

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? ³⁷ Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

DID GOD REALLY SAY...CHRISTIANS WILL BE RICH AND SUCCESSFUL?

My guess is that most of you here this morning are of the opinion that God didn’t really say “Christians will be rich and successful.” I say that because most of you who have been involved in this church have become well acquainted with the Bible, perhaps over some years. Many of you read the Bible regularly, even daily. Many of you go to Sunday School or to Bible Class— probably the best way to get well-acquainted with what God really says. You have heard God’s voice through the pages of Scripture.

But there are other voices that we hear. We have an inner voice that says something like, *“God says he’ll bless his people...and I’m ‘his people.’ I go to church most Sundays, I try to keep the commandments, I say my prayers. I try to raise my kids right. I give a nice offering to God week after week. I am God’s child. Why doesn’t God bless me more? Why am I struggling to make ends meet? Why does it always seem so tight?”* That inner voice of ours really accuses God of being unfair...or at least inattentive.

But it also could be that you haven’t been around church and God’s Word your whole life, maybe not very long at all. It could be that you’ve thought that maybe it works that way—that if we live the way God wants us to, like the Bible says, it makes sense that he would give blessings. You may have clicked through channels on TV and run across the most popular preacher on the planet who says things like this: *“God wants us to prosper financially, to have plenty of money, to fulfill the destiny He has laid out for us.”* (Joel Osteen wrote this to his flock in a 2005 letter.)

Really, any one of us, no matter the depth or length of our faith in Christ, might think that God would or should give an extra measure of worldly blessing to his children. Or that since we are relying on God and living for him...and praying, because we do pray too...the things we do ought to be successful.

It’s a much better idea to look at what Jesus actually says rather than rely on our reason or the false teachings of TV’s prosperity preachers like Joel Osteen (who has no theological training by the way) or similarly-credentialed Joyce Meyers—she of the \$10 million personal jet and this preaching: *“The whole Bible really has one message: ‘Obey me and do what I tell you to do, and you’ll be blessed.’”* And *“If you stay in your faith, you are going to get paid.”*

You heard what Jesus said, **“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.** Jesus is talking about what it is like to be a Christian, a disciple, someone who believes in and follows Jesus. The Savior says that if anyone wants to be that, this is what that person must do: deny himself. I want you to think about what it means to deny someone. A street punk comes up to you on the sidewalk, takes his hand (which he’s holding like a gun), sticks it under his shirt and says, “Give me your wallet!” You’re not afraid because you saw his finger and you deny him: “No!” The date was awkward and you don’t really see there being a second one, so when he goes in for the good night kiss at the door, you quickly side step it and say you had a nice time—denied!

This is what Christians MUST do—to themselves! That’s what Jesus said. Instead of saying “Yes” to everything YOU want, you must say “No” to many things. YOU must deny YOU! YOU must say “no” to YOU! Whatever tempting thing comes calling that does not go along with God and his Word, you must deny—no matter how badly you want it.

Jesus also says that you must take up your cross. Okay this is familiar language, isn’t it. This makes me think of Jesus and his cross. I remember that Jesus was forced to carry his own cross on the way to Calvary where he hung on that very cross—nailed to it, with thorns pressed into his scalp and a back shredded and bloody pressed against the wood of it. Once you hear about that, you can’t forget it—you don’t even have to see the visual in a movie like “The Passion of the Christ.” But what about ME taking up MY cross? This isn’t just handling your problems or a willingness to live with your troubles. Non-Christians can do *that*. The person that denies himself will take up his cross, which means to bear the burden that comes because of your new relationship with Jesus, the trouble that comes because you are connected with the Savior.

You know the kind of thing. You don’t quite fit in with certain people because they know you’re a Christian. You like them, but their language doesn’t match yours and neither does their lifestyle. Your presence as Christ’s light in the world makes them uncomfortable. You could change your language and what you do to keep the friendship, but you don’t. It’s a cross you bear.

Your kid is a really good soccer player but being on the travelling team means being gone on Sunday mornings for a few months. You’re not willing to miss Sunday School, Confirmation Class, Adult Bible Study and worship, so the family decision is not to do that. The team and other parents are disappointed and think you’re weird for denying your child that opportunity and yourself some proud-parent moments. It’s a cross you bear.

You pass up the opportunity for grand vacations or newer cars that you would like to have and could really have if you and your family didn’t give \$5,000 in offerings each year because you feel that represents an appropriate percentage of your \$50,000 income. You deny yourself those things because of your love for Christ and his salvation given to you. It’s a cross you bear.

So the picture painted for us here is that of Jesus, carrying the cross, loaded with the weight of every person’s sin and as he walks along, there in a procession behind him are his followers, each bearing the weight of their personal crosses. Followers of Christ take up their crosses willingly and follow him.

Actually, a little grammar technicality tells us that those who want to be disciples of Jesus are to “be following” Jesus. That means that this is not something we do once or even once in a while. This is a continual way of life for the person who trusts in Christ—they are *always* denying themselves, *always* taking up their crosses and *always* following him.

Jesus then explains the reason he says that—because **whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it**. You and I find both a warning and a promise here! The warning is this—if what you want is to guard and keep this earthly life and the things it offers, you will lose your life. And he’s talking about your eternal life. The promise is this—if you are willing to lose your life in this world and all that it offers BECAUSE OF CHRIST, then your eternal life will be kept safe and preserved. Taking up your cross, the thing that you suffer because of your faith, the thing that is *for* Jesus and *for* the gospel—that is what Jesus is talking about. That is what the Christian life looks like. That’s what faith looks like.

Think about it—if the first choice is made the gain that comes from living for yourself is temporary and the loss in doing so is eternal. BUT if we live for Christ and the gospel, the loss is minor and temporary but the gain is enormous and eternal! That’s what Jesus says...and then he takes it to the limit! **What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?** What good is it if

a person gains ALL that the world has to offer—ALL the wealth, ALL the power, ALL the pleasure, ALL the glory, ALL the success, ALL the enjoyments, ALL the achievements, ALL satisfactions? We know—and Jesus did too—that this isn't possible. But IF it was and IF a person could get all that, what good would it do them? What good would it do them if they lost their soul? No, let's make this personal as Jesus intended it: What good would it do YOU if YOU gained all the riches and successes of this life but lost your soul?

And you realize, don't you, that the devil doesn't even have to offer you ALL that the world has to give? All he has to do is offer you a little piece of it and you're tempted to start down the path that leads to trading it in for your eternal life in heaven. You've done it and so have I. A little affection, a little attention, and you'll trade your body, the temple of the Holy Spirit for it. A little money and you'll compromise your values. A little recognition and praise is yours as you cheat on the test or take the credit someone else deserves for their work.

We're willing to risk our soul, our eternal life, for just a little chunk of the world. And we think it's a one-time thing or it's not a big deal...but it turns out that it's not benign. Instead it can become a faith-cancer that takes hold, leading to a pattern of living for self and not for Christ, which is not a life of faith but the path to hell, a forfeiting of the soul. And we may have even got our start by listening to someone who claims to represent God when they tell us that God wants the world for us, that good Christians will be rich and successful because that's what God wants for us.

Jesus, the Master Teacher, makes the answer to his question so obvious—it does a person no good to gain riches and success or anything else but lose his or her soul. There is nothing of comparable value to the soul. Nothing can be given in exchange for a soul. You can't argue with Jesus on this. Even the most foolish person wouldn't try.

And how difficult is it to hear Jesus say that on the Last Day, he will be ashamed of the person who acted ashamed of him as they lived in this world? We know the times we haven't represented Jesus properly. We have not stood up for what he says. We may have even mocked something he says because we didn't like it—and that caused difficulties of faith for someone else. We have not expressed the hope that we have in Jesus to those who have asked or who have no hope of their own. Perfect representatives of our Lord who deserve to have Jesus represent us before the Heavenly Father on Judgment Day? I think not.

Our lives are not to be like that. Jesus says that we are to be denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following him. But that just doesn't sound as glamorous as being rich and successful!

Honestly, this is a tough piece of Scripture. These are tough words of Jesus. There's a lot of warning here and it is so easy to see how we just have not done what Jesus is looking for. That may lead us to conclude that we are going to lose our eternal life, that we have forfeited our soul, that we will find Jesus ashamed of us when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels and we're standing one-on-one before him.

But here's the thing. It's not us denying ourselves that gains God's favor. It was Jesus saying no to himself and to all that was rightly his as true God so that he could come into this world as a human being, to save human beings—that won God's favor for us.

It's not us bearing our crosses that earns God's love and eternal life. It was Jesus bearing our sins on HIS cross that earned his Father's love for us and opened up heaven so that we can one day be with him.

It's not our following him that propels us down the path to eternal life. It was Jesus following his Father's plan to redeem us from sin and open the gates of heaven for us.

It's not our living unashamedly that takes away the fear of meeting our maker at The End. It was Jesus having no cause to be ashamed before God the Father because he lived sinlessly for us.

Though the way we live is important to Jesus because it shows that we love him and have faith, the vital thing is the forgiveness of sins and promise of eternal life that Jesus won for us on the cross and on Easter morning. Do you want to be rich? You ARE rich—with forgiveness from Christ! Do you want to have success? You have success—because Christ has overcome sin, death and the devil and he's given that success to you—it is yours!

God never said that Christians will be rich and successful—not the way the world thinks of it. And anyone who tells you that is a liar. The truth is that God has given you riches and success that we know could otherwise never have been ours. All the times you haven't done the things Jesus expresses here—all forgiven, never to come back to haunt you, not even when you stand face to face with Jesus on the Last Day.

And does a crown of glory sound successful to you?! You wouldn't have it if Jesus didn't give that to you too, but the truth is that he has. It's yours. Christ's hard-earned success has been handed to you and you get to claim it as your own right now!

There is nothing better than following Christ. There is nothing more that you can have, nothing better that you can achieve. Instead of being concerned about worldly riches or success or anything else this life has to offer, revel in the riches and success of Christ which are now your very own by faith in him. Amen.