

Sermon ✝ February 28, 2021  
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I don't know about you but I have always been intrigued by two kinds of people. The first kind is the **perfect** kind. You know the type I'm talking about. **Everything** always goes their way. Their clothes are always just right, their children never act out (at least not in public), they're popular and successful in their work. These are the kind of folks who don't even sweat. Their world is like some kind of big fantasy land.

Then there is the other kind of intriguing person. For me, this is the kind of person who lives life on the edge. You know this type, too. They're not really bad people . . . but very close. These are the people who are always getting away with things for which I would **always** get caught. They always drive ten miles over the speed limit, in school, they could "lip-off" to the teacher without being punished. These are the people who wear outrageous clothes and say daring things and pay little or no attention to most of the rules of life.

I would imagine that most of us fall somewhere in the middle—in between— these two extremes.

Of the two types of people, I always thought it might be fun to be the second kind. Think about it. Wouldn't it be great not to have to follow any rules? At least, I thought that more as a child than I do now.

We need rules. We need limits. And this is even the case with our faith. That is what Jesus was getting at when he said *"if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*

These are some of the most difficult and unwanted words in the bible. They sound great in sermons . . . but . . . many wish Jesus had never said them. But he did and we can't get around it.

Years ago, when I was serving as one of the chaplains at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, a nineteen-year-old student remarked during a Bible study. *"I'm am not much for this religion stuff, but I just love the teachings of Jesus."* My response was, *"I don't always love the teachings of Jesus."* The young man looked puzzled and wondered why a member of the clergy would say such a thing. Simple. Many of the teachings of Jesus make us uncomfortable. And we cannot get around them without getting around Jesus as well.

The truth of the matter is if we wish to worship and serve this Christ of the Christian faith, we have got to take seriously his commands. *"Why do you call me Lord, Lord, if you are not willing to do the things I say?"*

Jesus was always suspicious of an emotional religious faith that didn't make much difference in the way a person lived. And so . . . he set limits . . . *"if anyone want to become my follower, let them deny themselves and take up **their** cross and follow me."*

Notice, Jesus does not say deny *something* but that we are to deny one's *self*. To say "no" to yourself, is to say "yes" to Christ. Most of us, when we think of self-denial, think of giving up something like

candy for Lent or putting an especially big check in the offering envelope.

But we must take care so that this “denial” does not become an end in itself. It is too easy to give things to God without giving ourselves. Jesus is attacking the hard core of egotism: deny *yourself*. For most of us this is a radical reorientation of life.

And then he says that we are to take up our cross. It is important to make a distinction between crosses and normal afflictions of this life. Over the years, we’ve heard folks say, “*I guess it's just mycross to bear*” when complaining about anything from headaches to hangnails. The cross is not an affliction that life throws our way.

To take up one’s cross means taking up a burden that, except for the compulsion of God's love, we would never touch. The cross is not simply an ornament to be worn around the neck; it is an attitude to be carried in the heart. To take up one's cross is to do all of those things that we would not necessarily choose to do . . .

- . . . to follow our Christian conscience
- . . . to speak out against injustice
- . . . to become an advocate for the poor and homeless

Taking up your cross is to say, “*Here I am, Lord, send me.*”

And then Jesus says, “*follow me*”. When you follow Jesus, you never know where you are bound to end up.

In Shaw's play *St. Joan*, the archbishop tells Joan that she is in love with religion. “*I never thought of that,*” she says, “*Is there any harm in it?*” The archbishop replies, “*No harm . . . but there is danger.*”

And so there is. There is danger that following Jesus might upset our plans or disturb our lazy days. There is danger that Jesus may trouble our conscience about the needs of the world. And, if you choose to follow him, you choose a lonely road for Christ does not walk the way of the crowds. His path is not always easy but he does not call us to any path that he is not willing to take himself. “*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*”

These are hard words. They are the limits of discipleship. But, they are the only way. If we follow, we may not be sure where we will go, but we are sure who will go with us. He will not always lead us to comfort, but always to joy. It will never be the popular way to follow this man carrying a cross. But it is the only way to blessedness. These are the limits but they are limits offered in love.

