

As we begin this morning, I want to offer you a hypothesis about modern Christianity and the current way I believe many people view Christianity here in America today. My hypothesis? Here it is: **We want it easy**. That’s my hypothesis. We want a Christianity that is accepting of everything, even if that means overt sin and acceptance of what the Bible describes as sin.

How has this view of Christianity come to be? Well, I believe much of contemporary Christianity can be described with one simple phrase: IT’S ALL ABOUT ME. Westernized Christianity has become a very self-centered, self-absorbed way of viewing God, where many only ask: “God, what have you done for me lately?”

Yes, it seems...there are many who wish to identify themselves with Jesus Christ...they wish to call themselves Christians and yet, their whole perspective and attitude toward Jesus is that they are in it for what they can get out of it. Christianity has somehow been redefined as: “get,” instead of “give.” And thus, Jesus has been turned into a cosmic genie in the sky, who must jump at our ever whim when we rub the magic lamp.

Unfortunately, many Christians, including many preachers, say that Jesus exists to make us healthy, wealthy and happy. They say, “It’s your destiny to be well and happy and rich and NEVER get a cold, never have financial troubles or burn your toast or have a flat tire.” And if you aren’t experiencing this kind of life, then you’re not demanding your rights as a child of God.

And lest we think that this kind of thinking hasn’t crept into our own lives, think about how we try to win people to Jesus today? Don’t we say, “Wouldn’t you like to be happy? Wouldn’t you like to fill that hole in your heart? Wouldn’t you like to know peace? Wouldn’t you like your problems solved? After all, if you’ll just quote Philippians 4:13, you can become a better athlete or salesman. If you will just quote Jeremiah 29:11, then you will have a life of prosperity and difficulty will never come your way...because we’ve isolated verses that’s almost become magic formulas to make us happy...and we’re surprised when we don’t get the sale or make the hit or we burn the toast. May I ask how does this view of Christianity fit with it’s leader. **What about this?**



How’d we ever arrive at this kind of unbiblical theology when Jesus had to do that to buy our freedom?

Oh Church family, may it not be said of us that we’ve somehow made “following Jesus” as something we do to “get” instead of SOMEONE we follow so that we can GIVE, because that’s exactly what Jesus did. And that’s what He taught...

Matthew 16:24-28

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. ²⁸ Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

For over 2 ½ years Jesus has been performing miracle after miracle and teaching and preaching the truths of the Kingdom of God. He's been calling people to come follow Him...NOT RELIGION. He's been saying, "Come after ME!" And as He has taught this message, He has said over and over that IT'S NOT GOING TO BE EASY.

Jesus, in chapter 10, had just called and commissioned His 12 apostles and He warns them in verse 34...

Matthew 10:34-39

³⁴ "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶ And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. ³⁷ Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. ³⁸ And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

It was here in Matthew 10 that Jesus first mentioned the method of execution for criminals that was being used by the Romans: death on a CROSS.

Matthew 16:24

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Now in our culture to talk about a cross is common. I mean we put crosses on our churches and we put them on key chains, bracelets and necklaces. Many of them are ornate and beautiful...like this cross...



But, the cross was anything but beautiful for those executed on it by the Romans. The cross was heinous and barbaric. It was unadulterated torture...and to hear Jesus use the cross as a way to describe what it would be like to follow Him was SHOCKING to His followers.

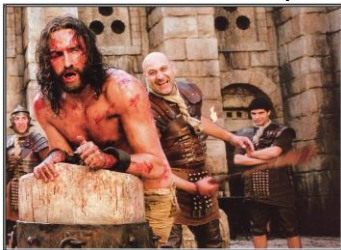
But, the cross is not shocking for us today. In fact, many Christians wear crosses around their necks and crosses on bracelets and key chains... And there's nothing inherently wrong with that. But, some have said wearing crosses around our necks (with the cross being that

heinous form of first century execution) would be like us, TODAY, wearing an electric chair on a necklace...something like this...



We would never do that! That's crazy! We'd never wear a noose on a bracelet (for hanging) or a syringe on a necklace (for lethal injection). We would never wear such adornments. Now again, we wear crosses to remind of us what Jesus did for us and that's fine...that's okay. But, Church Family, I'm here to tell you that an electric chair on a chain is NOT a good analogy of the comparison of what Jesus did for us on the cross and I'll give you some reasons why-LISTEN carefully...

- Those conducting an electric chair execution don't do it as sport, seeing how creatively and how long they can inflict pain, suffering, and humiliation. Yet, this was precisely what Jesus endured on the cross
- People put to death in electric chairs are not forced to carry their own means of execution to the place they'll die. Jesus carried His cross up the Via Dolorosa...the way suffering to Calvary.
- electric chair victims are not taunted, spit on, kicked, punched, verbally demeaned and have a crown of thorns rammed down on their heads. Jesus did...
- Those going to the electric chair are not brutally scourged to the point of losing so much blood that they can barely walk. Jesus was scourged with a cat-of-nine-tails by Roman soldiers. See the depiction on the screens...



These Roman soldiers were skilled with using an 18-inch stick with 2 ½ feet long leather straps with bone fragments, and metal and shrapnel attached to the ends. Jesus' body was ripped to shreds to where...literally his organs were exposed...

- No...people going to the electric chair are not stripped naked so their death is more humiliating. But, Jesus hung naked on the cross
- Those going to the electric chair are protected from the mobs of people who might desire their death. Jesus hung on the cross exposed to more foul and putrid language than one could possibly ever imagine
- Those executed in electric chairs are not left on display for all to see as a statement to other criminals, but, those crucified would be left on the cross where often birds would peck away at their eyes

Oh...listen church family...death on the cross was not like the quick death of a firing squad or lethal injection or having 2,000 volts surging through your body in an electric chair. Death on a cross was a device of death, meant to bring the greatest amount of torment and pain to the human

body imaginable. You see, there is no parallel symbol to speak of what our Savior, Jesus Christ suffered and endured for each of us!

And so Jesus uses the powerful symbol of a Roman cross as the way He describes to His followers what it will be like to follow Him. See it again... (Notice the words “deny himself” as we see it again.)...

Matthew 16:24

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

When Jesus said, “Deny himself,” He wasn’t talking about denying ourselves ice cream or a pillow top mattress. He was not talking about denying ourselves some form of luxury or pleasure. What He was saying is that if we’re going to follow Him we’re going to DENY OURSELVES. Think about it... Who is the hardest person in the world that you know to deny themselves something. ME! It’s hard for ME to deny myself. I can deny something for you and it doesn’t hurt that bad...but, let me deny myself...and then it really hurts. **YOU SEE...to deny myself is to take ME OUT OF THE PICTURE and replace ME with Jesus!**

The Apostle Paul described it this way in Philippians 3...

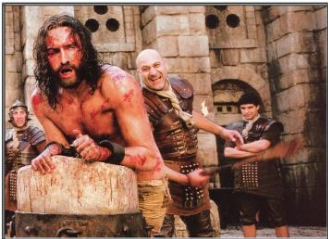
Philippians 3:10-11

¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Galatians 2:20

²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Church, we shouldn’t ever forget or become flippant about the fact that Jesus had to endure this for you and for me...



Don’t get used to it... Don’t let it become routine! No! Jesus didn’t go to the cross so that we might never get a cold or never burn the toast or never suffer. Oh, never forget, in heaven right now, if were to follow Jesus’ footsteps, this is what we would see...



He’s got holes in His feet people! Never forget that... Oh it sometimes amuses me what people say...a lady told me not long ago that her COPD was her cross to bear. No! That’s part and parcel with living in a fallen world. No! Our cross is not our physical ailments or burning the toast...our cross is OURSELVES. Our cross is our way...our will...our desires... And you see, if you choose Jesus...those desires will fade away in the light of your desire to follow Him!

No...Jesus died on the cross to show that in this life there will be persecution if one chooses to follow Him...maybe not to the degree, (Lord willing...that we are beaten with cat-of-nine-tails or crucified), but Jesus said, “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master.” And so while we may never meet our death by way of execution on a cross...may we be willing to do so, if called upon, for our Savior and Master and Lord.

You see, taking up your cross in the highest degree literally means being willing to die like He died. Denying yourself is more than just putting a bumper sticker on your car or wearing a cross around your neck or even saying that you’re a “Christian” in the “About” section in your social media bios. Denying yourself and taking up your cross for Jesus is literally about being willing to die for Him if that’s demanded of you. The Bible says in...

2 Timothy 3:12

¹²Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

So how in the world have we gotten to this point in Matthew 16, to the point where Jesus is talking about His death? Well, I’ll tell you how. Jesus and His disciples have been in Caesarea Philippi, away from the crowds of Galilee, because He knows He’s down to about 6 months to train His disciples before He faces His own death and HE’S GOT TO MAKE SURE they get it...that following Him is not about celebrating the coronation of a King...but, instead...in just a few short months...His disciples are going to watch their King of Kings obliterated on a cross. And so, Jesus is making sure they understand what they’re getting ready to endure.

Now...you remember, Jesus is in Caesarea Philippi. See the map... (up at the very top.)



And it was there that Peter had acknowledged Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, the One who had come to earth to pay for our sins. But, in almost the same breath, Peter told Jesus there was no way that He would die at the hands of the chief priests, the scribes and the Pharisees. You remember, Satan was trying to use Peter in getting Jesus to take the easy way out. No suffering. No pain. No death. And yet, Jesus looked at Peter and said, “Get behind me Satan!” Why? Because Jesus knew the source of Peter’s thinking. Satan always wants to get us to take the easy way out and avoid God’s plan for our lives. What is that plan? Total abandonment of ourselves and total submission to Him.

And so, Jesus had to sit back down in that circle of His disciples after He scolded Peter and He had to remind them of what He had already taught them from the very beginning. Remember when He said in Matthew 8: “Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but I don’t

have a place to lay my head.” What has Jesus been teaching for 2 ½ years? Simply this: If you follow me...it won't be easy and He reiterates that point in verses 25 and 26...

Matthew 16:25-26

²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?

Candidly, I say to you...these two verses can seem confusing. They are oxymorons ...because they seem to conflict... **Lose your life to gain it? Gain the whole world and yet, lose your soul?** You see, Jesus is pressing hard into His disciples to get them to understand that when He leaves this earth, it's going to be hard. They're going to be swimming upstream against a pagan culture and even the religious leaders they grew up respecting... And now they're going to have to be willing to give up everything, even their own lives (many of them) to follow Jesus.

I want to ask you a question about this man...Bill Gates...



did you know he is worth \$89 Billion? Here's the question, what has gained if he has all of that money and still dies and goes to hell. Is it worth it? Listen! No amount of money is worth losing your soul...that's what Jesus is saying. What will Bill Gates REALLY profit with \$89 Billion dollars if he dies and goes to hell? Nothing.

What's your \$89 Billion? Listen, what is it today that you're holding on to in this life that's keeping you from Jesus? That's your \$89 billion and IS that thing that the Holy Spirit brought to your mind going to be worth it for you in Hell? Listen...oh hear this lovingly...that thing or circumstance that you think will satisfy you today...may just be the very thing that keeps you separated from God in the Lake of Fire for all eternity?

Yes...it's the ultimate hyperbole...you gain the whole world...you have it all in this life...and then you die and go to Hell and have nothing. Because naked you come into this world and naked you'll leave it. Bill Gates won't take a dime of his \$89 billion with him when he dies.

It's been asked: "What's a dead man who owns everything when he dies?" **Answer:** A DEAD MAN. **He's still a dead man...that's all he is! What shall it profit you if you gain the whole world and lose your own soul! NOTHING!**

Back in 2007 I stood where Jesus stood when He began His walk to Golgotha, where He would be crucified on a Roman cross. Here's that pavement...



That's the beginning of what's called the Via Dolorosa... The Via Dolorosa is known as the "The Way of Suffering," and it's a ½ mile journey that would take Jesus through the streets of Jerusalem. They've marked the way with these signs on the walls...

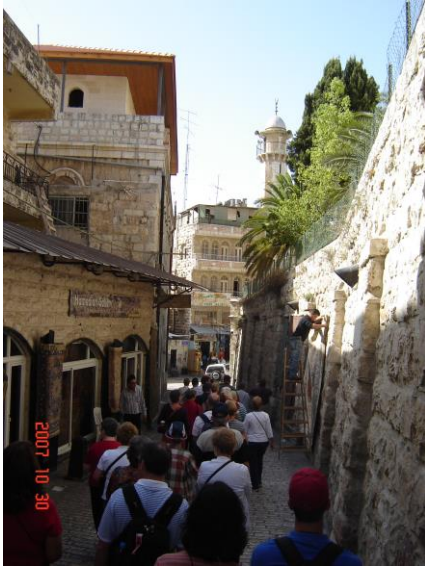


Here's a modern-day map of that way...



You'll see the Dome of the Rock on the left. That's the Muslim Mosque that sits where the Temple sat in Jesus' day. It was from there that Jesus would drag himself down the streets of Jerusalem. **I walked the Via Dolorosa in 2007. And I choked back the tears the whole way.**

Down the streets we went...and they are much narrower than I had ever imagined...



And all I could think about were all of those people shouting at Jesus as the soldiers pushed them back to make way for Jesus in those crowded, tiny streets that led to Calvary.

Along the way there are 14 stations where you can stop and go inside a small room or little facility to remember that agonizing path Jesus took. The one that stuck with me is station #3.



You'll see the Roman numeral 3 at the top. Inside...this is what I saw...



It's a mural of Jesus...but, a faint image...because He's now in heaven...but, we are painted brightly, for we're His disciples...it's US who are left here...who have chosen to follow Him...who have chosen to take up our cross daily and live for the One who died for us! I wept as I looked at that picture...over-powered by the moment.

I realized at that moment that I was so grateful to be counted worthy to carry my cross like my Savior...NOT because I'm worthy...but because He is worthy and because I've chosen to abandon my life in surrender to Him, I'm worthy AND I'M FREE because of Jesus!!

Listen, are you free today? Listen...You have to lose your life to gain it...so that you can truly be FREE!

Jesus said: "If the Son therefore shall make you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36). Truly being free comes by becoming a slave to Jesus Christ. But some people don't want that. They want to have it their way. Oh yes...they want to go to heaven and they may pray a prayer, but they don't want to take up a cross. Their into "easy Christianity," doing it their way! But, that's not true Christianity. Truly knowing Christ means dying to yourself. It's like tracks to train. What if a train said, "I don't want to run on these tracks, I want to be free?" And yet, we know...without the tracks...there's a train wreck just waiting to happen.

It's like a kite that says, "I want to be free. I don't want to be tied to this string!" And so it breaks from the string and down it goes. It's like a tree that says, "I don't want to be planted in the earth. I want to be free!" And it jerks itself up by the roots and dies! Oh...to be truly free you've got to run on the tracks to Christ, tied to Him so you can fly...rooted in Him so you can live.

Whew! Church family...it's been tough (today) this morning, hasn't it? Whew! It was tough writing this message. But, think about Jesus...about how hard it must have been to tell His disciples, whom He loved so much, the truth of what it would mean to follow Him. To have looked at Peter in the face and said, "Who-POG-oh Satan" Get Behind Me Satan. But, I must tell you and leave you with this encouragement...Jesus turns on a dime in what He says next and He gives a hint at something spectacular. He's going to give just a brief glimpse to three of His disciples of His glory (and we'll see this fully next week). For now, just verses 27-28.

Matthew 16:27-28

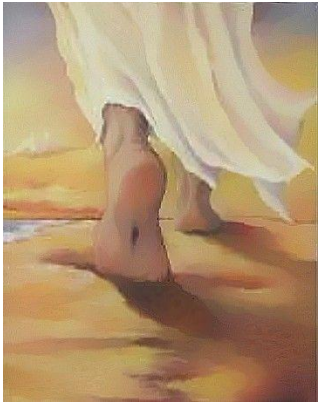
²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. ²⁸ Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Some of you have Bibles with headings in them. What's the heading above chapter 17? What does it say? "The Transfiguration." Yes. You see, Jesus has really dropped the hammer on His disciples and it's been tough. But, He's encouraging them NOW by pointing them to the future.

"Yes," Jesus said, "I'm going to die, but I'm coming back with all my angels...in the glory of my Father and some of you are going to see a taste of it." And they will...on a mountainside, where Jesus will briefly allow Peter, James and John to see Him in His majestic glory! His face and His clothes will shine like the sun in radiant brilliance. And don't you know they needed that! They'll need to see just a taste...just an "hors d'oeuvre" before the main course that we'll all experience one day...when He comes back in all of His glory! Until then... Will you do this...



Will you take up your cross and follow Him? No, carrying a cross and denying ourselves isn't easy...but, it's the only way to truly have life AND PLEASE NEVER FORGET that one day, we'll walk the streets of glory, following our Savior...



with holes in His feet...because He was willing to carry His cross through the streets of Jerusalem so that we might come to know Him and we can carry ours until we see Him face to face. Praise the name of Jesus Christ!
