

Buzz King  
[buzz@BuzzKing.com](mailto:buzz@BuzzKing.com)  
BuzzKing.com  
303 437 7419

**Matthew 16:24, NLT.**

*<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me.*

**Take up your cross and embrace the bad.**

Today, when aspiring pastors are being trained in the seminary, we are urged to be positive, upbeat, and to make people feel good about going to church. Don't be negative, don't chastise, don't talk about bad stuff like confronting one's hatred, bitterness, envy, and anger, and our lust for money. There is a famous TV preacher named Joel Osteen, who has earned vast sums of money promising people in his warehouse-sized church that if they believe in Christ, they will be happy, wealthy, successful, satisfied, and that life will be nothing but an uplifting, self-indulgent experience. The problem is that the Bible does not say this – and Jesus did not promise this. One of the greatest – and many theologians say the absolute greatest – teachings of Christianity is rather negative. Consider this passage from the Gospel of Matthew, from Chapter 16, where Jesus predicts that he will be murdered:

*<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. <sup>25</sup> If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it.*

*<sup>26</sup> And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul? <sup>27</sup> For the Son of Man will come with his angels in the glory of his Father and will judge all people according to their deeds. <sup>28</sup> And I tell you the truth, some standing here right now will not die before they see the Son of Man coming in his Kingdom.”*

In Christian theology it's called “*taking up your cross*”. Not Jesus', but yours. We all know that Jesus said this, and we all know that we must bear crosses in our lives. When Jesus speaks of life, he is speaking of both physical and spiritual life in a very nuanced way, saying that if we give up our selfish human lives and follow him, we will not gain everything we could ask for – but we will live for all of eternity. He is telling us that we should be far more concerned with our individual final judgements than with the pleasures of this world. By the way, the last verse, that many who are with him at that moment will see the Son of Man coming into his Kingdom does not mean that the world was about to end – which, of course, it did not – but rather, it refers to the transfiguration of Christ, which appears in the next scene in Matthew. Despite this passage telling us that we will suffer in life if we choose to follow Christ, we all accept this as part of being a believer.

Here is perhaps a more disturbing passage about the negative side of being a follower of Christ and walking in his footsteps, from Luke's Gospel, Chapter 14:

*<sup>25</sup> A large crowd was following Jesus. He turned around and said to them, <sup>26</sup> “If you want to be my disciple, you must, by comparison, hate everyone else—your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even your own life.*

*Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple. <sup>27</sup> And if you do not carry your own cross and follow me, you cannot be my disciple.*

This also talks about carrying our own crosses as believers. But it says that if we want to be a disciple of Jesus, we must, by comparison, hate everyone else – our fathers and mothers, wives, children, brothers, and sisters. We must hate even our own earthly lives. This is a very strong statement. I'm going to read some more:

*<sup>28</sup> "But don't begin until you count the cost. For who would begin construction of a building without first calculating the cost to see if there is enough money to finish it? <sup>29</sup> Otherwise, you might complete only the foundation before running out of money, and then everyone would laugh at you. <sup>30</sup> They would say, 'There's the person who started that building and couldn't afford to finish it!'*

*<sup>31</sup> "Or what king would go to war against another king without first sitting down with his counselors to discuss whether his army of 10,000 could defeat the 20,000 soldiers marching against him? <sup>32</sup> And if he can't, he will send a delegation to discuss terms of peace while the enemy is still far away. <sup>33</sup> So you cannot become my disciple without giving up everything you own.*

Jesus is offering a warning. If you make the decision to follow him, you need to stop and think about the true cost of doing so. He's telling us that the cost is great. When you decide to live like Jesus, you need to ask yourself if you would rather make an offering of peace to your enemy than risk having your army slaughtered. As genuine, non-hypocritical people of faith, we need to reprioritize our lives. We need to be prepared to truly sacrifice ourselves for others.

Let's try one of the Beatitudes, delivered by Jesus near the beginning of his massive, extremely historically impactful Sermon on the Mount in Matthew:

<sup>10</sup> *God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right,  
for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.*

The Beatitudes are typical ancient semitic, Jewish writing. They are poetic to the point of reflecting a bit of hyperbole, which is deliberate, artistic exaggeration.

It's also true that in our passage from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus does not want us to literally hate our parents or siblings. In the Beatitudes, he does not mean that if we get some authority or society angry at us for saying the right thing, we are going to be handed the Kingdom of God. Jesus' point is that we must, from the start of our active Christian lives, be ready to accept denial in life, to not have the things we want. Self-denial is a core aspect of a Christian life, not just something that might happen. Remember the words of Paul to the believers in Rome:

*And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him.*

Our society tells us to deny ourselves nothing, that whatever is important to us, that we have every right to get it. When someone disagrees with us, our society gives us the right to cancel them, to declare them as evil. Even worse, if something in God's teaching runs contrary to what we want in life, then we need to reengineer, reinterpret the Bible to allow us to do or get whatever we want. People no longer believe that we must deny ourselves so that others can thrive.

Let me make one thing clear: self-denial, the desire to always live by God's laws and not the permissive, do anything-you-want principles of modern society, doesn't come into play only when we face an occasional, isolated, melodramatic situation in life. It's not that someday, we might find ourselves having to offer up a kidney to a lifelong enemy of ours who happens to have kidney disease. Living the negative side of being a Christian is an ongoing, incremental, daily aspect of our lives, something that is with us nonstop. Consider what the author of Hebrews has to say at the very beginning of Chapter 12:

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us.<sup>2</sup> We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame.*

We are always being watched by society. If we profess to be believers, to truly be walking in the footsteps of Jesus, then we'd better act that way – every day. We need to avoid the frequent minor sins, the acts of selfishness and anger that other people think of as their earthly right. We must see life as an endurance race, not a sprint. We are also like greyhounds following a rabbit: we are Christians following Christ. We endure the pains of life, as well as the shame that society throws at us for being believers – because we know that we have joy waiting for us at the end of that very long race, and because a life of faith is always joyful.

The Book of Hebrews is called a letter but is structured like an essay. Even just after it was written, the author's identity was unknown. When the Bible was being compiled in the 300's, people argued that Paul must have written it in order to get it accepted into the Bible. We do know, however, that Paul wrote the two letters to the believers in Corinth. Here is something Paul wrote in Chapter 9 of 1 Corinthians. He, too, uses the running-a-race metaphor:

*<sup>24</sup> Don't you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win! <sup>25</sup> All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize.*

A runner in a race knows, when the starter pistol is fired, that only one person is going to win. (I assume that there were guns in Paul's time.) But that runner, in his mad desire to win, is only going to gain something temporal and temporary. We run the race of self-denial for a far greater prize, one that is eternal. Again, we run it so that we can spend every day of our lives and all of eternity in the Kingdom of God. Most people today run only for the things of this world.

Let us not forget that Jesus made it very clear that he is asking a lot from us. The life of a Christian is not meant to be a trivial, easy going one. Here is something from the Gospel of Mark, where Jesus predicts his death:

*<sup>32</sup> They were now on the way up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. The disciples were filled with awe, and the people following behind were overwhelmed with fear. Taking the twelve disciples aside, Jesus once more began*

*to describe everything that was about to happen to him.* <sup>33</sup> *“Listen,” he said, “we’re going up to Jerusalem, where the Son of Man will be betrayed to the leading priests and the teachers of religious law. They will sentence him to die and hand him over to the Romans.* <sup>34</sup> *They will mock him, spit on him, flog him with a whip, and kill him, but after three days he will rise again.”*

Jesus is walking uphill to Jerusalem. The Apostles are behind him. Behind them is a crowd of followers, the very first Christians, although they did not use that term, of course. They are in awe of Jesus. But they are also said to be in fear. This is easily misinterpreted by modern readers. These people did not know that Jesus was going to be arrested, accused of sacrilegious acts, and then brutalized and crucified. Even though Jesus is about to tell the Apostles that all of this will happen, this “fear” that the early followers of Christ felt is a biblical fear. It means that they know that this is no ordinary man, no wandering preacher with good advice. They know they are in the presence of someone sent by God. We know that we are walking in the footsteps of the person who has engineered the New Covenant. We are following behind – with incredible joy – the person who connects us directly to God. This makes the life of a Christian a radiant life.

I’ve always loved this metaphor of the life of a Christian being a marathon, a long race, one that lasts our entire life. When I was young, I was a runner. I was never competitive. I was never in any organized events, never won any trophies or ribbons. I just loved to run. In high school and college, even though I wasn’t a

member of the team, I would train with the cross-country runners. I loved moving rapidly over irregular terrain, fighting to maintain my footing as I was pushing myself to the limits. It was hard to keep up with runners who were better than me. In high school, one of the places we used to run through was a cemetery near our school. Looking back, it was probably disrespectful. The graveyard was on a rocky hillside: Southern California is a desert. We would wind between gravestones, hopping over some of them, dodging rocks, learning to plant our feet on whatever solid ground we could find. I don't know what was going on in the minds of the other boys, but I did think about those bodies below us. Every time I put a foot down, it was likely to be on the face or the belly of someone who had passed away long ago. The reason I liked the idea was because it tied me to eternity. I was a deep believer as a kid. I accepted the good and the bad of living a life of faith. My reward back then, in my mind though, was sadly limited: I thought that I was doing it because one day, when I was in the same place as the people over whom I was running, I would also be in Heaven. Now, though, I know that there is a better reason to embrace the life of a Christian, including the bad stuff. It's because, although I fail at it very frequently, I am trying to live like Christ. I want to do what he did. I want to be present for others even when it means denying myself some time for myself. I want to forgive, to



have empathy, to give. The life of a follower is sometimes negative from an earthly perspective. But it is incredibly good when viewed from the perspective of someone running that race in the Kingdom of God.

Here is perhaps the most compelling reason to take up your cross and embrace the bad. Consider Paul's letter to the Romans, from Chapter 5:

*<sup>3</sup>We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. <sup>4</sup>And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. <sup>5</sup>And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.*

Paul is not saying that God sends us suffering to toughen us up. God is not making Marines out of us. Paul is saying that life has suffering in it. But there are positive sides to going through bad times. Difficulties will – if we have the perspective of a follower of Christ and not that of a selfish, angry person – strengthen our will, our character, and our hope. This is because we know God and we know that God loves us. God, in fact, has filled us with the Holy Spirit to ensure that we will come out of our struggles better off than before it all began.

Now Consider the homily or sermon – and it is not a letter - written by James, the younger brother of Jesus Christ, from Chapter 1:

*<sup>2</sup>Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. <sup>3</sup>For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. <sup>4</sup>So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.*

James is giving advice to people who are struggling to live Christian lives while surrounded by evil. In the ancient world, this sort of homily was called an exhortation. James, along with Peter, was a leader of the Jerusalem church. He's addressing people who are poor for the most part, many of whom had fled Jerusalem because of persecution. He is telling us that bad times are an opportunity to find joy – because our faith is like the body of an athlete, something that can be built up, that can have its endurance developed. The closer we get to being fully developed, the closer we are to spiritual perfection. Indeed, when we willingly take up the cross and embrace the bad that confronts us in life, the Holy Spirit takes charge and draws us closer to perfection, closer to being a person of faith who walks through the Kingdom in the footsteps of Jesus. And there is no better way to follow our Lord's footsteps than to emulate his entire purpose in living a human life. Indeed, like him, we sacrifice ourselves in order to allow others to find peace, sanctuary, and hope. Please pray with me.

*God, please help me buy the entire package. Let me not be a Christian who only wants the things that Joel Osteen sells. Help me to want all of it. Let me take up my cross and embrace the bad. Let me truly walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, the man who is God – and who runs ahead of me, every step of my life.*

*Amen.*