

Dear members and friends of St. John,

And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, [Jesus] said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? 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." (Mark 8:34-38, ESV)

Lent is a time of *penitential* thought. The root to this word is 'penitent' – the feeling or expressing humble or regretful pain or sorrow for sin (from Webster's Dictionary). I would define *penitential thought* as a time of **honest** reflection on our standing before God, measured against His standard of perfect compliance with His Law. Using the scale from our grade school days, what kind of grade should we receive as a devoted follower of Christ? A, B, C, D, or F? The problem with this comes from the word *honest*. How good are we at looking at ourselves in an **honest** way? Oh, we can look at other people and see with great clarity all of their faults and foibles. But can we see our own condition?

Every good Lutheran knows that the Law of God is like a 'mirror'. We may not appreciate having a large mirror in the bathroom when we get up in the morning. Glance at it for anything more than micro-second and you'll have to live with that image, stuck in your head. I've found it best to duck and cover, early in the a.m. The problem with reading the Law is that we like to duck and cover from it, as well. Take our text, above. This is some very tough Law. I've found that the most common way of ducking and covering yourself from this text is by changing the meaning. How so? When speaking of "taking up your cross and following Jesus", it's common to hear comments like: "That back pain is just a cross that God has given me to bear." Or, "My affliction is just another cross I must carry." It may be comforting to think of the suffering we experience as a form of the cross of Christ, but the reality is that it has nothing to do with it. Look at the text carefully. Jesus says that His followers are to "deny [themselves] and take up [their] cross..." Afflictions are generally not self-inflicted. They're the result of sin – our sin, and the nature of this world which is riddled with sin. Our bodies experience decay. Parts wear-out. Disease may come, from our own sinful lifestyle, or from outside of us. What does any of this have to do with "denying ourselves?" The answer is - nothing.

Our text is referring to God working in us to strike down the desires of the flesh, and replace them with the desire to please our Lord. God works in us, through His word and Spirit, to kill the Old Adam within us. Our Old Adam is constantly seeking to **deny God**, and make ourselves preeminent – more important than anything else in this world. Since our Baptism, God has been working to replace this Old Adam with a new one – in the image of Jesus Christ. It's in this New Man that we're able to deny our sinful self (i.e., "*deny himself*"), and go out into the world to present the message of truth and salvation to a lost and dying world.

To "follow Jesus" is to put yourself out there in the world, like Jesus did. Share the Gospel, be Christ to someone who is hurting or dying or is in need. The paradoxical nature of being a follower of Christ is

stated by Jesus. First, from Matthew 11 Jesus says: *"Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."* (vv. 29-30) God promises that, as followers, we will find rest in Him, and that His burden is light because He does all the heavy lifting for us. Followers have the benefits of a loving God that cares for and protects them!

Second, there will be a worldly price that comes from following Christ. We read Jesus' words: *"Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you."* (John 15:20). And again, *"[Jesus] said to them, 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all this they will lay their hands on you and **persecute you**, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. **This will be your opportunity to bear witness.**"* (Luke 21:10-13) **This is cross-bearing.** This is denying the world, to the glory of the Father.

But we must not forget the promise of God: *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."* (Matthew 5:10-12) This life is fleeting – the next life, eternal. God strengthens us so that we can bear our crosses. He protects us from the real harm that can destroy our souls forever. And in the end, we have a reward that is great in heaven.

So, it's time to give yourself a grade. May I suggest you take out a slip of paper and write the following words on it: **My grade for denying myself and taking up my cross and following Jesus is _____**. Place this slip of paper on your refrigerator. During the remaining season of Lent, look at your grade each day. Through meditation on God's word, and reflection on our unworthiness, God prepares us for Holy Week and Easter.

You see, if we're honest, really honest, were going to quickly come to the stark realization that we have failed and continue to fail at cross-bearing. Don't even think about using your affliction as a substitute for the real thing. The reality is that we are beggars before our God. We don't deserve His love, but in the most amazing way, He showers us with love each and every day. His Son would bear our cross. He would place His perfect hands on the wood, so that the Roman guards could drive nails through them. The pain was real – blood would pour out. He would be lifted up to suffer and die, so that you could avoid having to suffer for eternity. His body and blood was given and shed for you.

You may be good at 'duck and cover.' But there's no hiding from this reality: Only Jesus can save you from your sins. On Easter Sunday, take that slip of paper from your refrigerator, and replace it with this: **Jesus died with my sins, and rose again, so that I can be free. Thank you, Jesus, for taking up my cross. Help me to deny myself and follow You. Amen.**

May God richly bless you and your family during Lent and Easter.

Pastor Travis