

**Jesus between the Seasons:
HIS CHALLENGE
Luke 9:23-27**

We face many challenges in life. You find that to be true, don't you? Today especially...people who are unemployed face major difficulties in trying to find a job. If you have a job...or, you're already retired and not looking for one...be thankful.

Of course, working and retirement present their own special challenges. It's just that this is a particularly tough time to be without a job and looking for work. It's very challenging!

Relationships are another sphere of life that seem to be presenting lots of challenges. Those who want to get married can't find the right person, while many who are married already are convinced they suffer from the very same problem.

Even if they did find "Mr. or Miss RIGHT" once upon a time, they are convinced that he or she has now become somebody different from the person they married. I tell you—it's challenging!

At least following Jesus is easy--"Come unto me, all who are weary and heavy-burdened, and I will give you rest"—how easy is that? There's nothing challenging about living the Christian life.

Well, following Jesus is not always easy either. If we take this journey of faith seriously--and we should--our Christian walk will be the greatest challenge we face in life; and I believe this is precisely what Jesus tells us!

See if you agree as we look at our text for this morning-- **Luke 9:23-26:**

²³Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. ²⁵What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? ²⁶If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels."

Now, seriously, just what part of this invitation sounds easy? We live in a world where we're told that we shouldn't have to deny ourselves anything;

so following Jesus' call to do this very thing—to deny ourselves--is challenging.

We get the message that we aren't responsible for anyone but ourselves, and we should do only what makes us happy; so we face some stiff headwinds when it comes to Jesus' invitation to take up our crosses and follow Him. I wonder if we can even begin to comprehend how challenging this is.

At first, taking up a cross doesn't really seem relevant to our lives. They go all the way back to a time when Caesars ruled and crosses were the preferred means of eliminating "undesirables."

Yet, Jesus' words won't go away: **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me."** Six times we encounter this phrase in the Gospels, so we can't just sweep it under the rug.

It's not that we're unfamiliar with crosses. We have one hanging in our baptistry. We often see them worn as jewelry today. And then of course, there is the increasingly present cross tattoo.

I don't know how you feel about this--I have mixed emotions at best. I suppose that if upon each sighting of the cross, we are prompted to ponder its meaning and be moved to adoration and praise, then we do well to have so many crosses about.

Lord help us, however, if we allow the cross to become a mere trinket. If we're serious about our commitment to Christ, we cannot help but be disturbed by those who wear crosses while advocating a lifestyle that is contrary to anything Christian.

But that's about them and their responsibility before God. What really matters for us is whether we have seriously considered what Christ's command means in our lives.

Perhaps the thing we find most confusing about this is trying to figure out what our crosses are today? Just what is it that Jesus wants you and me to take up?

We know what His cross was. Some of Jesus' early followers also knew about that kind of cross--two slabs of wood erected for the purpose of putting people to death. That was Jesus' cross.

But those crosses no longer exist--at least, not here. So that's not our cross. What is? What form does our cross take?

I believe we should think of the cross not so much in a literal sense, but as representing instead the challenges that Christ puts before us. These challenges take many forms. My challenge may not be the same as yours, nor yours the same as mine.

But for all of us, taking up the cross daily is a requirement of Christian discipleship. We all have a cross to bear. It may well be a cross that no one in this world can carry except us.

Since there's so much confusion about what it means to bear a cross, let's begin by talking about some things that are not crosses. There are many mistaken ideas about crosses. I'll give you a few examples.

1. Here's one: the Christians' cross is not **poverty**. I realize there are certain religious orders that take "vows of poverty." They have rightly observed that Jesus and his followers were not wealthy people. Most of them had very few of the earthly securities that we wear ourselves out trying to obtain.

It is also true that Jesus had some pretty stern words concerning wealth, especially wealth that is hoarded for oneself. We're still trying to find a "needle's eye" in Jesus' world big enough for a camel to get through.

We don't know what to make of our own wealth. The poorest among us is wealthy by the standards of this world—and even more so by the standards of Jesus' world.

I once heard a Christian leader speaking about poverty and hunger, and he made the comment that the most vulgar phrase he sees on a daily basis is this: "All you can eat buffet."

Jesus knew all about the dangers of wealth--this tendency we have to depend on our money and other resources instead of the God who provides these blessings to us. Still, Jesus never really required vows of poverty from his followers.

He did not ask this of the prosperous Joseph of Arimathea, who later would give Jesus a grave. (Of course, that turned out to just be a loan, didn't it?)

Nor did he ask this of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, who were also rather well to do. Following God's will for our lives may have economic consequences, but the Christian's cross is not poverty.

2. It's also not **persecution**. That's not every Christian's cross either. Jesus' cross was certainly a terrifying instrument of death. It was an unbelievably horrible way to die.

This is why it was such a "stumbling block" to the Jews and "foolishness" to the Greeks. It was inconceivable to both that God's Son would die like that.

But Christian history is full of crosses, as well as burnings at the stake, and maulings by wild animals, drownings for some of the early Baptists, and all the other forms that martyrdom has taken.

There have been those moments in history when being Christian subjected one to persecution. It still does in some places. Yet the Christian's cross is not persecution.

3. Nor is our cross to be identified with every instance of **pain** and hardship that comes along. The death of a spouse, for example, or falling victim to some awful disease, the breakup of a marriage, or seeing your home go up in flames.

In the presence of such tragic pain and loss, we often hear people say, "That's just the cross that I have to bear." Now, when I hear this, I don't correct anybody--and you shouldn't either. That would be rather cruel under the circumstances.

These are all terrible burdens to bear, and they cause much heartbreak, but listen: they're not what Jesus is talking about when He invites us to take up our crosses and follow Him.

4. The Christian's cross is not poverty, or persecution, or pain. And just in case you're wondering, religious acts and rituals aren't crosses either. Listening to sermons, for example—I'm not saying it's always easy, but even that's not a cross.

So what is this cross that you and I are called upon to bear? We've already said our crosses are not all the same. My cross is not yours, nor yours mine.

If we go back to our text, though, I believe it gives us some guidelines to help us decide what qualifies. It suggests three tests that must be applied for something to count as a cross.

1. First, a cross must be the result of **a free choice**--a decision that we make freely without any coercion.

2. Second, it must be a choice **resulting from a relationship or a conviction**. In other words, it is a decision based on what we believe, and who we love and believe in.

3. And third, it must be a choice to **assume someone else's burden**. It must in some way help or influence or benefit another person.

So do you see why so many things that we call crosses don't really qualify? Calamities, sorrows, tragedies, losses of all kinds--these are burdens; but they are not crosses.

There are so many difficult things that can happen to us in life, but we do not choose them. They choose us. We would avoid them if possible, but we can't. They just happen to us—and often do so in spite of our best efforts to prevent them.

1. Jesus, on the other hand, **invites us to take up our cross as a free act**, an intentional act. The cross doesn't fall on us—we take it up! We make this decision with full knowledge of what we're doing. It is a deliberate act. We choose to take up the cross!

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." The "if" in Jesus' words looms large. Nothing is forced upon us. He puts the decision in our hands. If it gets done, we must choose to do it.

And listen: this is also how it was for Jesus. The Bible makes it clear that Jesus could have avoided the cross. He had the freedom to say "no" to the Father's will.

We're wrong if we think this decision was easy for Jesus. In the garden, Jesus prayed "Father, let this cup pass." His sweat was like great drops of blood. He agonized over His decision.

But once Jesus was convinced that the cross was the Father's will for his life, He chose to take it up. For Jesus, this meant laying down His life for us—and He did so, knowingly, willingly, lovingly. He took up that cross that He alone could carry.

So taking up the cross is a deliberate choice of something that we could avoid. It is the taking on of a burden, a task, a mission or ministry that we're not forced to accept, but choose to accept. It's never have-to, but want-to and choose-to.

It's often been noted that there's no draft in God's Kingdom. His is an all-volunteer army. It may not always work well or seem to be adequate, but it's how God does it. We have to volunteer for the cross. We choose to carry it. That's the first test.

2. The second test is that **our crosses must be the result of a relationship and/or conviction.** Maybe this goes without saying, but in order for us to choose to take up a cross, these relationships must be pretty strong, and our convictions solid!

For Jesus, the cross was the result of two powerful relationships: His relationship with God, and His relationship with us. These led Him to the conviction: "Not my will, but Thine be done."

Crosses just don't get taken up in a lackadaisical way. We choose to take up our crosses only when our relationship with Christ is strong and our faith is filled with conviction.

We live in a day of "casual Christianity." The average church could drop half its members without the congregation or those former members ever noticing any difference. Casual Christians want the forgiveness the cross of Christ offers, but they never intend to carry a cross personally.

They're all about what Bonhoeffer once referred to as "cheap grace." He encouraged us to remember that while grace is free, it's never cheap! Of course, when you think about it, this could be said about any meaningful relationship in life.

3. Finally, if we meet Jesus' challenge to carry the cross, there is one more test to be applied. Carrying a cross always involves a decision to assume someone else's burden, to make their burdens ours.

This is precisely what the Gospel teaches us that Jesus did. It was our sin He took upon Himself. The cross He carried was rightfully ours, but Jesus chose to take it upon Himself.

We've sung it a thousand times in hymns like this one: "Upon the cross of Jesus, mine eyes at times can see, the very dying form of one who suffered there for me." MY sin. My burden. My cross, and yours.

To take up our cross and follow Christ means we choose to take on someone else's burden. Only then does it become a truly Christian act.

There's nothing uniquely Christlike about bearing one's own burdens—everyone does that. It is only when we choose to carry one another's burdens that we are truly following Jesus and beginning to understand what discipleship is all about.

Because of our relationship with Jesus Christ and our conviction that He is the Way we want to follow, the Truth we want to live by, and the Life we want to experience inside of us—this is why we take up the crosses He calls us to bear.

Bow your heads, please. I want us to take a moment and consider our own relationship with the Lord. What are the crosses we've already taken up: by choice, a choice we made because of our relationship with Christ, a choice that meant we assumed someone else's burden?

This may be something we do around here, or a ministry we provide out in the community. It may be a friend or relative we're caring for, doing for them what they can no longer do for themselves. And there are lots of other possibilities as well.

What cross did we bear yesterday? What about today? And what cross will we carry tomorrow? **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."** That's the challenge—Jesus' challenge to us!