

TAKE UP YOUR CROSS: IDENTIFYING WITH JESUS

What a wonderful weekend I was having at Camp Streamside in eastern Pennsylvania! It was springtime, 1955, my senior year at Millersville State Teacher's College. I was attending an InterVarsity Christian Fellowship regional conference. The speakers were excellent; the spiritual atmosphere challenging and uplifting; but meeting like-minded young people from various colleges was also a great incentive for being there. Many of us found our lifetime partners at InterVarsity conferences!

A young man from Lehigh University was paying attention to me on this weekend. We had been introduced before, but now we were getting acquainted. All of us were wearing name tags. His tag said Leo J. Kwiatkowski and underneath he had written (Quiet - cow' - ski). "How do you pronounce that?" I asked. "Try it," he replied. I did; he said I was correct. I didn't suspect then that just over two years later Leo's name would become mine!

Leo and I had some Bible discussions over the weekend, much to my delight. Shortly before departure time on Sunday, I approached him with a topic: "Leo, what did Jesus mean when he said, 'Take up your cross and follow me?'" He said that if I would give him my address, he would make a study of the question and write his findings in a letter to me. I was happy to oblige! A short time later I had my first "Letter from Leo." Five fine children and eleven wonderful grandchildren later, I am still glad I asked that question in 1955.

Here are the verses that I was referring to at Camp Streamside, that I have been pondering ever since, and that only now, in my old age, am I beginning to understand:

- *Matthew 10:38 – Those who do not take up their cross and follow me are not worthy of me.*
- *Matthew 16:24 and Mark 8:34 – Those who would come after me must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*
- *Luke 9:23 – Those who would come after me must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.*
- *Luke 14:27 – Those who do not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciples.*

I wanted to be worthy of Jesus; I wanted to follow my Lord, to be his disciple. I could see from these verses that this would involve self-denial. I also knew that the cross in the time of Jesus was an instrument of execution, that Jesus literally carried the cross on which he died. Hence, carrying our cross had something to do with death, whether death as faced by those where the church is persecuted or as involved in denying self. Many times I have heard hardships (a handicapped child, a difficult marriage, an ongoing illness, etc.) referred to as a "cross." If that were true, then many people do not have crosses. Since Jesus wants everyone who desires to follow him to take up their cross, I must conclude that it has nothing to do with our circumstances. Well, then, what is it?

I think it means (among other things) being Christ-like, taking on the attitudes and characteristics of Jesus, something that is possible because the Holy Spirit of God lives within each person of faith, ready to strengthen our resolve. In fact, "Taking up the cross" may be another way of saying, "Be filled with the Spirit." We are to be so filled that there is no room inside us for self to flourish. The contrast would be allowing self to flourish so much that the Holy Spirit (who lives within all believers, guaranteeing our full salvation) gets squeezed down into the big toe. Such people have little impact in furthering the kingdom of God. Are they, perhaps, "not worthy of" Jesus – as Matthew states? What a sad thought!

Another common saying that may be synonymous with "Take up your cross" is "Not my will, but

yours be done.” That is the kind of sacrificial life that Jesus lived, always doing the will of God his Father. All of us who want to follow Jesus will be aware that we are not our own, but have been bought with a price: the precious blood of Jesus. We will use our free will to find out, to the best of our ability, what the will of God is for us, and then do it.

“*Take up your cross daily and follow me*”: this was spoken well before Jesus died. Hence, it has to do with how we live our lives as Christ’s followers, not just how we die. If we think and behave the way Jesus did on earth, we would be taking up our cross; we would be his disciples in the truest sense. We need to know so well the life of Jesus as recorded in the gospels, that we will know what sort of life is expected of us. The writers of the epistles help us here. Often, in telling us how to live, they hold up Christ as the pattern to follow. Here are some examples. As Christ’s disciples, we are expected to:

– LIVE A LIFE OF LOVE. *Be imitators of God as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Ephesians 5:1,2).* If we lived according to these verses, our hearts and minds would be focused outside of ourselves and onto God and others. The fragrance of our sacrificial lives would permeate the air around us, pleasing God and challenging people, drawing them to God. Love is the greatest quality there is, according to Paul: *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:13).*

– FORGIVE. *Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you (Colossians 3:13).* We need to constantly remember that we are forgiven sinners who wouldn’t stand a chance of being saved were it not for our Lord’s mercy and grace. No matter how others may treat us, we have no excuse for holding grudges if Christ is our example. Jesus even forgave those who nailed him to the cross; let’s keep that in mind the next time someone offends us. An unforgiving spirit is such a bondage to anyone who harbors it! A prayer: Lord, teach us how to bear with each other and to be generous forgivers, just like you.

– HUMBLE OURSELVES AND SERVE. *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look out not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5-8).*

Paul, the author of these words, also lived by them. He looked at his wonderful, privileged background and said, “*Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ... I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead (Philippians 3:7,8,10).*” Paul wanted to live a resurrected life, to walk in newness of life, and the only way to do that was to identify with Christ, to take up his cross daily and follow him. That’s the way for us, too.

– ACCEPT ONE ANOTHER. Romans 14 and the beginning of chapter 15 addresses such an important subject concerning human relationships in God’s faith family: that of “gray areas,” or as Paul puts it, “disputable matters.” He speaks to those strong in the faith (in this case, those whose faith allows them to eat everything and who consider every day to be alike) and tells them to accept those whose faith is weak (those who feel eating meat is sinful and who consider some days to be more sacred than others). Paul says all of us are trying to please God and are responsible to God. We have no right to judge or look down on others because we differ in things like this.

Several times in this very practical passage Christ's attitude and behavior is held up as a standard for us. In a prayer near the conclusion Paul says: *May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude and mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 15:5,6)*. And the passage ends with a wonderfully simple, yet profound, statement: *Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God (Romans 15:7)*. Those who take up their cross and follow Jesus will find themselves becoming more tolerant, realizing that *"the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17)*. Christ accepted us, quirks and all; let's do the same for others.

– WALK IN THE LIGHT. *God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin (1 John 1:5-7)*. The writer goes on to give an example of how walking in the light affects our behavior: *Those who claim to be in the light but hate a fellow believer are still in the darkness. Those who love their fellow believers live in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble (1 John 2:9,10)*. People living in the light are simply not allowed to hate others!

Jesus spoke about light and darkness early in his ministry: *Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. All those who do evil hate the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But those who live by the truth come into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God (John 3:19-21)*. Jesus said he is the Light of the World; he expects his followers also to be lights in the world by their good behavior and good deeds, by walking in his footsteps wherever they may lead. The contrast in lifestyles between those walking in darkness and those walking in the light is vast. Paul makes this clear in his letters, as he issues us a challenge to walk in the light:

The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature (Romans 13:12-14).

You were once darkness, but now you are light in the world. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists of all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your hearts to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 5:8-12;18-20). Let's accept the challenge; let's walk in the light with our Lord.

There are other specific topics you will find where Jesus Christ is held up as a standard for our thinking and behavior; the above is just the start of a list!

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COUNTING THE COST. We might think the above list seems readily attainable and, according to your personality, it might be. But when Jesus talked about following him, he let his disciples know that some hard issues and harsh treatment were also to be expected. There was a cost involved, and he wanted the believers to understand that before deciding how closely they wanted to walk with Jesus. Here is the context of the cross-carrying verse in Luke 14:

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said, "If anyone comes to me and

does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even life itself – such a person cannot be my disciple. And those who do not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciples (Luke 14:25-27). How can we be asked to live a life of love yet hate our closest family members? Surely, the matter to be resolved here is: who is first in your heart and mind – God, others, or yourself?

I was fortunate to have an incident early in my life of faith that forced me to choose, and that has served as a guideline for me ever since. It was the summer of 1956; I was twenty-three, three years past the moment when God entered and energized my life. I had a strong feeling that God wanted me to resign from the church I had joined in childhood, as I no longer believed some of the official teachings of that denomination. I was discussing the matter with Mrs. Smith, an elderly Christian woman from a different congregation. “If I resign, I will really hurt my parents,” I said. Immediately she asked, softly but firmly, “Who are you going to hurt, your parents or your Lord?” I was stunned! But I also had my answer: I would obey my Lord to the best of my ability, then and for the rest of my life. And I would trust God with the consequences of my obedience.

In 1991, when I received an invitation from a small evangelical congregation in town to become their pastor, I felt strongly the call of the Lord as well. Of course, I accepted the position. Some of my Christian friends thought God would never ask a woman to lead a congregation, and that I was being disobedient by publicly preaching. That was not an easy time, but I held to my 1956 decision. “I would rather lose a whole churchful of friends than ignore my Lord’s call to service,” I said.

In John 15:18-20, Jesus told his disciples: *If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: “Servants are not greater than their master.” If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.* Would we want to be treated like Jesus was? That doesn’t mean, of course, that we will all be crucified, but we must be prepared to be misunderstood, criticized and abandoned. Jesus was misunderstood, even by his family; he was criticized by religious people, some sincere, some not; he was abandoned by former followers; he was betrayed by his friend Judas, one of the Twelve; and denied by Peter, one of his closest friends. Jesus certainly understands anything we might be going through.

After Jesus had given some “hard teaching” in John 6, we read in verse 66: *From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.* Can you hear sorrow in the voice of Jesus as he asks the Twelve the question that follows: *“You do not want to leave too, do you?”* Simon Peter answered him, *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”* Yes, some did believe and obey the teaching of Jesus and that brought him joy. Some will be transformed by our teaching and example, too. Does that make the hard times worth enduring? I think so!

A little chorus that I have been singing since my youth, often in solemn yet happy occasions like campfires, is appropriate here. In an effort to stir our hearts toward commitment to Jesus we would sing “I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back.” Once we took a family trip to the Statue of Liberty. Leo and I, our five children and Adelina, our friend who was visiting from Arizona, were all climbing the stairs inside the statue when we came to a cautionary sign that said, in effect: “Here you must decide whether or not you wish to keep on climbing stairs. Anyone continuing to climb beyond this point must go on to the top; there is no turning back.” I don’t remember how many of us continued climbing, but I know I was one of them. Long ago I also decided to follow Jesus – no turning back.

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BONUS. The bonus for those who take up their cross and follow Jesus is having our Lord as a constant companion and guide in the adventures of the committed life. A friendship develops with

growing intimacy as we practice obedience (*You are my friends if you do what I command.* – John 15:4). Friendship with the Lord is such a high calling! And this is my testimony: “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” – totally beyond compare!

An old hymn starts out with a request that expresses another desire of mine: “Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me.” We cannot be in such close contact with Jesus through the years of our lives without taking on his characteristics. The beauty of Jesus really can be seen in us! I have seen it in the face of many of God’s seasoned servants, and it is so beautiful! Imagine what Heaven will be like, with the beauty of Jesus everywhere and in everyone!

Obviously, hymns I’ve sung since I was a girl are taking on new meaning for me now. Sometimes I work on more than one essay at a time. A couple days ago I looked in a hymnal for “Abide With Me,” since I needed the words for the essay “Help of the Helpless.” When I looked in the back of the book for the birth and death dates of the author, Henry F. Lyte (1793-1847), I noticed that he had two more hymns in the book. One was a song of praise that I did not know and the other one – oh, the other one! – brought tears to my eyes, for it was perfect to use with this essay. I cried because I am so aware that God knows what I am doing and is giving me fresh ideas and the materials I need as I write. It’s a humbling experience!

The hymn I found – and remembered singing in childhood – is “Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken.” I believe it speaks of Mr. Lyte’s response to the call of Jesus to take up his cross and follow him. Oh, that we might do likewise! The reward is much greater than the cost!

Jesus, I my cross have taken, All to leave and follow Thee;
Destitute, despised, forsaken, Thou from hence my all shalt be;
Perish every fond ambition, All I’ve sought, and hoped and known;
Yet how rich is my condition, God and heav’n are still my own.

Let the world despise and leave me, They have left my Savior too;
Human hearts and looks deceive me; Thou art not, like man, untrue.
And, while Thou shalt smile upon me, God of wisdom, love and might,
Foes may hate and friends may shun me; Show Thy face and all is bright.

Man may trouble and distress me, ’Twill but drive me to Thy breast;
Life with trials hard may press me, Heav’n will bring me sweeter rest.
O ’tis not in grief to harm me, While Thy love is left to me;
O ’twere not in joy to charm me, Were that joy unmixed with Thee.

Hasten on from grace to glory, Armed by faith and winged by prayer;
Heav’n’s eternal days before me, God’s own hand to guide me there.
Soon shall close my earthly mission, Swift shall pass my pilgrim days,
Hope shall change to glad fruition, Faith to sight, and prayer to praise.

Amen.