The Way of the Cross

Fifth in the series “Come to the Cross”

# Scripture: Phil. 2:1-13

# Key Thought: God leads us through humility into obedience; in God's time He then releases rewards.

# Intro:

(Use as an illustration the cross on the plaque that I received for my ordination.) The cross that I would show you today is the one on this plaque. I received this plaque in commemoration of my ordination. In the denomination in which I was ordained, the Wesleyan Church, and in the time frame when I was ordained, ordinations were often performed in the local church where the pastor served. That was the case for me. I had been the pastor at Bentley Creek Wesleyan for two years when the church hosted my ordination service, with a grand reception following in the church gym. Among the gifts that I received was this plaque. This plaque with its cross has been on display in my office ever since. It is such an appropriate symbol for a pastor for the service of a pastor does involve walking the “way of the cross” of which I’m speaking today. There are many small sacrifices involved. There is a great need to stay humble. Pastors should not be in the ministry unless they are doing so in obedience to the call of God. And the daily walk of pastors needs to be a continuing march of obedience. Yet there are many rewards in the journey of ministry as well.

Today I want to talk about what it means to walk in the “way of the cross.” My three key words will be humility, obedience and reward. The hymn that we sang at the beginning provides the phrase, “The way of the cross”. But it is the command of Jesus and the theology of Paul that provides the underpinning for that of which I speak.

Jesus said,

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. Matt 16:24-25 NIV

If we follow Jesus as he asks, we will need to walk in “the way of the cross.”

# Humility is the first step

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul talks to us but how the cross of Jesus Christ provides for us an awesome inspiration and example toward personal humility. Last week we began to discuss what it means to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus as he challenged us to do (Mark 8:34). Today Paul describes for us a three legged to journey of discipleship which I’m calling “the way of the cross.” The journey begins with our following Jesus’ great example of humility.

## Example of Jesus

Already in verses three through eight Paul has pointed out several key marks of humility. In verse three he writes that the humble person does “nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit” (Phil 2:3). From the original we get the sense that we are not to push ourselves forward and we are to avoid empty bragging. Paul is very concerned that the Philippian believers understand this concept, so he holds out before them the tremendous example of Jesus himself. In verse six, Paul is pointing to the preexistence of Jesus, in the mystery of the Godhead. He points out the humble spirit that it took for Jesus to not hold onto–cling to–the privileges he had; but instead Jesus freely let go of many of those privileges in order to take on human form (Phil 2:6, 7). Jesus willingly took the lower place for our sake.

## Learning to be humble

To be sure, any humbling that we do, or experience is trivial compared to that which Jesus did. Yet Paul knew human nature and he knew that to humble ourselves goes against our grain. We are much more tempted to exalt ourselves, to brag about ourselves, to subtly figure out ways to push ourselves forward, then we are to take the lower place.

Paul is pointing out to us that if we’re really serious about denying ourselves and taking up our cross and following Jesus, then a great place to begin is by learning how to be humble.

JoAnne was reading this week about Adam Clarke, an early Methodist preacher who was a coworker of John Wesley. Pastors today know him simply as the author of the classic Clarke’s Commentary which is still useful today. Adam Clarke was one of those kinds of people who worked while others played. He had mastered 20 languages. And he wrote his eight-volume commentary of the Bible during his spare moments over a 27-year time span. That is an amazing feat of self-discipline. He was beloved and appreciated by his fellow ministers. In 1805, Clarke was elected as president of the Methodist conference. He felt so unworthy that the ministers had to pick him up bodily and carry him to the platform and place them in the president’s chair. That was the kind of humble man that he was. (Info from Measure Your Life by Wesley L Deuwel p. 93)

A great negative example today of refusal to be humble is American cultural snobbery in travel abroad. I have not had the privilege of travel abroad in a while but even years ago when I was abroad in the military I could see cultural snobbery happening. And one reads about it regularly. Now I’m not talking about not taking pride in the values of our Country or the history of our country. I think we do not value the Christian heritage of our great country enough. What I am talking about is going to another country and acting like everything that is not like the USA is basically either wrong or backward. For example, a fellow Naval officer stationed with me in Morocco would not go off the base because it forced him to interact with those “dirty Moroccans” as he disparagingly called them. What a horrid attitude. I was glad he did not go off base for the sake of those he might run across. Meanwhile my wife and I were visiting Fez and Meknes, Moulay Idriss, Tangier, Marrakesh and Rabat. We drank mint tea in the humble home of our maid, saw Roman ruins at Volubolis and even once journeyed over the mountains to see the Western fringes of the Sahara Desert. He missed a lot by being such a snob. We wanted to see and learn. We miss a lot when we are proud and egotistical too. umility opens dooers. Whereas the virtue of Humility opens doors of relationship.

## So how do we do learn humility?

In verse four Paul points out that the humble person is inclined to look out for the “interests of others” before their own (Phil 2:4). This is actually a good way to measure our humility. If are always looking out for ourselves first, we have a way to go in becoming a humble person.

Paul suggests that the humble person considers others “better than ourselves.” They give other people’s abilities a little extra respect. A humble woman or man listens with the idea that the other person has some good ideas they could learn from.

(additional admonitions to humility 1 Peter 3:8; Eph. 4:2)

# Jesus is our example of obedience

The second stage of the journey that we call “the way of the cross” is obedience.

## Jesus’ example

The reason this is the second stage, is that the primary cause of disobedience is our lack of humility before God. When we truly fear God and acknowledge his authority over us, then we are ready to obey. If our ego is at the helm of our lives, we will have grave difficulty in this stage of the journey.

Paul holds up to us in our text in Philippians the wonderful example of Jesus himself.

“And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:8 NIV)

Paul is encouraging the people to whom he wrote that if they would be obedient to God, God would work out his “good purposes” through them. There is no better example of this principle than Jesus himself.

Jesus’ obedience to his heavenly Father was clear, unquestioning, and detailed. On one occasion, Jesus told his listeners;

“The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.” (John 5:19 NIV)

Never was his obedience more explicit than in the hours prior to the crucifixion. As Jesus prayed for strength to face the impending events, he pointedly submitted to his Father’s will.

“Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” (Luke 22:42)

notice what Paul writes to the Philippian church in verse 12. How is it that they are to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling”? The answer is given in the first part of the verse, “as you have always obeyed.” So, having a consciousness that we are being obedient to God’s directions in our lives is to be a key characteristic of our discipleship. As followers of Jesus, there is nothing in which we are to be more careful to follow him than in imitating his example of obedience to his heavenly Father.

## Our obedience

Wesley Duewel, who was a missionary leader in the Far East wrote deeply about how necessary our obedience is if we are to follow the “way of the cross”. He suggests that there are four crucial aspects of our discipleship that we can test by looking at the measure of our obedience to Jesus. He writes;

Obedience is the measure of all spirituality.

Measure your love for Christ by your total obedience to him. You are his friends if you do whatever he commands you (John 15:14), that is, anything less than 100% obedience is a proof of inadequate love. Do you desire a relation, a special closeness to Jesus? Listen to what he says: "whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:50).

Measure your faith by your obedience. Faith without deeds is useless (James 2:20).

Measure your consecration by your obedience. To obey is better than formal worship or to give sacrificially (1 Samuel 15:22).

Measure Christ's Lordship in your life by your obedience. Obedience is a measure of the extent of Christ's Lordship over you. "Why do you call me, "Lord, Lord," and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46". If Jesus were to speak to you in person today, would he have a comment about the measure of your obedience? (Wesley L. Duewel in measure your life pages 104, 105)

## Two areas of obedience

The obedience that Jesus asks of us covers two distinct areas. First of all, we all recognize that it covers the things that are mentioned in Scripture that we are to do or not do as followers of Christ- things like keeping the 10 Commandments, learning to forgive as Jesus taught us, bearing with one another in love, putting off the old self which we are all still working on – these are things that we are all doing in obedience to Jesus Christ.

But there’s a second type of thing that we need to do in obedience to Jesus Christ. These are the things that he instructs us personally to do – help a neighbor, get up early to pray for a friend, or for your church, or for your child, accept the nominating committee’s invitation to serve in a church office, call an elderly aunt with encouragement, etc. These kinds of things are not written in the book someplace. Rather they are instructions that we receive personally through the Holy Spirit’s nudges or impressions. They are God’s “good works” prepared for us to do in the days of our lives. In these we must obey God as well. When we have doubts about whether something that we are thinking about is really God’s instruction, that is when we talk to a pastor, or close Christian friend or ask the Holy Spirit to confirm the instruction in various ways. But God is good communicator and he will make plain when he really wants us to do something. And he never asks us to do anything that is opposed to his written Word.

## The cost of obedience

The cross part comes in because such obedience is bound to be costly sometime. Most of the time it is relatively painless. But sometimes it will cost us time, money, energy, the opinion of someone we hoped to impress, etc. We do not know the cost. Many in our world today, I’m thinking about those among the persecuted church especially, are paying a huge cost for following Jesus, costs that we know nothing about. But do not be deceived. The way of the cross is still costly.

That is why Jesus spoke bluntly about the cost of the “way of the cross.”

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

“Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, 30 saying, ‘This person began to build and wasn’t able to finish.’ Luke 14:26-30 NIV

JoAnne was reading of biographical article about Rev. Billy Graham who passed away just recently that very much illustrates what Jesus was talking about. Jesus didn’t mean that one had to not love or even dislike your loved ones, far from it. What he meant was that when it came time to choose, the disciple needed to be able to give priority to the master, to the leader.

This was illustrated in the life of Dr. Graham. When it came time to go away for his large Crusades. This was especially difficult in the days when his 5 children were young. He would often have to leave his wife and children for weeks at a time to go away and lead his team in a crusade sometimes in a foreign country. It was very difficult for him to do this. The crusade schedule required that he be gone a lot. He conducted over 400 crusades as he called them. But bringing people to Christ in this way was clearly what the “way of the cross” required of him. And he obeyed.

# In God’s time, He will reward

## Heavenly rewards

The third part of our discipleship journey is the reward. Certainly, we do not expect our full rewards in this life. The Christian disciple who walks in the “way of the cross” is like Abraham, always looking in faith for the fulfillment of God’s promises. Of people like them it is written;

Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. Heb 11:16 NIV

This is ultimately the great reward that Jesus himself received.

Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place   
and gave him the name that is above every name,   
 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father. Phil 2:9-11 NIV

So, for the Christian too, as the Bible promises, Jesus will remember our good deeds in that great day when he rewards his servants.

If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.” Matt 10:42 NIV

Or as the writer of Hebrews put it;

God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. Heb 6:10 NIV

## Rewards now

Nevertheless, there are this-world rewards for walking in the “way of the cross” too.

For one, there is the satisfaction of knowing that we are serving God. There is no higher calling. So many today find existence meaningless, but the disciple who is walking the “way of the cross” does not. That person is filled with joy at being a part of the greatest cause on earth, the work of the kingdom of God.

When Jesus said that the one who loses his life will find it, he was not just referring to the fact that the “way of the cross” is the path to eternal life. He was also referring to the fact that when we are involved in serving others, in helping them, we find our own purpose and joy in it, we find our own life given back to us. One of the healthiest things for people to do who are suffering from mild depression is to go out and find someone who needs them and help that person. Often, in such cases, just getting our eyes off ourselves will make a big difference in our emotional health.

In addition, look at the example of Jesus. As he humbled himself, God exalted him. Think of the words of the Apostle Peter.

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. 1 Peter 5:6 NIV

When we walk the “way of the cross,” we open the way for God to work in our lives.

# Conclusion

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