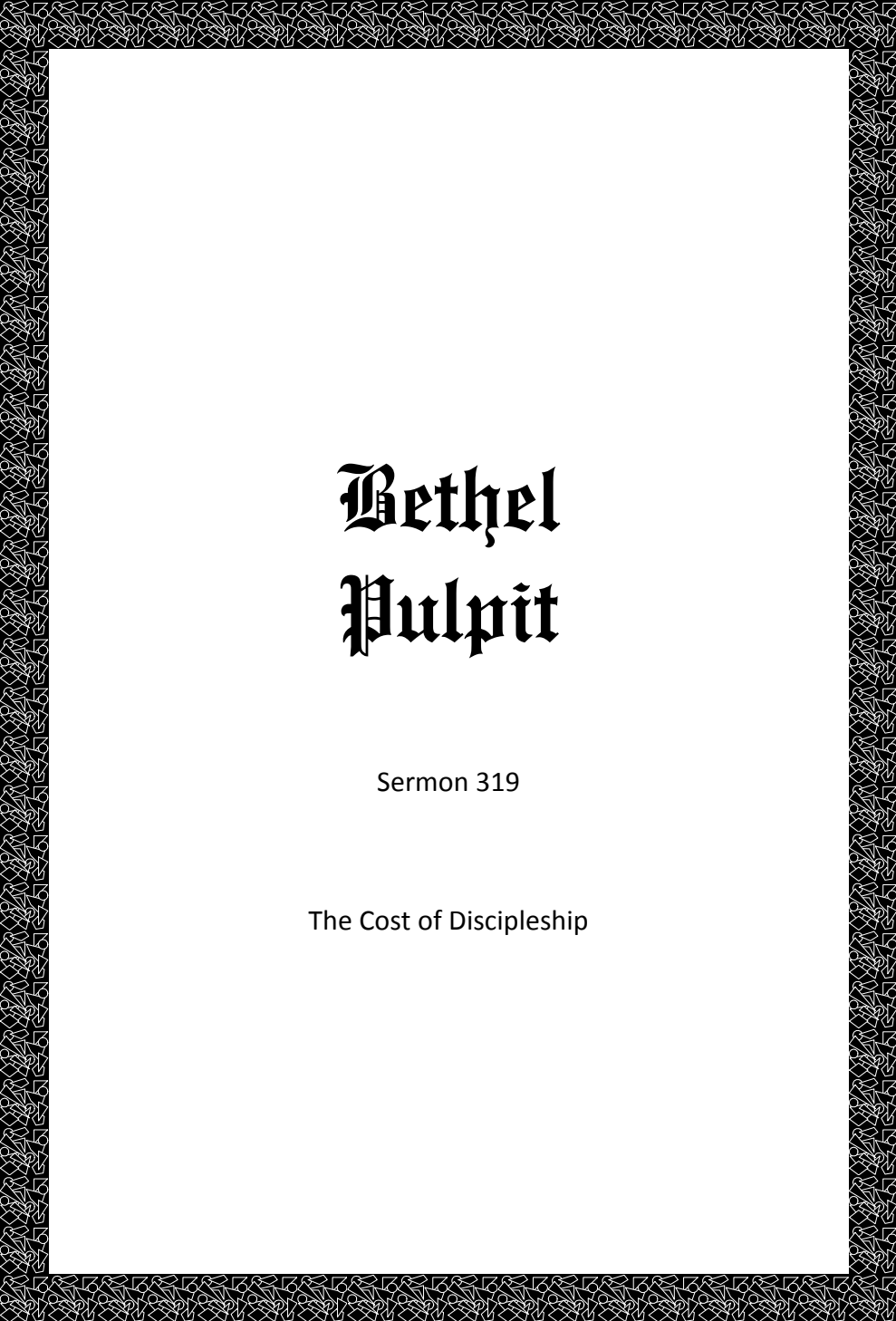




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 319

The Cost of Discipleship

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 21st February, 2010**

Text: *"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" (Matthew 16. 24).*

One important point which does not seem to be emphasised so much today: the cost of discipleship. The Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ continually warned people concerning the cost. He told them to count the cost. You remember there was that occasion when one of the scribes approached him with most beautiful language. He said, "Lord" – he called Him Lord, when so many were deriding Him. "Lord, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest." It was blessed language, beautiful language, but he had not counted the cost. "Jesus said unto him, Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay His head." In other words, have you realised that there is a cost? Have you counted that cost? And there was silence, and we never meet with that man again. O the necessity of counting the cost! "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." That is the cost. If our religion never costs us anything, then our religion is worth nothing.

"If any man will come after Me." Now there is a coming *to* the Saviour and there is a coming *after* Him. If there is ever to be any real coming *after* the Saviour, then there first must be a coming *to* Him. That coming *after* the Saviour is really discipleship. "If any man will come *after* Me." But then there is that coming *to* the Saviour. That is vital. That is living faith. That is where the Holy Spirit brings every sinner saved by grace: to the Saviour, to His feet, in helplessness, as sinners, in need, in complete dependence, trusting in Him, looking to Him for all. That is coming *to* the Saviour, and those who feel their need as sinners are invited to the Saviour, welcomed to the Saviour. "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Those with that spiritual thirst in their hearts, the world cannot satisfy it. They thirst for pardon, forgiveness, salvation, heaven. "If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink." That is to be satisfied.

The Lord Jesus clearly declared that all those whom His Father had chosen would be marked by this: this being brought to Jesus, coming to Him. "All that the Father giveth Me shall come to Me." And then the blessed promise: "And him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out." So there is that coming to the Saviour, as being brought by grace to the Saviour, as being led by the Holy Spirit to the Saviour. So there is that coming *to* Him, and then there is that coming *after* Him.

Really, a right coming after Him is as sweetly constrained by His love, because this sinner who is drawn to the Saviour, who comes to the Saviour, he finds his hope, his salvation, his heaven there. So there will be the gratitude; there will be the clinging; there will be the cleaving; there will be the desire to be found with Him; there will be the desire to go *after* Him. But it is because of what the sinner has found in the Saviour. It is not some kind of carnal decision to follow the Saviour, and that is the beginning of it. It is a going after the Saviour, a coming after the Saviour, as drawn by Him, attracted to Him, constrained by His love. "If any man will come after Me," if there is that desire, if there is the willingness. Well, we have the terms of discipleship. "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."

"If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself." So the Christian life is a life of self-denial. You cannot follow the Saviour and follow the world. You cannot go to heaven with Christ in one hand and the world in the other. "Let him deny himself." And it is not a legal denial. Some of us go back to our early days. We could not deny our pleasures. We could not deny our enjoyments. We did not want to. We did not want to part with them. We could not give them up. We wanted the world; we loved the world, and if we had felt that we ought to, we must, we were compelled, we had not got the power to do it, let alone the willingness.

"Let him deny himself." But it was not altogether a hard thing to give up the world when the time came. I know some people have a struggle here and some there, but really there were two things that did it with us. One was to have a view of a never-ending eternity. O how those pleasures faded then! "Let him deny himself." We were called to deny these things in the light of eternity. And the other, in the light of Calvary,

the sweet constrainings of dying love and atoning blood, the voice of love and mercy that sounds aloud from the cross. “Let him deny himself,” and gladly, willingly, we did, made willing in the day of His power.

“Lo! glad I come; and Thou, blest Lamb,
Shalt take me to Thee as I am;
Nothing but sin I Thee can give;
Nothing but love shall I receive.”

“If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself.” It is that denying, not just of the world and its pleasures, but it is that denying of self. Martin Luther once said, “O that I had not a myself!” Another divine said that self was his greatest enemy. So that sinful self has to be denied. What does the Epistle to the Romans call it? The mortification of the flesh. What does the Epistle to the Galatians call it? The crucifying of the flesh. “Let him deny himself” – that past life.

“Let him deny himself.” There is another side to it, beloved friends. That is the denying of any hope of salvation short of Christ, the denying of our self-righteousness. In some ways that is harder than denying the world and denying sinful flesh, denying anything we have done, everything we have done, anything we may do. Over the years, I have often mentioned the case of the great writer of the Evangelical Revival, James Hervey of Weston Favell. He was the great writer on Christ’s imputed righteousness. As a young clergyman he was a legalist. He suffered from poor health, and the treatment in those days was to follow the plough and breathe the freshly-upturned earth, which he did with an old ploughman. The old ploughman was a godly man. They talked about religion and Hervey propounded the question: What is the hardest thing in religion? The old ploughman put it back to him, and he replied, “To deny sinful self.” The old ploughman smiled and said, “Sir, I think you are wrong. I think it is to deny self-righteous self.” That was the beginning of the thinking which culminated in some of the pieces that Hervey wrote. They were once the glory of the churches, *Theron and Aspasio*. No-one has heard of them today. People loved him so much, they called children after him. Mr. Gosden was called after him, John Hervey Gosden.

“If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself.” As you are led along by the Spirit of God, there will be the self-denial. The Lord

Jesus in another place spoke of it as going that second mile. He spoke of it as being willing to spend and be spent. So it is not just denying bad things and evil things, but there are things in your life and they are not bad, they are not altogether wrong, but you can see it is more for the honour and glory of God if you do not have them. “Let him deny himself.” So the apostle: “Let us lay aside every *weight*, and the sin which doth so easily beset us.” There are sins to be discarded and there are some things, you cannot altogether call them sins, but they do not do you any good spiritually. “Let us lay aside every *weight*, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus.” That man who is running a race, well, he does not carry his briefcase. He leaves that behind. There is nothing wrong in carrying a briefcase, but it does not help him if he is running a race. “Let us lay aside every weight.”

“If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself.” Sometimes if you are led to serve the Lord, if you are led to obey the Lord, there are lawful things, right things, and you have to deny yourself in them. Why? Because there are more important things, there are things more for the honour and glory of God. They will be more of a help to His people. And there will be times in your life when there will be a choice before you. Is it going to be this? Is it going to be that? And you can see *that* is the best, but you can see it is going to be a denying of self. But, “Thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it.”

“If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross.” Interestingly, this is the first time the word *cross* is used in the New Testament. I wonder if the disciples really understood it. We understand what taking up the cross means, looking back, and especially after the Saviour bore His cross and was crucified. It was the awful custom of a person being crucified. They must carry their own cross to the place of crucifixion. Perhaps this was one thing the disciples did not know, did not understand until after the Lord Jesus had died and was risen again. “Let him deny himself, and take up his cross.” Some of us find it difficult to speak on this, because we do not feel over the years we have had much of a cross to carry, and some of you have very heavy crosses, very painful crosses to carry. But every believer is called to take up his cross.

“‘Take up thy cross,’ the Saviour cried,
‘If thou wouldst My disciple be.’”

There is a cross of affliction. But then the Lord’s people have a cross that the world knows nothing of. We read in Scripture of *the afflictions of the gospel* (2 Tim. 1. 8). Paul often spoke about it. If he had not been an apostle, if he had not been a preacher, if he had not been a follower of the Saviour, so many of these afflictions, these sorrows, these losses and crosses, these sore temptations of Satan he would have avoided. But the word still stands, “Let him deny himself, and take up his cross.” Now this is not easy religion. But it is as sweetly constrained by the love of Christ. But we find it hard to speak of this when we think of some of the martyrs and how they took up their cross and willingly they went to the stake to be burned to death in their testimony to their Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Yet every child of God will be made willing to bear the cross, and in lesser or greater measure to carry the cross. And some of you have heavy crosses to carry. I think there is this, that if you have a specially-heavy cross to carry, the Lord will bless it to you, the Lord will sanctify it to you. You will never be the loser for it. It will profit you; it will be made a blessing to you. Wasn’t it Rutherford who said that the heaviest end of that cross lies on the shoulders of your strong Saviour?

“If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up *his* cross” – not *the* cross; not *a* cross. That cross which the Lord has appointed. On this subject we cannot help our thoughts going to Moses the man of God. Perhaps more than anyone, he walked this out: denying himself, taking up his cross. And this is spoken of so beautifully in the Epistle to the Hebrews as a blessed example of the effect of faith. “By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; 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.” Perhaps you say, Is it right to speak of Moses bearing the cross when this was in Old Testament times? Well, was it right for the inspired writer to say that he endured “the reproach of Christ”? That is the cross, isn’t it? “Let us go forth therefore unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach.” Why, seeing that “Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered

without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach.”

“Let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.” When you think what Moses gave up, what he had to deny himself. He was a prince. It was a great empire. Many people can speak of the need to give things up when they have never had them. Did anyone ever give up more for Christ’s sake than Moses did? A palace, a prince, the riches of Egypt, and they were fabulous, the treasures of Egypt, and there were all kinds of pleasures, the more refined pleasures and the coarse pleasures. He was an honoured man. If you read Josephus, he tells you the greatness of Moses in Egypt.

“Let him deny himself.” And he gladly, willingly gave it all up. “For he had respect unto the recompence of the reward.” He saw it in the light of eternity. He saw that sin has its pleasures, but that word was burned in his heart: the pleasures of sin which are “for a season,” the only pleasures that they will ever know, like the crackling of thorns under a pot – bright and noisy and then soon gone and gone for ever. “He had respect.” He saw both sides. And the people of God in their bondage and slavery and under the cruel taskmasters, he saw them as the excellent of the earth. O beloved friends, have you ever had a little glimpse, just a little glimpse of God’s dear people as the excellent of the earth, and have you felt you could deny yourself all things if only you might be favoured to be one of them?

“With them numbered may I be,
Now, and through eternity.”

You cannot bear the thought of being left out, but it is your great, your chief concern. Like the Shunammith woman: “I dwell among mine own people.” Like Ruth: “Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.”

“Let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me,” as Moses did. He “refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter.” Now you know what worldly wisdom and carnal philosophy would say to Moses: Have you really considered it? Look at the wonderful opportunity you might have as ruler of this great empire. What good you could do to the Lord’s people, and you think, you didn’t choose this position yourself.

Those mysterious circumstances when your mother laid you in the bulrushes and it was Pharaoh's daughter who came and adopted you. Surely you are not going to turn your back on all this! Surely this is the Lord's opening in providence. "By faith Moses, when he was come to years, *refused* to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter."

"Let him deny himself, and take up his cross," as Moses did. "Choosing rather" – beloved friends, there is a choice. That is not free will; that is not Arminianism. There *is* a choice. The point is, by nature we choose wrongly. By nature our wills are sinful. By nature our wills will not choose right. But there is a choice. "O for faith that choice to make," that living faith will still desire the reproaches of the Lamb and esteem them greater riches than the treasures of this life. "Choosing *rather*." O that *rather*. "Choosing rather." Have you ever had it burned in your heart, that *rather*, the difference between the poor, despised people of God and the world with all its pleasures and honours that lie in wickedness? *Rather*. "Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin" – we give the world a point: they have their pleasures – "for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ." There is a word in the epistles, trying the things that differ and esteeming the things that are excellent (Phil. 1. 10 *margin*). Well, you will esteem the reproach of Christ – if you will the worst that Christ gives you – you will esteem it better than the best that the world can give you. "Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward."

"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." What do we sing?

"His institutions would I prize;
Take up my cross, the shame despise;
Dare to defend His noble cause,
And yield obedience to His laws."

"Let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow *Me*." That is the secret of it all. It is a Person. It is a glorious Person. It is Jesus the Son of God. It is Jesus the Saviour. It is Jesus who has done so much for this sinner. It is Jesus who loves him. It is Jesus who died for him. It is Jesus who calls you, and it is because it is this glorious Person and

because of these constrainings of His love that this sinner is enabled by faith to deny himself and take up his cross and follow Him. O how often did the Lord Jesus say to one and another whilst here on earth, "Follow Me"! Now some follow fashion; some follow the world; some follow the man. Jesus said, "Follow Me."

"Jesus calls us o'er the tumult
Of this world's tempestuous sea;
Day by day His sweet voice calleth,
Saying, 'Christian, follow Me.'"

The Lord does not promise an easy way, but He does promise a safe way, and He does promise salvation in it at last. But He does promise that He will be with His people, that He will never leave them nor forsake them, that He will help them along, that He will bring them through, that He will be with them in trouble, that He will support them.

"Follow Me." There is a following of the Lord Jesus by faith. We follow Him in His goings forth from everlasting. We follow Him in His mysterious incarnation and birth. We follow Him in His life and in His sin-atonement death, in His glorious resurrection, His ascension to heaven, His exaltation. By faith we follow Him. I like that:

"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."

"Follow Me." And then in obedience to His Word and constrained by His love there is the following Him in that narrow way which leads to life. "Follow Me." You must not get before. "Follow Me." It means you must go after. "Follow Me," to tread where Jesus trod. "Follow Me." He has gone before. "When He putteth forth His own sheep, He goeth before them, and the sheep follow Him."

"Follow Me." And then we read that description of them: "These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth." May this be the great point with you and me: to be followers of the Lamb of God, because when we come to the end, that is the point that will matter – not this or that, but were you, was I, a follower of the Lamb? O we do want to be found among the followers of the Lamb. "These are they which follow the

Lamb whithersoever He goeth.” We would follow His steps. We would follow Him in the narrow way. We would follow Him in an open profession of His loving name. We would be followers of the Lamb. “These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.”

“If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” – follow Him all the way, follow Him right into heaven at last. What do we sing?

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

What then?

“I ask them whence their victory came,
They with united breath,
Ascribe their conquest to the Lamb,
Their triumph to His death.”

Followers of the Lamb of God. “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” Then through grace, by faith to be made a follower.

“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.”