

Say What?

Hard Sayings of Christ:
Take Up Your Cross and Follow Me- Luke 9:23

Background for Luke 9

The cross was an instrument of violent and painful execution. To “take the cross” was to carry the horizontal beam of the cross out to the site of execution, usually past a jeering mob. In rhetorically strong terms, Jesus describes what all true disciples must be ready for: if they follow him, they must be ready to face literal scorn on the road to eventual martyrdom, for they must follow to the cross. From the moment of faith believers must count their lives forfeit for the kingdom (Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background*, IVP, 213).

Because many Palestinian Jews believed that prophets in the Old Testament sense had ceased, ranking Jesus among the prophets would have been radical- but it was not radical enough to grasp his true identity. Jesus' prediction of his death was surprising to the disciples. There were many different views of the Messiah (or messiahs) in Jesus' time, but they all revolved around a deliverance on earth and an earthly kingdom (Keener, 213).

Discipleship entails radical self-denial, daily cross-bearing and accompanying Jesus. Because of the degree to which individuals in Roman antiquity were embedded in networks of kinship, the call to denial cannot be understood along strictly individualistic terms. Rather, to deny oneself was to set aside the relationships, the extended family of origin and inner circle of friends, by which one made up one's identity. By “radical” self-denial, then, is meant openness to constructing a wholly new identity not based on ethnic origins or relationships of mutual obligation, but in the new community that is centered on God and resolutely faithful to Jesus' message. Jesus refers to our cross bearing as being a “daily” activity, signifying that one is to live on a daily basis as though one had been sentenced to death by crucifixion.

In this sense dead to the world that opposes God's purpose, disciples are free to live according to the values of the kingdom of God proclaimed in Jesus' ministry. It may be of interest, too, that persons who had been legally condemned to



Digging
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*“If anyone would come
after me, he must deny
himself and take up his
cross daily and follow me.”
Luke 9:23*

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death forfeited their estates and were denied burial. In the wider Roman world, then, Jesus' metaphor would have spoken to Luke's heightened concerns with the peril of possessions and the pursuit of honorable status. Disciples, then, are called upon to identify with Jesus in his suffering even if they are not necessarily to be sentenced to death on account of their witness for him (Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, Eerdmans, 372-373).

Thoughts on Following Jesus

Jesus' words on discipleship forcefully place himself and God's rule above the very best of all human commitments and priorities. And that is the point. In the world Jesus is creating for those who follow him, God's claim is above all other claims. God's rule demands one's ultimate commitment, and if this commitment clashes with any other (no matter how important), then that other allegiance must give way. But why does Jesus have to put it so sharply? Why such an extreme demand?

Jesus' call to discipleship is a summons to change, a call to experience the world in a new way, an invitation to a new understanding of God, an appeal to reorder human relationships in the light of this picture of God. Old patterns of life are tenacious, however, and old understandings of God do not die without a struggle. Jesus dares to replace our vision of things with a new one. Yet we cling stubbornly to our old way of seeing and discerning and valuing. And so Jesus, in challenging our familiar and comfortable world, can only succeed by making exaggerated claims, by painting extreme images. He must, in a word, *attack* the world that we have allowed to define us, the life we love so much, in order to give us a new life. He must pry loose from the safe haven of our past if we are to be open to experience the reign of God (John T. Carroll and James R. Carroll, *Preaching the Hard Sayings of Jesus*, Hendrickson, 43).

From a description of his own fate, Jesus moves directly to the comparable life of the disciple. As dreadful as his destiny as the Son of Man might be, those who choose to follow him may expect nothing other than the opposition that will become his trademark by the end of his life. This is not because Jesus is a masochist who embraces suffering, but because he is unreservedly committed to the purpose of God- a purpose that resists, and is resisted by, the habits and patterns and powers of the larger world. As the Son of Man fulfills God's design, he will encounter hostility and experience great suffering; can those who follow him along the path of God's purpose expect less? Jesus' message to his disciples pictures a lifetime of discipleship as cross-bearing, not for the sake of suffering but because this is how God's salvation will reach the world: undermining the power structures of the world through daily refusal to engage in the values of the world. For Luke, then, the theology of the cross is rooted in a portrayal of the life of faithful discipleship as the way of the cross (Green, 372).

We must face the implications of the cost of grace as we live our daily lives. Jesus Christ comes first! He learned in early childhood: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5). Later, in his public teaching, he would call this the "first commandment" and, expand it to include loving God "with all your mind" (Mark 12:30). We dare not pass over lightly the word "all." How easy it would be if the call to follow Jesus meant following him part of the time or being loyal most of the time or being true to him with half a mind or with half-hearted devotion (Carroll and Carroll, 47).

Jesus tells his disciples that each of them must “take up his cross” referring to submission to God's will wherever it may lead and explained further by the parallel phrase “deny himself.” Self-denial does not imply self-abuse or lack of self-esteem. As Jesus' disciples, believers should have a better self-image than any other people, but it should be based on God's grace and not their merit. Self-denial does, however, mean putting God and his kingdom priorities first. This should have a visible impact on the nature of one's financial commitments and service to church and world and should lead to the rejection of self-centered arrogance and pride (Craig Blomberg, *The New American Commentary: Matthew*, Holman, 260).

Following Jesus will alter our relationships with people, relationships with possessions, and relationships with our vocation. Jesus has jolting ways of describing the cost of following him in relation to people. “Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead” (Matt. 8:22). “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). In other words, following Jesus is so supremely important that it calls for behaviors that are sometimes going to look like *hate* to the world. I have seen this lived out in agonizing choices that missionaries make to take their little children to risky places and leave aging parents behind, well cared for, but perhaps never to be seen on earth again.

Following Jesus also ruptures our relationship with possessions. Jesus told the rich young man to sell everything he had and follow him (Matt. 19:21). If something gets in the way of following Jesus, we must get rid of it. And this is not unique to that rich man but applies to all of us: “*Any one* of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33). Renouncing what you have may not always mean selling it all. Jesus commended Zacchaeus for giving *half* of his goods to the poor (Luke 19:8-9). But renouncing *all* does mean that everything we have is totally at Jesus' disposal for purposes that please him and that it must never get in the way of radical obedience to his command of love.

Then there is the rupture that following Jesus brings to our vocation. When Jesus called the twelve to follow him, none of them was a professional Jesus-follower. They were fishermen and tax collectors and the like. They had jobs. Incredibly, it went something like this: “As [Jesus] passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he rose and followed him” (Mark 2:14). Just like that! (As far as we know.) For most of us it was not that simple. But it does happen. And it may happen to you. Not everyone should leave his vocation to follow Jesus. When one man wanted to leave his homeland and follow Jesus, Jesus said, “Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you” (Mark 5:19). Most of us should stay where we are and follow Jesus in all the radical ways of love demanded by our present position and relationships. But not everyone. For some following Jesus will mean a risky rupture in your vocation. Do not be afraid to follow him away from the familiar.

Jesus has no desire to trick you into following him with a kind of bait and switch. He is utterly up front about the cost. In fact, he urges you to count the cost. “For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? . . . Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand?” (Luke 14:28, 31). Let the call to follow Jesus be clear and honest. “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). It is costly, and it is worth it (John Piper, *What Jesus Demands of the World*, Crossway, 72-73).

Home Group Questions

1. What makes being a disciple of Jesus hard?
2. Why do you think Jesus teaches about discipleship after the prediction of his death (Luke 9:21-23)?
3. How do Jesus' teachings on discipleship differ from people who believe God's primary desire is for you to be happy in this life?
4. How can we "take up our cross" today?
5. Is it fair for Jesus to ask for this kind of devotion? Why or why not?
6. What makes following Jesus worth the sacrifice?

Questions for Personal Application

7. Are you taking up your cross everyday and following Jesus? If not, what are you giving your devotion to in place of Jesus?