

NO BED OF ROSES

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Scripture: Matthew 16:24-26

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"²⁴ Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me. ²⁵ For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. ²⁶ For what good will it do a person if he gains the whole world, but forfeits his soul? Or what will a person give in exchange for his soul?"

Heavenly Father, through Your Spirit, amplify Lord for us the words of Your Son, so that we may understand, and even beyond understanding, appropriate, and after appropriating Lord, apply it in our lives and to that end, that each one of us will be in Your beautiful presence, following hard after You. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

I think one of the first things to do when we look at a passage like this, is to establish who we are in relationship to what the Bible is saying. Jesus is addressing this to His disciples, saying, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, He must deny Himself, take up His cross, and follow Me." I think it would be wise for us to first understand where we are in this whole concept of who God is as a Creator, who we are as His creation, and whether we would fall into this category of disciples. Because if it doesn't, or we don't, then it has no bearing on any of us. It's just words!

As we look at establishing this relationship, we need to acknowledge four things I believe that we need to say this is true for me.

1. We acknowledge that God is Creator God, that He is the One who spoke this world into existence, that He is the One who flung those stars into space and created this beautiful canopy over us; He is the One who drew a line and said, "Only this far can you come before land starts." He is the One who placed the vegetation, these beautiful trees, the flowers, all the things that add such beauty to the world. He did it. He is the One who put fish in the water and birds in the air and such beautiful animals on the ground. We must acknowledge that He is Creator God.
2. We need to acknowledge that we are His creation, that He made us, that He formed us. The Bible tells us that we are fearfully and wonderfully made, that we are the clay and His is our Potter. We need to understand that in relationship to the Creator God, this magnificent Creator, we are His creation.
3. He has a purpose for His creation. He didn't just form us and then plunk us down on the earth and say, "Okay, go and have some fun!" But He has a purpose for each one of us. We find that purpose in Genesis 1:26-28.
God says, "Let us make mankind in our own image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.

God created us with a purpose. He created us to be stewards to manage His creation. In fact, that's the understanding of the Hebrew word *menahel* for 'manager' – it's one who takes authority from God and then oversees God's creation. That's the purpose that God had for us.

4. As we look at His purpose for His creation, what does it mean for you and me? How does it touch us? What do I need to do to fulfil this purpose that God has given me? So I need to ask the question: How do I manage the resources that are around me? How do I reflect His glory? How am I fruitful? How do I keep His will? How do I fulfil my reason for being here at this time, in this place, in this era amidst all the situations and circumstances that we are facing right now? What does God have in store for me?

Those are the four areas that I believe we should first look at as we begin to look at what it means to be a disciple. We know that creation didn't stay in this pristine condition; the Fall happened, and we lost it. We gave allegiance to Satan. It took the incarnation of Jesus to begin the restoration work, to draw us back to a loving and holy God. He did that by paying the penalty for our sins. God had said that the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. He paid the price for us and restored to us that relationship that we have with God. And in restoring that relationship, He gave us back our purpose. And in giving us back purpose, He called us to be His disciples.

So today, we are able to acknowledge all of the above. If we have bought into the sacrifice that Jesus made, then this passage is front and center for you and me. We are called to be His disciples. Jesus said to His disciples: If anyone wishes to follow after me, he must deny himself. So beloved, we are followers of Jesus; we are followers of God.

Remember Elijah standing in front of the children of Israel and the priests of Baal! His clarion call to them was: If the Lord is God, follow Him. And if Baal is god, then follow Baal. But let's not vacillate between two opinions. It was crystal clear. If the Lord is God, follow Him.

Remember Bartimæus! The bible tells us that Bartimæus was sitting by the side of the road (Greek = *paratein hodon*). Then he had this encounter with Jesus and v. 52 of the 10th chapter ends by saying that he got up and began to follow Him on the road (*enthe hodon*), in the way, or in the road. Following Him on the road.

Beloved, that is the call of the disciples even today. The call to discipleship is not static; it is dynamic. We are not called to be spectators to watch this Christian parade go by, or to just sing a few songs, enjoy ourselves. We are called to be dynamic followers of God – ongoing, step by step by step, we move after Him. Not sitting down and watching something happen. We know that there's plenty that we can sit and watch today. The internet is full of it. The call for us is to be followers of Jesus, to dynamically follow Him.

Then Jesus says, "If you want to be My disciples, if you want to follow me, there are two things that you need to be aware of:

1. You will have to deny yourself
2. You will have to take up your cross

What would He want us to deny as we look at ourselves? The original term is to lay something down, to put something down intentionally. What would be things that you and I need to put down? Let me give you some areas in our lives that I think could be areas that we need to be very careful.

They may be areas of great strength and success, but they could lead to a place where we need to deny them.

- **Our abilities:** We are all gifted in different ways to be able to do something and do it well. And yet, in doing it well, we can get to a point where we abuse it. Take leadership, for example. We can be a good leader, and then we can get to a place where there is exploitation – exploitation of the underprivileged, exploitation of the poor and the uneducated. Leadership can also get to a place where there is abuse and the purposes of God are not being fulfilled. So we get into that space where we need to deny ourselves and the things that are happening because leadership is an abuse. It could be any ability that you have that you do well, that if it moves to a point where it is not being used in the will of God, that is something that needs to be denied.
- **Service:** How can that be? It is possible that we serve people, we do everything as unto the Lord. that's the call, that it offered as a sacrifice to God. We do our best. Yet it is possible that, even in service to God, that we can begin to be proud of the things that we do, and slowly get to a place where we usurp the glory that must be God's. through our service, people see us and they don't see God. Twice in Isaiah, we're reminded by God: "My glory I will not share with another." We need to be so very careful that at no time do we take God's place in the things that we do.
- **Emotions:** Take love for example. We can operate out of love. But at some point, if we let love get to a place where it is abused, it becomes lust, the other end of the spectrum. So we need to be sure that we never get there, that love never gets into an abusive place, a place where we take advantage. So we need to deny that emotion in ourselves and move back to a loving relationship.
Take anger. The bible tells us: Be angry but do not sin. Anger is an emotion. How do we not sin? Make sure that the behavior that is attached to the emotion is not a sinful behavior. The ability to be angry is like the stopper on a pressure cooker; it releases but we need not make sure that when that it released, it doesn't harm.
- **Talents:** Look at the talents that God has given us. Maybe you are a gifted singer, actor, orator, athlete, sports person. How do you handle it? how do you handle success and fame? Do you handle it with pride, or do you handle it with humility? In your office spaces, when the adulation comes after you've done a good job, how do you handle it? Jesus is saying that you need to be careful to deny these things.
- **Personality:** You may ask how does personality needs to be denied? You broadly look at personality and see that we may be introverts and extroverts; extroverts would be outgoing and introverts would not be outgoing. The difference between both is where we get our energy from. Extroverts get it from people; introverts get it from solitude, "like being alone". yet, we can see that if you're an outgoing person more used to being in the social realm and you enjoy it, there can be times when you can get overbearing. Or if you're an introvert, there can be times when there's passive-aggressive attitudes that come to the fore.

When I do pre-marital counseling for those getting married, I do a personality test with them. It's always interesting, because the one that I do has strengths and weaknesses. And to see that your strengths; at the other end of the spectrum they can turn into a weakness. So be constantly aware that you are never not dealing in weak areas. When you find that, then be able to deny yourself.

What does it mean to take up your cross?

Jesus here is not talking so much about His death as He is talking about what the cross means. The cross was a very well-known instrument of punishment during that time. Let me read what John MacArthur, who has done a lot of research in this area, says about it.

“The cross was a very concrete and vivid reality. It was the instrument of execution reserved for Rome’s worst enemies. It was a symbol of the torture and death that awaited those who dared raise a hand against Roman authority. Not many years before Jesus and the disciples came to Caesarea and Philippi, one hundred men had been crucified in the area.” Then he goes on to say, “There were 800 Jewish rebels who were crucified at Jerusalem, and then during the proconsul Varus, 2000 Jews were killed.” He ends by saying something like 30,000 crucifixions occurred under Roman authority during the lifetime of Christ.

So that was the backdrop to understanding what it means to take up your cross. Jesus is saying that there are some things that need to be crucified. Taking up your cross is to put something to death; something needs to be crucified in our lives.

So, we ask the question: what exactly needs to be crucified in my life? What needs to die in my life? the cross is more than suffering; it’s about death. It’s putting to death and making something final. So, let’s look at a couple of things that we see in the Bible.

Our thoughts: The bible talks about how our thoughts can go on a rampage; we can think things that we ought not to be thinking about. And yet, Paul says in Philippians, “Take every thought captive.” Look at it and say: Is this worthy of my time? As a disciple of Jesus, is this a good thought? If it’s not, then kill it. dismiss it. Don’t dwell upon it. Take every thought captive! In other words, don’t be gentle with these things. To crucify is an aggressive word, and he says that’s how you are to be dealing with the thoughts that come to your head. Nail them and say you have no business here, and I dismiss you from my mind.

Old habits: When you think about sin and the old habits that keep coming back, to recognize that we are a new creation. The old has passed, behold new things have come, and to crucify those old things. Recognize them; this is not part of my disciple walk and to say: I will not go into this area. In fact, in Galatians Paul talks about impure talks, eagerness for lustful pleasure, idolatry, spiritism, hatred, infighting, jealousy and anger, constant effort to get the best for yourself, complaints and criticisms, feeling that everyone else is wrong except those in your own group, wrong doctrine, envy, murder, drunkenness, wild parties, and things like that. All things that we may indulge in which we need to crucify. They need to be nailed to a cross so that they don’t come back to us.

But here’s the thing. Following Jesus’ instructions can be painful. It can be inconvenient. It can be unpopular. And yet, that is par for the course. At no point did Jesus tell us it was going to be easy. In fact, in Matthew 8:19-20 One of the scribes came to Him and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to rest His head.” Think carefully before you say that you will follow Me.

Also, He never lowered the standard. Remember the rich young ruler who came to Him and asked, “what must I do to get eternal life?” and Jesus said, “Keep the commandments. Love and all of that.” he said, “All that I’ve done.” Jesus then said, “Sell all that you have and give it to the poor, and follow Me.” And the man turned and went away. The bible says very clearly that Jesus loved him, but Jesus didn’t stop him from turning around and walking away.

How do we hold on to the things that we have? If God were to say, "Leave it and walk away," would you do so? That's the litmus test. Not how much you have, it's how you hold on to the things that you have. Tomorrow if God was to say, "I want you to leave it. I want you to give this away," would you be able to do it?

Failure and Restoration:

In the midst of that, there is also failure; failure as we walk the path of discipleship. Peter understood that very well. but the path to restoration after remorse and repentance is just one question that Jesus repeated three times. And that one question was: Do you love me? It seems to be at the heart of being a disciple of Jesus. Do we have a love relationship with Him? Do we love Him dearly? If He were to ask us today, "Do you love Me?" what would our answer be? I'm not interested in the things that you do for Me, just tell Me if you love Me. I always point this out in that passage – doing things for Jesus came after this question was answered. Do you love Me? Yes Lord. Feed my sheep. After yes, then feed my sheep. Do you love Me? Yes Lord. Shepherd my flock. Do you love Me? Yes Lord. Feed my lambs. Always after the love question has been answered.

So beloved, I think as we look at our own lives today, and the call to be a true disciple of His, to realize that being a disciple is not convenient. It wasn't convenient for Jesus. The incarnation was not convenient. It was difficult, as the songwriter says: He left the splendor of heaven, He did! But it's a call that He makes on each one of us. If you name Jesus as Savior and Lord, you're His disciple and the call then is to deny yourself, pick up the cross and follow Him.

The question for us today: Is there anything that we need to deny ourselves today? What do we need to put to death in our lives that continue to plague us? How closely are we holding on to the things that He has given us? Would we be ready to let go? Are we learning from Him every day as a disciple ought to learn of the Master? Are we being obedient to Him? Are we emulating Him? Do people see Jesus in us?

There was an old chorus that said:

When the morning breaks, and when I awake,
This my plea will be
Lord today, I would ask of Thee
More like Jesus that I would be.
Then I'd be like Jesus
Only by His grace
More and more like Jesus
Till I see Him face to face.

If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself, pick up his cross and follow Me.

I don't know where you are this morning, beloved. Could be that you've lost your way. You started off as a disciple with zeal and fervor and somewhere along the way it got too difficult. Or love just grew cold and yet, the good news always is that we come to the foot of the cross, to the table of mercy and grace. Here forgiveness is offered, cleansing is done, U-turns are allowed, confessions are received.

So let's prepare our hearts to come to the table and come as the Holy Spirit directs each one of us to come.
