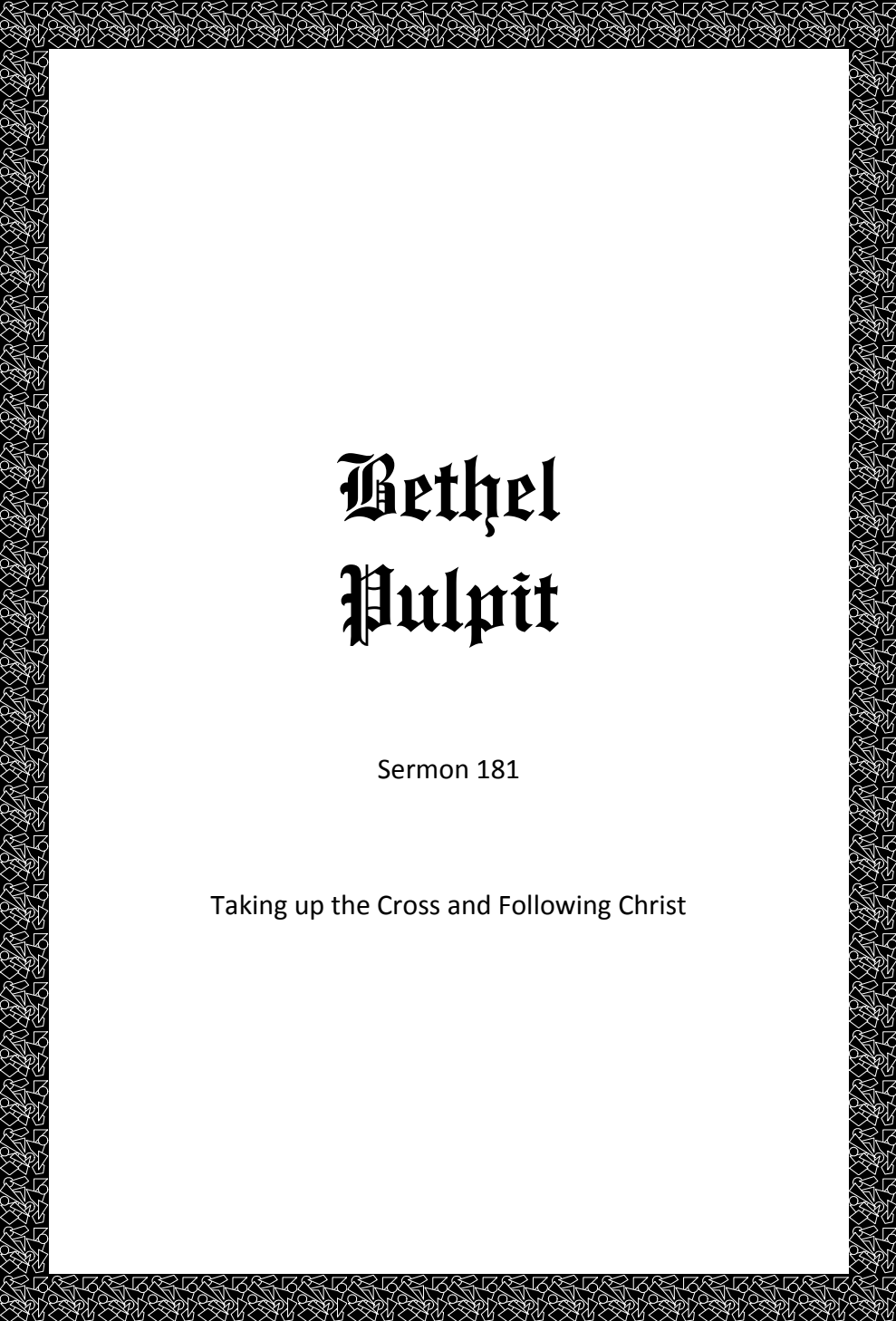




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 181

Taking up the Cross and Following Christ

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 9th July, 2000**

Text: *"And He said to them all, If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Luke 9. 23).*

This is Christ's own description of what a real Christian is, who is a real Christian, where he is to be found. He is one who denies himself and takes up his cross and follows the Saviour. The great point, beloved friends, is for you and me to be followers of the Lord the Lamb, to be followers of the meek and lowly Jesus. This will be the great point that will matter at last: were you, was I a follower of the Lamb?

"When He makes up the Book of Life,
O may I read my name
Among the chosen of His love,
The followers of the Lamb!"

"These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth."

"He said to them all" – *to them all* – "If any man will come after Me" – that is, if you wish to be a true Christian, a real believer – "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me." Now this is the life of the Christian. This is the life of the believer. This is the life of the pilgrim as he leaves this world as a city of destruction and sets out on pilgrimage to reach the celestial city at last.

Let us be exceedingly clear on one point. There is not any merit in this. It is not *because* he denies himself, *because* he takes up his cross, *because* he follows Christ that he is saved, and saved at last. Salvation is entirely on the ground of grace. It is entirely on the ground of God's free, sovereign mercy. It is entirely through the blood of Christ. It is not *if* a man does this, then he wins the blessing, he gains the blessing. But this is the mark of every sinner who is saved by grace; this is the mark of every sinner who is washed in the blood of the Lamb; this is the mark of every sinner who *does* receive the blessing; this is the mark of every sinner who *will* reach heaven at last.

There is not much of this religion about today. It is a religion that seems to be on the decrease. There is nothing light-hearted about this

religion, is there? Denying yourself, taking up your cross. There is nothing easy about it. There is nothing light-hearted about it. It is very serious. It is exceedingly solemn. There is eternity here. “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” Neither is there anything half-hearted here. It is not that Christ and the world both have their parts. It is not being in a kind of no-man’s-land. In those last two terrible wars, especially the first, there were the trenches with no-man’s-land in the middle. It did not belong to anybody. There is not any no-man’s-land in the things of God. “Who is on the Lord’s side? let him come unto Me.” “If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.”

The similar account we have in Matthew begins with this: “*Then* said Jesus unto His disciples.” What is the *then*, why the *then*? Well, the Lord Jesus had just been speaking about His rejection, His sufferings, His crucifixion, His death. “*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.” There is an intimate connection, and that intimate connection is in two ways. First of all, to be identified with the suffering Saviour, to be crucified with Christ. Was Jesus crucified? Did He die that accursed death to put away sin? Then may I deny myself, take up my cross and follow Him. May I be willing to be crucified with Christ, to live that life of separation, to go forth unto Him without the camp. O may my testimony be this: “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.” But the second thing, the sweet constrainings of the love of Christ. If you will, that is the foundation underneath everything here. That is the reason for it all, and that is the only way, the only ground on which any sinner will rightly go after Christ, deny self, take up the cross and follow Him. It is, “The love of Christ constraineth us.” Is Jesus rejected? Does He suffer? Is He crucified? Does He die? Was all this for sinners? Is He the Son of God? Did He stoop so low? And was all this for me? Then sweetly constrained by His love, I would be made willing to renounce the world, renounce it for ever, to deny myself, to take up the cross and to follow Him.

Let us be very clear, beloved friends, this is not an act of man’s free will or some kind of creature decision or some carnal resolve, as if a person would say, “I am going to follow the Lord. I am going to be a follower of Him.” At the end of this chapter we have three who talked

about following the Lord. The first was that scribe. He spoke some of the most beautiful language that was ever spoken, some of the most beautiful language in the whole of the New Testament. He said, "Lord, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest." No better desire, no better resolve than that, no more beautiful language than that: "Lord, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest." Now Jesus put his religion to the test, and He puts your religion and mine to the test tonight. He bids him count the cost, just as David bid Ittai the Gittite count the cost, just as Naomi bid Ruth count the cost. What He really said, "This is a good desire, but have you really thought what it means? It is going to be a way of hardship. It is going to be a way of sacrifice. It is going to be a way of humiliation. Have you thought about that?" "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay His head." The scribe had not got an answer. There was a solemn silence which followed. He did not speak a single word. We never hear of him again. There is that counting the cost.

Tell me, what was wrong with this scribe's religion? What could be wrong when he speaks such beautiful language? "Lord, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest." Do you know what was wrong with it? *Real religion does not start there.* When a sinner is born again of the Spirit, he does not come out with some wonderful resolve and say, "I am going to follow Jesus all the way." "I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest." That is not his language. It does not begin with resolves. It begins with prayer. When you are born again your first contact with the Lord Jesus is, "Will He forgive me? Will He have mercy on me? Will He save me by His precious blood? Does He really want me, unworthy me, as one of His followers?" But this resolve to follow Him comes later on. It is the language of faith in a believer, one whom the Lord has blessed, one sweetly constrained by the love of Christ, made willing in the day of God's power. But how humbly he speaks it! We have said it (haven't we, some of us?), and now we feel we have failed so badly in walking it out, but we did say it at the foot of the cross, looking in the face of a dear, dying Saviour, "Lord, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest." But real religion does not begin there. It does not begin with these resolves. That is the effect of Christ's salvation, the effect of Christ's love. "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay His head."

And then there was another one and he said, “Lord, suffer me *first* to go and bury my father.” Now, “If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” But this second one said, “Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father.” “Well,” you say, “that was a reasonable request, wasn’t it?” Some have tried to explain it like this, that his father was not yet dead, that he was going to wait until after his father had died; and others have explained it like this, that eastern funeral obsequies went on week after week. That is not the meaning at all. I think the meaning is this, and it comes close: nothing is more lawful than a person wanting to attend his own father’s funeral, but it must not come before following Christ. Not the best thing, not the most lawful thing, must come before following Christ.

And then the third one. “Lord, I will follow Thee; but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house.” Now, “If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” What was wrong with this man’s religion? Well really what he said was this: “Lord, I will follow Thee; *but*.” That is what it says here: “Lord, I will follow Thee; but.” You are not going to follow the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ with any *buts*. That is not real religion. That is not a true follower of the Lamb. If sweetly constrained by love, you are brought to deny yourself and take up your cross and follow Him. You cannot say, “I will follow Thee; but.” Jesus said, “No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”

So you see, it is not a legal decision. It is not something sentimental, some desire of the carnal heart: “I am going to be a Christian; I am going to be a follower of Christ.” We have three of them at the end of the chapter, and the Lord weighs them in the balances and they are found wanting. O but here we have a sinner viewing the sufferings of his Saviour, sweetly constrained by love, wanting to be identified with Christ, willing to be crucified with Christ, willing to bear the cross that one day he might wear the crown. In former days of godly prosperity there used to be a saying (you do not hear it nowadays, but it is still true): no cross, no crown.

“He said to them all, If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” Now there is not much of this religion about today. There is a lot of comfortable religion. There is a lot of chapel religion. There is a lot of religion that goes so far.

But there is a lot of religion that will not really part with the world, a lot of religion that will not part with self. Beloved friends, I do not want any of you here tonight to be deceived. I take it most of you believe that Jesus is the Son of God – I hope all of you do – that He loved His people with an everlasting love, that He died for them. I take it most of you at times have your serious thoughts. I believe too many people take it for granted that they are what they call *seekers*. I do not find the Bible speaks of any special class being called *seekers*. You say, “But the Word says so much about seeking Christ.” Yes, but every child of God down to his dying day is a seeker, every one of them. “That which I see not teach Thou me.” That is a seeker, and not just at the beginning, but down to your dying day. But if you and I never find Christ then we never really sought Him. There is so much taking it for granted today, so much wanting the world and Christ. “If any man will come after Me,” and it is a way of suffering, a way of sorrow. There will be a cross to be borne. If your religion has never cost you anything, it is not worth anything.

“If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” But where are we going to find this religion? Where are we going to find it today? It is a religion of self-denial. It is a religion of taking up the cross, following the Saviour. Do not think as if this is just some point of Strict Baptist doctrine. This was at one time the religion of all the people of God, the godly in the Church of England, in our state church, the godly people in any chapel. I know some of you at present are reading the book, *A Thousand Miles of Miracles in China*, because it is exactly a hundred years since it took place. That was a young clergyman. It was the religion of Luke 9. 23 which was found in this godly man in China. It is the Word of God, the narrow way, the well-beaten track that the saints of God have always trod and it is the only way that leads to heaven. If you really are overpowered with a sense of the love of Christ and if along with that sense of the love of Christ there is that awful sense of the solemnity of a never-ending eternity, you will be made willing in the day of God’s power to give up everything for Jesus’ sake, to leave all and follow Him. This is a real Christian. This is the religion that takes a sinner to heaven, but where is it to be found today?

“If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” I had a magazine sent to me only this last week or so, the official magazine of the Netherlands Reformed Church, and their complaint is just the same: where can this religion be found

today, in Holland or in the Dutch churches of North America? The writer there puts it very plainly. He says, “If you attend the church and you are no different from your next-door neighbour, where is the reality of your religion? If they have a television set and you have a television set, if there is no difference in how you keep the Sabbath, if there is no difference in dress and in hairstyle, what is the difference between you and the world?” This is the most recent issue of the official organ of the Netherlands Reformed Church. Where is this religion to be found? But the Lord has never lowered the standard and never made the gate any broader and the way any wider.

“If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself.” What is this self-denial? As constrained by the love of Christ, under the power of the Spirit of God, it is denying your past life. You renounce it, and you renounce it for ever. It is a renouncing of the world which lieth in wickedness, and it is a renouncing of the spirit of the world which lieth in wickedness. “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” “If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself.” It is denying your own self, not just denying the world, not just denying your past life. It is denying your own self. It is denying the lusts of your flesh. It is denying the sin that does so easily beset you. It is denying that pleasure which you love which dishonours Christ. It is choosing the things you once abhorred. “Let him deny himself.” “Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward.”

“For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life *for My sake*” – we emphasise that; it must be *for Jesus’ sake* – “the same shall save it.” “Let us go forth therefore *unto Him* without the camp, bearing His reproach.” Again we emphasise, it is *unto Him*. It is not just wanting to be different, to be peculiar, to be strange. It is *unto Him*, it is *for Jesus’ sake*, it is constrained by His love. “Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, save in the death of Christ, my God.” Dare you, can you, must you say it? “All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to His blood.”

“Let him deny himself.” And not just deny sinful self, but to deny religious self, to deny self-righteous self. It is harder to deny religious self,

good self if you will, self-righteous self, than to deny carnal, wicked self. In the history of the Christian church, the great writer on the precious doctrine of Christ's imputed righteousness has always been counted to be James Hervey, who was the Church of England minister at Weston Favell which is just outside Northampton. Remember he was the vicar and he had a bad chest complaint, the beginnings of T.B., consumption. In those days they said the best remedy for it (this was before antibiotics) was to get the smell of freshly- stirred-up soil, so he was advised to go out with a ploughman. He found this ploughman was a most godly man. He would not go to hear the vicar; he went down the road to hear Philip Doddridge at the chapel. One day, the vicar said to him, "Tell me, what is the hardest thing in religion?" He said, "Sir, you are the minister. You tell me." Hervey said, "I think it is to deny wicked self." The ploughman said, "I am a poor, ignorant man, and I know it is hard to deny wicked self, but I have found it harder to deny proud, religious self." It was like an arrow in Hervey's heart and later he became the most eminent of all writers on the subject of Christ's imputed righteousness and the denial of our own

"If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself." It goes further than this. Sometimes you will have to deny yourself in a good thing, a right thing, a lawful thing, if it is for Jesus' sake, for the honour and glory of God. What do you know of this way of self-denial, sweetly constrained by the love of Christ?

"If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross." "Take up the cross, the Saviour said, if thou wouldst My disciple be." In the parallel passage in Matthew this is the first time the cross is ever mentioned in the Word of God: the Lord Jesus looking forward, thinking of the cross where He would be crucified. The allusion is to the custom of a person who was going to be crucified having to carry his own cross to the place of crucifixion. Remember how it was with the Lord Jesus Himself. Now there is a cross appointed for every believer that he has to carry. Every believer has a different cross, and really in these days so often the cross to be carried is light. When the Lord Jesus was speaking this, He was thinking of the most cruel persecution. Mercifully, that is a thing that for the most part outwardly we are exempt from, that cruel persecution for our religion's sake. Rutherford said, "The heaviest end of thy cross lies upon thy strong Saviour." O but, "Let him deny himself, and take up his cross." "His institutions would I prize." This is the sweet constraining of the love of Christ. "His institutions would I

prize; take up my cross, the shame despise.” “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for My sake, the same shall save it.” You remember when the Lord Jesus was going to be crucified, they caused one, Simon the Cyrenian, to carry His cross. Years ago that was a word which was often quoted amongst the godly:

“Shall Simon bear the cross alone,
And all the rest go free?
No, there’s a cross for everyone
And there’s a cross for me.”

But it is only the sweet constrainings of the love of Christ that will enable you to deny yourself and to take up your cross.

And the Lord Jesus said, “Daily.” If your religion and mine is real, it will be a daily religion. It will not just be a Sunday religion. It will not be a religion that we can leave behind in chapel when we go home. It will not be a religion that we can leave at home when we go out for the day. It is a daily religion. Jesus taught His disciples to say, “Give us *this day* our daily bread.” Why, there are daily needs and there is a daily provision, but there is a daily witness. There is a daily cross to be carried. But Jesus says, “Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.” “Daily.” There is daily grace promised, there is daily strength promised. “As thy days, so shall thy strength be.” But the believer is called to take up his cross daily and follow the Saviour.

“If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” Now some follow the world; some follow fashion; some follow a man; but Jesus says, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow *Me*: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand.” It is the great point, to be a follower of Christ, a follower of the meek and lowly Jesus, the Lamb of God.

“And follow Me.” First of all, there is a following of the Lord Jesus by faith. If our eyes are open, we follow the Lord Jesus in His goings forth from everlasting, and as He was incarnate, He became a Man, He came to Bethlehem, and that holy life He lived in obedience to His Father’s law, and that cruel death He died to make atonement for sin. We follow Him by faith in His death and then His glorious resurrection. We

follow Him as He ascends to heaven and as He ever lives to intercede. There is a following Him by faith and as we follow Him by faith it is this: we have to rest our only hope of heaven on all that He accomplished.

“Dear Jesus, my Saviour, Thy truth I embrace –
Thy name and Thy natures, Thy Spirit and grace;
And trace the pure footsteps of Jesus, my Lord,
And glory in Him whom proud sinners abhorred.”

That is following Christ by faith.

And then sweetly constrained by His love it is denying self, taking up the cross and following Him in that narrow way which leads to life. It is a following of His gracious example. “Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow His steps.” In our profession, in our witness, in our desire to walk worthy, now it is following Christ. This is the way the redeemed have ever walked.

“They marked the footsteps that He trod,
(His zeal inspired their breast);
And following their incarnate God,
Possess the promised rest.”

O but you see the humility of the Lord Jesus! It is to seek grace to follow Him in His humility. His desire to honour and glorify His Father: “I do always those things that please Him,” it is a desire to follow the Lord Jesus in that. In the way He walked separate from the world, a desire to follow the Lord Jesus in that. And His zeal for the honour and glory of God, a desire to follow Him in that. And that patience, a desire to follow Him in that. And that wonderful love to His Father and to His people, a desire to follow Him in that.

Perhaps the best commentary on following Christ in the narrow way: “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted Him.” It is following Him in that narrow way, where needful in that way of suffering, suffering for Christ’s sake, bearing the burden for Christ’s sake, bearing the reproach for

Christ's sake, because there is a reproach, and Jesus said, "The reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon Me." So faith sings,

"If on my face for Thy dear name,
Shame and reproaches be,
All hail reproach, and welcome shame!
If Thou remember me."

"Let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me." This is the religion that takes a sinner to heaven. "These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth." "His servants shall serve Him: and they shall see His face; and His name shall be in their foreheads." O to be a follower of Christ! But, "Who is sufficient for these things?" Our mercy is this, that all those who are sweetly enabled by faith to follow the Lamb have the promise of His gracious presence: "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." They have the promise of His love: "Having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end." They have the promise of divine strength and all-sufficient grace. They have the promise of heaven itself at last. All through grace, sweetly constrained by love, to be a follower of Christ, a follower of the Lord the Lamb. "And He said to them all, If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me."