

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.²⁶ What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? (NIV 84)

Theme: What good are the things of this world?

Last week we talked about the purpose of a Christian congregation—the reason why Holy Cross exists. We said that it all boils down to fulfilling the Great Commission of making disciples of all nations by baptizing and by teaching everything that God says in his Word. We are going to assume that since we are all Christians and this is the Lord’s directive to us as Christians, this is what we all want to do. But it is easier said than done. It takes a lot of effort, it takes a lot of work, and we may have to give up something to help spread the gospel throughout the world.

Frankly put, it takes money. While each and every one of us are to spread the gospel we also need someone to lead us, to represent us, and to watch over our spiritual lives. So we call a pastor to do so—and that takes money. It also takes money to buy supplies, whether it’s for the bulletin, Sunday School, Bible studies, outreach, or any number of other things. We also send money to the synod to support the training of future called workers, to send missionaries overseas, to offer support to established congregations, and to start new congregations. While we can share the gospel with anyone for free, running a congregation takes money.

And it also takes effort. A congregation the size of Holy Cross relies a lot on its own members to volunteer. Whether it’s teaching Sunday School or VBS, mowing, cleaning, running hymnsoft, ushering, serving on the council, or many more things, we rely on volunteers. That takes time and effort on your part—time out of your day and effort to do the work of spreading the gospel.

Here’s the problem: we often aren’t willing to make the effort needed to carry out the Great Commission. Oh, we want the blessings, we just don’t want to do the work ourselves or have to give up anything to

receive the blessings. It’s as if we want a high-paying job without doing any work, or being good at sports without practicing, or getting good grades without ever studying—we want our cake and to eat it too!

Should Holy Cross have full-time pastor? We may like the idea of a full-time pastor, but not necessarily supporting one. Some aren’t willing to give something up, to make their lives less comfortable for the sake of the gospel. They still want to be able to do whatever they want, buy whatever they can afford, and they balk at the notion of giving something up or even suffering in order to support the gospel ministry by putting more money in the offering plate. Giving our best and first to God and living on the rest is a foreign concept to even some of us; at times, it seems as if God gets the leftovers.

Many also aren’t willing to take time out of their busy schedules for the gospel. Our time is valuable, and so many people aren’t willing to volunteer their time or make an effort to help out. We see the same few volunteers over and over, taking advantage of their generosity and perhaps even burning them out. We are busy, we have things we need to do and plenty of other things we should do but we haven’t had time. We act as if we are busier than everyone else—we just don’t have the time, let someone else who isn’t so busy volunteer; I’ll just reap the benefits without doing any of the work! But it is as they say “it’s not as if you don’t have the time, it’s just that you don’t want to make the time.” A congregation is like a body with each part doing its work for the good of the whole. If one day the eye decided it isn’t going to see or the ears not hear, the body can get by, but it suffers. The same thing with a congregation, when parts of the congregation fail to properly support the gospel the whole body suffers.

So what does Christ say? **If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.** Those who follow Jesus must deny themselves; it is simply what Christians do, because those who don’t deny themselves aren’t really followers of Christ. So, what does it mean to deny yourself? It means that if you want something but it is contrary to God’s Word or may lead you away from God, or cause you to sin, then you don’t do it. It means to deny yourself all your basic wants and desires for the sake of the gospel. It means that you give up things such as popularity, money,

happiness, sleep, not suffering, and so on—all for the sake of Christ. It means denying your sinful nature, which wants to join in the wicked and sinful ways of the world or do anything rather than obey God. Denying yourself is connected to carrying your cross. The Christian cross is anything that we suffer through because of our faith. It refers to persecutions, troubles, distresses, and shame that happen to us because we follow the Lord and strive to do his will. And Christ says that we must carry it! As Christians we will suffer in one way or another because of our faith. We can choose to throw that cross off and not suffer, or we choose to take up our cross, carrying it and follow after Jesus just as he carried his. A Christian considers it a privilege to suffer for Christ, and that includes suffering because you give so much in your offerings or because you volunteer in whatever way you can with the mission of Holy Cross.

The form of the Greek word for “follow me” indicates that this isn’t a one-time action, but something that Christians continually do. Denying yourself, taking up your cross, and following after Jesus is not an on-again-off-again affair. It’s not something you do in a burst of enthusiasm or only when you feel like it. No, following Jesus is something you continually do, maintaining your loyalty to the end.

But of course, we don’t always do as Jesus tells us to do. We can’t completely deny ourselves, there are many times we fail to carry our crosses. And yet, that doesn’t mean we aren’t saved—that doesn’t mean we aren’t Christians. But where we fail to carry our crosses, Christ never did. And it wasn’t just the cross he carried to Calvary, or the suffering he endured at the hands of Pilate, the guards, and the Jewish leaders. Throughout his life Christ suffered, from family members, his own disciples, the Pharisees and Sadducees and many more. Jesus’ entire life is one of self-denial. Not once did he do what he wanted to do, what was good for him, or made his life comfortable at the expense of God’s Word. Think about Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane just hours before his death. He asked that the cup of suffering that he was about to endure be taken from him. He knew the pain that he would have to go through—both physical and spiritual and he didn’t want to suffer through it. If it was the Father’s will. For he said, **Yet not as I will, but as you will.** It was the Father’s will for Jesus to suffer and die the way he did, so it became Jesus’ will. He had the power as God to kill all those who arrested

him, to come down from the cross, or get out of it some other way; but he didn’t. He willingly let himself be arrested, beaten, and executed. He denied himself and bore his cross.

He did this willingly because he knew what he would accomplish by the cross. He knew that by the cross he would earn for us the forgiveness of sins by becoming guilty of our sins and suffering through their eternal damnation he would pay for our sins and remove them far from us that they will not condemn us. He also knew that on the cross his perfect life would be given to us, so we would be perfect and holy in the eyes of God. Again and again Jesus predicted that he would rise from the dead three days after his death. And by his resurrection we too will rise to a new life—a perfect life with him forever in heaven. So Jesus willingly bore his cross because by it he would win for us our salvation. He denied himself, even giving up his life, for our sake!

This is our motivation and encouragement to carry our own crosses. And if we need comfort while we carry our crosses, while we suffer for the sake of Christ, all we have to do is look up at Christ and his cross. He knows what it’s like to live on this earth, he knows how it feels to suffer for the sake of doing what is right; and his heart goes out to us. We know that he’ll be with us no matter what happens. But even more comfort is found in the fact that Christ’s cross is empty, and so is his tomb. His work of saving us is complete; and his resurrection assures us of a perfect life to come, a life without sin and its effects—no pain, sorrow, sickness, trouble, or any other effect of sin. A perfect life awaits us and we know that the glories and joy of eternal life in heaven, far outweighs whatever pain or suffering we have to endure on this earth. So we carry our cross willingly, knowing that it will last only a short while, but the joy of eternal life lasts forever.

And as Jesus asked, **What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?** The answer, of course, is rhetorical. It would not be good to gain everything in the world, to have all the possessions in the world and to gain for yourself all the money in the world if it means that you have lost your faith. For all the money in the world can’t buy you eternal life, your possessions can’t take hold of and grasp the gift of salvation that Christ has won for you.

So, in the end, what good are the things of this world? No good. You can't use them to get to heaven; they won't do anything for you when you die! So what should you do with your worldly possessions here on earth if they are no good for you when you die? You might as well use them for good. That is Jesus' point in Matthew 6, **Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**

The gospel ministry takes work; it takes of effort and money to fulfill the Great Commission. The Holy Spirit works through that gospel and brings others to faith and keeps them in the one true faith. We know that the Lord will bless our work for the gospel, for his Word does not return to him empty. And since we love all people and want all people to be saved, we do our part. We volunteer, we share the Word ourselves, and we support the gospel financially so that others can share it for us when and where we can't. Will it be in inconvenience? Yes. Will it mean you won't have as comfortable of a life, or that you might have to give something up that you enjoy? Yes. But that is what the Lord calls on us to do throughout our lives, to deny our sinful nature, to take up our cross, and to follow him. For us, it's not an inconvenience at all—it's something we willingly and cheerfully do; we use the gifts God has given us to his glory and for the good of the gospel! Denying ourselves and carrying our crosses is a way we say thanks to him for bearing his cross and winning us our salvation. Amen.