



NO LIMITS

WITH PASTOR DELMAN



When the

CROSS

gets in the

WAY

S E R M O N G U I D E

When the Cross Gets in the Way

Matthew 16:24-26

A few weeks ago, I was on the campus of Morehouse College for the unveiling of portraits for nine distinguished alums. As the honorees assembled for a group photo in the Martin Luther King Jr. Chapel, one of the student photographers blurted out, "Hold up! Is the cross in the way?" A brass cross on a table was obstructing the camera's view. My Ph.D. advisor, Dr. Vincent Wimbush, who was one of the honorees, chuckled and quietly remarked, "Isn't that typically the case?" That question, and his provocative response, has arrested my attention ever since. Here we were, in a memorial dedicated to peace and justice, and we couldn't properly see the people furthering those principles because the very symbol of our faith was blocking the view.

This experience forces us to ask a difficult question. Could it be that the political upheaval, global instability, and economic turmoil we face is because the cross, or at least a certain version of it, is in the way? When millions of Americans lose food benefits, when healthcare costs become unbearable, when our government supports genocide abroad and Christofascism at home, we have to wonder if the cross has been co-opted. The symbol meant to draw us to Christ has, for many, become the very thing that makes it difficult for the world to see Him. This is not about the cross Jesus called us to bear, but the cross that Western culture has weaponized. As Jesus prepares his disciples for his own suffering in Matthew 16, he calls them to a radical path of self-denial, one that we must reclaim today.

KEY POINTS

1. Bear the Incarnational Cross, Don't Just Wear the Imperial One (Matthew 16:24)

When Jesus says, "*If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me,*" he is not asking his followers to wear a piece of jewelry. For the early church, the cross was a brutal instrument of Roman execution, a symbol of suffering and state-sanctioned terror, much like an electric chair or a lynching tree today. To "take up your cross" was an invitation to bear a profound spiritual responsibility: to identify with the sacrifice of Jesus and to stand in solidarity with the suffering of all humanity. This is the **incarnational cross**, an inner reality of compassion for the pain in the world.

However, in the fourth century, the Roman emperor Constantine claimed a vision of the cross with the words, "By this sign, you will conquer." In that moment, the cross of the persecuted became the **imperial cross** of the powerful. It was painted on shields and transformed from a symbol of solidarity into a token of Christian expansionism, domination, and conquest. When we fail to distinguish between these two crosses, we risk following an empire instead of the Savior.

2. The Imperial Cross Obstructs Justice and Promotes Supremacy (Luke 14:26-27)

When the cross is used as a weapon of empire, it inevitably leads to an abuse of power. This imperial cross is the one that justified the Crusades, the transatlantic slave trade, and the "Doctrine of Discovery," a 1493 papal decree that gave European powers a religious basis to claim non-Christian lands. This doctrine was codified into U.S. law and continues to inform the logic of white supremacy today, which suggests that Black people "had no rights which a white man was bound to respect." When Christian nationalists today talk about the cross, they are lifting this imperial cross, a polished emblem of power and control.

Tragically, this has led some Black Christian thinkers to feel they must choose between their faith and their Blackness, suggesting that identifying as a Black Christian is somehow idolatrous. This is a profound misunderstanding of the Gospel. Our Blackness is not in competition with our Christianity; it is the prism through which we understand it.

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3. The True Cross Calls Us to Community, Not Corrupt Capitalism (Matthew 16:26)

Jesus asks, "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" He was not launching a prosperity plan; he was launching a revolution of love, sacrifice, and community. Yet, the imperial cross has been hijacked by a corrupt capitalist theology that suggests following Jesus will make you rich. This lie allows politicians to misquote scripture to defend cutting food programs for the poor and to label those who need assistance as lazy, all while protecting a financial system that engineers unemployment and exploits suffering.

The cross of Christ calls us to a radically different economic vision. It is the cross that drove Jesus to overturn the tables of the money changers, declaring God's house a house of prayer, not a "den of thieves." It is the cross that inspired the early church on the day of Pentecost to practice a cooperative economy, selling their possessions to distribute to anyone as they had need. The sign that we are following the true cross is not the dollars in our pockets but the number of feet we wash. It's not the size of our house but the size of our heart.

Application

We are confronted with a choice between two crosses. One is an icon of imperial power, cultural erasure, and economic exploitation. The other is a call to radical love, defiant solidarity, and restorative justice. To follow Jesus is to consciously reject the imperial cross that has been used to dominate others and to instead pick up the incarnational cross that stands with the oppressed.

This requires us to do more than just believe; it requires us to act. It means using our voices to challenge the systems that starve the poor, marginalize the different, and concentrate wealth in the hands of a few. It means refusing to let anyone tell you that you must erase your cultural identity to be saved. God meets you in your skin, in your rhythm, and in your ancestors' prayers. Finally, it means living out a faith where our value is measured by our compassion, not our capital. Let us remove the cross of this world so that we, and the world, can clearly see the cross of the Word.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. In what practical, everyday ways can you move from simply acknowledging the cross to actively "bearing" the cross of solidarity with those who are suffering in your community?
2. The sermon argues that the "imperial cross" has been used to justify injustice. How can you and your community challenge this co-opted version of Christianity when you see it in politics, media, or even in other churches?
3. How can you actively cultivate a faith that serves as a source of liberation and community, rather than falling into the trap of using it for personal financial gain or allowing it to be used to advance corrupt capitalism?

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