

Jesus Without the Cross?
Matthew 16:21-28
August 30, 2020

In today's passage, we find Jesus saying that following Him requires sacrifice, even the sacrifice of one's own life. He says, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."¹ What is it to follow Jesus that would require such a sacrifice? It is love. Following Jesus is living a life of love and sacrifice. Jesus once said, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."²

Coach Muller is a physical education teacher and coach, and has a website called "My Good Time Stories." He shares many wonderful heartwarming stories. One of them is about a father who loved his daughter so much that he made an ultimate sacrifice for her.

One day his 11-year-old girl asked him, "Dad, what are you going to get me for my 15th birthday?"

He replied, "Please wait, there is much time left."

When the girl was 14 years old, she fainted and was rushed to the hospital. The doctor came out and told her dad that she had a bad heart and that she was probably going to die.

When she was lying in the hospital bed, she said softly, "Daddy... have they told you that I am going to die?" The father replied, "No, you are going to live."

She asked, "How can you be so sure, Daddy?" As he got up to leave the room he said, "Because...I know."

A short time later she turned 15. After she was released from the hospital and recovering, she came home to find a letter on her bed which read: "My dearest daughter, if you are reading this letter it means that everything went well, just as I told you it would. A little while ago, you asked me what I was going to give you for your 15th birthday. I didn't know then, but my present to you was MY HEART."³

¹ Matthew 16:24.

² John 15:13.

³ <https://mygoodtimestories.com/2018/04/29/an-ultimate-story-of-love-and-sacrifice/>

But living a life of love is not difficult especially in this world of self-centeredness.

In August of 2003, the Church of the Holy Cross in New York City, which is a Catholic church, was burglarized twice. In the first event, thieves took a metal moneybox. Three weeks later, the church was burglarized again but this time the thieves did something very interesting. Being a Catholic church there was a large crucifix in the church. The thieves had unbolted Jesus from the wooden cross and took Jesus. They left the wooden cross behind.⁴ Isn't that interesting?

If they wanted the crucifix, why wouldn't they take the whole crucifix?

I wonder if they just wanted Jesus without the cross. Jesus said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Many people would like to have Jesus, believe in him, and follow him without bearing the cross.

Jesus represents forgiveness and grace. Jesus is a divine Friend who accepts us as we are, hears our prayers and helps us in times of need. Who wouldn't want that? His cross, on the other hand, represents discipline and denial of self, sacrifice and service. Do we really want that? We want Jesus but we are not certain about taking up our own cross.

Jesus' disciples did not realize it either. It was only after Peter's historic confession that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, Jesus began to spell out his true mission and what it means to be his disciples.

Jesus told them that becoming his follower involves a serious cost but the disciples did not realize it and did not want to accept it. The disciples wanted Jesus to establish his kingdom on earth without any sacrifice. They thought of all the wonderful experiences they shared with Jesus and hoped that those good times would continue indefinitely. Jesus tried to tell them he was going to Jerusalem to suffer, die and be raised again. That did not make any sense to them. That even upset them. "This must never happen to you," Peter told Jesus. They misunderstood. They misunderstood about Jesus' mission and purpose.

They also did not realize that Jesus' life and death was their model to follow. Jesus would suffer and die. They would also suffer and die for Jesus' sake, and in

⁴ Andrea Elliott, "Thieves Take Figure of Jesus, but Not the Cross," *New York Times* (8-25-03). Cited by Greg Asimakoupoulos in *Leadership*.

dying they would have life. We know that through history all Jesus' disciples died horrible and violent deaths except John who died in the old age in exile.

Andrew died on a cross
Simon was crucified
Bartholomew was flayed alive
James (son of Zebedee) was beheaded
The other James (son of Alphaeus) was beaten to death
Thomas was run through with a lance
Matthias was stoned and then beheaded
Matthew was slain by the sword
Peter was crucified upside down
Thaddeus was shot with arrows
Philip was hanged

All of them died but they died gladly knowing that they had eternal life. When we give of ourselves for Christ's sake, when we witness to our faith, and even when we put ourselves at risk for our faith, we will find life.

Valerie Place was a young woman who went to Somalia to work as a nurse. She was only 23 years old. She wanted to share her faith and help people who had nothing. She wanted to offer them a better way of life. Valerie was concerned about her safety, but nothing would stop her from doing her work.

She was in charge of a feeding center in Mogadishu. Through her life-saving efforts, children who had been near starvation were fed. Valerie even established a school so the children could learn and have some hope for the future. Valerie began to see some of the fruits of her labor.

A few years ago, Valerie made the national news. Not because of what she had accomplished, but because of what she gave up. She was killed by armed bandits outside the school she had started. Valerie was willing to risk her life to help other people. Valerie lost her life there, but she lives on in the hearts of the children she helped.⁵ Even though she gave up her life in Somalia, she has found her life in the presence of God.

One more thing we need to think about is that even though the sacrifice in love costs greatly it is worth it.

⁵ "Can We Learn the Mystery of Crossing Over to Love?" Barbara Reynolds. USA TODAY, February 26, 1993, p. 13A.

Stan Gaede tells about two friends at West Point in his book, *Surprised by God*. These two cadets had very different abilities and talents. One was athletic and intelligent, while the other was without much athletic ability. He was smart enough to be at the military academy but his physical aptitude wasn't quite strong.

To graduate from West Point, seniors must be able to pass a physical fitness test, which includes push-ups, sit-ups, and a two-mile run within a certain period of time. In fact, he had never finished it. The two cadets took the test on the same day. For the first cadet, the test was absolutely no problem. For the second, however, it was not only a problem, it was the problem of his life. If he failed the test, he would not graduate from West Point. He did pass the first part of the fitness test, but the two-mile run was the problem. Throughout his training, he had never run the two miles within the allotted time. He knew he would not make it. As he began running, it showed he did not have confidence to finish it in time. He was ready to give up. His friend, the first cadet noticed what was happening.

So, he slowed down, waited for the second cadet to catch up to him, and then proceeded to encourage him down the track with shouts of, "You can do it." "Go for it." "You're gonna make it."

With his friend's encouragement, the second cadet did not give up, and ran as fast as he could. With all the energy he could muster, he finally crossed the finish line with the first cadet at his side. The second cadet was totally exhausted. It was a great moment for both men. There was only one problem - both of them failed the test.⁶ I wish both of them passed. But no.

This wasn't the conclusion we expected, was it? We expected a nice ending where both young men succeeded but that wasn't the result. However, the first cadet considered his friendship was worth the price he had to pay, and the second learned the value of friends from the sacrifice of his friend. Following Christ has a serious cost but the cost is worth it when we find true life in Christ.

Jesus, without the cross, cannot give us life. Only with the cross we bear, we will find life in Christ.

⁶ Stan Gaede, *SURPRISED BY GOD*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), pp. 101-102.