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## Take up Your Cross

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*This week's bible reading is from Mark chapter 8 verses 31 – 38.*

### **Introduction**

I would think that most of us are familiar with the popular saying: "We all have our cross to bear." But I wonder how many people realise that this saying actually comes from the Bible? And, like many other sayings that originate in the Bible, it's often completely misunderstood, and is usually used out of context. So I'd like to take a closer look at this saying, and try and understand what Jesus actually meant when He said:

*"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me." (v34).*

In trying to understand this statement from Jesus, the very first thing we need to do is put it in context. And, given passage where this verse is located – the end of Mark chapter 8, the context is very definitely on the cost of being a follower Jesus; the cost of discipleship. And it's only in this context that we can properly understand this teaching.

### **Volunteers or Disciples?**

Before we unpack this verse though, I first want to say something about the difference between "disciples" and "volunteers". There are some today, who view the church as little more than a sort of "Sunday club", a place where they occasionally put in an appearance in order to keep up their membership. And I've had it said to me a number of times over the years, "don't forget vicar, we're all volunteers."

Well, whilst I understand what people mean when they say that, I have to respond by saying - if you see yourself as just a volunteer, then it strongly suggests that you haven't understood Jesus' teaching here in Mark's Gospel. I say this because we are not volunteers – we are disciples; and there's a significant difference between the two.

And if we are to be effective disciples – which is what Jesus is calling us to be – then we need to be able to understand and appreciate the difference between a volunteer and a disciple. Because nowhere in the NT does Jesus ask for volunteers; rather instead He calls people to become His followers; His disciples – and as I said, that's something very different indeed. A disciple is someone who has pledged

their very life to Christ; has pledged to work for the furtherance of God's Kingdom, in all situations; through thick and thin; through good times and bad.

On the other hand, a volunteer is someone who does what they want to do, when they want to do it. Whereas a disciple does what Christ wants, when He asks them to. A volunteer is someone who will often just pack up and go home the minute things aren't going their way. A disciple doesn't give up until the task is accomplished. Someone once put it this way:

*"Discipleship is not part-time volunteer work that one does as an extra-curricular activity, when you happen to have time. God will not accept a minor role in your life, rather he wants the controlling place."*

So when Jesus said:

*"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."*

He wasn't asking for possible volunteers - He was calling people into a life of discipleship. And here, in verse 34, Jesus is saying that if anyone wants to be His disciple, then they must be able to do two things: firstly, "deny themselves", and secondly, "take up their cross".

### ***Deny Self***

So let's look at the first of these two commands. What does Jesus mean when He asks us to 'deny ourselves'? Well, I don't believe He is referring to material things, here. Jesus isn't saying don't buy that new smartphone you've been wanting; don't go on that holiday or get that new car. Rather, what he's talking about in these verses is the denying of the 'inner self'. He's talking about the need to curb and control our human and worldly instincts and desires.

When we 'deny ourselves' it means we don't push ourselves forward at the expense of others; it's about deliberately choosing not to seek status, wealth or the praise of men. It's about taking a back seat and letting others have the limelight. It's about curbing our desire for vengeance and keeping greed under control. It's about not giving in to bitterness or hatred or jealousy. It's about saying "No to I" and "Yes to God", and to be able to do so even when it might be costly. Denying ourselves then, is about allowing God, allowing the Holy Spirit, to control our ego, so that we do not grow conceited and full of our own importance.

### ***Take Up Your Cross***

Then, in the second part of this verse, Jesus tells us that, if we are to be His disciples, then we must "take up our cross and follow Him". Again - what does He mean? Well, in Roman times, when someone was to be crucified, they would be made to carry their cross to the place of execution. Sadly, it was a sight all too common in those days, so the people would have known exactly the image Jesus was

referring to. In this context of crucifixion, it was as though Jesus was saying to them: “be prepared to be put to death”, and it’s this metaphor about death, that’s at the heart of this teaching. Of course, Jesus isn’t asking His disciples to be *literally* crucified, rather He is talking about putting to death our sinful nature - meaning we must allow it (our sinful self) to die on the Cross with Christ. St Paul put it this way, when he said (Gal 5:24)

*“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.”*

As I mentioned earlier, being a follower of Jesus is no-longer about doing what I want, when I want to; it’s about doing what God wants, when He wants it. Each day is to be lived for Him, each day an opportunity to fulfil His will and obey His commands, not follow our own desires and passions.

### ***Obedience***

Indeed Jesus expects obedience; He expects His Word to be obeyed, and the Father to be honoured. The Cross in Jesus’ teaching here very clearly stands for obedience to God’s will. Indeed for us, the cross is the ultimate symbol of obedience to God. Jesus does not invite us to try the cross on for size, to see if we like it – no, it’s something we must pick up and walk with, if we want to become true followers of Jesus.

This particular command- take up your cross - separates the mere volunteers from the real followers, the true disciples. It separates those who belong to Christ from those who don’t; those who are happy to watch from a distance, from those who are actually prepared to put Jesus’ teaching into action - even when doing so will not be popular. Because as His disciples we must face whatever comes our way each day, and do so living in obedience to God’s Word.

Is this too hard? Is Jesus asking too much? Well, Jesus never promised it would be easy to follow Him, but He did promise to be with us, through it all, upholding us and strengthening us, with His Spirit. Amen.