

I was reading the account that a father wrote about taking his three-year-old daughter... Amy... to her first circus. ... Before the event her father tried his best to describe the exciting atmosphere of the big top. ... She asked lots of questions along the way. ... Would she get to pet the elephant? ... Could she swing on the trapeze? ... Would the clowns come and talk to her? ... The night before... she could hardly sleep. ...She woke her parents with: "*Daddy, Daddy, come on. We can't be late.*"

As they drove to the circus grounds... Amy's eyes sparkled. ...When they finally arrived... he had to hold her hand tightly to keep her from running ahead of him. ...He bought her peanuts and Cracker Jacks before taking their seats in the stands. ...Amy giggled as her father put the ring in the Cracker Jack box on her finger... pointing out the three rings in the center of the tent.

"*When's it going to start, Daddy? When's it going to start?*" she asked again and again.

Finally it began.

Amy clapped her hands to the music... and squealed with delight as she watched the parade of animals and performers. ... Her eyes darted back and forth... not knowing which of the three rings to watch.

Suddenly... Amy became very still and quiet.

"*What is it, Amy?*" her father asked.

"*Daddy,*" she said, her voice filled with awe, "*They did all this just for me.*"

Today... Evangelical Christianity has taught... (and I believe wrongfully)... that all God has done... His entire existence... His creation... His acts of love... is all done just for me. ... As we present God and His mercy... Christ and His self-sacrifice... painful... torturous death on the cross to pay the penalty that I cannot pay... that... it is all done just for me.

A very popular... contemporary worship song presents the death of Christ in it's chorus:

Crucified, laid behind a stone  
You lived to die, rejected and alone  
Like a rose, trampled on the ground  
You took the fall and thought of me  
Above all

Whenever we sing that song here... we change the words just a bit:

Crucified, laid behind a stone  
You lived to die, rejected and alone  
Like a rose, trampled on the ground  
You took the fall although You are  
Above all

Here is the point that I am trying to make... "YES Christ thought of me!" ... "YES He sacrificed Himself for me (personally)" ... and I have no doubt that He even thought of me... He had me (personally) in mind when he went to the cross... BUT NOT ABOVE ALL. ... What is above all...? What... or Who is primary... if I am not. ... .. God and His GLORY is primary. ... It is not me... and it is not you. ... Jesus thought of His Heavenly Father above all!

*"...Well... you are just splitting hairs here... pastor. You are making a mountain out of a molehill. I happen to like that song and you are being*

*very unfair in criticizing it...* ... Let me tell you... I love that song to. That is why we still sing it... and have for years. But it is so much better with this slight change... and we are not contributing to what I think is a major problem today in Evangelical Christianity.

This existing problem... of thinking that it is all about **me**... will prevent many people from grasping the full implications of our passage this morning. ... The false expectation... that my Christian walk... is all about **me**... soon finds itself in trouble... at the first outbreak of hardship... or outright persecution. ... *“God... this isn’t what I signed up for...” “Woe! Hold on here! You better change things for me... right now... God... or You’re gonna find out how quick You’ll loose me! ... And You certainly wouldn’t want that... to loose **me!!!**”*

We have a **different** message from our passage in Luke today... and ironically... our passage... deals with the suffering and self-sacrifice that Jesus went through... to pay the penalty for yours and my sins.

Would you agree with author Christian Smith... who writes in his book... *Soul Searching*... that prevalent perceptions about God in the church... are that He is "moral therapeutic deity"...? (I would label this viewpoint "Santa Claus god").

*Moral* implies that God wants us to be nice. He rewards the good and withholds from the naughty.

*Therapeutic* means that God just wants us to be happy.

Smith’s use of the word *Deity* means that God is **distant** and not involved in our daily lives. ... God may get involved occasionally... but on the

whole... God functions like an idea not a personal being actively present in our world. ... He is OK with so many “Sunday-only Christians.”

According to Smith... this is the version of God that's prevalent in our culture and in our churches. ...Often without realizing it... every culture quietly molds and shapes their own views of God.

Today's Evangelical culture... seem to be molding a god who primarily exists for us... instead of the other way around. ... The truth is... we exist for Him... We are displays of His marvelous grace and mercy.

We can't grow in our relationship with God... when we insist on relating to God... and our walk with Him... as all about me. ...and the point of today's passage will fly right by us... (we won't recognize it)... and definitely won't assimilate it into our life.

As we approach our passage this morning... let's be careful that we surrender ourselves to God-as-He-is... as revealed in the Bible. ... Otherwise... we will have a god of our own imaginations – which for many... is the American god - an obese... jolly toymaker who works one day a year.

### **Luke 23:26**

The grim customs of the crucifixion march were well known to every Roman subject. ...Jesus was placed in the center of a *quarterion*... a company of four Roman soldiers. ...The *patibulum*... the cross beam of the cross... weighing perhaps as much as 100 pounds... was placed on His

shoulders. ... It was a part of the prisoner's humiliation that he carry his own cross to the place of execution.

As Jesus stumbled along the route to Golgotha... a soldier preceded Him... carrying a wooden placard bearing the inscription of Jesus' crime: "JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS". ...Jesus was led on the longest route possible... so cold fear would grip the populace as a deterrent to crime.

Jesus was a carpenter... in the physical **prime** of His life. ... He was accustomed to heavy lifting. ... (He knew how to put His shoulder to a task.) ... Bearing the 100 pound *patibulum*... however... was well within His *normal* capacity. ...But Jesus had already undergone **prolonged** physical **torture**... The final scourging must have inflicted a horrible loss of blood and tissue. ...Thus... with His arms forcibly extended wide... He began to reel like a wounded butterfly. ...The soldiers discerned that He would not make it to the site of execution... and that He might even **die** under the cross beam... while on the road.

In order to prevent that from happening... the Roman soldiers enlisted a very **surprised** North African from the city of Cyrene... in what is today Libya. ... Thousands of Jews came to Jerusalem from other nations to celebrate the feasts... and Simon was probably among them. ... He had traveled over 800 miles from Africa to celebrate Passover, and now he was being humiliated on a most holy day!

Simon was probably a convert to Judaism. ... We know that there were a lot of them from Cyrene... The Cyrenian Jews had their own synagogue in

Jerusalem... it is mentioned in the book of Acts - Acts 6:9. (They were very zealous for their Jewish faith.)

We have good reason to believe that Simon became a believer in Christ... shortly after this... Mark... in his gospel account of this incident introduces Simon as "the father of Alexander and Rufus" (Mark 15:21). ... Mark originally wrote his Gospel to the church at Rome... and he evidently assumed his Roman readers would know this man's two sons... Alexander and Rufus. ...

Mark would not have named Simon's sons had these believers in Rome **not** subsequently come to know Simon. ...And why would they have gotten to know Simon... unless Simon became a follower of Christ?

In Romans 16:13 Paul writes, "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too." ... This highly suggests that Simon's family had become pillars of the church in Rome!

What we have here is a huge surprise of sovereign grace during one of the most outwardly helpless moments of Christ's life. ... Before Simon met Jesus... he had apparently been seeking for the truth about God. It had brought him 800 miles from home. ... Simon of Cyrene happened upon the gruesome parade at the precise moment of Christ's extremity... was forced to carry the loathsome crossbeam... unwillingly saw every movement and heard every word of Jesus... Who staggered before him... observed the execution... and at some time during that day... or the following days... believed in Jesus Christ. Amazing grace!

God can still use unexpected and difficult situations - even **humiliating** situations - to bring people to the Savior.                   **[ P A U S E ]**

Here is a question now... that I would like us to focus our attention on... because the answer to it... opens up the rest of the passage for us.

Why do Matthew... Mark... and Luke - all **three**... known as the “Synoptic Gospels” - mention Simon? ... They don’t even **all** mention the **birth** of Christ. But why **this**...? Is there a tremendous amount of importance here?

Here is what I believe is **SUCH** an important truth... that God does not want any Christian to miss... Simon... bent under the weight of the cross... and following in Christ's footsteps... is a dramatic image... of what is **necessary** to be a disciple of Jesus.

After Peter's confession that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus made it clear that he would die at the hands of the Sanhedrin, and "*Then he said to them all: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me'*" (Luke 9:23).

Later when his popularity was on the rise... He turned to the large crowd and said,

**Luke 14:26-27 (ESV)**

*If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.*

So this bent silhouette of Simon from Cyrene... trudging after Jesus... made a striking profile for every disciple of the Savior. ...

What sobering this makes for you and I...(!) ... because if **we** do not feel the weight of the cross... (let me say that differently...) If there is no **sacrifice** in our Christian life... if there are no occasions of **humiliation**... we are **not** following Christ in true discipleship.

This is quite a different message than the "It's-all-about-me Christianity" - that is played out in so many of our churches today.

14<sup>th</sup> Century... German theologian... Thomas à Kempis profoundly wrote:

Jesus has many who love his kingdom in heaven, but few who bear his cross. He has many who desire comfort, but few who desire suffering. He finds many to share his feast, but few his fasting. All desire to rejoice with him, but few are willing to suffer for his sake. Many follow Jesus to the breaking of bread, but few to the drinking of the cup of his passion. Many admire his miracles, but few follow him in the humiliation of the cross.

19<sup>th</sup> Century... **British** theologian... and literature professor... CS Lewis also writes:

Christ says, "Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want you. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there. I want to have the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think are innocent as well as the ones



you think are wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you myself: my own will shall become yours."

The rest of our passage today... shows us what cross-carrying discipleship looks like. ... Once we get beyond "Its-all-about-me Christianity"... we are to die to ourselves – daily... hourly... moment-by-moment – continuously!

### **Luke 23:27-31**

Public executions drew crowds of spectators... and **this** one... involving Jesus... would especially attract attention. ...Add to this the fact that Jerusalem was crowded with pilgrims... and it is not difficult to believe... as verse 27 states... that a "*great multitude*" was following the condemned man to Calvary.

In that crowd was a group of women who openly **wept** and lamented as they sympathized with Jesus... and contemplated the terrible spiritual condition of their nation. ...

Bible Commentator... Kent Hughes... points out that... these women are **not** to be confused with Christ's devoted followers... who had traveled from Galilee... and would stay with Him to the bitter end. ..."Rather"... Says Hughes... "these were devout women of Jerusalem... who had come to lament the death of a young man... local women who regularly turned out to witness executions... and provide opiates and drugs to ease the pain." (Apparently there are Jewish writings from the 1<sup>st</sup> century that mention such women.)

So these “daughter’s of Jerusalem”... may have been acting out the part of professional mourners as they literally "were beating themselves and bewailing him." ... These daughters of Jerusalem were well-intentioned... sympathetic... kind souls.... who protested the death penalty for anyone.

But these good women... absorbed with their ritual wailing and self-pummeling... were in no way prepared for what was to happen as... incredibly... Jesus turned around... facing both them and Simon... and said,

**Luke 23:28 (ESV)**

*Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.*

The surprise was that the wretched prisoner, on the verge of a most torturous death, was thinking of them. Amazing grace!

While they were weeping over the injustice of His impending death... He was looking ahead and grieving over their horrible and impending death... that was just as certain as His. Jesus saw the terrible destruction of the entire nation... and knew it would be the women and children who would suffer the most. ... History has... indeed... verified that this did happen. ... In 70a.d. ... the Romans attempted to starve the Jews into submission... and the people of Jerusalem... holding on to their city... resorted to cannibalism. They killed and ate their own flesh and blood.

Taking His eyes off of His Own suffering... Jesus... essentially warned them... "When the day of judgment arrives... there will be no escape for you, either" ... "Dark days are coming for you. Beware!" ... The details

that Christ gives to the women... shows that he wanted to impress it upon them. He wanted them to be ready. ... It is a sincere warning.

When you and I have not taken up our cross – as disciples... we do the exact opposite. We want to draw people into our pain and misery. We **want** others to mourn for us... when we experience hardship. ... “*Woe is me... look what I have to face... Feel sorry for me everybody!*”

Of course we are supposed to share our burdens with fellow members of the body of Christ. Galatians 6:2 **tells** us to do that! ... But often it ends up... as what Philippians 2:14 says we are not to do – grumble and complain.

**Philippians 2:14 (ESV)**

*Do all things without grumbling or questioning,*

In the midst of UN-imaginable agony... Jesus thought of them! ...Again I say – “Amazing grace!” – The kind that comes when we die to ourselves.

When we pick up our cross and follow Christ – we intentionally give grace to others... even in the midst of our own agony.

Are you ready for a very practical challenge from this...?

Every day there are opportunities for each of us to reach out to others... to demonstrate the excellencies of Jesus. ...There are family members... colleagues at work... and strangers that happen to intersect the trajectory of our lives... who are waiting to be touched by an action of God’s GRACE...

So here is our challenge... If taking up our cross and following Christ looks like this... that we show grace to others... even though we ourselves may

be suffering... my recommendation is that we plan to commit one intentional act of grace toward others [an act of goodness that isn't earned or deserved] ... every day... this entire week!

What do you think would happen if we prayed every morning: "Lord, direct me to the people who I can show grace to... today"...?

To be very honest... we may be given another opportunity for us to die to ourselves even more. ... We might be placed in the midst of people we don't normally like to be around... unpleasant company. ... AND... we might even have to suffer abusive mocking from them.

Mocking and reviling back at them... is not following in the footsteps of Christ.

### **Luke 23:32-38**

He still blesses them! He shows a powerful kind of grace toward them.

Each of us... has a lot of dying to self... that we must do. ... God knows how much more dying we need to do... in order to be sincere disciples... and He knows just how much abuse from others we are able to handle.

Listen... I believe that the place where we all need to start... is by initiating each day... looking for intentional acts of grace... to give out to others. The only thing that will keep us from doing it... is that we don't really want to die... to ourselves. ... What would that reveal to us about being a disciple of Jesus...?

It would be a commitment. A HUGE commitment for many of us!

If you were inside the cockpit of a departing airplane... just as it took off from the runway... you would hear the copilot or captain call out... "V1." This phrase represents the "point of no return."

As the airplane accelerates toward the end of the runway... the pilot must decide if the plane is moving fast enough for a safe takeoff. ... This speed must be determined preflight... based on several factors... including the air pressure... temperature... speed of the wind... and weight of the aircraft... cargo... and passengers.

The pilot maintains a hold on the throttle... as the plane approaches the V1 speed... so that he can abort the takeoff... if something goes wrong. However... after V1... the plane must take off.

As Christians... we should have a V1 commitment to our walk with Christ.

V1 ! Take up your cross and follow Christ.

V1 ! Commit to show one intentional act of grace toward others [an act of goodness that isn't earned or deserved] ... every day... this entire week!