

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen

Have you ever wanted to sort Jesus out? Like Peter telling Jesus the idea of dying to live is completely ridiculous?! Peter might have thought; 'Jesus you can't say such things', 'if you're going to be our leader you can't die' or 'Jesus you can't do it like that'.

Do we do this all the time? 'Jesus you can't do it like that, Jesus you can't say that', 'you can't save us by dying, it doesn't make sense', 'You can't have died for all people, surely you only died for those who reform their life to my standards', 'you can't give us eternal life by washing us with water and saying a few words', 'you can't give us your body and blood with bread and wine, that doesn't make sense'. These are just the big theological issues. What about all the ways God cares for us, protects us and guides us and we never notice and claim that God can't work in that way?

Peters' claim, or rebuke, must have been something pretty special to illicit such a response from Jesus: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

Surely with that response, we have to say that Peters' words and thoughts were sinful; after all, Jesus calls him Satan and claims he has the thinking of man, not God; sinful thinking. What is Peter's sin, and where does that leave him concerning Jesus? Do we see from here on that Peter is out of the 12, he's fallen and outside of grace. Not at all! Six days later Peter is up the mountain witnessing the Transfiguration and saying foolish things again. Peters' big sin has not pushed him out of the group; he has been kept close to Jesus, in the inner circle. Jesus has forgiven him, and it isn't even recorded, maybe Peter doesn't even know.

What is the sin that Peter commits? If we wanted to place it in the 10 commandments, where would we start? Peter wants to tell Jesus what to do, he wants to tell God what to do, he thinks he knows better than God, he does not trust Jesus' words of explanation and prophesy, and he does not believe that Jesus knows what will happen to him. As soon as we hear words of trust and belief, we should immediately jump to one commandment, The first commandment. Peter thinks he knows better than God, he has made himself God!

This is the same sin we commit when we don't trust Jesus' words. Peter is an idolater, yet he is still a follower, one of the closest disciples, how can this be? Don't we usually think that when someone sins, they fall from grace? Yet in our epistle reading next week, we are going to hear that we are all saved by grace and today we heard it from Paul also, trust in the promise is counted as righteousness, **not perfection but trust in God's promise**. Therefore, we all continue to sin, even though we have heard the message and believed, we continue to break all the commandments, especially commandment number one, 'You shall have no other gods.'

What does Jesus ask of us, and the crowd right after he rebukes Peter? He says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it."

Jesus calls us to take up the cross, it's not pretty. It is not a fashion symbol, big, chunky and shiny for the sake of appearances. Jesus calls us to join him in the activity that he must do. He must suffer, die and rise. The cross of Christ is far from attractive.

Have you ever watched the crucifixion: perhaps in a movie? It is a gruesome, grotesque, painful, bloody, death! I don't think there is a painless way to die, but there might be less painful ways. The cross, it's one of the most painful ways to die. Jesus tells us if we want to follow him, we must die with him, take up our cross and follow him.

It's not to walk around with the cross. Occasionally you see people literally trying to carry a cross to show their dedication or remind people of Jesus' suffering. Sometimes churches do it on Good Friday. We see

them on TV, or when travelling through a new town, with some flimsy little 2x4 cross, on wheels so it doesn't get too heavy. They've missed the point by making it easy!

Did Jesus look at the cross and say, 'Sorry, that's too big, that's too rough, can I just get the sander out and take off the splinters and then you can nail me to it?' No way! He took the suffering and pain, and he knew it was coming and he still followed through. Let's be clear, crucifixion lasts hours; it's a long, slow, painful death!

Crucifixion means death, dying to our own desires in life. When Jesus says; 'let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me', he wants you to die, to deny yourselves and die.

This is a great struggle for the Christian, as Peter demonstrates with his response to Jesus. We have to turn from all the things we think are important and be willing to follow Christ, turn and deny; DIE to all the things we want because he has already gone through death into life, for us. We have to;

- Die to our agenda – 'Jesus I'll save myself thanks and this is how I will do it'
- Die to our desire – 'Jesus these things make me feel happy, fulfilled, I'll do these please'
- Die to our need to be right – 'No Jesus you can't die that way'

This is Peter demonstrating the original sin, 'Did God really say...' In answer to Jesus' proclamation; 'the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.' Mark 8:31-32 (ESV)

Sometimes as the church, we focus on the verses that tell us God created humanity in his image. We look at these verses and God's pronouncement that it was good, very good, and we point out that humanity is good. We can do good things. We look at these verses when someone has a negative view of themselves when they don't feel worthy, it's like the Christian answer to self-esteem; 'you are created in the image of God'. Or encouragement to treat all people with dignity, 'we are all created in the image of God.'

But there is a flip side in the Bible, before Noah went into the Ark Moses tells us, "5 The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." Nothing has changed, this is still the state of humanity, every intention of the thoughts of his heart are only evil continually. Ouch!

This is backed up by Paul and all the New Testament writers; "23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Romans 3:23 (ESV). So, if we are good because God created us, yet we are sinners because we all became sinners in the fall; when Jesus says, 'you must die', what is it that must die? How do we differentiate between what is good, a remnant of the image of God, and what is evil continually coming out of our hearts? How on earth can we tell the difference? Further to this how do we know what is the new will that God has given to us by his spirit?

One reason this is so difficult for us is because we have assimilated our beliefs into our culture over such a long period that we can't tell the difference. Our Western world is built on Christian values, maybe not forgiveness, which is at the core of the Christian faith, but most of the other values that we see in our society come from the Christian faith. So how do we separate 'this is just how we do things in our society' from our sinful hearts and minds?

We've been taught that we can witness to Christ in our daily lives and that we don't need to change anything about how we live, but that's not what Jesus is telling us here. Our culture thinks it's ok to just be a 'good person', and in many respects, most of us are good people, but that's not what God requires, he requires perfection. None of us live up to His requirements. That's why we must deny ourselves, take up our cross and DIE with Christ.

Even if we are good people, the one thing we can't do is not be selfish, when it all boils down to it almost everything we do is for ourselves:

- We chose a life partner based on what makes us feel good.
- We choose to have children because we think it will make us feel happy.
- We choose a job based on what we enjoy and expect it to offer us enjoyment our whole lives, and if it doesn't, we change to one that we think will.
- We are free to participate in sports and social activities because they make us happy.
- and of course, we are free to not do any of these things in our constant search for happiness.
- all our life choices are centred around 'me'.

Even our participation in church is sometimes based on our selfish desire to be happy, fulfilled, valued, and important. We don't attend because we know we need it, or we want to hear God's word; it's because we think it makes us feel good, or we think we have to because we are doing God's work, or we've just always done it. Often our motivation to join God and his people in His house is far from pure.

It's very easy for us to do that in our society because realistically no one is challenging our faith or our life, although that could be changing. But Jesus tells us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and DIE. To turn from our looking in and look to him. None of these things that we think make us happy are going to save our souls, none of them are going to give us eternal life, and none of them can restore our relationship with God.

That is the crux of the problem; our relationship with God is broken, it's forever damaged because of our selfish desire, our service of me!

When we are honest with ourselves most of our work amounts to trying to gain the whole world. We are pretty realistic, we know we can't all be dictators controlling the world, but we sure want to control the bit around us. I work hard at my job, to pay my bills, and feed my family, I buy things I enjoy, and do things I want to do. I worked hard all my life and now I'm retired and can do what I like with my time and money. This is a first commandment matter, 'I can save myself, by things I do, and things I say; I don't have to trust Jesus' words. We are not talking about people out there, this is a problem for us in the church today, for all the 'me's' in the pews; we want to be like Peter and tell Jesus how to do it.

That is why Jesus willingly took up his cross, and carried it right up to death, to restore us to a right relationship with the Father. He must suffer, die and rise and he did. Not just to compensate for our sin, and obsession with ourselves but to completely override our sin and replace it with his righteousness, his care, and his service to others. That's what happens when we turn from ourselves and turn to Jesus. That is the life of baptism, that is the life of repentance.

In a completely unfair substitution, we are given his righteousness before the Father, his desire to serve others, and his spirit to strengthen us in his work; while he takes on our sin and all the pain that we have caused him. (Grace)

We hear the gospel, the good news that Jesus died for us in our stead, and believe it, and we get all the things that Jesus promises he will give. Just like Abram got the things God promised because he believed, he was not a good person, who always did right, he was considered righteous because he believed God's promise. It was counted to him as righteousness, just as 'It will be counted (as righteousness) to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord,²⁵ who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.'

The question of following is one of the most difficult commands of Christ; nothing that he says is easy but this is the most difficult. Somehow over history, we've made following Christ into something easy that we just tack on to our lives on a Sunday morning, but that is never what Christ wanted. If we are just tacking

Christ onto Sunday morning we are just like Peter, thinking from our human perspective with no idea of who God is and what he has done for us.

If we are honest, every day there are things that we hear about, think about, and have written down to do that means we have to deny our own desires to serve ourselves and follow Christ, and daily we don't do them. We break the first commandment by making ourselves into a god and failing to trust Jesus and his promises. But he has given us the gift of faith, we can trust his promises, not because we are good at trusting him, **but because he is trustworthy, his promises are fulfilled.**

When we fail to deny ourselves and take up our cross, we are like Peter again, telling Jesus 'you don't have to die, you silly messiah, it can't be like that, we'll save ourselves'. Christ has called us to follow him in the way of the cross not to willingly disobey, but as saved and redeemed people to willingly follow. When we do disobey, he has called us to return to him for forgiveness and continue living in that forgiveness, that is hearing and trusting the fulfilled promise that 'the Son of Man **must** suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.'

Following the way of the cross may mean:

- Turning the other cheek when we are hurt. Forgiving even our brothers and sisters in the church.
- Standing by His church when the world says we should abandon it, or when the organisation that is supposed to be the church has abandoned it.
- Standing up for God's truth when everyone else wants to follow Satan's lie.
- Doing good that will receive no applause, and then doing it again.
- Sitting with someone who is grieving or ill, when we have much better things to do with our time.
- Visiting with someone who we think should be able to get out and about.
- Treating the down and out as children of God.
- Making food for ungrateful people who seem to be better off than we are.
- Visiting someone else's parents in the nursing home because they don't have time – and neither do we.
- Talking about the faith even when we are ridiculed for it, or it seems too scary.
- Doing good for people who will do no good to us in return.
- Praying for people we don't want to care about.
- Praying for those who have got only themselves to blame for their predicament, or maybe even visiting and caring for those same people.
- Praising God and telling people what a loving and caring God we worship, as we struggle through our own pain and grief.
- Obeying his commands even when they are unpopular or even illegal.

Taking up the cross means we do all these things and more, not because they make us feel good, not because they will earn us anything, but because God has changed us when he forgives us. When we realise, we are not changed and have reverted to sinner version 1.0, we are called to deny ourselves, look to Jesus who did take up his cross, who did die for us, and receive his forgiveness over and over again. This transforms us from inward-looking selfish sinners into dead sinners on the way of the cross.

Amen

Peace