

Come, Follow Jesus to the Cross: Keep Calm and Follow On!

A sermon based on Matthew 16:21-26

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

There was a fad I had noticed a few months back that seems to have calmed down a bit. Maybe you saw it, too. T-shirts, posters, Facebook pics that were a take-off of the famous saying, “Keep Calm & Carry On.” I mean, it was just everywhere. “Keep calm and rock on.” “Keep calm and don’t hate.” “Keep calm and *insert random person’s name*.”

I didn’t get it. But I did look up the history of that phrase. Maybe you know, but “Keep Calm and Carry On” was a motivational poster produced by the British Government before the beginning of WWII, intended to raise the morale of the public after mass air attacks had been launched against their major cities.

I think it would be fair to say all of us, in one way or another, have had our fair share of attacks laid against us...against our faith. Being a Christian in a largely unbelieving world is tough, and I’ll admit, it can sometimes even get downright disheartening. Throw in the crosses God calls for us to bear, and I wouldn’t be surprised if you wanted to just throw in the towel and wave the white flag of surrender.

But we won’t. We have the greatest cross-bearer leading the way, and as we struggle to follow him, here’s his encouragement today: “Keep calm and follow on!”

I’m guessing the mood in our text was anything but calm. Can you see why? The disciples had just finished an awesome moment with Jesus, one of those few times where you could see the light beginning to go on in their heads, that they were actually starting to get it. Jesus asked them to, really, give him a confession of who they believed he was. And Peter gave the perfect answer, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Right on, Peter!

And from that...right into this. Christ, the Son of the living God, God himself, admitted what “must” happen, what was going to happen to him in a short time when he would go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. And you’d have think the disciples had to have done a double-take. “Wait, what?!?”

And then, Peter, the self-appointed spokesperson, shared the concerns all of the other disciples had to be having at that moment. “Jesus, I hope this never happens to you! You’re God! You can’t die! I don’t want you to die. I won’t let you die!” Translation? “Jesus, don’t carry out your mission. Don’t obey your Father’s will. Don’t fulfill the promises of God’s Old Testament prophets.”

Makes it easy to see then, why Jesus was so harsh in his response, “GET BEHIND ME SATAN! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”

I’m sure Jesus could sense the frustration in the disciples. The truths he had to share with them about his suffering and death? Weren’t easy to hear. We’d probably be surprised if they DIDN’T try to talk Jesus out of it. Isn’t that what loving friends do when they feel someone’s making the wrong choice?

But this, it wasn’t the wrong choice. Jesus wouldn’t be talked out of it. That was the path God had laid out for him, and he would walk it, all the way to the cross.

And the disciples' place? Not where they were trying to be, as obstacles in Jesus' path, like a pothole or a tree blown down in the road, making it impassible. No, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." In other words, their place was behind Jesus, following him, bearing their own crosses.

Same place we ought to be, wouldn't you agree? Early in Matthew, Jesus has similar words to speak, "Anyone that does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." Following Jesus, for us, also includes a cross.

Let's talk about that cross for a moment, not Jesus's cross, but yours. Do you know what it is? Well, in general, the crosses Christians bear are the hardships and sufferings and persecutions they endure as a consequence of faithfully following Christ. It's what you and I face as a result of our faith in Jesus. These crosses vary from person to person, but every Christian must expect to bear a cross.

Do you know what yours is? I mean, we all have our own crosses. Every person's cross is going to look different. So, what's yours? I can tell you a little bit about what mine looks like. My cross often focuses on me rather than being Christ-centered.

"If I were a better preacher, people would listen and come; I must be doing something wrong or I would be more successful. How come they don't like me?" "Maybe it will work if I tell more funny stories in the sermon; maybe then they will like me and listen to me; perhaps less about repentance and our sins and Jesus dying for our sins and more about – well, anything, everything else...maybe that will work." "Maybe if I'm not so strict in doctrine and practice, maybe if I give a little here and a little there, I will grow this church faster; we can get around to "tough stuff" later when they are more mature and like me well enough to listen to it." As if it depends all on me and my work instead of only on Christ and his greater work.

What about you? It changes as we grow older. When you were younger, maybe it dealt with self-doubts and the want to find your niche, to fit in.

Questions, like, "If God really cared about me, why does he let me suffer so all alone in the world, with no one who understands me or really cares about me?" "What's the point in resisting sins that I know I'm going to commit anyway? Why not just give up instead of tormenting myself with a struggle that I'll lose anyways?" "If I don't do what everybody else does, then I won't have any friends. Worse yet, they will discover what I am working so hard to keep a secret: I'm weird!"

Or, maybe as you've gotten older, the cross has changed to mis-ordered priorities. With the business of making a living, getting ahead, accomplishing goals, or even just surviving from day to day in this world, it can turn our eyes away from the cross of Christ to focus on me, me, me. Our priorities can become altogether worldly, doing whatever it takes to get ahead and be comfortable, fixing our eyes on the temporal and the temporary instead of the eternal. Where the temptation is to serve me first, care about me first, and eh, others and maybe even God, they take the back seat, or maybe I don't even have to care about anyone else.

Admit it, it's hard, isn't it? I've shared with you before how tiring being a believer in Christ is...that every moment I have to be thinking about living for Christ and making God-pleasing decisions. It's hard. And then, throw in these very real crosses with the hardships and sufferings I'm supposed to be carrying and temptations I'm supposed to be fighting and avoiding. It's hard. And we would like nothing more than

to throw it off and be relieved of the painful burden for good, right? After all, no one else in this unbelieving world is carrying one. But you see the danger in that, don't you?

Listen again to Jesus' words, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"

What does it mean to deny yourself? As hard as it is, it's less of me and more of Jesus. Less of serving my wants and desires and more, all about serving Jesus. It's forfeiting the world for the eternal good of my soul.

And we haven't always done that. You can think of times when your selfish, sinful concerns have trumped God's will. You can think of time when you've denied God instead of yourself. You can think of times when you've tried to throw off your cross or complain about it instead of embracing it.

And you know what Jesus has to say? "Get behind me! You are a stumbling block to me!" Every sin, one more time we're acting like Peter, trying to prevent Jesus from carrying his cross. Every sin, one more obstacle meant to trip Jesus up, and stop him. Every sin, one more weight we're putting on his cross, making it heavier and heavier.

So you know what Jesus says? "Get behind me!" You see, we may not always see the necessity of our own cross, but thank God that Jesus did. Remember the word Jesus used when he was explaining to his disciples the route he would soon embark upon? He "must."

He must go to Jerusalem. He must suffer many things. He must be killed. It was absolutely necessary for Jesus to carry his cross. It was absolutely necessary for Jesus to lead the way.

And you need only look at the events of Holy Week to see how he did. Jesus never tried to wiggle his way out of his responsibility as the Savior of the world. Jesus never complained about the weight of his cross and his mission, but lovingly and eagerly went. Jesus never the obstacles thrown in the way by sinners, including you and me, to drive him off course or stop him completely.

No, Jesus must...and Jesus did. The perfect life Jesus had to live on this earth because no other human being ever has...he did. The substitutionary death Jesus had to die because it was the only way he could bear all of our sins and give us his perfect life in exchange...he did. And the resurrection Jesus had to experience because he's God and he promised he would, but even more importantly, so it could serve as your guarantee, and mine, that our lives, filled with our own individual crosses, would also end in a glorious resurrection and the crown of eternal life for us. Yeah, he must...and he did!

That's why Jesus says, "Get behind me." If you and I were leading the way, we'd be lost. We couldn't make it to heaven on our own. But with Jesus leading the way, with his life, death, and resurrection, be assured of this: salvation is yours. Forgiveness is yours. Heaven is yours.

That, heaven, is our ultimate goal. That road is not done for any of us, not yet. That road involves self-denial. It involves self-sacrifice for God. It involves carrying our cross. Because of Jesus, once and for all, you say good-bye to yourself. Once you pick up your cross, you never put it down. Following Jesus means to completely lose sight of self and your own interests and to focus your attention entirely on him.

It's hard. It's exhausting. And don't feel like you're the only one who wants to give it up at times. And that's where Jesus encourages us, "Keep calm and follow on."

Here's a place where Jesus encourages you to keep calm and follow on. We don't need church to be the place where we can raise our crosses for all to see. We don't need church to be a place where each of us can go and hear about all MY great accomplishments, or where God hoists me up on his shoulders and gives me an "at-a-boy."

No, there's already a cross hoisted here, and Christ's cross reminds me of the full forgiveness I have when I don't always follow on. This is a place where you get your tank refilling because out there, it's draining to carry the cross. And oh, how Jesus completely fills us up with his forgiveness and with his words of comfort, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

Keep calm and follow on. Brothers and sisters in Christ, it's a war out there. Enemies of Christ are lurking around every corner. You may feel burdened by the cross you have to bear. But know what doesn't burden you...your sin. That was Jesus' cross. He gladly carried it for you. He gladly led the way. Now it's our turn to carry our cross and follow. Will you deny yourself and carry it? Because of Jesus and with Jesus, you will...the entire road, until you get to heaven. Amen.