

Matthew 11:28 & Mark 8:34

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[0 : 0 0] I'd like us to turn for a few moments this evening to the two New Testament passages that we read. The first of these in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 11, and at verse 28, where we have these words, Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

And along with these words, also some further words of Jesus, taken from Mark's Gospel, chapter 8, verse 34, where Jesus said to the crowd, If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross, and follow me.

In one of these sayings of Jesus, he refers to burdens, burdens which are to be laid down.

In the other, he refers to crosses which are to be picked up. I found it very helpful some years ago when visiting the city of Hong Kong to go to a Christian center there, a center of which had been built by some Norwegian missionaries at the early in the 20th century, as a place where Buddhist monks passing from China on pilgrimage to Thailand and Burma might be challenged with the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This center is high up in the mountains, overlooking Hong Kong. It's called Tau Fong Shan, which in Chinese, I understand, means the mount of the Logos wind.

[1 : 5 3] The focal point of that center is a beautiful octagon church, which is constructed very tastefully in a Buddhist style of architecture. And under the church, there's a small meditation chamber, which is built out of huge blocks of granite.

You can enter this chamber through a narrow passageway and go into a small cell. A cell which, in the heat of Hong Kong, has an atmosphere of coolness and peace.

It's fairly dark inside the cell. It is lit only by one small window. But once you're in, your eyes are accustomed to the dim light.

You can make out some Chinese characters written above the window. And my guide, who took me there, told me that these words translate, lay down your burdens.

And turning to leave that little cell, one notices above the doorway a further inscription, above the exit. And my guide, again, my guide translated for me and told me that these words are, take up your cross.

[3 : 1 4] And so, in this way, those who visit that cell are invited to cast their burdens upon the Lord.

And having done so, to take up their cross and to follow him. Now, that little cell, for me, graphically depicted the difference between a burden and a cross.

Burdens, according to Christ, are to be laid down. Crosses are to be taken up. A burden is to be offloaded and placed in Christ so that he might carry it for us.

A cross, on the other hand, we carry for him. And it's very important for us to distinguish these two. A cross from a burden.

Our reaction to a problem, a difficulty, an experience in life will be very different if we see it as a burden rather than as a cross.

[4 : 27] And for a few moments this evening, I would like us just to meditate and to think about how the Bible helps us to distinguish between a burden and a cross.

First of all, let us think of burdens. The Bible says quite a lot about burdens. There are basically three kinds of burdens that are outlined in the Bible.

First of all, there are religious burdens. Jesus tells us that the scribes and the Pharisees did not practice what they preach.

He says, they tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Bastidious legalism in any religion becomes a burden.

The task of trying to be good enough for God becomes an enormous, crushing burden. as what Martin Luther as a young monk found when he tried his level best to be pure enough, to be good enough for God.

[5 : 37] The burden was intolerable. He was weighed down under it. But he came to realize that that burden drove him to Christ.

He came to realize, as Paul realized much earlier, that God has given us his law to lead us to Christ. Martin Luther was able to, by the grace of God, to take that burden and to offload it onto Christ.

And that was a life-transforming experience for him. He was able, by the grace of God, to cast his burden upon the Lord.

God. So, he was able to do that by the grace of God and accept Christ's, not only give him his burden of sin, guilt, but receive from Christ the goodness, the righteousness of his life.

And therefore, to be accepted by God, not because of what he had done, but because of who Christ is and what Christ has done for sinners.

[6 : 49] So, that's the first kind of burden the Bible speaks about, a religious burden. And it's so easy for us to acquire these burdens, to think that somehow or other we can recommend ourselves to God.

The more seriously we take that, the more sincerely we address it, the deeper, the heavier the burden becomes. And the gospel urges us to cast that kind of burden upon the Lord.

But in addition to religious burdens, there are what we might call moral burdens. When, like Martin Luther, we come to recognize that sin has created a barrier between us and God.

And like the psalmist in Psalm 38, we say, my guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden. Too heavy to bear. We come to see the enormity of our sin.

We come to see its gravity. We come to recognize just how great a burden it is. We have that sense of guilt before God.

[8 : 02] God. And this is a burden also which we are urged to cast upon Christ. Because he has borne our sins in his own body on the tree.

Paul tells us he was delivered over to death for our sins. That God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement. The assurance that we are given, the promise that we are given by John in his first official is that if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

And it is as we cast this burden of our guilt and of our sin upon him that we know what it is to be set free, to be liberated. John Wesley in his hymn speaks of sin imprisoning him in a dungeon.

But then Christ came and he said the dungeon flamed with light. And he says he rose and he went forth and he followed Christ. And Christ came and took away the burden. In the pilgrim's progress when Christian came to the cross the burden rolled away.

And that is a parable which many people have reenacted by the grace of God. And we are invited tonight to make that discovery that he made and that many others have made that Christ will take that burden of our guilt and bear it for us so in order that we might be set free.

[9 : 37] I think also the Bible speaks of what we might call psychological burdens. We're urged in the book of Psalms to cast our burdens upon the Lord and discover that he will sustain us.

We're urged to bring our anxieties to the Lord. Jesus urges us not to be anxious. He urges us to consider the lilies of the field, consider the birds of the air.

Paul tells the Philippians not to be anxious about anything, but in everything we pray and thanksgiving to let the request be known to God. That they might know the peace that passes all understanding, keeping their hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

And so Jesus offers to bear not only our religious burdens and our moral burdens, but also these psychological burdens that can so easily become an overpowering focus in our lives, become almost an obsession.

He invites us to cast these burdens upon him. We are to leave our troubles with the Lord, as the psalmist says, to cast our cares upon him and to know that he will sustain us.

[10 : 59] The promise is that he will never let the righteous fall. So, these burdens which we have identified from different passages of scripture are burdens which the Lord offers to carry for us.

Whether it's a religious burden, a moral burden, or a psychological burden, Christ is the burden bearer. He comes willing to carry the burden for us.

It's not just that he comes to us and helps us to carry it and takes one end of the load, as it were. He just doesn't come to assist us. He comes to do it for us.

in some ways we might prefer for him to assist us because then we could at least take some credit for the burden being relieved, for us being relieved of the burden.

But Christ comes and he says he wants to take it all because only he can remove it, only he can lift it, only he can take it away.

[12 : 08] Then Jesus spoke to the people not only about burdens but also about crosses. The cross, these crosses are not something to be offloaded onto Christ but something which he says we are to bear ourselves and to bear it for his sake.

He said this is a challenge to the crowd. He wasn't there speaking just to his disciples, he was speaking to the crowd and he was urging them to recognize, to count the cost of becoming a disciple, to becoming a follower.

That is not easy, it's difficult, it means taking up a cross and following Christ. If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.

And just as we've identified three types of burden, I would suggest to you that we, carefully looking at scripture, we can identify three types of crosses.

First of all, there are the crosses that arise from what we might call the severity of life. Life can be hard, life can be unfair, life can be hurtful.

[13 : 24] It's interesting that Jesus says here that anyone who comes after him must deny himself and take up his cross. Jesus doesn't say take up my cross. We often interpret it that way, but Jesus is saying let him take up his cross and follow me.

Life treats some more severely than others. There's a mystery of suffering. This is a great mystery which we find very difficult.

Why is it that some should suffer severely while others suffer very little if at all? Life is full of inequalities there are those who are successful and those who are unsuccessful.

There are those who are rich and there are those who are poor. Life gives us example after example of what we might call quirks of fortune.

Some are promoted, others are not. Some seem to land on their feet, others on their heads. And it's so easy for us to say that life is not fair.

[14 : 33] And in a fallen world life is not fair. We have to recognize that. And what Jesus is saying to us in this situation, such situations, is that we ought not to let our apparent disadvantage sour us.

Not to see it as a burden, but to see it as a cross. And to bear that cross for him. Bear it as a means of following him.

Some people who have to suffer, who are poor, or passed over, are in fact often much happier than those who live healthy lives, who are relatively well off, and who reach the top of the tree.

And their happiness results because they have refused to accept their disadvantage as a burden sent to crush them. They have denied themselves the luxury of self-pity. Instead, they have converted their disadvantage into a cross to be born with dignity and honour for Christ's sake.

And Christ urges us to take up our cross, to recognise that if we're going to follow him, our whole life is a life of following him, even if it involves carrying a cross.

[15 : 52] We live in an age in which there are sections of the church that preach a kind of prosperity gospel of health and wealth, and say that if you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be free of all injustices and you become wealthy.

That is a false gospel. That is not the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It may attract masses of poor people in the third world, but it is not the gospel that Jesus preached which tells us that we are to take up our cross.

Cross and follow him. But secondly, there are crosses which arise from the hostility of the world, not just the severity of life, but from the hostility of the world.

The context in which Jesus spoke these words to the crowd was that of his teaching that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, people and that he must be killed.

And so Jesus here is urging us to count the cost. He is saying just that as he has suffered, just as he had to go to the cross, so also because of the hostile world, the world that crucified Jesus is the world in which we live and move and have our being today.

[17 : 17] because we live in such a world, then we also will have to take up our cross. Jesus took his cross and we also must take up ours because we are followers of him, because we seek to be faithful to him.

It is relatively easy for us today in Western culture to become a Christian. It is not so easy in many other cultures. It is very difficult in the Islamic culture to become a Christian.

If you are baptized in many Islamic societies, then you become a target for assassination. Even the family, your nearest and dearest, feel that they have a God-given responsibility to kill you.

It is not at all easy. It is terribly, terribly, terribly difficult. Yet we thank God for those who are coming to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ in such circumstances.

They indeed have to take up their cross and to follow Jesus. It is not easy in many situations, even in our Western society, where we may not be assassinated literally, that by becoming Christians, often we can find ourselves the victims of character assassination, being ostracized.

[18 : 50] We are being called to take up our cross and to follow Christ. And Jesus is challenging us to see the privilege of suffering for him as a cross rather than as a burden.

Not to see it as something which ought to create self-pity in our hearts and in our experience, but to see it as a privilege to follow his steps as the one who went before us to the cross and there died for our sins.

And thirdly, there are crosses which arise from what we might call the priority of God's will. First type of cross we noticed was the cross that arises from the severity of life.

The second that arises from the hostility of the world. And now, just for a few moments, let us think of the crosses that arise from the priority of doing God's will.

Taking up a cross is explained by Jesus in terms of denying oneself in order that God's will might be done. Let him deny himself and take up his cross.

[20 : 08] Now, we live in a society where we are encouraged to affirm ourselves, not to deny ourselves. Jesus is saying that if we're going to be his disciples, then there are certain occasions in life in which we need to deny ourselves.

Although following him does mean that we find the greatest sense of self fulfillment, yet that fulfillment comes often through the denial of self.

And if we're going to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, then we must make God's will the priority in our lives. It means that we will miss out in a competitive career-oriented society in which we live today.

We live in a society in which people want more money, they want more promotion, freedom from caring for disabled children or frail elderly relatives.

Therefore, of necessity, the Christian who puts God's will before a better paid job, before career prospects, before his or her own personal freedom, will inevitably suffer disadvantage in the eyes of the world.

[21 : 18] And in some cases, it will be tough. It will mean bearing a cross. But the promise of Jesus is that if we are willing to take up our cross and follow him, if we are willing to lose our lives, then we will find them.

We will discover a sense of living and a sense of life, which those who live by worldly standards will never know.

And so Jesus is calling us to take up our cross to follow him. Jesus is asking us tonight not simply to nod the head to him.

He's not simply asking us to put our hands and to say, I vote for Jesus. He's asking us to follow him. He's asking us to be practitioners.

He's asking us to be doers. It's relatively easy to say yes. It's relatively easy to nod the head. It's much more difficult to make that commitment of all that we are and all that we have.

[22 : 35] When Jesus taught his disciples, the model that he used was not the model of an academy in the ancient world. It was rather the model of a workshop.

He trained his disciples as apprentices. they were doers as well as listeners. They were people who were committed to following him literally as he went from place to place.

They were called to be practitioners. And Jesus is calling us tonight to be practitioners. Not simply to say, yes, I believe the gospel. Not simply to say, yes, I'm on Christ's side.

He wants us to nail our colors to the mast. He wants us to go forward and become active followers of him and to follow him through thick and thin, even if it means bearing a cross.

And so Jesus tonight invites us to take up our cross and follow him. A conscious decision is being called for.

[23 : 45] A decision on our part and your part and my part to take up our cross and to carry it with dignity and honor for the sake of Jesus.

I wonder if there's someone here tonight who has hesitated, perhaps been hesitating for years or at least months, to follow Jesus because they're afraid of the cost.

And what Jesus is saying tonight is that the cost, cannot be avoided. This cost cannot be negotiated downwards. This is the cost of discipleship.

But what Jesus is saying to us is that if we're willing to lose our lives, then we will find them. We will find not only life here and now, we will find eternal life. We'll find the pearl of great price.

We'll find the prize above all others. what Jesus is saying to us is that however costly it may be, that cost will be gloriously worthwhile.

[24 : 52] If there is someone here tonight who is carrying a burden, you've come into the church tonight, bent, low, carrying a burden. Then Jesus is inviting you to cast that burden upon him.

He is the burden bearer. he comes to us and invites us to cast our burdens upon him that we may prove that he cares for us.

He does care for us. He cares for you. He cares for me. And he invites us tonight to bring our burdens and to cast them upon him. So as we respond to the words of Jesus tonight as we've heard them from the gospel, as we've meditated upon them, let us respond not simply by making a mental ascent, but let us be active.

Let us cast our burden upon the Lord. Let us take up our cross. Let us follow him. Amen. Let us pray. Our heavenly father as we come to the close of this service we come to pray that you will enable us to respond by becoming the disciples of Jesus, becoming his apprentices, becoming his followers.

Help us our heavenly father to cast our burdens upon him. We thank you that he is the great burden bearer, that there's no burden too heavy for him to carry.

[26 : 23] Help us to be willing to cast the whole burden upon him and to hand it over to him and have that sense of freedom and deliverance, of being set free from our burdens.

grant to Lord that as we cast our burdens upon him we might be willing to take up our cross and to follow him, willing to face the difficulties, the challenges, the obstacles, the pain, whatever these may be, in order that we may find him and the eternal life that he has died to give to us.

Help us, O Lord our God, so to become his disciples tonight, that we may indeed cast our burdens upon him and take up our cross and become his followers, for we ask it in his name and for his sake.

Amen.