

A.W. Pink:

“Then said Jesus unto His disciples, if any man will—**the word “will” here means “desire to”** just as in that verse, “If any will live godly.” It signifies **“determine to.”** “If any man will or desires to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross (not a cross, but his cross) and follow me.” Then in Luke 14:27 Christ declared, “And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after Me, cannot be My disciple.” So it is not optional. The Christian life is far more than subscribing to a system of truth or adopting a code of conduct, or of submitting to religious ordinances. Preeminently the Christian life is a person; experience of fellowship with the Lord Jesus, and just in proportion as your life is lived in communion with Christ, to that extent are you living the Christian life, and to that extent only.

The Christian life is a life that consists of following Jesus. If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.” O that you and I may gain distinction for the closeness of our walk to Christ, and then shall we be **“close communionists”** indeed. There is a class described in Scripture of whom it is said, “These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.” But sad to say, there is another class, and a large class, who seem to follow the Lord fitfully, spasmodically, half-heartedly, occasionally, distantly. There is much of the World and much of self in their lives, and so little of Christ. Thrice happy shall he be who like Caleb followeth the Lord fully.

Now, beloved, our chief business and aim is to follow Christ, but there are difficulties in the way. There are obstacles in the path, and it is to them that the first part of our text refers. You notice that the words **“follow Me”** come at the end. Self, self stands in the way, and the world with its ten thousand attractions and distractions is an obstacle; and therefore Christ says, **“If any man will come after Me—(first) let him deny himself, (second) take up his cross, (third) and follow Me.”** And there we learn the reason why so few professing Christians are following Him closely, manifestly, consistently.

The first step toward a daily following of Christ is the denying of self. There is a vast difference, brethren and sisters, between denying self and so-called self-denial. The popular idea that obtains both in the world and among Christians is that of giving up things which we like. There is a great diversity of opinion as to what should be given up. There are some who would restrict it to that which is characteristically worldly, such as theatre-going, dancing, and the racecourse. There are others who would restrict it to a certain season when amusements and other things which are followed during the remainder of the year are rigidly eschewed at that time. But such methods as those only foster spiritual pride, for surely I deserve some credit if I give up so much as. My friends, what Christ speaks of in our text (and O may the spirit of God apply it to our souls this morning) as the first step toward following him, is, the denial of self itself not simply some of the things that are pleasing to self. not some of the things after which self hankers, but the denying of self itself. What does that mean—**“If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself?”** It means in the first place, abandoning his own righteousness; but it means far more than that. That is only its first meaning. It means refusing to rest upon my own wisdom. It means far more than that. It means ceasing to insist upon my own rights. It means repudiating self itself. It means ceasing to consider our own comforts, our own ease, our own pleasure, our own aggrandizement, our own benefits. It means being done with self. It means, beloved, saying with the apostle, For me to live is, not self, but Christ. For me to live is to obey Christ, to serve Christ, to honor Christ, to spend myself for Him. That is what it means. And **“if any man will come after Me,”** says our Master, **“let him deny himself, let self be repudiated, be done with.** In other words it is what you have in Romans 12:1, **“Present your bodies a living sacrifice unto God.”**

Now the second step toward following Christ is the taking up of the cross. **“If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross.”** Ah, my friends, to live out the Christian life is something more than a passive luxury; it is a serious undertaking. It is a life that has to be disciplined in sacrifice. The life of discipleship begins with self-renunciation and it continues by self-mortification. In other words, our text refers to the cross not simply as an object of faith, but as a principle of life, as the badge of discipleship, as an experience in the soul. And, listen! Just as it was true that the only way to the Father’s throne for Jesus of Nazareth was by the cross, so the only way for a life of communion with God and the crown at the end for the Christian is via the cross. The legal benefits of Christ’s sacrifice are secured by faith, when the guilt of sin is cancelled: but the cross only becomes efficacious over the power of indwelling sin as it is realized in our daily lives.

I want to call your attention to the context. Turn with me for a moment to Matthew 16, verse 21: **“From that time forth began Jesus to show unto His disciples, how that He must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day. Then Peter**

took Him, and began to rebuke Him. He was staggered and said, "Pity Thyself, Lord." That expressed the policy of the world. That is the sum of the world's philosophy—self shielding and self-seeking; but that which Christ preached was not spare "but" sacrifice. The Lord Jesus saw in Peter's suggestion a temptation from Satan and He flung it from Him. Then He turned to His disciples and said, if any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. In other words what Christ said was this: I am going up to Jerusalem to the cross: if anyone would be My follower there is a cross for him. And, as Luke 14 says, "Whosoever doth not bear his cross cannot be My disciple." Not only must Jesus go up to Jerusalem and be killed, but everyone who comes after Him must take up his cross. The "must" is as imperative in the one case as in the other. Mediatorially the cross of Christ stands alone, but experimentally it is shared by all who enter into life.

Now then, what does "the cross" stand for? What did Christ mean when He said that except a man take up his cross? My friends, it is deplorable that at this late date such a question needs to be asked, and it is more deplorable still that the vast majority of God's own people have such unscriptural conceptions of what the "cross" stands for. The average Christian seems to regard the cross in this text as any trial or trouble that may be laid upon him. Whatsoever comes up that disturbs our peace, that is unpleasing to the flesh, that irritates our temper is looked upon as a cross. One says, "Well, that is my cross," and another says, "Well, this is my cross," and someone else says something else is their cross. My friends, the word is never so used in the New Testament.

The word "cross" is never found in the plural number, nor is it ever found with the indefinite article before it—"a cross." Note also that in our text the cross is linked to a verb in the active voice and not the passive. It is not a cross that is laid upon us, but a cross which must be "taken up"! The cross stands for definite realities which embody and express the leading characteristics of Christ's agony.

Others understand the "cross" to refer to disagreeable duties which they reluctantly discharge, or to fleshly habits which they grudgingly deny. They imagine that they are cross-bearing when, prodded at the point of conscience, they abstain from things earnestly desired. Such people invariably turn their cross into a weapon with which to assail other people. They parade their self-denial and go around insisting that others should follow them. Such conceptions of the cross are as Pharisaical as false, and as mischievous as they are erroneous.

Now, as the Lord enables me, let me point out three things that the cross stands for. First, the cross is the expression of the world's hatred. The world hated the Christ of God and its hatred was ultimately manifested by crucifying Him. In the 15th chapter of John, seven times over, Christ refers there to the hatred of the world against Himself and against His people; and just in proportion as you and I are following Christ, just in proportion as our lives are being lived as His life was lived, just in proportion as we have come out from the world and are in fellowship with Him, so will the world hate us.

We read in the Gospels that one man came and presented himself to Christ for discipleship, and he requested that he might first go and bury his father—a very natural request, a very praiseworthy one surely (?) and the Lord's reply is almost staggering. He said to that man, "Follow Me: and let the dead bury their dead." What would have happened to that young man if he had obeyed Christ? I do not know whether he did or not, but if he did, what would happen? What would his kinsfolk and his neighbours think of him? Would they be able to appreciate the motive, the devotion that caused him to follow Christ and neglect what the world would call a filial duty? Ah, my friends, if you are following Christ the world will think you are mad, and some natures and dispositions find it very hard to bear reflections on their sanity. Yes, there are some who find the reproaches of the living a harder trial than the loss of the dead.

Another young man presented himself to Christ for discipleship and he requested the Lord that he might first be allowed to go home and say farewell to his friends—a very natural request, surely—and the Lord presented to him the cross: "No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God!" Affectionate natures find the wrench of home ties hard to bear; harder still are the suspicions of loved ones and friends for having been slighted. Yes, the reproach of the world becomes very real if we are following Christ closely. No man can keep in with the world and follow Him.

Another young man came and presented himself to Christ and fell at His feet and worshipped Him, and said, "Master, what good thing shall I do?" and the Lord presented to him the cross. "Sell all that thou hast and give to the poor. ..and come and follow Me." And the young man went away sorrowful. And Christ is still saying to you and to me this morning, "Whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after Me, cannot be My disciple." The cross stands for the reproach and the hatred of the world. But as the cross was voluntary for

Christ, so it is for His disciple. It can either be avoided or accepted; ignored or “taken up”!

But secondly, the cross stands for a life that is voluntarily surrendered to the will of God. From the standpoint of the world the death was a voluntary sacrifice. Turn for a moment to the 10th of John, beginning at the 17th verse: “Therefore doth My Father love Me, because I lay down My life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.” Why did He thus lay down his life? Look at the closing sentence of verse 18: “This commandment have I received of My Father.” The cross was the last demand of God upon the obedience of His Son. That is why we read in Philippians 2 that, He “being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God; but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death” (that was the climax, that was the end of the path of obedience) “even the death of the cross.”

Christ has left us an example that we should follow His steps. The obedience of Christ should be the obedience of the Christian—voluntary, not compulsory—voluntary, continuous, faithful, without any reserve, unto death. The cross then stands for obedience, consecration, surrender, a life placed at the disposal of God. “If any man will come after Me, let him take up his cross and follow Me” and “Whosoever doth not bear his cross and come after Me, cannot be My disciple.” In other words, dear friends, the cross stands for the principle of discipleship, our life being actuated by the same principle that Christ’s was. He came here and He pleased not Himself: no more must I. He made Himself of no reputation: so must I. He went about doing good: so should I. He came not to be ministered unto but to minister: so should we. He became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. That is what the cross stands for: First, the reproach of the world—because we have antagonized it, raised its ire by separating ourselves from it, and are walking on a different plane, and through being actuated by different principles from those by which it walks. Second, a life sacrificed unto God—laid down in devotion to Him.

In the third place, the cross stands for vicarious sacrifice and suffering. Turn to the first Epistle of John, the third chapter, verse 16: “Hereby perceive we the love of God, because He laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives.” That is the logic of Calvary. We are called unto fellowship with Christ, our lives to be lived by the same principles that His was lived by—obedience to God, sacrifice for others. He died that we might live and, my friends, we have to die that we may live. Look at the 25th verse of Matthew 16: “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it”: that means every Christian, for Christ was speaking there to disciples. Every Christian who has lived a self-centered life, considering his own comforts, his own peace of mind, his own welfare, his own advantages and benefits, that “life” is going to be lost forever—all wasted so far as eternity is concerned; wood, hay and stubble, that will go up in smoke. But “whosoever will lose his life for My sake,” that is, whosoever has not lived his life considering his own wellbeing, his own interests, his own profit, his own advancement, but has sacrificed that life, has spent it in the service of others for Christ’s sake; he shall find—“find” what?—he shall find it, not something else: it, not another: he shall find it. That life has been immortalized, perpetuated, it has been built of imperishable materials that will survive the testing-fire in the day to come. He shall find “it”. He died that we might live, and we have to die if we are to live! “Whosoever will lose his life for My sake shall find it.”

Again, in the 20th chapter of John, Christ said to His disciples, “As the Father hath sent Me, even so send I you.” What was Christ sent here to do? To glorify the Father: to express God’s love; to manifest God’s grace; to weep over Jerusalem; to have compassion on the ignorant and those that are out of the way; to toil so assiduously that He had no leisure so much as to eat; to live a life of such self-sacrifice that even His kinsfolk said, “He is beside Himself.” and, “as the Father hath sent Me, even so,” says Christ, “send I you”: In other words, I send you back into the world out of which I have saved you. I send you back into the world to live with the cross stamped upon you. O brethren and sisters, how little “blood” there is in our lives! How little is there the bearing of the dying of Jesus in our bodies (2 Cor. 4:10)

Have we begun to “take up the cross” at all? Is there any wonder that we are following Him at such a distance? Is there any wonder that we have such little victory over the power of indwelling sin? There is a reason for that. Mediatorially the Cross of Christ stands alone, but experimentally the cross is to be shared by all His disciples. Legally the cross of Calvary annulled and put away our guilt, the guilt of our sins; but, my friends, I am perfectly convinced that the only way of getting deliverance from the power of sin in our lives and obtaining mastery over the old man within us, is by the cross becoming a part of the experience of our souls. It was at the cross sin was dealt with legally and judicially: it is only as the cross is “taken up” by the disciple that it becomes an experience—slaying the power and defilement of sin within us. And Christ says, “Whosoever doth not bear his cross, cannot be My disciple”. O what need has each Christian here this morning to get alone with the Master and consecrate Himself to His service.