

Most of us have heard sermons from one preacher or the other in a church or in a convention that following Jesus is the road to material prosperity. These preachers teach saying that if we commit our lives to Jesus then he will give us a huge bank balance, several houses, the latest luxury cars and wealth beyond limit. On one occasion I was myself personally taken aback when I heard this from a wealthy doctor in the UK, when he was professing that God gave him two houses and several luxury cars and a huge amount of wealth because he committed his life to Christ. These are false teachings and there are many who profess it and many who follow it. This is known as the Prosperity Gospel and is a heresy.

The Bible however teaches us that those who confess that Jesus is the Christ must be ready to suffer. Jesus himself said, 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.' In Luke's gospel we note that Jesus is having a discourse with his disciples and he asks them, "Who the crowds say I am?" and "Who do you say I am?" Peter then immediately answers "You are the Christ of God." Jesus teaches them that he must be rejected by the leaders, Chief Priests and teachers of the law and he must be killed. However on the third day he will be raised to life. Jesus tells his disciples very clearly that suffering and death was the way of the cross. If one wanted to be a disciple of Christ then suffering for the sake of the gospel was part of the calling. True followers of Jesus cannot expect this path to be a bed of roses. For Jesus it was the way of extreme suffering and death and if we chose to follow him we too will have to undergo suffering.

Jesus teaches his disciples that "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it and whoever loses their life for me will save it." Jesus tells them that there is no profit in working 24x7 when we lose our very lives in the bargain. We are called to take up the cross daily and follow him. Cross bearing is a daily duty and not a part time job. We are called to keep Jesus as the center of our focus. Everything else needs to revolve around him. If we persevere only for profits and have no time for God then we will lose our very life. God calls us to walk after him as his followers in the path that he himself has taught. This path entails denial of the self and facing the cross. We may all not end up not being crucified but we will face opposition and suffering. In the midst of all this God has promised us the presence of the Holy Spirit to be with us.

What does Jesus mean by denying the self and carrying the cross? Denying the self means, dying to the love of self, dying to the love of possessions, dying to the love of praise and dying to the love of power. Dying to our selfish self and our sinful nature is not such an easy thing. The self always works around its own motives and desires. Paul tells us in Colossians 3:5, "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthy nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed which is idolatry." Paul is reminding that these are the deeds of the sinful flesh and therefore we are called to mortify them on a daily basis. These desires don't go away very easily and they keep coming up over and over again and therefore putting them to death has to be an ongoing daily habit with the help of the Holy Spirit. The second thing we saw was dying to the love of possessions. We find it very difficult to give up the love of possessions. Many of us as Christians have the feeling that true satisfaction comes from owning material things but material things can never give us true satisfaction. A third area is dying to the love of praise. Human beings love to be praised and flattered. Our ego's blow up like a balloon when somebody pumps our egos with flattering remarks and we explode sooner or later. Finally, we are called to die to the love of power. Many a time our discipleship is motivated by the love of power. In our minds we are thinking about what positions we can get and how much more power we can wield. This dominates our discipleship rather than our genuine love for Christ. This is not new as Jesus's own disciples wanted to sit in positions of authority on his right and left.

Jesus clearly indicates to us that there is a cost in following him. If we gain the whole world and yet we forfeit our very self then it is of no use. Jesus therefore calls us not to be ashamed of him or his words but to stand firm in the midst of suffering and trials and to be faithful to him till the end. We are to carry our cross daily and follow him. May God, the Holy Spirit help us to deny ourselves, take up the cross and follow him daily.