

# Deny Yourself, Take Up Your Cross

## Follow Me

---

David J. Dahms  
Lazy Mountain Bible Church  
June 13, 2010

### Introduction

In August of 2003, the Church of the Holy Cross in New York City was broken into twice. In the first break-in, thieves stole a metal moneybox that had been resting next to a votive candle rack. Three weeks later, vandals escaped with something much more valuable: they unbolted a 4-foot long, 200-pound plaster Jesus from a meditation area, taking the statue of Christ, but leaving behind his wooden cross on the wall. The church caretaker, David St. James, confessed his bewilderment at this: "They just decided, 'We're going to leave the cross and take Jesus.' We don't know why they took just him. We figure if you want the crucifix, you take the whole crucifix." In other words, David St. James was saying, "If you want Jesus, you take his cross, too."

### Leaving the Cross

It's a bit embarrassing to admit this, but I understand the choice of those thieves. I like the figure of Jesus: I like the clever and compassionate way he treated people; I admire the clarity and balance of his ethical teaching; I love his stories. The character of Christ is the ideal of health and wholeness toward which I want to grow more and more. The whole world would be better if more of us lived Christ's way. According to almost every study I read, millions of people—even those who hardly ever darken the door of a church or have serious questions about God—are quite attracted to the figure of Jesus.

But as for his cross—that's a little more complicated. Some of us prefer not to get too close to that. Isn't there already enough violence, blood, and cruelty in this world? Hasn't religion often wrapped itself up in that same kind of horror in the name of God? Who wants to associate Jesus with that sort of thing? I can appreciate that sentiment.

### Lifting the cross

There are other good reasons why someone might choose to take Jesus but leave the cross. You might do it because you don't want to get too near his blood. You might do it because you honor his blood. But there's another reason many of us might leave the cross where it stands: We don't want to shed any of our own blood.

We like the figure of Jesus; we like being forgiven people; but we are not sure we want to follow or be formed by Jesus if it means taking up our own cross. But following Jesus does mean we have to take up our cross. Forgiveness of sin and the blessing of eternal life comes through accepting what Jesus did on his cross. But truly following Jesus—being formed into the image of Jesus and knowing his abundant life—comes through accepting what we must do with our cross. Hear the words of Jesus recorded in Mark 8:34–38. "If anyone would

come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

But I am getting ahead of myself. If you like Jesus, the peacemaker, the forgiver, but don't like the cross, don't like denying yourself to follow the will of God, you are in good company. Even people who were with him, who saw him heal the lepers, raise the dead, feed the 4000 and 5000, were there for the sermon the mount—even those closest to him his disciples and his parents and brothers and sisters—loved Jesus, they just wanted him without a cross. They had a better idea—or so they thought—they wanted crossless Christianity. They wanted Jesus, but not the cross.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Let's read.

**Mark 8:27–30 (ESV)**

**<sup>27</sup> And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" <sup>28</sup> And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." <sup>29</sup> And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." <sup>30</sup> And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.**

Here is the penultimate moment of the book of Mark. The moment Jesus might have been tempted to say: Finally, they got it, finally after all the teaching, after all the healing, after all the miracles—they see. They finally get it. I am the Christ. I am the one the whole Old Testament promises, I am the fulfillment of all prophecy.

But it must have been just like when we see a 99 yard kick returned for a touchdown, and then the announcer says: Wait, there's a flag on the field, let's see what the call is. And because of a block in the back, the whole wonderful play is called back.

In the very next line, at the very moment Jesus might have been celebrating these slow thinking humans finally got it. Peter shows him he still doesn't get it. That Peter still has a plan for Jesus. That Peter still wants Christianity on his own terms—he wants a Messiah, but not the cross.

We read:

**Mark 8:31–33 (ESV)**

**<sup>31</sup> And he began to teach them 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. <sup>32</sup> And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup> But turning and seeing his**

**disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."**

Peter says, "There must be a mistake. You are all powerful Lord. We have given it all up for you. To follow you. You can't be killed, you don't need to be killed, you don't need to hang on a cross. There must be another way. Here, I have a plan, I call it crossless Christianity."

Peter takes him aside to tell Jesus the new plan he has for his life.

Ever do that? Ever want crossless Christianity—it might be called, "Christianity Light." Half the commitment but all of the salvation. Half the obedience, but all of the blessing. You see in Christianity light we get the name, we get to call our selves Christians without ever having to actually do anything that would deny us anything we want? Right.

Ever wanted Christianity without ever denying yourself anything, without making any turn or change?

Sure, we all do. We are constantly coming up with ways to live our Christianity without the Cross, without denying ourselves anything.

In Crossless Christianity, you don't have to practice sexual purity, you have a better idea, right? Why should I save myself and remain sexually pure until marriage? That is puritan. That went out in the 50's. And why would I deny myself when I am married, you can get anything you want on the web now, why not indulge? Why deny yourself.

In Crossless Christianity, you don't have to pay all your taxes, you know how better to "invest your money for God rather than giving the full share to a Godless government."

In Crossless Christianity, you don't give sacrificially to the church or anyone else. I mean after all, God knows I need a new car, or new clothes, or a new computer, new cell phone plan, why would I deny myself and give when I have all these debts?

In Crossless Christianity, you don't even have to ask, "God what do you want me to do in my relationship with my parents, my spouse, my children, my boss, my former spouses, step parents." And you would never ask, "God show me how to stay married in sickness and health, for richer or poorer, until death do we part." No, we just part, and find another partner who believes like you do in marriage without denying yourself.

You see, in Crossless Christianity you just decide the best way to deal with each and every situation in the way you feel is in your best interests.

But if perhaps you look back at your Crossless Christianity, and what it has brought you to—multiple divorces, babies out of wedlock, family members that won't talk with each other, debts up to your eyeballs, not to mention STD's, serial romances that don't last, going from job, to job, to job.

Then maybe you might be ready to look at real, authentic Christianity. Here is how you tell. Jesus says IT ALWAYS INCLUDES CARRYING A CROSS.

**Mark 8:34–9:1 (ESV)**

<sup>34</sup> And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. <sup>36</sup> For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? <sup>37</sup> For what can a man give in return for his soul? <sup>38</sup> For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” <sup>1</sup> And he said to them, “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.”

His disciples, the crowds, has a plan—there plan is “Jesus heals me, Jesus forgives me, Jesus feeds me, and I do what I want.”

Jesus says that is a recipe for slow, excruciating death. Crossless Christianity is fatal. It will kill you.

I not getting down on smokers, because I know how addictive smoking can be and how difficult it can be to make the habit, and I have my own struggles with bad habits, addiction to Ice Cream is one of them. But no one would deny this scientific truth. From the day you first smoke, if you don’t quit, you will die from the effects of cigarettes. You know how in the United States we use to have this nice, polite warning, “The surgeon general has determined that cigarette smoking may be hazardous to your health.” And it is kind of hidden on the side of the pack, well in England they don’t beat around the bush, because in an October 2008 study in England they found that smoking continues to be the biggest killer in England and the cause of 87,000 premature deaths each year. So on the front of every pack of cigarettes in England in big bold letters it says: These will kill you! And on the back of the package they say: Smoking clogs the arteries, and causes heart attacks and strokes.

That is what Jesus is saying, in big, bold letters, so that we don’t miss it. He turns to the whole crowd, because this teaching isn’t just for the disciples, it is vital for everyone, and He says: Crossless living will kill you. You will loose your soul if you just claim my name but don’t pick up your cross.

You have to deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow me.

Now if there is a word in the English language that we try to use the least, it has to be deny yourself. We are called consumers—conspicuous consumption is what we are all about. We have the consumer price index, not the deny yourself index.

So what does Jesus mean, deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow;

Negatively, one **must deny himself** decisively (“deny” is an aorist imper.) saying no to selfish interests and earthly securities. Self-denial is not to deny one’s personality, to die as

---

imper. imper. imperative

a martyr, or to deny "things" (as in asceticism). Rather it is the denial of "self," turning away from the idolatry of self-centeredness and every attempt to orient one's life by the dictates of self-interest (cf. TDNT, s.v. "*arneomai*," 1:469-71). Self-denial, however, is only the negative side of the picture and is not done for its own sake alone.

Positively, one must **take up his cross**, decisively ("take up" is also an aorist imper.) saying yes to God's will and way. Cross-bearing was not an established Jewish metaphor. But the figure was appropriate in Roman-occupied Palestine. It brought to mind the sight of a condemned man who was forced to demonstrate his submission to Rome by carrying part of his cross through the city to his place of execution. Thus "to take up one's cross" was to demonstrate publicly one's submission/obedience to the authority against which he had previously rebelled.

Jesus' submission to God's will is the proper response to God's claims over self's claims. For Him it meant death on the cross. Those who follow Him must take up *their* (not His) cross, whatever comes to them in God's will as a follower of Jesus. This does not mean suffering as He did or being crucified as He was. Nor does it mean stoically bearing life's troubles. Rather, it is obedience to God's will as revealed in His Word, accepting the consequences without reservations for Jesus' sake and the gospel (cf. 8:35).<sup>1</sup>

So what does this practically mean?

A few years ago, Peter Hiett gave a message that was provocatively entitled "Marriage: A Sneaky Way to Get a Person Crucified." At first the title seemed crazy to me. What in the world does marriage have to do with crucifixion? Then I thought about it, and I realized the answer: *a lot*. You don't sign up for marriage because you're thrilled about the prospect of learning to deny yourself or losing your old way of life; you don't go into it thinking, *Oh good, this is going to be really hard. Thank goodness I'll finally get to have my character defects nailed and my selfishness flogged*. Nobody goes into marriage or any other covenant in life because they are eager to take up a cross. Who would voluntarily sign up for a summer camp whose symbol was a giant mosquito? "Come to Camp Stinger! Your blood is our business!" When I listen to the way of Jesus, it seems that crazy. Turn the other cheek? Pray for those who persecute me? Forbid myself not just from touching lustfully, but even looking at others lustfully? Visit the criminal in prison? Give my hard-earned money to a beggar? No way! It's unrealistic. It's overly demanding. It's hard to walk that way in life.

Here is how you tell that you are a Christian. Here is how you tell that you are following the authentic Christ. You are carrying a cross.

---

cf. cf. *confer*, compare

s.v. s.v. *sub verbo*, under the word

imper. imper. imperative

cf. cf. *confer*, compare

<sup>1</sup> Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Mk 8:34). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

I may mean you are in a bad marriage—I don't mean a physically abusive marriage—I mean a real marriage, a marriage that has its share of bumps and bruises, disappointments and miss communication--and you are staying there. It means that you accept your promise to love them through it all, and that person you are married to is part of your cross you are carrying. ( You won't read this in the advice columns in the paper ) That is why Jesus said, "What God has joined together, let know one separate. That is why we wouldn't even think of living together—that is crossless Christianity. Living together is the ultimate in crossless living, it is saying "I will move in with you see if this works out," it is taking a person for the good, but giving yourself an "opt out" if the relationship goes south.

Guess what, we are all naturally selfish self-centered people moving in with a person does not change that, and that fact alone will guarantee the relationship will go south. But in marriage you are saying, "yes, I will pick up my cross, I will deny myself." It is saying "Yes, I want to join myself, a naturally selfish self centered person, to this other naturally selfish self centered person, and with the help of God, and under the blessing of God, deny myself, pick up my cross, and give myself to this person—forever and be fully know by this other person."

Marriage is just one small example of what Jesus is talking about. Is it any wonder so marriages fail today. They are trying to have a souless union, a union without the cross, with denying yourself daily and following Jesus.

Is it any wonder so many friendships are so trite? They are crossless. Is it any wonder that our Christianity is so ineffectual? It is because it is crossless. It is saying, "Give me Jesus, but please don't give me a cross."

## Conclusion

### Music Team Comes Forward

So let me conclude with the words of Jesus, and as I do, ask yourself, which kind of Christianity you have, crossless, or crossbased. The answer will be telling.

#### Mark 8:34–9:1 (ESV)

<sup>34</sup> And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. <sup>36</sup> For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? <sup>37</sup> For what can a man give in return for his soul? <sup>38</sup> For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."