

Simon of Cyrene : Called to Carry The Cross

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Luke 23:26; Mark 15; Matthew 27

The story is often told about Jackie Robinson the first African American to play major league baseball. He faced jeering crowds in every stadium. While playing one day in his home stadium in Brooklyn, he committed an error. The fans began to ridicule him. During a delay in the game Robinson stood at second base, humiliated, his head down and began to sob. The fans jeered and threw things at him. But about that time, Brooklyn's shortstop Pee Wee Reese, came over and stood next to him. He put his arm around Jackie Robinson and faced the crowd and as they stood there the fans grew quiet. Robinson later said, "That arm around my shoulder saved my career."

Today I want to look at the story of a man mentioned briefly in the gospels: **Simon of Cyrene**. He also comes and puts an arm around Jesus. He's the third face around the cross we're looking at. Two weeks ago we saw Pontius Pilate, then last week was Peter and next week we'll look at the apostle John. Simon was the man who was called to carry the cross when Jesus could no longer carry it himself. Jesus was alone and the crowds were screaming at him and jeering him. And Simon an innocent bystander put his arm around Jesus, gathered him up from the ground and helped him carry his cross.

Simon's role is brilliantly developed in the movie *The Passion of the Christ*. In the movie we see Simon putting his arm around Jesus and together they carry the cross to Golgotha. And Simon says to Jesus at one point, "Its not far, we're almost there."

THE STORY

Everything we know for certain about Simon is found in just three verses. In Matthew chapter 27 we see the soldiers of the Roman guard leading Jesus out of Pilate 's palace to Golgotha where they are going to crucify him. And in verse 32 of Matthew 's gospel, the Bible says, "As they were going out they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross."

In Luke 23:26 it says "As they led Jesus away they seized Simon of Cyrene who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus."

And finally Mark 15:21 says "A certain man from Cyrene, Simon the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country and they forced him to carry the Cross." Mark's readers must have known who Alexander and Rufus were, and there is a Rufus mentioned in Romans 16:13, a leader in the church in Rome. It may have been the same person.

It was customary that a man condemned to be crucified carry his own cross to the place of his crucifixion. There is something disturbing about a person having to carry the instrument of his death. It is like someone carrying the rope that is going to hang him, or someone sharpening the ax that will chop off his own head. Jesus is not allowed to have a moment of peace before his death, because the reminder of his death is, literally, on his shoulders.

THE VIA DOLOROSA

The path that Jesus walked from Pilate 's palace to Calvary is known as the Via Dolorosa or the "way of suffering." You can visit the Via

Dolorosa today in Jerusalem where it is tradition says Jesus carried his cross. It is a narrow path, enclosed by stonewalls on both sides.

The Via Dolorosa would have been crowded with people that day. Jerusalem would swell to from 40,000 to 250,000 people at Passover. The Roman soldiers would have had to separate the crowds to create a narrow path for Jesus and the criminals who would be taking this journey to the place of crucifixion.

In that crowd was Simon of Cyrene. The Bible says he had just come in from the country. He had come from Cyrene, a large city in North Africa where many Jewish people lived.

Simon made the pilgrimage to the holy city during the time of the Passover to celebrate and make his sacrifice at the temple. The trip to Jerusalem would have been a long and difficult one for Simon. 855 miles by land, 57 days to walk. 35 days by camel or horse... 723 miles by sea at least 6 days of sailing, plus 1 to 2 days over land.

For Simon this was perhaps a once in a lifetime journey. It might have even been a planned for years. His family was probably with him.

Simon probably got lost as he entered Jerusalem. He may not have known his way around the city and got caught in pedestrian traffic. He accidentally found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time. When Simon had come to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover little did he know he would end up meeting God's Passover Lamb!

Roman soldiers had the authority to conscript any citizen into temporary service. Simon was like a kid in the classroom who doesn't want to be called on by his teacher. Imagine him, eyes

lowered trying to be inconspicuous. But at random the soldiers seize him from the crowd and force him to carry the cross.

WHY WAS SIMON RELUCTANT?

There are a few reasons why Simon might have been reluctant to carry this cross. For one it was AN FILTHY TASK. Jesus' sweat and blood would have drenched the cross by the time Simon picked it up. Imagine the blood of Jesus running all over Simon.

It was also A DIFFICULT TASK. Someone suggested that the crossbeam weighed somewhere between 200 and 300 pounds! Imagine carrying a 300 pound beam a mile or so. It was not pleasant. I am sure that Simon had a sore back after this.

It was also AN EMBARRASSING TASK. Only hardened criminals carried a cross. It was a sign of guilt and depravity. Simon was a law-abiding citizen and in the movie he makes it known to everyone and the Roman soldiers that he was not a criminal.

It was an INCONVENIENT TASK. Simon didn't come to Jerusalem to carry a cross. He had just spent 50 days walking to Jerusalem and he gets there and he has to lug a 300-pound cross through the streets of a strange city. This was supposed to be a memorable time for him and now he is inconvenienced by this disgusting, bloody criminal who is so disabled he can't even walk.

CALLED TO CARRY THE CROSS

When I watched *The Passion of the Christ* the scene with Simon of Cyrene I was reminded of Jesus' words in Mark 8:34-35.

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 and for the gospel will save it.

Jesus lays down a requirement for his followers. In fact, he implies that if anybody does not take his cross and follow him he is not worthy of him and cannot be his disciple. I love what John Stott says about this: "One might say, every Christian is both a Simon of Cyrene and a Barabbas. Like Barabbas we escape the cross, for Jesus died in our place. Like Simon of Cyrene we carry the cross for he calls us to take it up and follow him."

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO CARRY THE CROSS?

What does it mean to take up the cross? It means simply to DENY SELF. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself." To deny oneself means to turn away from the idolatry of self-centeredness. It means to die to self. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it like this, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

In a real sense, Jesus calls you to a crucifixion: **your crucifixion**. When we follow him, we are to crucify ourselves, our desires, our possessions, our reputations. It means I no longer live for me. What I want no longer matters. When you carry a cross it is a sign that an execution is taking place: **your execution**.

Paul wrote in Galatians 5:24, "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its selfish passions and desires."

WE ARE SELF CENTERED

Do you know who I have found to be some of the most self centered and selfish people in the

world? Christians. I hear Christians say, "Well, I didn't like the church service today, the music didn't fit my taste." "I don't like that church, the pastor didn't say hello to me." "I don't want to work with children, I want to go to worship, I need to be feed." "I can't believe that I wasn't asked to sing or speak in the service. I never get asked." "I've served that church as a leader for years and no one has ever thanked me. I just want to be appreciated."

Let me ask you a thought-provoking question? Why did you come to here today? Did you come for yourself or did you come for God? Did you come to get something or give something? We even come for selfish reasons. Folks, if there is one lesson in life Jesus Christ wants to teach you is that **IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU.**

WHY IS IT SO HARD TO DENY SELF?

Why is it so difficult to deny self? For one is it difficult because it goes **CONTRARY TO WHAT SOCIETY TEACHES.** We live in a self-worshipping culture.

2 Timothy 3:1-2 says (I'm paraphrasing), "In the last days, life will very difficult. People will love only themselves and their money." It is easy to get sucked into the self-centered ways of this world.

Self-denial is also difficult because it goes contrary to our **INHERENT SINFUL NATURE.** We are born with an innate desire for immediate self-gratification. One of the first words a child learns is "mine." Parents you don't have to teach your children to be selfish. It's ingrained, inherited from Adam.

How can children be so self-centered? Aren't they innocent? No, there is something inside all

of us that gravitates to self-centeredness.

HOW TO DENY SELF?

Well how do we take up the cross of self-denial? How do we begin to release this selfish ambition we all have. Let me give you four ways.

All of us came up through school knowing that there are four things you do in math: **add, subtract, multiply** and **divide**. I think you can take those same four things and use them to grow spiritually and to learn real self-denial and God-dependence.

First, **ADD**. The first step in taking up your cross is...taking up your cross! The image of Simon of Cyrene is that of picking up that crossbeam. So also, when you set your face to following Jesus, there are some things to **add** to your life. You add worship and study and prayer and fellowship.

And as time goes on, we keep adding. You don't stop adding. There are new disciplines to bring into our lives. Giving is a spiritual discipline designed to make us less materialist. Add that one. Add evangelism as a spiritual discipline: the planned intention of sharing your faith in Jesus with others. Add rejoicing. That's a great spiritual discipline that makes us more God-centered as less circumstance centered.

Second **SUBTRACT**. Take something out of your life that serves as a barrier to spiritual growth. A lot of people have heard of "giving up something for Lent" like meat or chocolate. What's the idea? Well, there are a lot of things that can serve as spiritual barriers. We can get addicted to all kinds of things. The first of the Ten Commandments warns us "You shall have no gods before Me." (Exodus 20:3)

Sometimes that's easier said than done. TV, your job, your boyfriend, time spent "online" can all crowd out God.

One Biblical practice that is all about "subtract" is fasting. Fasting is a period of abstention or self-denial. We usually think of fasting in terms of food and that is its primary manifestation. But fasting teaches you to deny self. It teaches you to put your desires on the backburner. It is an exercise not in self-discipline as much as in self-denial. Fasting puts things into context: do I hunger and thirst more for God or for lunch? There is a power that comes from real Biblical fasting.

The real purpose of Lenten practices is to teach Christians self-denial. It comes from a deep down yearning to deny self and remind yourself that in order to follow Christ you must take up the cross. I think Lent is a good and proper exercise for Christians as long as we don't make it a test of spirituality.

The third is **MULTIPLY**. I already mentioned evangelism, but let me mention it again. God's will is that believers be spiritually fertile. In John 15:8, Jesus says, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." He wants to be fruitful. He wants us to share our faith, to share how great and good Jesus is. Do you know what the hardest part of evangelism is? It's crossing the room, opening your mouth. It's that little fear of being thought foolish. My advice: just go for it! 1 Corinthians 4:10 says we're fools for Christ anyway!

The last is **DIVIDE**. Divide your time and resources and give a nice chunk to God and to the needs of people.

Rick Warren says, "I'm convinced that to be spiritually and emotionally healthy and

balanced, that everybody needs some form of service on at least a weekly basis, where they voluntarily give themselves away without receiving any personal benefit in return."

You have 168 hours this next week. God doesn't want you to spend them all on yourself.

The world says, "Live for you. Get all you can." And Jesus Christ says the exact opposite -- "Live for others. Give all you can." The world says, "Who wants to burden yourself with others and their problems." Jesus says, "Bear one another's burden." We do that with the way we treat the poor, with the time we give, with the money we give. That "dividing" does a beautiful thing is in, and reaches into our hearts and makes us more Christlike.

There is no better way to teach you self-denial than to serve and to put others ahead of your self. Isn't that what Jesus did for you? I doubt Jesus desired to be crucified, but he denied self and went to the cross for you. Now he asks you to do the same for others.

I want to be like Simon of Cyrene. When Jesus comes along, He calls me to come alongside and calls me to help, it may be inconvenient. It may be dirty. It may hurt. It may cost me something. It may embarrass me. But I will not let Him carry it alone. Will you as well step up and carry the cross as well?

END
PRAYER