

Following Christ

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Psalter 10

Scripture: Matthew 16:13–28

Psalter 112

Sermon Text: Matthew 16:24

Psalter 335

Psalter 52

Beloved congregation, is it not true that every man, woman, boy or girl is always working on how to escape hardships? There are people that surround themselves with all kinds of insurance policies so that when hardships arise they know that everything will be taken care of for them. Others have an extensive life insurance policy so that when death occurs, the remaining family will be provided for. Many of our corporations have safety programs to insure safety to employees in different industries, construction included.

Society is geared to be always working at how to prevent hardships in life. Why is that? Well, because no one likes hardships. I'll be the first to admit it, and I know that you will too. If we have a hard day today, we're hoping that tomorrow will be better than today.

If we have something unpleasant or challenging to face in the future, we're already thinking about how we can work it out, because we do not want any significant measure of anxiety or stress.

Isn't it true that what we struggle with, worry about, and try to resolve, quite often doesn't end up being the way we thought about it, or work out the way

we planned in our minds? We really are as human beings, a bundle of worries and needs, aren't we? Yet, why worry? Really, why worry?

Why is it that we can't accept what God in His sovereignty lays upon each of us? Why is it that we're so opposed to, cantankerous about, and rebellious with God-sent afflictions, troubles, and miseries?

Why? Because our flesh doesn't like them. But furthermore, though we don't think of it in this way, don't troubles, trials, setbacks, hardship, and afflictions come because of what we've done against God? Staring us in the face are the consequences of our own sins. But how many of us really look at it that way?

Let's stop and think for a moment. How many of us at present have some type of hardship, and are we asking ourselves, "What's the reason for it?" Ultimately, the reason is traceable back to sin!

Perhaps you never thought about it in this way, but maybe this is the message that God in His gracious providence intends to use to bring you to realize your need for Him. Maybe this is the message that will bring you to Him who promises to resolve your issues, if you come to Him. If it's a sin issue, salvation issue, or a hardship issue, He can resolve it, I guarantee you!

Has God not said, "And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me" (Ps. 50:15)? Notice that God puts the word "day" as singular, thereby indicating that as you have a trouble today, and another tomorrow, and another the next day, you may call upon Him each and every day, for He will resolve each day's trouble. Is He a God that He should lie? Indeed not! Try Him, He will not fail you! As He says, "I will deliver thee," so too Scripture says, "thou shalt glorify me." You will praise and thank Him for His mercy!

It's hard for our flesh to bear a cross, and only two reactions are possible. We can either accept the cross

and surrender to the Lord, or we can rebel against the cross and kick against God's sovereign will and way. But if we rebel, the cross will only get more difficult.

Are you aware of the biblical truth that God often brings troubles and afflictions upon us in order to bring us back to Him? In Job 33:29–30 God records, “Lo, all these things worketh God oftentimes with man, to bring back his soul from the pit, to be enlightened with the light of the living.” Still, we want to run away from troubles and bury them, not realizing that God in His mercy aims to turn our hearts to Him for the good and gain of our souls, both presently and eternally.

And so it is certain that every human being has a cross. Job 14:1 confirms this truth. “Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble.”

Have you heard the story of the village in which everyone was to put their cross on the front lawn so that all passing by could see them? As one passerby went from house to house viewing each cross, he concluded that at each place the cross was too great for him. But at one house there was no cross. This made the man think, Well, this is the place where I think I could find peace, comfort, and rest. Here is a place without trouble! Proceeding to the door with confidence, he knocked. The door opened. He asked the woman, “Is there no cross at this house as I don't see it on the lawn?” The woman replied, “My cross is so big, I can't get it out the door.” Needless to say, the person carried on without finding peace, comfort, and rest. Most certainly, there is no peace, comfort, or rest apart from God.

Beloved, in this sermon Jesus is going to speak to us not only about following Him, but that in following Him we will have to deny ourselves and be cross-bearers. There is a course that is to be followed for those who deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Christ. But there's also the blessed reality of

the enjoyments that result even while bearing those different crosses so that a person can say, “It is good for me to be afflicted.” Job responded in this way when he lost all. He said, “The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21). The apostle Paul had the cross of the thorn in the flesh, and he prayed three times for its removal, but how did Jesus respond? He said, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” Oh beloved, do you not grasp the faithfulness of Jesus to sustain His own under cross-bearing who faithfully submit and surrender to His cross? And then Paul declares, “Most gladly therefore will I glory in infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:8–10). So, Paul was accepting Christ’s cross since he was assured of sufficient grace and the fact that he would not be forsaken, even in his trial. What a sweet and blessed place to be! Jesus will provide, and make the cross sweet!

Let’s now turn to Matthew 16:24 where it’s written, “Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.”

Our theme for this verse is **Following Christ**.

1. The Course Described
2. The Advantages Enjoyed

Now you may be wondering how it’s possible to enjoy advantages under trials, crosses, losses, persecutions, and so on. Scripture has already provided two proofs in the lives of Job and Paul, and it will become clear that Scripture provides more for our instruction and comfort

to prove that the enjoyments far outweigh the miseries, troubles, and trials.

1. The Course Described

Why does Jesus bring this text into focus for the disciples, and for you and me? The context contains the answer.

In looking at the previous verses, our attention is drawn to Matthew 16:13. In this verse, Jesus asks the disciples a question of greatest importance, namely, “Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?” Simply stated, Jesus is asking His disciples to share with Him who the public thinks He is.

The disciples respond by saying that some “say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets” (Matt. 16:14).

But now Jesus comes with the probing and personal question that pierces to the core of the disciples’ hearts, as well as yours and mine, by asking, “But whom say ye that I am?” (Matt. 16:15).

How does Simon Peter respond? He states, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). What a confession of faith! Why so? Because this was the unshakable and eternal foundation upon which the souls of the disciples had found solid rest. Is this your confession? Is Jesus Christ your life, your love, and your Lord?

Notice the commendation that follows from Jesus. He says, “Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 16:17).

Beloved, Spirit-wrought heart religion is by revelation, not via pictures and dreams, nor is true heart religion an intellectual matter alone. True heart religion is the portion of every child of God by means of special revelation which is the Word of God. In His Word is

revealed the way of repentance, salvation, and sanctification through faith in Jesus Christ.

Peter, the disciples, and every child of God come to know God through Jesus Christ by the Spirit as revealed in the Word of God. This revelation of the truth and its application to the heart re-establishes a blessed and unbreakable relationship with a triune God. That relationship is also solid and secure. It is a relationship that has as its solidity, the *Rock*, Christ Jesus, which is why nothing can destroy the relationship.

Jesus confirms this by saying, "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).

What Jesus is doing here is not only bringing out Peter's confession and instructing him how he arrived at that confession, but now He's telling Peter that Jesus Christ is the only solid Rock upon which the entire church finds rest, but also through whom the church will be victorious. Jesus is setting the stage for what He will say to His disciples as well as you and me in Matthew 16:24. He's encouraging and strengthening His disciples by telling them that as living members of Him, their living Head, they will achieve the glorification of His Father as well as obtain a rich inheritance.

Then Jesus introduces the subject of His sufferings and death. Thus, He builds them up, strengthens their faith, commends them for their faith, and then introduces the way whereby they will achieve that victory, and the way whereby their religion of the heart will be tested, whether it's true or false.

Isn't that always the case, beloved, that our religion will be tested as to its sincerity, whether true or false, by the crosses we encounter in our lives and how we react to them? Isn't this one of the lessons in the parable of the seed that fell into four different types of ground in Matthew 13?

What occurred when the seed fell on stony ground? At first appearance it looked so good and promising, but then we read, “But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended” (Matt. 13:20–21).

You see, the disciples had a problem. Their perception of Jesus while on earth was that He would establish an earthly kingdom of which He would be the Head, and they His subjects. They had no understanding of Jesus’ redemptive work for the salvation of sinners. They had no clue that by the cross not only would Jesus earn a crown, but the disciples by cross-bearing would obtain a crown. Jesus lovingly instructs them that He would not be an earthly king with all kinds of earthly pomp, but that He had come to give His life a ransom for sinners through suffering and dying. Jesus confirms this in Matthew 16:21: “From that time forth began Jesus to shew 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.”

But how do we know that the disciples were not thinking about Jesus’ life on earth as one of suffering which would end in death? By Peter’s immediate response: “Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee” (Matt. 16:22). Literally in the Greek those words expressed by Peter mean, “Lord, pity thyself!” Peter was stressing with Jesus that there was no need for Jesus to lay hardships on Himself. Peter would prevent any hardship, death included, from overcoming Jesus.

How does Jesus respond? “But he (Jesus) turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me Satan: thou art an offense unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men” (Matt.

16:23). What Jesus means is this: Satan had continuously opposed His work throughout Jesus' life on earth. He aimed to thwart Jesus' work of redeeming sinners. One of the ways Satan did this was by tempting Jesus in Matthew 4:1–11. Satan's goal was to put a roadblock in Jesus' way so that redemption would never be obtained for sinners like you and me. Thus the Devil didn't savor the things of God, nor was Satan one with God's plan of redemption. He wanted to destroy the redemption of sinners in whatever way possible.

Thus Jesus is saying, "Peter, your attitude and aim is like Satan's because you're not looking at what I've come to do as being of any value. Rather, you're an obstacle to the call of My Father to die in the place of sinners."

Look at the order of Jesus' presentation. First He draws out a wonderful confession from Peter. Then He commends Peter for this confession, followed by telling Peter about the source of His work in Peter's soul. He then provides Peter with the comfort and assurance that the church redeemed by blood shall never perish because the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. After that, He introduces His sufferings. But Peter's response is simply, "No Lord, I will not allow this suffering and death to occur." Yet Jesus is teaching Peter and all of us, "As My way to the crown is via the cross, so every faithful follower of Me will have to bear a cross after which a crown will be granted. It can't be any other way, Peter. It can't be any other way, congregation. The way to the crown is via the cross!

Peter's affection was certainly commendable. He loved the Lord Jesus and didn't want to see Him suffer and die. When we love someone, do we not do all we can to prevent his or her hardship and trouble? Who of us who love our children and grandchildren want to see them suffer? Have we not grieved, sorrowed, and even wept when our loved ones have had to face hardships?

And will we not do whatever it takes to prevent their suffering? Certainly!

Though we commend Peter for his love and affection for Jesus, we cannot commend him for being an obstacle for the salvation of sinners.

Jesus now proceeds to tell Peter as well as all of us, “If any *man* will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me.” “If any *man*” means any person, boy or girl, man or woman! No one is excluded from the call to follow Christ.

Jesus teaches us that following after Christ entails self-denial. The text says it. “If any man will come *after* me.” You and I, dear believer, can fall prey to a covetous spirit. We can say, “I’d like to have this earthly object or that possession,” even when it has nothing to do with our spiritual profit and our life lived for Christ. We must crucify our flesh and deny ourselves when it comes to anything in this life that rivals Christ. Anything that competes against God and doesn’t advance His glory must be forsaken. In Matthew 5:29–30, Jesus emphasizes the need to pluck out our eye and cut off our right hand. Certainly this is required when you and I, dear believer, hanker after worldly, fleshly materialism, or any other object that conflicts with serving God.

How far-reaching is the call to practice self-denial! When we do so through God’s grace, we give God the glory and the result will be greater humility and more growth in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

There can be other issues in the lives of God’s people that require self-denial, too. For example, God’s people may rejoice in Christ and enjoy His spiritual leadings, yet there can be times when, while sharing God’s gracious work with others, they fail to end in God, becoming proud of their spiritual experiences. How great is the need for humility and brokenness of

heart for God-dishonoring sinful human pride! How we need to pray for self-denial!

Jesus says, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself." Initially when God began His work in our hearts and lives, dear believers, did we not begin to seek after God? Was there not a seeking after the Lord because we realized we had lost Him, needed Him, and wanted Him back?

Not only is there an initial coming to Christ, but there's a continual coming after Christ in the life of sanctification. Oh beloved, does it not become the desire of our hearts to give up all for Christ because He is altogether lovely, and the chiefest among ten thousand? Then we no longer exalt ourselves, but fight against our God-dishonoring ambitions. Do we find within our hearts and lives the desire to end in the God of all grace and what He has wrought within us by His Holy Spirit?

This life of following Christ in self-denial is captured by Paul who said in 1 Corinthians 15:31, "I die daily." Who among us would pray each day, "Lord, give me grace to die daily?" You know who would? Those who are conscious of the fact that in the course of following Christ they find their heart at times opposed to His way; in humility they are found praying, "Lord, give me grace to die to myself! Lord, give me grace to die to these worthless things of the world! Give me grace to live my life dependent on Thee! Give me grace to accept the way things are at present in my life!" That's self-denial and submission! But that prayer also indicates that there's an ongoing battle in the life of God's people because we are not always one with God's way.

Look at Jonah. He was a servant of the Lord, yet instead of going to Nineveh, he went the opposite way. He didn't exercise self-denial. Look at Peter. He too was a servant of the Lord, yet when he brought himself

into the company of Christ's enemies, he didn't deny himself, but rather sought self-preservation.

Oh what sinful, foolish people we can be when we seek to maintain our own identity! And what failures we will then be in following Christ!

"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself." Beloved, there are so many ways in which we must deny ourselves in order that Christ may be first!

Sometimes we hope tomorrow will be better than today. But it may not be so, for the Lord wants us to learn how to deny ourselves. He wants us to crucify our flesh. He wants, through trials, to bring us back to Himself, and keep us close to Him.

Following Christ means we must deny ourselves when we're satisfied with our own achievements because that's putting self on the foreground and not giving the Lord the honor. And who of us does not fall into that snare?

There's something wonderful that results from denying ourselves, for then we reap the richest blessings and God gets all the glory.

2. The Advantages Enjoyed

Jesus says, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me." We must deny self and *take up* the cross. What is meant by the word "cross"?

First, Christ's cross was one of rejection. His was a cross of suffering at the hands of His enemies. His was a cross of being forsaken, even by His own disciples who forsook Him. His was a cross of death as He gave up His life for His enemies.

When the Bible speaks of a cross it can include every trouble, affliction, misery, and persecution, as well as death itself.

So beloved, every child of God will be a cross-bearer. Second Timothy 3:12 states, "Yea, and all that

will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.” Christ was persecuted for righteousness’s sake, yet He surrendered. He had all power within Himself to come down from the cross to destroy His enemies, but He denied Himself. He could have refused the cross, stepped aside from the way of suffering and death, but this wasn’t the way of His Father, nor was it found in His heart to disengage Himself from dying in the place of sinners, and so He denied Himself.

Similarly, a believer must take up his or her own cross. The text says, “Let *him* take up *his* cross.”

This teaches us several things. First, each believer will have his or her own cross, tailor-made by the Lord. This in no way disconnects believers from each other so that each is only self focussed. This should not be the case as Galatians 6:2 states: “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

In denying self and taking up our own cross, we must own it as our own cross. Jeremiah 10:19 confirms this by stating, “Woe is me for my hurt! my wound is grievous: but I said, Truly this is a grief, and I must bear it.” Jeremiah surrendered to his cross. He said, “I must bear it.”

Second, we must acknowledge that our crosses come from God. Even if you’re an unbeliever at present—and how sad and dangerous that is—you must see your present cross as coming from God. For what purpose? Job 33:29–30 says, “Lo, all these things worketh God often times with man, to bring back his soul from the pit, to be enlightened with the light of the living.” See every cross as coming from God to bring you back to Him. What a *mercy* crosses then are!

For the child of God, carrying a cross and following Christ implies the certainty of a crown and the guarantee of no curse. But if you’re living right now with some kind of trial that you’re frustrated with and can’t figure out, Job 33:29–30 teaches that the Lord is work-

ing these things to bring you back from the pit. What a *mercy* still!

I challenge you to take your present cross to the Lord with the prayer, “Lord, teach me whatever I need to know under this present cross and take away my rebellious and hard-hearted spirit. Work repentance and faith in Christ in me. I have heard that where the cross is borne submissively, there will be a crown, there will be victory. But I’ve heard also that when I reject the cross in rebellion against Thee, I will destroy my own soul and bring upon myself the curse of an everlasting hell. Have mercy upon me.”

Will you settle for that horrible curse and eternal loss when there are so many things to be enjoyed even in bearing your cross in a submissive way before God? Does the Bible teach we can really enjoy persecution? Indeed it does!

In Acts 5, the apostles were being rejected and persecuted for Christ’s sake. Acts 5:41 says, “And they (the apostles) departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.” The apostles rejoiced in suffering for Christ.

Third, the Holy Spirit will grant patience in suffering. Scripture teaches, “In your patience possess ye your souls” (Luke 21:19). Thomas Hooker wrote, “Most often when God’s people must undergo persecution they are more silent, more patient, and more resigned than the person doing the persecuting. The persecutors are being cruel, hard, irrational, and loud, and gaining nothing but a hotter place in hell.”

Christ bore all His sufferings patiently. In John 18:11 we read, “Then said Jesus unto Peter, Put up thy sword into the sheath: the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?” When Jesus was bearing the trial of purchasing death for His own patiently, He cried out, “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup

pass from me, nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39). As our precious Lord Jesus Christ uttered those words, you and I, people of God, have the guarantee that sufficient grace is available for us also to submit patiently to God's will. This is the way we're made more Christ-like.

Fourth, good will flow out of cross-bearing. It will bring us to the Lord in prayer, as Jeremiah proves when he says, "Lord, I am oppressed, undertake for me." And Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." Our God and Father, dear believer, will not and cannot fail us. Did He fail His beloved Son, our Savior and Lord? Though He suffered, bled, and died, yet He arose victorious on the third day, and after forty days entered into glory. And shall not we follow after our precious Forerunner and enter into glory too? Most certainly!

Though our present crosses may be heavy, hear what Paul says about troubles and trials in 2 Corinthians 4:8–10: "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body." Paul puts cross-bearing in the right perspective in 2 Corinthians 4:15–18 by directing us to the glorious future that awaits us. He says, "For all things are for your sakes, that the abundant grace might through the thanksgiving of many redound to the glory of God. For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen

are eternal.” In Romans 8:16–18, Paul records similar truths for our encouragement and comfort. There we read, “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ: if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”

Dear child of God, our present trials and troubles are but for a moment compared to the glory that awaits us. Therefore, “let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:1–2).

But what about you, dear unbeliever? You have your troubles also, but in your rebellion against the Lord what can you expect? God could righteously execute His just judgment against you because of your rebellion. I urge you to pray, “Lord break my hard heart and bring saving mercy out of this trouble.” If you refuse to turn to the Lord, realize that you not only forsake your own mercies, but in forsaking them you will make your damnation in hell more grievous. You will be eternally lost! Why? Because these afflictions and troubles were the mercies that the Lord used to knock at the door of your heart, saying, “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20). Will you refuse to surrender and submit to the God of grace who can save to the uttermost? Will you refuse the good that can come out of your present trials? Hear the Lord’s call to you once more: “Call upon

me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me" (Ps. 50:15).

The final lesson being taught by our Lord through taking up our cross cheerfully and following after Him is that everlasting glory will be our portion. You and I, dear believer, are assured of everlasting glory!

In this life, we as the church militant must carry our cross, yet we have this certainty that as our Lord bore His cross prayerfully, patiently, and perseveringly, and was victorious, and now is crowned King of kings and Lord of lords, so we too, in bearing our cross, will obtain victory and wear a crown. Paul speaks of this in 2 Timothy 4:6–8, "For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing."

You and I may therefore live each day in anticipation of an everlasting glory that will be full of joy. The crosses may be many in this life. They may be heavy at times, but we do not have to bear them alone. Isaiah 63:9 states, "In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old."

Thus we are constantly directed to Jesus Christ as our all-sufficient and all-supplying Head. Therefore let us ever be looking to Jesus, for we shall inherit everlasting glory. All our crosses here shall soon be exchanged for a crown!

Let us therefore bear our crosses prayerfully, patiently, perseveringly, and cheerfully like our Lord. Let us deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him. Let us crucify our flesh, flee from this world, press on in our Lord's service with joy and strength,

knowing that we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.

Oh, what precious lessons are learned in the cross-bearing school of grace! Oh, what blessed assurance our Jesus provides that His grace is all-sufficient (2 Cor. 12:10)! Oh, what blessed advantages to be enjoyed when we bear our cross after our precious, loving, and compassionate Lord Jesus Christ!

Thus, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." Amen.