

“The Cross of Genuine Love”

Peter has just made the Great Confession – that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God” – but he will not follow where Jesus leads. Jesus says that He will suffer, be killed, and be raised to life – but Peter is having none of that. He takes Jesus aside and rebukes Him! “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.”

It’s satanic to tell God how things will be. “Get behind me, Satan!” Jesus says to Peter. Disciples follow – quit trying to lead – get behind me. “For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

Jesus is speaking to you when He says – “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” Deny yourself, folks – get rid of man’s way of thinking – quit trying to run the show – to be the lord of your life. “Follow me.”

But what does that mean? How do you take up your cross and follow Jesus? Here, the Word of the Lord in Romans 12 is very helpful – very practical – even though it goes against our way of thinking. Let’s walk through this Epistle lesson.

“Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.” The first hurdle in taking up our cross and following Jesus involves denying ourselves and believing that Jesus is God. He defines what is evil, and what is good. We must set our minds on what He says – not what man says. He defines what it means to “love one another with brotherly affection.” For us to love one another – we must love others as Christ has loved them.

“Outdo one another in showing honor.” As a follower of Jesus Christ, you are held to a higher standard than the standards of the world. There is no higher standard – no better way to honor another person – than to see them as one whose life was created and sustained by God – as one for whom the very Son of God shed His blood and gave up His life, for their salvation.

“Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.” This one is a heavy cross for me, and maybe for you. Don’t be lazy. Don’t always take the path of least resistance. Rather, see your life as one of service – and specifically, of the Lord’s service to your fellow man, THROUGH YOU – the Lord using your mouth, your hands, your life in genuine love for others.

“Rejoice in hope” – living not in despair, in hopelessness – but with the hope that comes from the victory being won because Jesus “the Christ” has suffered, was killed, and raised to life again on the third day. “It is finished” – the debt of sin is paid, you are redeemed in the blood of Jesus, death has been defeated, and His resurrection assures the resurrection of your body and a life everlasting! You live, and rejoice, in that hope!

“Be patient in tribulation.” Tribulations are afflictions that pierce you, wounding you and making everything uncertain. Death of a loved one. Marital issues. Financial woes. Doctor’s diagnosis. Rejection by peers. Uncertainty and confusion about who you are. When everything is crumbling – be patient, wait, and rely on the Lord who is a Rock.

“Be constant in prayer.” Prayer that flows from faith, which knows that your present struggles are in the Lord’s hands – praying that He would lead you, and preserve you.

“Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.” Watch out for and take care of fellow believers. These are your brothers and sisters in Christ – love them with the genuine love of Christ.

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.” Man tells you to curse those who persecute you. Your friends think they are being your friend by wailing on those who attack you – cursing them, damning them to hell. But following Christ, you use your tongue to bless those who persecute you – you ask God to have mercy on them, to repent them, to forgive them, to give them the new life of faith in Christ.

“Rejoice with those who rejoice” – rejoicing at the birth of a child, at a baptism into Christ, when the faith is confessed, when man and woman are united in Holy Marriage – sharing in the joy which the Lord has poured out on your fellow man.

And “weep with those who weep” – mourning with them at the death of a loved one, or the loss of a job, or house, or marriage – coming alongside to help them take up their cross.

“Live in harmony with one another” – not disrupting their lives with your selfish deeds – not justifying your actions which cause them harm, telling yourself it is okay to be bitter, to continue butting heads with them.

“Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited.” You know what that’s like when you play the comparison game – when you think of yourself as better than that person, more worthy of man’s honor and God’s blessings. Rather, like Jesus who ate with sinners – draw near to the outcast, the loner, the “losers” – love them, even as Christ loves them.

“Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to what is honorable in the sight of all.” Do not return harsh words with harsher words – a beating for a beating – ruining their reputation because they have tainted yours. Instead, honor them with a godly response – turning the cheek, putting the best construction on everything.

“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God.” You are not the judge of all mankind. You do not always know what is right and just. Wrath is not something God has given into your hands – but He calls you to trust that He will punish the evildoer in His way, and in His time.

“To the contrary, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.’ That’s the last thing man has on his mind – to help his enemy. To receive such kindness, such genuine love, may cause great shame – and open their eyes to God’s way of thinking – to see how the Christian follows Jesus – to receive the very grace of God.

The life of the Christian is different than the life of the unbeliever. It’s not consumed with trying to save yourself and gain the riches of the world – it is one in which you daily deny yourself and take up your cross – losing your sinful ways by contrition and repentance – and being resurrected to a new life with Christ – a life of genuine love.

You are a follower of Jesus – who goes to the cross for you, to serve you, to lose His life to save yours. His forgiveness earned by His cross is given to you with His Body and Blood – to feeding you who are hungry, and giving to drink you who are thirsty – to strengthen you to be able to take up your cross and follow Him – to recreate you so that you have in mind the things of God – to give you a clean heart and a new spirit, even the Holy Spirit, who leads you in the path the Lord has laid out for you.

This is God’s genuine love for you – given to you in Christ – so that you may live peaceably with God, and with one another. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.