

Following Jesus – Part 1: “Take Up the Cross”

Introduction

Very good evening to all of you and thank you for joining us in our Christian Education Program here at Gospel Light. This is meant to provide additional feeding and training and equipping for your spiritual lives. And I'm so excited that you could join us here. This subject of following Jesus cannot be more important, isn't it? You might want to be a better father, wife, husband, child, worker, student. But underlying all that must be that commitment to follow Jesus well, so I'm glad you can join us. And in these seven sessions, I like to share with you some secrets of the Christian life. Now there are secrets in the sense that not many people, I think, really understand these truths. But they are actually very, very important, as you will see in these sessions to come. So, I'm glad you can join us and I trust you will be greatly benefiting from these times together.

Prayer

So, let's begin in a word of prayer, as we kick off our first session, Father, thank You for this time we could study your word, may your spirit be our teacher, seal these truths into our hearts, and may we be faithful to obey them for your glory. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.

Take up the cross: Mat 16:24-28

Now, the very first thing I like to share with you about following Jesus is about taking up the cross. I take these words from Matthew chapter 16, and verses 24 to 28. Let's read these verses that “Jesus told his disciples if anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it and but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death, until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” (Matthew 16:24-28) So let me share with you three simple points from these few verses.

1. The prerequisite

Number one, I like us to see the prerequisite to following Jesus. You want to follow Jesus? Great, but there is one condition you really need to know. You say, what's that? Well, let me put it in the opposite first. Many people think that the Christian life is one where God guarantees you success and blessing and a smooth life. Many people believe that the way to the good life here is becoming a Christian. And that's not helped when in Singapore, many Christians are actually quite well to do. I think in general, the church is made up of middle, upper class people. Now that's even worse, or the situation is worsened, when there are preachers who actually teach that when you follow Jesus, that is the guarantee, that is the formula to a successful, prosperous life here on earth. Now, I quote, a sermon by Kong Hee, the pastor of City Harvest Church, the sermon is entitled, “Was Jesus poor?”. And this is what he said, “the idea of Jesus was so poor that he was a destitute have been repeated so often, that many people including Christians, have accepted it as gospel truth. But if you study the Bible very carefully, you will

realize Jesus was never poor in his 33 and a half years of earthly ministry. You will always have what you believe if you believe Jesus isn't poor, you are able to break through out of poverty and come into God's abundance and prosperity. When we study the Bible and read of the heroes of faith. Most of them were very wealthy. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, (David donated \$50 billion worth of gold for the building of the temple) ... Solomon, Job, Joseph of Arimathea... A poverty mindset will block the prosperity of God to you. Poverty is a curse, prosperity is a blessing." So what is he saying? He's saying Jesus was not poor, and therefore if you follow Jesus, you should not be poor. So, you see, this is the predominant thinking in many people's minds about the Christian faith. That following Jesus is the method is the means to a successful, rich and happy life here. But do you realize what Jesus said. He said in Matthew 16, if anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. So Jesus is not saying that following Him is the means to self-fulfillment, to have my happiness, my wealth, my treasures here. In fact, following Jesus means that I have to deny myself of all these things. Now, he's not saying that wealth is bad. It's not saying that health is bad. But he's saying that following Jesus is not the means to get stuff. But it means that you see him so valuable, that you're willing to give up all this stuff.

In fact, this is so absolute, that he said it three times in Luke chapter 14, verse 26, "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." Verse 27, "whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple." And then verse 33, "So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has, cannot be my disciple." So, this is what Jesus is saying, "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself." You know, what's the one characteristic about Peter, Andrew James and John and how they follow Jesus? They left everything. They left their father, they left their boats, they left their nets, they were willing to deny themselves, their own dependents and their own livelihood in order to follow Jesus. Where did Jesus go? Did he live a life of self-fulfillment? No, his life was one of self-denial, of going to the cross. So, following Jesus is not self-centered, but it's cross-centered and the prerequisite to following Him must be the willingness to deny ourselves or to die to self. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, he says, "When Christ bids a man to come, he bids him come to die". So the prerequisite to following Jesus is dying. The secret to the spiritual life is dying to self. In Hokkien, we say, *li ke si*, go and die. That's really what the Christian call is. Do you realize then that when you study the Bible, you're really studying it so that you may die? You want to die to your old ways, you want to die to your old lust, so that Christ's way and His love will be lifted out in you? Do you realize that when you go to church for service, you're not going there to be entertained, to be humored, but you're going there to say, Lord, speak to me that I may die. I want to be that living sacrifice. I want to die to myself to live for you. Do you realize that when you allow your husband or your wife to go for Bible study, for discipleship group, you're saying, dear, go and die, die to your old ways, die to yourself, that Christ may live in you. This is the joy of the Christian life, not one of self-fulfillment for the things of this world, but one of self-denial, that his life might be lived in and through me. So, Jesus says, in Luke 9, verse 23, "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily." I like that dailyness, it reminds me that this is not a once for all surrender I made 10 years ago in church camp. But the secret to following Jesus is dying to myself, every day. When I drive, I can take revenge, or I can die to self. When I'm surfing the internet, I can indulge in pornography, or I can die to self. When my wife scolds me, I can retaliate, or I can die to self. It is about the daily choices of your life, in your entertainment, in

your reading, in your job, in your business dealings. How can I follow Jesus? What's the condition? What's that prerequisite? You must be willing to die to yourself.

2. The paradox

Now, Jesus gives us secondly, a paradox. He says, "Whoever would save his life will lose it but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 16:25) It's a paradox. When you want to save your life here, you actually lose life. But when you lose your life, you actually gain it. And this takes wisdom to believe and to live up, isn't it? Jim Elliot, he had this famous saying, "He is no fool, who gives what he cannot keep, to gain that which he cannot lose". How appropriate, you lose that which you cannot keep anyway, to gain that which you will never lose. That's exactly what Jesus is saying. "What profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?" (Matthew 16:26) What would you gain if you had the whole world, but lose your soul? Imagine today, you're successful, and you climb to the top of a company, you own the company now. And you're so smart and so capable that you don't only own that one company, you own 10 companies now, while you are quite a phenomenal businessman, but you do even better than that. Now you own the big companies of the world now, Alibaba, Apple, IBM. And not only that, but you also now own all the companies now. You sure would be a very happy man, I think. But no, that's not enough. You still want more so you now own countries now. And that's not enough. You own the whole world now. Well, let's say you are such a man, you own everything. And then you die. And then you meet with God. And you say, "Lord, I, I have all these things in my life. Can I give you all these companies all this world, in exchange for my soul?" And God will say to you, "It's too late". At that point of time, my friend, what does it profit you to gain the whole world, but to lose your soul. So, this is the paradox, that if you live your life trying to gain and to gather in this life, you actually ended up with nothing. But if you are Jim Elliot, and you're wise like him, you give up what you cannot keep. You give up the things of this world which are transitory in its own place to gain that which is eternal and beautiful.

3. The Promise

And then finally, I end off with the promise, I hope this encourages your heart to die to self because there's a promise here. My son likes Kinder Joy, Matthias. And I've always tried to convince him don't buy Kinder Joy buy Kinder Bueno, if you really like it, because Kinder Bueno is bigger, there's more chocolate, is cheaper, but you know, he will never want Kinder Bueno. Why? Because the beauty of Kinder Joy is not the chocolate, according to Matthias, but it's the secret toy in Kinder Joy. So, when he buys that he longs for, he hopes, and he is certain about a rewarding toy for him. Now, guys don't buy for my son anymore. He's moved beyond that age. But that's what he looks forward to. Not a Christian, what do we look forward to? This is what we look forward to. "For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father. And then he will repay each person according to what he has done." (Matthew 16:27) Now I can be certain that God will gloriously reward those who lay down their lives here in this life. The secret to the Christian life is not self-fulfillment here and now, it's about self-denial here and now for a glorious, eternal life to come. Jesus assures us that. In fact, he said to the disciples, "Truly I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of men coming in His glory." (Matthew 16:28) And that actually is Jesus saying, hey, you wait awhile alright, because you're soon see my glory. When? At the Mount of Transfiguration, so Jesus is

so keen to assure his followers that glory is coming. Glory is coming. Glory is coming. So, stay faithful trust in me.

There's this modern slang YOLO, which stands for You Only Live Once. Do you know what it's all OOYL? Well, it is Only Once You Live, according to Yoda. Now when people talk about YOLO, they use that as an acronym to describe or to bring attention to exciting events or excuse irresponsible behaviors. They're saying, you only live once, just live recklessly. Just enjoy yourself. Don't care about the consequence. But you know what the Bible actually teaches. You only live once. live responsibly. Lay down your life for Jesus. That's the best thing to do, why? You only get to live once.

Let me show you a video clip of a scene. My sons and I had the privilege of catching at the Botanic Gardens. Take a look. So, you see that bird it has this pellet of food in its mouth. You wonder what is he doing with it? He flies off to a stone nearby. Instead of eating this pellet of food, this bird stupidly drops its food into the waters. And it picks it up again. I mean, what's this bird fooling around about? You may ask? I look carefully here. Up, you got that? It drops that pellet of food into the waters. But what did it pick up? See this again. He drops the pellet of food, and he picks up a beautiful fish. What a smart bird. We did some research later on and realized this bird is caught the little Heron. Oh, it looks stupid by dropping the food. But actually, he's very smart. He's putting down the food that he may get that fish. And many of us are not as clever as the little heron. We preserve the little pellet of food in our mouth. We preserve this puny little life of ours, we are so unwilling to lay it down. But there are those giants in the faith, who are willing to lay down their lives and now they rip that fish in the mouth. What a picture of true wisdom. You want to follow Jesus? Great. Let me tell you, the secret is *li ke si* (Hokkien . Go and die, die in a Bible study, die in the worship, die in the Christian community. Die in your reading of the Bible, die in your prayer. Ask God to slay your life. Lay it down, deny yourself and then like that bird, one day you discover the beautiful joy of gaining that which will never be taken away from you. You only live once, make it count. When I die or before I die. I've always taught my wife that If I should die, play this song, if it is appropriate. And this song is a very simple one, "Jesus, I my cross have taken" I hope at the day, at the end of my life, I could say I have taken the cross, I have died to self, that this life is not lived for self-fulfillment. As best as I can, by the grace of God, by the power of His Holy Spirit, I want to die to self, that Christ may live his life through me and that he might be glorified through me.

Jesus I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow thee. Destitute, despised, forsaken. Thou from hence my all shall be. Perish every foreign ambition, all I've sought or hoped or known. Yet how rich is my condition! God and Heaven are still my own. Let the world despise and leave me. They have left my savior to human hearts and looks deceive me. Thou art not, like them, untrue, O while thou dost smile upon me, God of wisdom, love and might. Foes may hate and friends disown me, show thy face and all is bright.

It is worth following Jesus. Let me tell you, the reason why you want to do this, is Jesus went to the cross for you didn't he? He gave his life that he might save you from your sin. Let him be your joy. He's coming back for you one day, he's your hope. Let him be your example. Follow Jesus. Follow him well, die to yourself, trust in Him. It will be worth it. Let's pray. Father, thank You for Your Word. Bless each one, that we might really grasp this in our heads, in our hearts and in our lives. May we learn the secret

to living is dying. May we take up our cross daily that your son might live his life through us by His Spirit to bring you praise. Thank you in Jesus name. Amen. God bless.