

Sermon for Sunday, September 20, 1981 by Andrew A. Jumper D.D., Pastor
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THE CROSS ISN'T MADE OF BALSAM WOOD
St. Matthew 16:21-28

Text: "Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'" St. Matthew 16:24

Do you know what a cross is? I suppose the modern equivalent would be a gallows or an electric chair. You see, the cross is an instrument of death. We have glamorized the cross. We have made it into beautifully designed gold forms and I suspect many of you may be wearing a cross of some sort this morning. But the fact is, the cross of Jesus was about as attractive as an electric chair or a hangman's noose.

What if we took the words of Jesus and modernized them a bit. Suppose we took the words in our text for this morning and said, "If any man would come after me, let him take up his electric chair and follow me." If you will pardon the pun, that is sort of shocking, don't you think? Yet, that is exactly what Jesus says. He says, if you want to be my disciple, if you want to follow me, get ready to die."

Well, I'm not so sure how ready I am to die--are you? Yet, if there is any one thing we learn from the New Testament, it is this: Jesus calls us to die. Now, this death Jesus calls us to isn't any ordinary death. Physically speaking, all of us are going to die some day. I guess we all know that. We may not think about it very often and we may try to push it out of our minds, but the fact is, all of us know we are not going to get out of this life alive! And in a way I suppose we all accept that. Naturally we want to put it off as long as possible, but down deep, all of us know we are going to die. But that isn't what Jesus is talking about.

No, as a matter of fact, Jesus is asking us to die while we are still alive! He wants us to die right now. How do you feel about that? Are you ready to die? I'm pretty sure I'm not ready right now! I'm sort of like the man who prayed, "Lord, make me your servant, but in an advisory position." So I tend to pray, "Lord, I'll die for you, but not right now." Do you feel the same way? I suspect most of us do.

The point I want to make is this: Jesus is calling every one of us here this morning to go to the cross. He says, "take up your cross and follow me." Do you realize what Jesus did when he took up his cross? Why, he went out and died! And that's what he asks us to do--take up our cross and follow him. Follow him where? Why, to calvary! Why, to the hill of Golgatha! Why, to follow him to death. Has Jesus lost his mind? I'm not ready to die--are you?

Well, maybe Jesus is not really serious. Maybe he is using figurative language. Maybe he is just talking about a balsa wood cross. You know what balsa wood is. It is very soft wood. It won't cut your back if you carry it. Balsa wood isn't heavy. It is very light and if you carry a balsa wood cross it won't break your back. Now that doesn't sound too bad! Maybe I'd be willing to carry a cross if the wood is soft and won't cut my back, or if it

is light enough that it won't make my knees buckle, and if I don't have to be nailed to it, I'll carry a cross for Jesus. After all, who of us would mind carrying an electric chair around if it is light, has soft cushions, and nobody plugs it in.

Unfortunately, Jesus isn't talking about a balsa wood cross. He is talking about the real thing. He really means what he says and he is talking about a cross you can get killed on. Well, are you ready to pick up that kind of a cross?

There is a famous legend about the apostle Peter. According to tradition, Peter was in Rome when a terrible persecution broke out against the Christians. In the story, Quo Vadis, Peter is fleeing Rome for his life. As he leaves the city, the Roman legions are searching out the Christians and the arena is already filled with the stench of their burning flesh as they are burned; it is filled with their screams as the wild animals tear their flesh; it is filled with their cries of anguish as many are nailed to crosses. And Peter flees the city that day for his life. But as he leaves the outskirts of the city behind, he suddenly comes upon a traveler going to the opposite direction. As the two are about to pass, Peter suddenly recognizes Jesus himself. "Quo vadis?" cries Peter, "Where are you going?" Jesus looks at him and replies, "I am going to Rome to be crucified again with my people." According to the legend, Peter plants his staff in the ground and turns back towards Rome. There he is taken prisoner and according to tradition is sentenced to death on the cross. Peter does not feel worthy to die in the same manner as his Master, so on his request, he is crucified with his head down. Jesus had said, "take up your cross and follow me." And that's exactly what he meant.

No, the cross Jesus calls us to carry isn't made of balsa wood. It is the real thing. Jesus always calls us to crucifixion and death. That being the case, the question I want to ask you this morning is this: have you been crucified yet? You see, I suspect a lot of us Christians are on death row, but we haven't been executed yet. If you are as I, you are not so sure how ready you are for the switch to be pulled and you've got a lot of appeals out, and maybe we are hoping the governor or God or somebody will get us a stay of execution, or maybe even pardon us from dying.

Well, I've got some bad news for you. If you want to be Christ's man or woman, there is no stay--no escape--just execution. Are you ready to die? Jesus says, "take up your cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." And then he goes on to add a sobering thought. He says, "For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?"

There are three scriptures that I want to leave with you this morning. The first is from Galatians 2:20. There St. Paul writes, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me..." Now, that means simply that Jesus can't live in you until you are dead. Who controls your will? Why, you do. Who controls how you act, how you talk, how you treat other people, how you spend your money, how you spend your time and your energies? Well, you do. So until you are dead, Jesus can't control how you act and how you talk, and all those other things. There is an old saying, dead men tell no tales." Well, they don't do anything else either? It is only when you are dead that Jesus can take over and run your life.

Does that begin to make some sense to you? St. Paul said he had been crucified with Christ. He was a dead man. That's why he could say, "it is no longer I who lives, but Christ who lives in me." That's what happened to a man named William Carey. William Carey alive in the flesh wasn't very much. He had quit school in his early teens. His manners were crude from his rustic, rural upbringing. He was just an ignorant, clodish country bumpkin. He was not impressive physically and in his boyhood even the slightest exposure to the sun brought on a painful affection of the skin. He had no gifts of oratory or speech for he was a graceless country boy. Yet, when William Carey died with Christ so that he no longer lived, but Christ lived in him, God did a miracle. He took that unlikely bumpkin and used him to open up India to Jesus Christ. What could God do with us if we were dead and Jesus lived in us instead?

The second scripture I want to leave with you is Romans 6:6. There we read, "We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin." Are you a slave to sin? I know I am. I have some bad habits to which I am a slave. I have some prejudices to which I am prisoner. I am a slave to sin. No matter how hard I try, I find myself acting unkindly. I am selfish, and self-centered, and greedy, and a lot of other ugly things. (I don't want to confess too much this morning! Somebody might start to say, "amen!") Do you have that problem? Are you the person you really want to be or are you a slave to sin? Well, the Bible says the only way we can get free of sin is for the old self to be crucified.

Do you know who Hudson Taylor is? He is the missionary who first opened up China to the Christian gospel. Through his efforts millions in China came to know Jesus. How did he get to be a missionary? He tells us himself that on December second, 1849, he prayed for complete sanctification. This means he prayed to be free of sin. He prayed for the old self to be crucified so he wouldn't be a slave to sin any more. As he prayed to die and to be free of sin, this is what he wrote, "I felt that I was in the presence of God, entering into the covenant with the Almighty. I felt as though I wished to withdraw my promise but could not. Something seemed to say, 'your prayer is answered, your conditions are accepted.'" For the rest of his life he looked back on that day as the time from which there was no turning back.

The third scripture I want to leave with you is Colossians 3:3 and 4. There we read, "For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory." Listen, do you want to go to heaven? Do you want to appear in glory of Jesus? Then you have got to die so that your life is hid with Christ!

Out in the wheat states in the fall of the year the fields for miles and miles are a rich, golden brown. They are covered with wheat, ready for the harvest. Each stalk is burdened down with its heavy load of grain. But sometimes before the harvest can be reaped, a storm will sweep across the fields. Under the force of the wind and the heavy, soaking rain the wheat is beaten to the ground. It is said that millions of dollars can be lost in a storm of only a few minutes duration, for the wheat--beaten to the ground--is too low for the harvester. It is then that the miracle of the wheat takes place. The warm sun begins to shine and to caress the broken wheat. A soft, drying wind stirs over the land. Slowly, so slowly the stalks begin to rise from the ground and

to lift their heavy burdens once more. The sun and the gentle wind literally lift millions of pounds from the ground. Within three short days the wheat is once more proudly erect, waving gracefully in the breeze.

Well, that is what Jesus does for us. When we are broken and beaten down to the ground, when our burdens are too heavy to carry, when we die so that our life is hidden with Christ, then he comes and gently lifts us up so that we appear with him in glory.

Jesus says, "If any man 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, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." His cross isn't made of balsa wood, but it is the only way to die so you can live--it is the only way to get to heaven.