve, being sacrificial, suffering for God's glory — we can apply these principles in *every* situation.

The way of the cross is a tough ask. It is the way of self-denial. It is, says Jesus, like losing yourself. Yet Christians can accept the way of the cross with great joy. We should embrace it, because it is the way of blessing (John 13:17). In losing ourselves, we gain ourselves; in losing life, we gain life (Mark 8:34-38).

The way of the cross is not an abstract standard or code. Our standard is a person: our Saviour. It is the cross on which he died *my* death, bore *my* sin, took *my* punishment. It is *my* cross. The way of the cross is the way of Jesus. All the love I feel for Jesus attaches to the way of the cross and all the beauty I see in Jesus attaches to the way of the cross. The way of the cross is love responding to love.

Reflection

What will the way of the cross mean for you in the next five minutes? In the next five hours? In the next five days? In the next five months? In the next five years?

Looking to the cross for our acceptance

The way of the cross will crush you if you do not embrace the pardon of the cross. We do not follow the way of the cross to be accepted by God. We are accepted by God so that we might be free to follow the way of the cross. We must constantly return to the cross to find acceptance, pardon, forgiveness and grace.

In Romans 8:1 Paul says that “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Our sins condemn us — that is the message of Romans 1-3. However, now there is no condemnation because Jesus Christ has redeemed us from sin and justified us before God (Romans 3:21-26). “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh” (Romans 8:3). Jesus was the sinless one, but he came “in the likeness of sinful flesh”. In other words, God treated him as a sinful man. He became a sin offering. In the Old Testament, people symbolically placed their sin on an animal and the animal was then killed. The animal took the death penalty for their sin. It was an illustration, and Jesus was the real thing. At the cross God placed your sin on Jesus, so he bore your punishment and died your death. God condemned sin in Jesus. The result? No condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Condemnation for Jesus; no condemnation for us.

By faith we are united with Jesus and so we become “those who are in Christ Jesus”. It means that his death is my death; his life is my life; his vindication is my vindication; his righteousness is my righteousness. God counts me righteous in Christ.

As a result, Christians need never feel condemned. Every morning we can say, “There is now no condemnation.” Actually, it is easy to do it in the morning. You need to do it in the evening. You need to do it when you sin; when you look with lust; when you lose your temper; when you do not show sacrificial love. It is at these times that you need to say, “There is now no condemnation.”

We can so often be challenged about our sin in Bible studies, or through talks and in conversations with fellow believers. We fail in our duties and we can be left feeling a burden of guilt. However, it is then that we need to remember that there is now no condemnation. Our sins are real sins. They grieve the heart of God and should grieve our hearts because they rob God of his glory. However, we need to remember that there is

now no condemnation. We are free because God regards us as righteous, and so you should, too. You should think of yourself as a saint, as a child of God, as an heir of glory. On the cross, God reveals the full extent of our sin at the very moment at which he reveals the full extent of his grace. We should come before God with confidence and freedom. God does not merely tolerate us. In Christ, he smiles upon us as a Father.

There is no need to earn approval, no need to prove yourself, no need to perform. It's worth pointing out that this is not just about what happens on the day of judgement. Many Christians believe they will be acquitted on the last day through the blood of Jesus, but they never apply this great truth to their day-to-day lives. They sing it on Sunday mornings, but they do not live it on Monday mornings. Instead, we try to prove ourselves through our work, through our performance, through our success, or through our service. But Jesus cried, "It is finished." C. J. Mahaney asks us:

- Do you relate to God as if you were on a kind of permanent probation, suspecting that at any moment He may haul you back into the jail cell of His disfavour?
- When you come to worship do you maintain a 'respectful distance' from God, as if He were a fascinating but ill-tempered celebrity known for lashing out at His fans?
- When you read Scripture does it reveal the boundless love of the Saviour or merely intensify your condemnation?
- Are you more aware of your sin than you are of God's grace, given you through the cross?

Do you see any traces of condemnation in your life? Don't be surprised if you do. But don't keep carrying the burden! Because of the gospel's power you can be completely free of all condemnation. Not mostly free; *completely free ... God is glorified when we believe with all our hearts that those who trust in Christ can never be condemned.*⁴

Looking to the cross for our confidence

How do you know God loves you? It is not just an academic question. Sooner or later something will happen that will throw God's love for you into question. Illness. Unemployment. Marital problems. Bereavement. Sin. In these situations, how can we know God loves us?

⁴ Mahaney, C.J., *The Cross-Centred Life* (Multnomah, 2002), 39.

Exercise

The following are all possible answers to the question of how we can know God loves us. But why are they inadequate?

- “I feel really great today.”
- “I’m often overwhelmed by the praise at our church meetings.”
- “I experience God’s love in the love other Christians show me.”
- “I serve God diligently.”

In Romans 8, Paul addresses Christians going through hard times, Christians troubled by sin and suffering. In verse 37 he says: “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” Why does Paul use the past tense to describe God’s love? Surely we want to know that God loves in the present.

If you say “through him who loves me,” you are still left with the question, “How can we *know* that God loves us?” We are left with that question at the very point at which it matters most — at the point in which circumstances throw God’s love into question. It is no good saying you know God loves you “because you feel good” at the point when you do not feel good. It is no use saying God loves you “because you had a spiritual experience” at the point when God feels absent. It is no good saying God loves you “because you enjoy serving God” when serving God is a pain.

Paul says “through him who loved *us*” because he is referring back to the cross. How do we know God loves us? Because he has given us his Son. Because Jesus died for us on the cross. The cross is the great fixed, unmovable declaration of God’s love.

When we face suffering, when we struggle with sin or when we stare death in the face, we can be confident in God’s love because God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” (1 John 4:9-10). No circumstances can change that. Christ cannot un-die for us.

Christ died for us when we were his enemies (see Romans 5:5–11). He did not die for us when we took an interest in Christian things, cleaned up our lives or started serving him. If God gave his Son for you when you were at your worst, what circumstances could ever make him stop loving you? Nothing will be able to separate us from that love. *We know that God loves us because he loved us; because of the cross.*

Exercise

In Romans 8:31 Paul says: “What then shall we say to these things?” He sums up what he has been saying about the certainty and surety of God’s love by asking the following four questions. What are the answers that he gives?

1. Who can be against us? (8:31–32)
2. Who will bring any charge? (8:33)
3. Who is to condemn? (8:34)
4. Who shall separate us? (8:35–37)

Christians should never stray far from the cross. It should often be in our thoughts, often on our lips, often in our songs; it should be determining our actions, shaping our attitudes, captivating our affections. This is why the remembrance of the Lord’s death in communion is so integral to Christian discipleship.

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