



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Gospel of Matthew

“Jesus on How to Find It,” Matthew 16:24-28

TRANSCRIPT

The Scripture reading for today is Matthew chapter 16 verse 24 through 28, the conclusion of this 16th chapter in which the Apostle Peter has made his famous confession of the Sonship and Messiahship of Jesus Christ, and in which the Lord Jesus has made his first definite and clear announcement that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and be killed and be raised again the third day.

Now you remember that after the Lord Jesus made that announcement, which is the first of three of the major announcements of that fact, Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, this be far from thee Lord, this shall not be unto thee, and the Lord Jesus turned to Peter, who evidently was following closely behind him, and said, get thee behind me Satan, thou art an offense unto me, for thou savorest not the things that are of God but those that are of men.

Now in the 24th verse he expatiates on some of the principles that are found in just what he has been saying in these previous verses. In the 24th verse, Matthew writes:

“Then said Jesus unto his disciples, ‘If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For

whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?’ (Incidentally, the word, soul, in Greek is a word that in many, many contexts of the New Testament means simply “life,” and evidently that’s the major point that the Lord is making through here, and in fact it could be rendered, life, in these verses that we have just read in each case. The 27th verse continues giving further grounds for coming after him) “For the Son of Man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works. Verily I say unto you, There are some standing here, who shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

May God bless this reading of his word.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee, and we do give Thee thanks for the Lord Jesus and the saving ministry that he has accomplished in the sacrifice of himself for sinners. And we do acknowledge, Lord, that apart from Thy grace, that is exactly what we are, we are sinners and we are under divine condemnation heading to judgment and the lake of fire.

And we thank Thee for the message which has been brought home to us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit by which Thou hast in wonderful grace provided an atonement, provided redemption that we may have everlasting life. And we thank Thee for the work of the Spirit in bringing us to the knowledge of the Lord Jesus. And we pray Lord that in our own Christian life that the principle of the cross may be manifested, that others may see that the Lord Jesus is not only our Savior from the penalty of sin, but has become in measure at least the master of our lives.

We know Lord that we are not perfect and shall never be perfect in the flesh. We know that we are always subject to fall, subject to sin, but we thank Thee for the redemption and for the assurance that there has come a change in our lives, we are new creatures. Thou hast delivered us from the dominion of sin, and we pray O God that we may come into the experience of that concerning which Jesus Christ has spoken, true life, full life, in the Lord Jesus.

We remember Lord to pray for the expansion of the gospel of the Lord Jesus, not only here in our church, but in other assemblies in this city where Jesus Christ is magnified and honored, where the word of God is preached. We pray Thy blessing upon each faithful portion of the body of Christ, wherever they may be today. O God, we thank Thee that Thou hast made us one in Christ, and continue Thy work of bringing the church to maturity, and ultimately to likeness to him in holiness and righteousness.

We pray again for the sick, we ask that Thy healing hand may be upon them. We especially remember, Lord, some who are in the hospital at this present time. Undertake for them, encourage them, strengthen them, give those who minister to them wisdom, guidance, insight, and restore to health and youthfulness, we pray.

We pray also Lord for each individual present and ask that Thy perfect will may be accomplished in all of our lives. We praise Thee, that Thou art in control of the affairs of all of the saints and that all things do work together for good to them that love Thee, to those who are the called according to Thy purpose. And we thank Thee that this great purpose is a purpose which was conceived in ages past and shall never be completed throughout the ages of eternity that is before us.

We rejoice, Lord, for the hope that Thou hast implanted within us through Christ. May Thy blessing be upon us in this service, through the ministry of the word, through the singing, and through the fellowship in Christ that we enjoy.

We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

[Message] The subject in the ministry of the word today is, “Jesus on How to Find It.” It is the opinion of many, and I certainly concur, that the church’s energy is often misdirected today, and personal consecration is not really a general experience in the Christian church. We are concerned greatly with Christian commitment to society, when the best commitment to society is the believer’s commitment to God.

David asked a question when he was seeking to stir Israel to the construction of the temple, and that question that he asked is still very germane: “And who then, is willing to consecrate his service this day unto the Lord?” That really is a question that faces each one of us as Christians and certainly with increased force today.

One of the greatest theologians of the 20th Century so far as unusual originality was concerned was P. T. Forsythe. Mr. Forsythe once said, “The reason why the church is too little missionary is that it is established on good terms with its world instead of being a foreign mission from another.” And I think there is an important truth there.

The Christian church is established on a very good relationship with its world, and it often forgets that it is a mission from another world to this world. In the Old Testament when the priests were inducted into their office, certain sacrifices were to be offered and certain cultic or ritual practices were to be observed, and one of them was the consecration of the priest’s office by the giving of certain sacrifices.

For example, at a certain point in the service, as it is described by Moses in Leviticus chapter 8, the priest was to offer an offering composed of a shoulder of an animal, the fat of the animal, and then some bread. These three things evidently were designed to represent the strength of the priest, the affections of the priest, and the possessions of the priest. And when the offering was made, it is described in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament as the filling of the hand of the priest so that as he ministered before the Lord he was to minister with hands full. That is, he was to have something to present to the Lord. He was to present his possessions typically, he was to present his affections typically, and he was to present his strength, his life, typically.

Now, of course, we are not Levitical priests and the Levitical priesthood itself has been done away with, but the New Testament makes very plain that we are priests of God, every one of us. We are a spiritual priesthood and we are exhorted by the apostles and by the New Testament teachings to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. And these spiritual sacrifices are, first and foremost, our life itself, and then our possessions, our worship, and our praise.

Personal consecration, in the words of our Lord, is equivalent to cross bearing. Martin Luther used to say, “Every Christian is a cruxian.” Now that word, cruxian, was just simply his word derived from the Latin word *crux*, which means the cross, so that every Christian is a cruxian meant for him that every Christian is a person who is dominated and lives by the principle of the cross, which is the principle of self abnegation.

Now, of course, we cannot expect to buy ourself abnegation to accomplish an atonement, only Jesus Christ can do that. But the same principle that dominated him as he carried out his work of redemption is to be reflected in the lives of those who have put their faith and trust in him. And ideally one should be able to look at every Christian and see some evidences of the principles that are found in our Lord’s work of the cross. Someone has said the cross-bearing life is simply spread out surrender. And that is, I think, fairly accurate and certainly in harmony with the words that Jesus Christ has said to us here.

Remember in the context of Matthew chapter 16, the Apostle Peter has just confessed that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, and then shortly after he has made this great confession the Lord Jesus has announced to the apostles and to the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and to die. And Peter who has made this great confession has reacted with horror at the first announcement of the Lord’s suffering and has made it necessary for the Lord Jesus to turn and rebuke him with some of the strongest words found in the New Testament: get thee behind me Satan.

It is evident that while Peter has come to recognize the Lord Jesus as the Messiah, he has not come to understand yet that he is a suffering Messiah. It was very difficult for the Israelites to grasp this, even when they had come to faith in the Lord Jesus as the Messiah, because they had anticipated that when the Messiah came he would establish Israel as the head of the nations again, and they would enter into the blessings of headship over all the peoples of the earth.

And they somehow had missed the point that he must come and suffer and die. I think that the reason for this is that they had an inadequate conception of their own sin. They were not troubled in their conscience about how a God can give us a kingdom when we are so polluted with sin and under such condemnation. Had they, by the Holy Spirit come to a true understanding of themselves, they would have been troubled and plagued by the question, how can a holy God establish us in a kingdom if something is not done for our sins? So, Peter and the apostles had to be told that the Lord Jesus is a Messiah all right, but he is a suffering Messiah.

Now if they had studied the Old Testament as I say, and if they had had that exercise of spirit, which every one should have about their own spiritual condition before God, this would not have been such a great problem to them. But it was, because they were very, very superficial at this state in the understanding of God and the understanding of themselves. So after the Lord Jesus has rebuked Satan, he must now turn and unfold some of the implications of the office of Messiah and some of the implications of what it means to be one of the disciples of the Messiah and one of the responsibilities that belongs to them is expressed in verse 24 as conditions for discipleship.

Now you can see immediately as you read these verses that two philosophies of life are brought into sharp conflict. There is the philosophy of life espoused by the Lord Jesus and there is the philosophy of life espoused by Apostle Peter, and I dare say, by many of us today. Peter was for saving, someone has said; Jesus was for losing. But

Peter’s saving would be loss and Jesus’s losing would be gain. These apparent contradictions, these or, these paradoxes the Lord Jesus will explain.

So evidently now it is upon our Lord’s mind that he must bring home to Peter and to the disciples the inevitable law of the Christian life, and it is expressed for us here in verse 24. If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. There’s a great deal of confusion over this little word, will. If any man will.

The Greek text says, if any man wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. And I’ve, I’ve listened to the commentators on this point, and they frequently give us statements that really are contradictory if understood in the light of their context only. For example, one commentator has said, Christ does not pull his sheep by a rope; in his service, in his army, there are none but volunteers. So he will not force, he will not coerce. Everybody who truly serves the Lord as a Christian soldier is a volunteer.

Now I have a good friend who is a lawyer in the city, a very prominent lawyer, and he likes to put it in the precisely opposite way. He likes to say, Christ asks for no volunteers. He conscripts his servants. Now I’d like to suggest that both of these are true, if we understand the sense in which they may be harmonized. It is true that in the army of the Lord Jesus there are no unwilling soldiers. But, all who serve willingly are those who have been made willing by the Holy Spirit. It is true, there are no unwilling soldiers, but there are no soldiers who out of their own free will have come to the service of God.

My old evangelist teacher used to say, “Our wills are never active for God until God has first jiggled our willer.” [Laughter] And that is exactly what happened. So that when we do willingly serve the Lord—and in his army there are no unwilling soldiers—it is because it is because he has first jiggled our willer. It is he who has made us willing. And so my lawyer friend is correct. He conscripts his soldiers.

There are no volunteers who volunteer out of their own free will. As a matter of fact, our own free will will always be negative. And so it’s true, there are no unwilling soldiers. But all the willing soldiers are those who have been made willing by the Holy Spirit. Not coerced. Not compelled. Not dragged into service.

But in his own secret and mysterious way, the Holy Spirit works in our hearts and makes us willing to do his will. Paul puts it very beautifully when he says, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in you, both to will, both to do of his good pleasure. Well, what are the precepts of this discipleship? He says three things are required: let a man deny himself, let him take up his cross, let him follow me.

Now it is possible to interpret this passage in two different ways, and I want to say this without arguing it. We don’t have time to do that. I want you to know there are two different ways to take this passage, and I want you to know clearly the way in which I am taking it. It is possible to argue that when the Lord Jesus says, if any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me, that he is giving us in different words a statement of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and that every true Christian is a person who denies himself and takes up his cross and follows the Lord Jesus.

Now a good case can be made for that, because it is biblical teaching that when a man believes in the Lord Jesus Christ there is a definitive change in his life. He is a new creature, and that definitive change in his life is manifested in a new kind of existence. There is no change of life. We have no reason for assuring a person that he has become a member of the body of Christ. It is true, the saints persevere. And the evidence of the fact that they are saints is that there are good works. There is new life, it manifests itself. Of course, we may not necessarily see all of the results of it, but it’s there and God sees it. So that is a truth. And I say, one can make a case for saying the Lord Jesus is just preaching the gospel when he says, if any man will come after me, let him deny himself

and take up his cross and follow me. That’s what’s involved in personal faith in the Lord Jesus.

Now I do not take it that way, although I respect that viewpoint and I think that a truth is expressed by what lies back of that interpretation. I rather take the view that the Lord Jesus, since he is speaking to disciples here, is speaking about something that concerns what we may call Christian discipleship.

There are two types of Christians. The Apostle Paul speaks of Christians as spiritual and carnal for example, in 1 Corinthians chapter 3. He doesn’t approve carnal Christians. He doesn’t say that they are in the will of God in the truest sense, speaking of his preceptive will. He doesn’t say, by saying that there are carnal Christians, that he approves in any way of carnality.

But it is a fact, and even Charles Hodges, the great Princeton theologian, who might not be expected to recognize this, does recognize the fact that there are two types of believers. This is the reason we have in the New Testament exhortations addressed to believers to present their body as a living sacrifice, to be not conformed to this age. The facts are that there are true believers in Jesus Christ who have truly believed but who have not yet presented their bodies as a living sacrifice.

I think rather than the Lord Jesus is speaking about what I will call, just for the sake of a term, discipleship. And that we are to make a distinction between, if any man will come after me, and if he had said if any man will come to me. To come to him is to come to him for salvation. And salvation, deliverance, forgiveness of sin, justification of life, is our experience and our possession when we have seen the Lord Jesus as the objective sacrifice on the cross for sinners, and when by the Holy Spirit we have been brought to rely upon him and what he has done alone for our salvation.

We no longer rely on the church. We no longer rely on good works. We no longer rely on the ordinances. We no longer rely on culture or education, or whatever it may be that we may have relied upon before we see the Lord Jesus as the sole and

sufficient sacrifice for sin. And when by the grace of God the Holy Spirit we trust him, receive the knowledge concerning the sacrifice of Christ, become convinced of its truthfulness by the Holy Spirit, and trust it, and that alone, that is to come to him for salvation.

That’s the experience of every believer in Jesus Christ. Every Christian has to have that experience. That is the experience that brings us out of the world, into the body of Jesus Christ. What’s in our text here is that if any man will come after me. And all through the Scripture we are over and over pointed to genuine believers who have not come after him in Christian discipleship, have not realized the full implications of what it is to believe in the Lord Jesus as the objective sacrifice for sin.

Well what is it that is involved in coming after him? What is it that is involved in Christian discipleship? Well the Lord Jesus says, if any man will come after me let him deny himself. That’s the first thing that he said. What does the word deny mean? Well, technically it means simply “to say no to.” It’s the word that is used, for example, of the Apostle Peter later on when he denies the Lord Jesus. And Peter when he denies the Lord Jesus goes on to confess, I know not the man. So, it really means to say no to.

Now he does not mean simply when he says, let a man deny himself, that he is to deny things in himself. But strictly speaking he says, let him deny himself. It is possible, you know, for us to deny things but not really to face the question of the relationship of our own inmost being to the Lord in this day by day relationship. So I think that what he means is that we are to deny not simply the things that are attached to ourselves but to deny ourselves.

Moses, for example, according to the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, has had such a decision when we read in Hebrews chapter 11 and verse 24, that Moses refused— incidentally, that’s the same word as denied—refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He made a certain decision that involved his whole life. So to deny means to say no to. It means to say no to self will.

Catherine Booth, who is the mother of General Bramble Booth and the founder of the Salvation Army, said that the greatest struggle that she had in the life of her son came when he was six months old—six weeks old. How often that’s true. Mothers know that if you’re going to have control of your child the struggle begins awfully early.

I remember years ago reading at Sir Sidney Smith, who was the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Edinburg, says that a child comes into the world aggressive, acquisitive, and in all ways a potential criminal. Now that is in our mind a beautiful medical fact [Johnson laughs]. Because every child that comes into the world does come into this world objecting, rebelling. The French have told us that if our babies were born in the dark perhaps that wouldn’t happen, because it’s the light that bothers their eyes and makes them cry. The French are not very discerning.

As a matter of fact, every infant does come into this world aggressive, acquisitive. You can see it even in the clenched fists that all of them have when they are born. And in all ways a potential criminal. Yet all those sweet little infants, potential criminals. Now that makes it very, very difficult for preachers who believe in original sin, because when mother brings up an infant, what shall I say? What can I say? What do you think?

Well you know, many years ago preachers invented a way to say something that sounded good but which was really the truth, and what you should say is, my that is a baby. [Sudden, boisterous laughter]

When we deny self, we’re not simply to deny things in self but self will itself, self-seeking. The most beautiful illustration of seeking the will of God is the case of our Lord Jesus himself. And he expresses it so beautifully in the passages of the word of God, such as John chapter 8 and verse 50. The Lord Jesus says, “And I seek not mine own glory.” Involved in self denial or the denial of self is denial of self will, denial of self seeking—that means that in connection with our material possessions. Our material possessions are not to be the dominating force in our lives. Now mind you, it is not a sin to be rich, it’s a miracle. [Laughter] And I don’t mean in any way to suggest that we are

sinning if we have money. But we should remember, of course, that what God has given us is given us that we may use it as a trust from him. Everything that we have is a trust from him. It is true too that to be a rich person does make a difference.

I laughed quite a bit when I read the article written by one of the young ladies on the staff of the *Dallas Morning News* two or three months ago in which she thought that she would carry on an experiment in the city of Dallas to determine if it was really true that rich was better. And so she hired a Cadillac and a chauffeur and engaged in some experiments. And she also had a beaten-up Toyota.

And the first experiment was on the Dallas North Tollway. And she drove up with her chauffeur driven Cadillac to the tollway entrance, and the toll guard was there and she leaned out and said, I’m awfully embarrassed, but I don’t have any money and my chauffeur is broke too, can I charge it? [Laughter] And the man behind the guard, behind the desk uh began to laugh and giggle a little, and he said well this is one time that it’ll be on me, and let them go through.

Two days later she drove up in the battered Toyota and she said, I’m awfully sorry, I’m very embarrassed, I don’t have any money. Can I owe you? And he proceeded to give her a lecture on, she should have read the signs, she knew what the charge was, and finally he said, “Write me a check.”

Then she thought she would try another experiment at a self-service gasoline station. So she rode up in the Cadillac, parked in front of one of the self-service tanks and sat there. Two minutes later, finally, the manager came out and said, can I do anything for you ma’am? She said, fill it up. [Laughter] And with that, he went out, he not only filled up the gasoline tank but he cleaned off the windshield and of the all of the windows, and then she asked if she could use the phone. He said, why certainly, we have a phone in here and you can use the phone. And incidentally, she said he was very, very pleasant, even though it only took two dollars’ worth of gasoline to fill the tank.

He said, by the way, this is good for my business. The people here think because I sell off brand gasoline that we’re kinda cheap. But with you here, with a chauffeur, said that you can come in here any time, I’ll buy your gasoline for you.

Couple of days later she came in with her Toyota, pulled up in one of front of one of one of the tanks and sat there, and after ten minutes of waiting he yelled out of the booth and said, this is a self-service station! So she had to get out, serve herself, and she went up and asked if she could use the telephone. He said, there’s one down at the 7-11 store, go down there and use it.

Well she carried on two or three other experiments and did discover that rich is better. But it’s only in this world that rich is better.

If any man will come after me, let him deny himself. That means denial of self-pity, denial of self-consciousness, those feelings that we have when we’re so easily wounded by the things that people say, self love, self exaltation. You know the apostles so beautifully expressed the Christian discipleship when they described the lives of some of the others that I want to read a statement the Apostle Paul makes concerning Epaphroditus.

He states in Philippians chapter 2, “Yet I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, and companion in labor, and fellow-soldier, but your messenger and him that ministered to my need. For indeed he was sick near unto death: but God had mercy on him; and not on him only, but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. And I sent him therefore the more eagerly, that, when ye see him again, ye may rejoice, and that I may be the less sorrowful. Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness; and hold such in reputation: Because for the work of Christ he was near unto death, not regarding his life, to supply your lack of service toward me.” Epaphroditus was evidently a man who had denied himself and was coming after the Lord Jesus.

The second thing that the Lord Jesus says is a requirement for discipleship is to take up his cross. Now what does it mean to take up his cross? Incidentally, that “his” is a reference to “ours,” but it’s a reference to ours in the sense that it is our identification with him in what he has done.

Now it seems to me that one of the most beautiful ways to explain what it means to take up his cross is to put two texts together that are found in the word of God, and one is in John chapter 19 and verse 17 and the other is in Hebrews chapter 13 and verse 13. And in John chapter 19 and verse 17, it’s the simple statement that the Lord Jesus as he went out to Golgotha where he is where he was to be crucified without, John says, bearing his cross.

Now the writer of the Epistle of the Hebrews makes a statement that is so similar to it that I often have wondered if he did not have in mind our Lord traveling out to Golgotha with the cross upon his back when he made it. For the writer of the Epistle of the Hebrews in the 13th chapter and the 13th verse states concerning the believers, using the figure of the sin offering because our Lord was going out to Golgotha as a sin offering, he says, “Let us go forth therefore unto him outside the camp,”—outside the camp of religion, outside the camp of Judaism—“let’s go forth unto him,” and then he adds, “bearing his reproach.” So the figure in both places is of individuals who are going out to the place of sacrifice. In the one case it is bearing his cross. In the other case it’s bearing his reproach.

Now it’s evident to me that there is a similarity here. There is a place of meeting in these two expressions. To bear his cross is to bear his reproach. What does it mean then to deny one’s self and take up his cross? Why it means to assume the place of identification with our Lord in his death, burial, and resurrection for us. It is to be identified with him in the reproach of his sacrifice. It is to acknowledge in our Christian life the fact that we are joined to him and to follow him in that sense, so that it means then to be willing to experience the suffering caused by identification with the Lord Jesus.

Now remember, the Lord Jesus was hated by the world, and he said in effect, if the world does not hate you, then you don’t really belong to me. If you do love me, the world will hate you, because the world loves its own. It doesn’t love those who are not of it. And the world is still carrying on its enmity and its conflict with Jesus Christ. And the minute a person identifies himself with the Lord Jesus, acknowledges him as Lord and lives with the lordship of Christ predominant—never perfect—predominant in his life, you can be sure that there will be reproach in it, just as Moses, just as Abraham, just as all of the saints in the past have have experienced. So to take up his cross, then, means to take up the position of identification with the Lord Jesus, to acknowledge that we really do belong to him, and to put him first in our lives.

To take up his cross does not mean to take up *our* cross, that is, the experiences of our life. Our cross is not our bad temper, for example. It is not our mother-in-law who causes us such great difficulties. Our cross is the relationship to him. All these other things that we like to say are “my cross,” are really crimes, not crosses.

The apostles again, I think, have so beautifully exemplified this in their lives, and the Apostle Paul describes it, I think, in words that are right to the point in 1 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 9 and following when he says concerning the apostolic existence, “For I think that God hath set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ’s sake.” That’s what it means to take up his cross: we are fools for Christ’s sake. “But ye are wise in Christ; we are weak, but ye are strong; ye are honourable, but we are despised. Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwellingplace; And labour, working with our own hands: being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure it: Being defamed, we intreat: we are made as the filth of the world.”

Think of that. The apostolic existence. Nice wasn’t it? We are made as the filth of the world, as the offscouring of all things unto this day. Luke says, when he gives the

account of this, “If a man come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross daily.”

It is the experience, any experience of Christian identified with the Lord Jesus.

Now the third thing that he says is, follow me. Incidentally, he says follow me, not the church. He says follow me, not the clergy. He says follow me, not the creed. There is a personal relationship to the Lord Jesus involved.

Now its very striking that in the first two of these requirements the Lord Jesus uses a tense which refers to decisive action. He says, “If any man come after me let him deny himself.” Decisive action. Come to a decision about a person’s true relationship to the Lord. Let him take up his cross, decisive action, and then, using the present tense, he says, and go on following me. So if a man wants to be a disciple of the Lord Jesus, deny himself, take up his cross, the place identification with him, and go on following him.

One of the commentators has said, it’s like taking a journey. There are three steps in taking a journey. The first thing you do is to say farewell to your family and to your friends. That’s denying one’s self. Then you pick up your bags. That’s taking up the cross. And then you make your journey. That’s following him.

Now then that raises the question, is the Lord Jesus here really speaking about believers? Is there such a thing as a believer? In order to be a true disciple, to come after him, is it necessary for him to deny himself, take up his cross and follow me? Is it true that there is this decision in the family of God that there are some who are carnal and there are some who are not, there are some who are worldly and some who are not? Yes, it’s true.

Let me give you, I think, one of the most beautiful illustrations of this that we find in the whole of the word of God, and it’s the story of Lot, Abraham’s friend and relative. Lot had a great deal going for him. How would you have liked to have been the friend and relative of Abraham? Furthermore, in the New Testament, we read that Lot was a just man. That is, he was a true believer. He had believed in Abraham’s Savior who was to come, and he had been justified. He was a just man.

But now, what was the difference between Abraham and Lot? Well, there came a time when there was a strife that arose among the herdsmen of Lot and Abraham. I have a good Baptist friend, he likes to say that’s the beginning of the Baptist Church, there was a strife among the brethren. [Laughter] It has nothing to do with that, of course, but there did come a strife and there was a necessity for Abraham and Lot to make a decision about the future, and you’ll remember that Abraham and Lot got together and Abraham said, you choose first.

And Lot looked out, and he looked down, and he saw the plains where Sodom and Gomorrah were and they were like the garden of God the Scriptures say. He said, I’ll take that. But the the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners exceedingly, the text of Scriptures says, but he chose that for his existence.

After he had made his choice, incidentally, God said, “Abraham, come here.” He took Abraham up on a high mountain, he said, “Now Abraham, I’m gonna make your choice for you, because you have allowed Lot to make the choice and you’re allowing me to make the choice. I want you to look North, East, West, South, I’m gonna give the whole thing to you. That’s the benefit of letting the Lord make the choices, of course.

But incidentally, but by the way, Lot did make his choice, and so he went down to Sodom and Gomorrah. He made a guilty venture of a contracted marriage with the world and became a very influential man. He must have been a man with great possessions. The text of Scripture in Genesis chapter 19 makes that, I think, quite plain, that he did have great possessions. And so he became influential, he sat in the gate, he was one of the judges of the town. He had what you would think a beautiful opportunity to give testimony for Jesus Christ.

The only thing is, that when a person is not really following after the Lord Jesus, is not really following after his testimony to the one true God, Jehovah, but holds that confession only within his heart, he doesn’t have any influence. And though he may be a genuinely justified man, if his life does not conform to his testimony he doesn’t have fruit.

And so when the time came for God to destroy Sodom, you remember that he sent an angel down? Lot had to be practically dragged out of Sodom. He went around, he warned after, Lot was a believing man, he was told that God was going to destroy the place. He went to his sons, his sons-in-law, and he warned them that it was going to happen, as the Scripture says, but Lot seemed as if he were mocking to them.

The man who is a worldly man doesn’t have any influence. Even though he has worldly possessions and worldly position, no spiritual influence. But you remember that finally he got his family out of the city and the angel told them, now I want you to get out of the city and don’t even look back, trying to stress the fact that so far as the world is concerned, not only are you to get out of it physically, but mentally and spiritually as well.

Lot’s wife looked back. There must have been a tremendous earthquake. All of the chemicals that were there were compounded together, there was a great explosion and all of this went up in the air, and as she looked back, unfortunately she was caught in the salt and the minerals and in the explosion, the burning fire, and she became a pillar of salt—a standing testimony to a person who looks back, desiring really the things of the world deep down in the heart.

Now Lot escaped. But you remember that the Scripture ends his story in the 19th chapter in which he is a monument of the vengeance of God, the justice of God. He has a blackened home. He has a blackened name. His unknown and unhonored grave may have over it a brand plucked from the burning, was saved yet so as by fire that Lot died a justified man with no influence. No true life. I think that there is no shorter more meaningful testimony than the expression of the biography of Lot’s wife which our Lord gives in Luke chapter 17. He said, “Remember Lot’s wife.” Three words that tell a vivid biographical story of a life that was really at heart wedded to the world.

Now you might expect the Lord Jesus to give us some reasons why we should become disciples. And he does, in verses 25, 26 and 27. They are very simple, and so I

won’t say much about them. What he essentially says is, discipleship should lead to imitation of the Lord Jesus and to self-denial. And notice that there are three “fors” that introduce verse 25, verse 26, and verse 27.

And he says, first of all, we ought to meet the terms for discipleship because of the preservation of life. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it, and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. What does he mean by these paradoxical words? That in order to save life we must lose, and when we lose life we really find it.

Well, he means simply this, that one must sacrifice the natural life in order to truly possess the spiritual life. One must sacrifice the love of the world and the world’s loves in order to have the experience of true spiritual life. One must sacrifice the temple in order to possess the eternal in the fullest sense. One must sacrifice the minor for the major. When a man seeks to save his skin, he loses his full experience of Christian spiritual life.

The early Christians are the greatest illustrations of this and we find some in, for example, the 20th chapter of the Book of Acts when the Apostle Paul speaks about his own experience. He states, “But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself so that I might finish my course with joy in the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus to testify the gospel of the grace of God.” Even life itself was insignificant for the apostle.

Vance Havener, who has a beautiful way of saying some things and says some very significant things has said, “As long as the church wore scars, they made much headway, but when they began to wear medals the cause languished. It was a greater day for the church when Christians were led to the lions than when they bought season tickets and sat in the grandstands.”

The second reason he says we ought to meet these terms is the profitlessness of the world. For what is a man profited if he should gain the whole world and lose his own life? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his life? To save life is to lose the

world—I’m sorry, let me go back. To save life is to gain the world but to gain the world is to lose my true spiritual life. So it’s a matter of balancing profit and loss in the final analysis.

Which would you have? Would you have this world? Or would you have your life? True spiritual life. True spiritual life comes from losing the natural life. When a man says, I’ve found it, I know what that means. I know that that means that he’s come into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. He is supposed to be a living proof that he has the forgiveness of sin, delivered from the penalty of sin. That’s a great experience. That’s the beginning of Christian life.

But that’s not the full significance of finding life. According to our Lord, to truly find life is to lose life and to be identified with him in the reproach that comes to a genuine Christian. And finally, he says, “For the Son of man shall come in the glory of the Father with his angels and then he shall reward every man according to his works.” So we ought to come after him because it’s the way we preserve true spiritual life. The world is a profitless gain if we think that gaining it’s great, and the time has come when he’ll not simply be a suffering Messiah but he’ll be a judging Messiah. And then he is going to render to each according to their works.

Now I’m not going to say anything about verse 28, because that’s going to be the introduction to our study of the transfiguration next week.

Let me close by just saying a few words about the necessity of this cross-bearing. When the Lord Jesus says, if any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me and for use it, in this beautifully logical way, he’s telling us if we want to enter into true experience and full experience of Christian life, more is involved than the simple act of faith by which we come into the Christian life. Let a man deny himself, let him take up his cross, and let him go on following him.

Theodore Monose was a great French preacher, and he had the most beautiful way of expressing the need for denying self and taking up the cross and following the

Lord Jesus that I know. He said, “Let’s imagine for a moment that we’re getting ready to leave this meeting and as the benediction is pronounced, you turn around, and you see someone drop a bill, and you go over and pick it up and it’s,”—well he was speaking about francs, but we’ll speak about dollars—“and you pick it up and it’s a ten dollar bill, and so you say, finders keepers losers weepers, and you stick it in your pocket. But soon your conscience begins to speak and uh you sense that that’s wrong, and so you make a little decision. I’ll give him two dollars and keep eight. [Laughter] And so after you’ve thought about this for a moment your conscience continues to speak and you say, no I’ll give him eight and keep two. Conscience still speaks and so finally you say, I think I’ll do the great grand glorious sacrificial thing, I’ll give him the whole ten dollars.”

And then Pastor Monose used to say, “That’s not the great grand glorious sacrificial thing to do, that’s the only honest thing to do.”

Now I say to you Christians this morning, the Lord Jesus has offered the sacrifice which has bought you, and you were bought with a price. You think it’s a great grand glorious sacrificial thing to do to give yourself to him who has bought you? It’s not the great grand glorious sacrificial thing to do. May God help us to realize that it’s the only honest thing to do.

Now I know what you’re thinking. Dr. Johnson, if I give myself to the Lord Jesus, it’s not going to be a very pleasant life. All that suffering. All that reproach. All those things the Apostle Paul was talking about. They’re not easy to stand. I’d much rather have a big bank account and a certain position, and influence in the community. And if you hadn’t said anything about Lot, I think that’s exactly what I would have wanted to be, a Christian in influence in the community.

Let me assure you, that the man who was truly happy was Abraham. The man who was truly fruitful was Abraham. The man who was truly influential was Abraham, not Lot. Lot vexed his righteous soul day after day as he lived among the wicked. True believer, unhappy for his whole life, and wound up ultimately in shame, fathering two

children of his own daughters that pestered and bothered Israel in the remainder of Israel’s history.

Samuel Rutherford put it well, “He that looketh unto the white side of the cross and taketh it up handsomely findeth it just such a burden as wings are to a bird.” If you want to say truly, I’ve found it, it comes when you’ve responded to the apostles’ exhortation.

Brethren, by the mercies of God present your bodies a living sacrifice that’s holy, acceptable unto God and it shall reasonable service.

If you’re here this morning and you have never believed in the Lord Jesus, of course you need to come to him that you may come after him. May God work in your heart to that end. Let’s stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father, we do pray that the Holy Spirit may bring home to our hearts the importance of proper priorities. O God, help us to know what it truly is to find life, the life that is life indeed. O God, enable us to have as our own priorities the reproach of identification with the Lord Jesus.

We commit each one present here to Thee and pray that if there are those who have never believed in the Lord Jesus, O God, bring them to the faith in him that means life, forgiveness of sins, and deliverance from the eternal penalties.

We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.