After one hard announcement, another one was made that was just as hard. The Lord Jesus told His disciples that He must be put to death one day. Now He tells them that it will happen to them in the same way that it will happen to Him. This second announcement came about naturally because of the way in which the first one had been received. Peter had said, “This shall never happen to You” (Mt. 16:22), and all of the disciples felt the same way. The essence of Jesus’ reply was, “You really believe this? I am telling you that not only will I, your Master, be crucified - for this will be the way in which I die - but you who faithfully follow Me will most certainly have your crosses to bear. ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me’”(Mt. 16: 24).

The first announcement was made only to the Twelve; the second was not. We can assume this from the general words used in the announcement. But even more convincing is the fact that we have been informed by Mark and Luke that before making it, Jesus called the people and His disciples to Him and spoke so all could hear (Mk. 8:34; Lk. 9:23). Therefore, the doctrine taught here is for all Christians in all ages. It is not only for Apostles, but for the most humble disciples; not only for priests or preachers, but for the laity as well; not only for monks living in cloisters, but for people living and working in the secular world. By this announcement, the King and Head of the church proclaims a universal law which is binding on all His subjects: *all who are in fellowship with Him are required to bear a cross.*

We are not told how the second announcement was received by those who heard it, not even by the Twelve. However, we can assume that to Peter and his fellow disciples, it did not sound as harsh as the first. Theoretically, it seemed more acceptable. Experience might teach them that no matter how unpleasant crosses are to flesh and blood, they could be expected by virtually every person. But what did Christ the Son of God have to do with crosses? Shouldn’t He be exempt from the sufferings and insults of ordinary mortals? If not, what advantage did His divine Sonship give Him? In short, the difficulty this announcement had for the Twelve was this: not that the servant was no better than the Master, but that the Master was no better than the servant.

Our confusion, on the other hand, is likely to be just the opposite. Because we are familiar with
the doctrine that Jesus died on the cross in our place, we are inclined to wonder why we should bear a cross. If He suffered for us vicariously, why do we need to suffer also? We need to be reminded that Christ's sufferings, while in some ways unique, are in other ways common to all those in whom His Spirit abides. While His death alone remains redemptive, His suffering for righteousness' sake is the highest example of a universal law. This law maintains that all who truly live a godly life must suffer hardship in a false, evil world. It can be clearly observed that Jesus used a very effective method of keeping this truth prominently before the minds of His followers in all ages. He emphasized it the first time He announced He was going to die. In fact, he gave it as the first lesson on the doctrine of His death, the first of four which are found in the Gospels (see also Mt. 17:22-23; 20:17-19; Lk. 18:31-34). By stating this truth, in effect He was declaring that only those who were willing to be crucified with Him would be saved by His death. Furthermore, a person's willingness to bear a cross was indispensable to the right understanding of the doctrine of salvation through Him. It is as if there were a door to a school where the mystery of redemption was being taught, and above that door He had inscribed these words: Let no man enter here who is unwilling to deny himself and take up his cross.

The Meaning of the Cross

In this great law of discipleship, the cross signifies not only the external penalty of death but all troubles that come to those who earnestly try to live like Jesus lived in this world and who receive the consequences for living like He did. The afflictions of the righteous are many and varied. They differ in kind and in degree, according to times and circumstances, and the callings and positions of each individual. Jesus, the Righteous One, died not only at the hands of unjust people; He died for them. The appointed cup was filled with all the possible ingredients of shame and pain, mingled together with the highest degree of bitterness. Many of His most honored servants have come very close to their Master in the manner and measure of their afflictions for His sake. They have certainly drunk of His cup and have been baptized with His bloody baptism. But for most Christians, the hardships they endure are ordinarily less severe. The cross they have to bear is less heavy. For one, the cross may be the libel of lying lips, which speak horrible things against the righteous and do it with pride and contempt. Another may not reach the much-worshiped idol of success in life, which is so often reached by ungodly means. These means are not available for the person who has a conscience. A third person may experience isolation and loneliness in the middle of unfriendly, unsympathetic neighbors who do not live soberly, righteously, and godly and are not loving to those who do live that way.

The cross, therefore, is not the same for all. But there is a cross of some shape for all true disciples. This is implied in the words, “If any one wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross” (Mt. 16:24). The plain meaning of these words is this: no one can follow Jesus on any other terms. And no matter how clearly this doctrine is taught in the Gospel, spurious Christians are unwilling to believe it and are determined to deny it. They take the edge off their Lord's statement by explaining that it applies only to certain critical times. They are glad
these times are different from their own. Or, they say, if it has some reference to every age in history, it only applies to those who play a prominent role in leadership, those who are pioneers in progress, or prophets who denounce the sins of the age and who speak messages that are not welcomed. The latter (being a prophet) was a proverbially dangerous occupation, as is shown by the Greek poet, Euripides, who said, “Apollo alone should prophesy, for he fears nobody.” True Christians maintain that all who decide to live godly in Christ Jesus must suffer. But the counterfeit Christian believes his view of the wickedness of the world is too gloomy and somber. Or, he believes it presents too high and harsh a view of the Christian life. In his view, the righteousness which involves a cross is foolishness and fanaticism. He believes those who hold these views are speaking when they really should be silent; that they are meddling in things that are of no concern to anyone. In a word, he thinks these believers are overly righteous. These kinds of thoughts, whether expressed or unexpressed, are sure to be widespread when making a profession of faith is the popular thing to do. It is a well-understood fact that faith involves a cross. It is also a fact that Christ was crucified just because He was righteous. These truths are understood by a minority of Christians who are suffering, like those who lived during the early years of the Christian faith. But in peaceful and prosperous times, people lose sight of them. During those times, it is common to find many who hold sound views of the cross that Christ died on for them. But these same people are sadly ignorant concerning the cross they have to bear because they are in fellowship with Him. They are determined to know nothing about this cross. They cannot even comprehend what it means, or from whence it can come. If they only had the true spirit of self-denial that was required by Christ of the disciples, they might find their crosses in their daily lives, in their businesses, in their homes - perhaps even in their own hearts. Then they would have no need to seek for them all over the world or to manufacture crosses out of their own strict self-denial.

Three Reasons for the Law of the Cross

Jesus added three reasons to the law of the cross. They were designed to make obeying it easier by showing the disciples that when they obey this stern requirement, they are, in fact, looking after their own interests. Each reason is introduced by the word, “for.”

The first reason: “For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it” (Mt. 16:25). In this startling paradox, the word “life” has a double meaning. In the first part of each sentence, it means natural life, with all the additional things that make it pleasant and enjoyable. In the second part of both sentences, it means the spiritual life of a renewed soul. This deep, rich saying may therefore be expanded and paraphrased as follows: Whoever will save (make it his top priority to save or preserve) his natural life and his worldly well-being will lose the higher life - the real life. And whoever is willing to lose his natural life for My sake will find the true eternal life. According to this statement, we must lose something. It is not possible to live without sacrifice of some kind. The only question is what will be sacrificed - the lower or the higher life, physical happiness or spiritual blessedness. If we choose the higher,
we must be prepared to deny ourselves and take up our cross, even though the actual amount of the loss we are called to bear may be small. “Godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” (I Tim. 4:8b). If, on the other hand, we choose the lower and risk everything to have it, we must inevitably lose the higher. The soul’s life and all the imperishable qualities of the soul - righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness (I Tim. 6:11) - are the price we pay for loving the world and what it has to offer.

This price is too great. This is the next thing that Jesus told those who were listening to Him and was the second persuasive argument for cross-bearing. “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?” (Mt. 16:26). These two questions set forth the incomparable value of the soul. Look at both sides like you would a commercial transaction. The soul, or life, in the true sense of the word, is too costly a price to pay for the whole world, not to mention the cost for even a small portion of it which comes to any one individual. The one who gains the world at such a cost has lost the bargain. On the other hand, the whole world is too small a price - utterly inadequate - to pay for the ransom of the soul once it is lost. What will a man give in exchange for the priceless soul he has foolishly bartered away? “With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (Mi. 6:6-7). No! O man; not any of these things, nor anything else you may have to give. Not any of your merchandise. Not a million dollars. You cannot buy back your soul which you have traded for the world, even with all that you have of the world. For sure, the redemption of the soul is precious. It cannot be delivered from the bondage of sin by things that are corruptible, like silver and gold. Trying to purchase pardon and peace and life in this way can only make your case more hopeless and add to your condemnation.

The appeal which is contained in these solemn questions comes home with irresistible force to all who have the mind of Christ. They feel there is nothing that can be compared in value to having a “saved soul.” However, everyone does not think this way. Masses of people consider their souls to be of little value. Judas sold his soul for thirty pieces of silver. And there are probably many who think of themselves better than he, yet would part with their souls for the most meager worldly advantage. The great ambition of millions of people is to be happy rather than to be blessed by being saved, noble-minded, and sanctified. “Who will show us any good?” is what the masses say. “Give us health, wealth, houses, lands, honors; we do not care about righteousness (either imputed or personal), a clear conscience filled with peace, or joy in the Holy Spirit. These may be good to have in their own way and, if we could have them along with the other things without trouble or sacrifice, it would be good. But we cannot agree to deny ourselves any pleasure, nor will we voluntarily endure any hardship.”

The third argument in favor of cross-bearing is drawn from the second coming of Christ.
“For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and will then recompense every man according to his deeds” (Mt. 16:27). These words suggest a contrast between the present and the future state of the speaker (Jesus). They also imply a promise of a corresponding contrast between the present and the future for His faithful followers. Now Jesus is the Son of Man, destined before long to be crucified in Jerusalem. At the end of time, He will appear having the obvious glory of Messiah, attended with a mighty host of angels - His reward for enduring the cross and despising the shame. Then He will reward every man according to the way he has lived his life. To the cross-bearers, He will give a crown of righteousness. To those who avoided the cross, He will assign shame and everlasting contempt. This is stern doctrine. It is distasteful to the modern mind for various reasons, especially two: (1) because it gives us alternatives for where we will go after death; and (2) because its intent is to spread heroic virtue in people by offering them the hope of reward in heaven, rather than have them believe that virtue alone is its own reward. Consider the first one. The alternatives presented for life after the grave is certainly a great mystery as well as a burden to the human spirit. But isn’t it true that an alternative is involved in any sincere doctrine of morality or of human freedom and responsibility? As to the second reason, Christians do not need to be afraid that they are using Christ for their own ends if they seek to become virtuous. There is no offensiveness or impurity in the virtue which is sustained by a person having the hope of eternal life. That hope is not selfishness, but rather self-consistency. It is simply believing in the reality of the kingdom for which you labor and suffer. Of course, this involves the reality of each Christian’s personal relationship with Jesus Christ, including your own. Such faith is necessary to heroism. For who would fight and suffer for a dream? What patriot would risk his life for his country’s cause who did not hope for the restoration of her independence? And who but an intellectual would say that the purity of his patriotism was tarnished because he had hope for himself as an individual citizen as well as hope for the whole nation. It is equally necessary that a Christian believe in the kingdom of glory, and equally natural and proper that he should cherish the hope of a personal share in its honors and joys. Where such faith and hope are lacking, very little Christian heroism will be found. One of the Church Fathers, Tertullian, said, “There is no certain work where there is an uncertain reward.” People cannot be heroes if they are in doubt or despair. They cannot struggle for perfection and a divine kingdom if they are skeptical about whether these things are anything more than devout imaginations or unrealized ideals. In such a mood, they will take things easy and make secular happiness their main concern.