

Blessing, Obedience, Compassion and Vision

Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.”

Matthew 16:24

This verse has always been a puzzle to me, perhaps because it is somewhat cryptic, but also because it seems to be so important, so central to both the Gospel and Jesus message to us when He was here. Below is one more attempt to grasp the depth and meaning of this verse, shedding light on what it means in our daily life and how to live a life typified by the implications it contains.

To deny ourselves means to quit living life for ourselves and rather to live for the community. The community refers to whatever group of people we are in at the time. If we are standing in line at the grocery store, then our community is the other people in line, the checker, the bagger, etc. If we are at home, then our community is our spouse, our children, our neighbors, our mail carrier, etc. If we are at work, at school, at church, wherever we are all day long, the people around us constitute the community that we are in at the time, and we are to give ourselves for them rather than being selfish and fighting for our rights, our way, our needs, our wants, our benefit, etc. Even in a traffic jam, that is our community, the other drivers – we are to give ourselves for them. We are to benefit others with our life, benefit the community, be a blessing to those around us. Try this next time you are in a traffic jam and late for work.

Community also includes the group of people at large that we are a part of. If we live in a city, then it is our city, and we are to give of ourselves to better the city, help the poor, fight against evil and oppression, etc. Once we are born again, we are to quit being so me-centric, focused on our needs/wants/desires/etc. and rather focus on being a blessing to others. It starts by realizing that we are in community when we are driving down the road to work, standing in a line at the movies, sitting in a meeting, etc. – the people around us constitute our current community. Then we must think about what we can do to be a blessing to that community we are now in. What can we do to be a benefit to the people around us. It is a complete 180 degree shift of our focus, our thoughts and our actions. Jesus makes it clear that this is one of the key understandings of this passage in the following verses where he asks “What would it profit a man if he gains the

whole world yet forfeits his soul”? He is clearly telling us to let go of our self-focused ways of thinking and doing (consuming – “gaining the world” for ourselves) and embrace His way of helping others (creating and cultivating). He calls us to build community rather than tear it down, in all situations (by living selfishly we typically tear down community rather than building it up). He calls us to be a blessing rather than a curse, in all situations. To give vs. to receive.

Take up our cross speaks of the two-fold ministry of the cross – the justice of God and the love of God. God’s justice in that Jesus paid the penalty for sin and God’s wrath against sin is satisfied. God’s love in that rather than us paying for it with our lives, Jesus paid the price for us. God put the wrath that we deserve on His son rather than letting us suffer through it. One thing it means for us to take up our cross is to live a balanced life of justice and love like Jesus did, not being tilted to one or the other in our interactions with others, avoiding legalism (extreme justice) and also avoiding licentiousness (extreme love). A balance between the two yields the life God is calling us to live.

We can also practice balancing justice and love by expressing love for those in community with us and taking the penalty due to those in community with us. This type of action is showing God’s love to others by going to the cross in their place. It is similar to the idea of throwing ourselves on the hand grenade so our buddies don’t die, except we may or may not know the other guys in the foxhole with us. This type of sacrificial lifestyle can be seen in things as small as letting someone go in front of us in a line or as big as sacrificially giving to the poor or taking the blame for something we did not do and suffering major consequences for their actions without breathing a word about it. It is the basis for [Rudyard Kipling’s poem titled “If”](#), it is the basis for the Gunsmoke character Marshal Matt Dillon risking his life to bring the outlaw to justice rather than pulling a Clint Eastwood and just shooting the outlaw dead on the spot (making Clint’s day). This is mercy, combining justice and love in our dealings with others. It is compassion.

The cross also speaks of obedience to God. At the first tree (in the garden of Eden) we disobeyed regarding the tree. God said obey and you will live. But we disobeyed and we suffered death. At the second tree (the cross), God said to His son obey and you will die. Jesus obeyed God and He suffered death because of His obedience. But through his obedience to the point of death we received life. In this respect taking up our cross refers to being obedient to God in the things He tells us to do. Through the obedience of faith we enter into the work of the cross – the demand for justice for our sins is satisfied and God’s love moves us from death to life. We are made alive in Him. We pass out of the death we inherit from Adam and move into the life we are given in Jesus.

The cross reminds us that “It is finished”. There is nothing left for us to do, Jesus did it all on the cross. This empowers us to be obedient, to think of others,

to consider the interests of others (Philippians 2:4), to consider their needs. To study the situation and look for a way to be a blessing, to be a benefit. We can step out of the “He who dies with the most toys wins” game and rather live for eternity, live for God’s purposes. This mindset frees us from the incessant concern for ourselves so we can think about others. It delivers us from our lone wolf “every man for himself” mentality and enables us to be a contributing member of the team, looking for ways to help those around us. The need for “more” settles into the background and is replaced with the desire to “give”, the desire to be a part of what God is doing, the desire to further His kingdom rather than my own. Like the rising of the sun transforms the face of the planet and gives energy to all things, the cross rises in our heart and gives life to those around us, transforming us into vehicles for God’s grace in a fallen world.

Follow me refers to taking on the mind of Christ and setting our minds on the interests of God rather than the interests of man. It is living a Matthew 6:33 life. When we are in community, and we take on the mindset of being a blessing to the community rather than a drain, there are often multiple choices regarding what we can do to be a blessing. When faced with choices, we are to choose the option that furthers the interests of God in that community. We see this in the previous verses in Matthew 16 – Jesus tells the disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and die. Peter rebukes Him and says “May it never be”. Jesus rebukes Peter, calls him satan, and tells him his mind is set on man’s interests, not God’s. Our vision, our mindset, has to be based on God, His kingdom, His righteousness, not man’s. It is choosing the best over the good. It is big picture, long range, eternally minded vision. We are empowered to do this because of the cross’s power to free us from our me-centric mentality. Once we realize it is finished, we are free to set our minds on God’s kingdom and righteousness.

How do we know God’s will in any given situation? We must have eyes to see and ears to hear. We must be men and women of God - born again, filled with the spirit, knowledgeable of God’s word, in fellowship (community) with other believers, etc., so that we may discern God’s interests in all situations.

So we have Blessing, Obedience, Compassion and Vision – four keys to understanding what it means to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus. Always, in all situations, we must look for ways to be a blessing and a benefit to our community, remembering that we are now free in Christ to think of others and act for their benefit because we have been delivered by the cross from the tyranny of the self-focused mindset we were born with. This is abundant life.