

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Psalm 25:1-7 August 20, 2017 at Victory of the Lamb.

Series: Take Up Your Cross

Today's Focus: In Youth

"The World Can Be Mean...so Learn and Lean!"

LEARN

That you can't do this all on your own

That you're not in this struggle alone

LEAN

On God's great mercy and love

On Christian mentors and friends

For many of you this is a familiar sight in your homes right now. Backpacks getting stuffed full like this one. My daughter Lydia is going into 7th grade and her backpack is stuffed full of things like many of yours are. Binders. Books. Chromebooks. School supplies. Her backpack is heavy!

Any of you still have school shopping to do? You've got a list of all kinds of things you need to have, right? Let me ask you this, did any of you find a little box to check off that said "heavy, painful cross" on that list? No? Not something you would expect to see on a school supplies list, right? If you saw that on your list your first reaction might be think, "I hope that's optional."

Yet in this series that we're starting today called *Take Up Your Cross* we're looking at the different crosses we carry in different seasons of life—in youth which we'll focus a little bit on today, in middle age, and finally in our golden years... because here's what Jesus said. You heard Pastor Bill read this just a few minutes ago. **"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me"** (Matthew 21:24).

In other words...every true follower of Jesus Christ has a cross to carry—not a literal wooden cross of course, but a metaphorical one. Our cross is a necessary consequence of identifying with Jesus who loved us so much that he came down from heaven, was crucified and died on the cross in our place for our sins. And we cannot forget that this was a necessary thing for him to do in order to save our souls from the punishment of hell. That's why Jesus rebuked Peter when he tried to dissuade Jesus from going to the cross. If Jesus had taken the easy way out, if he had pursued his own personal comfort instead of embracing the cross, we would be left to stand before God on our own. Without *his* cross, we would stand eternally condemned to hell and it would make no sense to carry our own cross. But Jesus willingly endured the suffering and death of the cross so that we could one day wear the crown of eternal life in heaven. He won the victory for you and me! This is why the message of Christianity is called the gospel—*the good news!*—and why it's worth it to follow Jesus even when life gets hard as we carry our cross. We get to go to heaven—all because of God's great mercy and love in Christ!

But we're not in heaven yet, are we? Blatant racism and terror attacks are just the tip of the iceberg. We live in a sinful world that is hostile to God. And so while we're here in this world, Jesus said that as his followers we will have to carry a cross. In other words, what Jesus actually said sounds very different

than the version of Christianity that is preached by many popular preachers who share a message that basically says the opposite... “God wants to remove all your pain. He wants you to be happy. If you can dream it, you can do it” and things like that. Except that Jesus said that following him will require taking up our cross! A cross is by definition something that will feel heavy, painful, and difficult at times. So what exactly is this cross that Jesus was talking about? As Jesus explained it, the essence of the cross in every stage of life is self-denial. **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”** (Matthew 21:24).

What is self-denial? It’s the struggle against what every single one of us wants by nature and you know what that is, right? It’s to be able to say and do whatever I want for reasons of my own choosing. It’s the struggle against what the world says the goal of life should be all about. The world today says the goal of life should be your own self-fulfillment. Find out whatever is going to make you feel fulfilled and pursue it. It’s all about you in other words—your uniqueness, your personal happiness without any regard for the commands of God. Don’t carry a cross. And...there’s a certain appeal in this, isn’t there?

But Jesus explained the foolishness of this alternative to cross bearing. He said that if you think you can lay down the cross of self-denial and simply trade it in for self-fulfillment...you’re gonna end up losing your soul. Even if you imagine that by laying down your cross you could exchange it for the care-free pleasures and instant gratification of the world, you wouldn’t actually get the world anyway but rather a counterfeit version of it. A world of unfulfillment and endless frustration like a bucket with holes in the bottom that you keep pouring water into wondering why it never fills up. So Jesus says, **“What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul”** (Matthew 21:26)?

In the last decade, researcher George Barna discovered that when push comes to shove, in our country, 79% of people will identify themselves as Christians. But what he also found is that only 18% of those same people said they would be willing to inconvenience themselves in any measurable way because of their attachment to Jesus Christ—making some sacrifice of their time, their money, what they want...in the name of Christ. Why? To use the words of Jesus...because they refuse to take up their cross and actually follow him. Many have tragically exchanged their immortal souls for the temporary pleasures and self-centered pursuits of the world. It’s an important question for all of us of every generation...friends, are you in danger of doing the same?

What makes things even harder for all of us too isn’t just that our sinful nature hates the idea of self-denial. But also the fact that the world mocks and ridicules the idea of self-denial, doesn’t it? The secular world scorns the idea of carrying a cross. We live in a world where, in our American culture, doctors immediately prescribe some kind of pill for just about every pain. Where the highest virtue is personal freedom without restraints and the ultimate goal is personal happiness without suffering. We value convenient things and places. (Nobody is going to go school shopping at an *inconvenience* store!) And so often the weight of the cross we carry as Christians is made heavier by the world around us, isn’t it?

This week I asked a question of some of the youth in our church and our youth leaders. I asked them, “What do you think is the biggest challenges that Christian teens are facing today?” And in every response there was some aspect of this answer: Remaining loyal to Jesus while avoiding the trap of trying to fit in just so that you don’t get made fun of for your faith.

So what I want to do with the rest of our time today is help all of you, and especially our youth, our teens, find some renewed cross carrying strength today. *The world can be mean...so learn and lean!*

Learn that you can't do this all on your own. But also learn that you're not in this struggle alone. And then lean. Lean on God's great mercy and love. Lean also on Christian mentors and friends. Here's what King David of Israel wrote in Psalm 25 and maybe think about how this might be a great prayer for the start of a new school year....

**¹ In you, LORD my God,
I put my trust.**

**² I trust in you;
do not let me be put to shame,
nor let my enemies triumph over me.**

**³ No one who hopes in you
will ever be put to shame,
but shame will come on those
who are treacherous without cause.**

**⁴ Show me your ways, LORD,
teach me your paths.**

**⁵ Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Savior,
and my hope is in you all day long.**

**⁶ Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love,
for they are from of old.**

**⁷ Do not remember the sins of my youth
and my rebellious ways;
according to your love remember me,
for you, LORD, are good.**

In this Psalm we learn that we can't carry our cross in life all on our own. You can't do it all on your own. Note that the internet wasn't invented yet and David didn't have a Snapchat or Instagram account, but he had detractors and haters nevertheless. He had people who didn't like him, who were jealous of him, who talked about him behind his back, who schemed against him, who hated the fact that he was trying to live out his faith, and so were out to get him. Sound familiar? Friends, that's the world. It can be really mean, can't it? So where did David turn? He knew he couldn't stand in his own strength. So he turned to God. He prayed. **In you, LORD my God, I put my trust... You are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.**

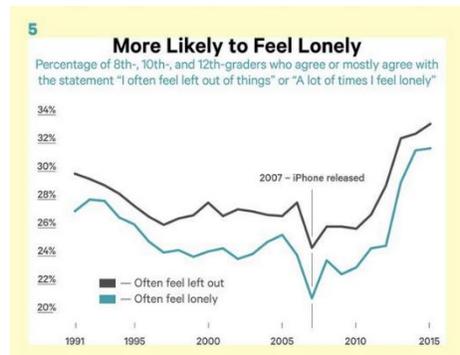
When he turned to God, David was then encouraged to take the long view of his life. This is important I think in youth to realize that what you're going through is a season of life. It may feel like an unbearably long season at times, but it will pass. And as David turned to God's Word for guidance he was reinforced in the truth that in God's ultimate plan for his life he would not be put to shame—no, not in the end, no matter what he was experiencing. When David turned to God he understood that the cross he was carrying in trying to follow God with integrity was temporary and that in the end he would exchange it for a crown of eternal glory. He understood that in the end it would be the mean, godless people of the

world who will be put to shame when they have to stand before God on judgment day and they have no shelter in their Savior.

At the same time David was very keenly aware of his own need for a Savior. He had a deep sense of personal shame and his own guilt. And let's be honest, the road to becoming an adult which winds through adolescence and our teenage years is often marked by this, isn't it? How many of you don't have some deep regrets from what you might call "the sins of your youth"?

So David prayed, **Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways. According to your love remember me, for you, LORD, are good.** Let's be honest again. During our youth, life can be really confusing. We all remember how there seemed to be no end to the temptations that we face going through adolescence and trying to find where we fit in the world, right? Temptations to lie, to cheat, to do whatever it takes to be popular, to compromise our sexual purity, to give in to peer pressure to drugs or alcohol as a means to find acceptance or escape the pressures of other people's expectations.

And in the process the devil tempts us to think, "If God really cared about me why does he let me feel so alone?" "Why shouldn't I just give in instead of tormenting myself with a struggle that I will lose anyway?" "There must be something wrong or weird with me because no one else seems to have my problems."



One of the ironies of youth especially today is that it is a time when you are usually the most connected to your friends and yet it's for many the loneliest time in their lives. We really need to consider the impact of living in our digital age when it comes to this. [Check this out {graph}](#). The iPhone which seems everywhere now was released just 10 years ago in 2007. Since that time more 8th grade, 10th, and 12th graders express feeling lonely than ever before. It should come as no surprise then that today's youth are experiencing higher rates of depression and anxiety than any other generation too.

But what this means is that so many young people don't realize that there are lots of people feeling the exact same way. And it often doesn't occur to a teenager that their pastor, or teacher, or parents understand their struggles at least to some extent because we've all been there—we've all struggled with the fiery and insistent passions of our changing hormones, with our desire to be popular and be liked, with the turmoil of trying to figure out where we fit in the world. And we've all made mistakes. My prayer is that our teens would learn that they're not in this struggle all alone. Though the world can be mean...learn and lean!

Lean on God's great mercy and love! This is the most important part of this message today. Because finally, why does God allow the cross into our lives? Well for one thing it's often God's way of getting our attention. I read a quote in a book this week that went like this: "Until these trials hit, most young people are blissfully ignorant of their need of a Savior and of his constant grace and mercy." I believe this was true for me. It wasn't until I was a teenager trying to navigate high school and college that the law that the pastor preached started to resonate and I realized how much I needed a Savior. That's why continuing to go to church throughout high school and college is so important. And there were those moments when under the weight of the cross I was tempted to despair and think, "How could God

possibility love me after I did that?” And “What would happen if other people found out about what I’m really like?” And what I would tell you if you came to me as your pastor with these questions is the same thing that a dear college professor/pastor once told me:

“So you think that God cannot love or forgive you? Consider this: He ruled over all of history so that you would be baptized and he adopted you there in baptism. He promised to be your dear Father because of Christ, even though he knew what you would do. He has ruled over all of history so that you would hear the message of forgiveness, and yes, even eat and drink the price of forgiveness in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Isn’t that more than enough evidence and proof that he loves you, even you, even now? No one will ever love you more than he has or than he does!”

I’ve always wondered how an old pastor could know so well know what was on my heart and how much I was struggling. But I realize now it was because no matter what of season of life you’re in...we all have more in common than we think. And we all have a constant need for the gospel of Jesus Christ. So lean on it. Lean on God’s great mercy and love in Christ! There you will find your comfort and your strength to carry your cross! And then finally lean on Christian mentors and friends.



The day before our church’s summer soccer Bible, our camp director Cassy called and said, “There’s a huge cross!” And I said, “What?! What do you mean?” She said, “Under the pavilion. Where all the kids are supposed to go, there’s a huge, heavy cross. What are we going to do?” So I drove over and here’s what we found {pic}. Not what you’d expect, right? Not at all. A huge inconvenience we all thought. This wasn’t our

plan. What we were going to do? Well it was clear that none of us could just pick it up and carry it away alone. We needed to work together. And we did. Together we took up our cross and moved it out of the way. It was a team effort.

Taking up your cross to follow Jesus can be the same way. It isn’t easy—especially in youth. That’s why you need to lean also on Christian mentors and friends who can lovingly listen and support you. And that’s why for our teens we have our Quest group that meets every Sunday night. It’s a group designed to help our youth find Christian mentors and friends, people who you can trust. People who will listen without judgment. People who will help you to learn and to lean on God. Did you notice when I read Psalm 25 how many times it says things like **4 Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths. 5 Guide me in your truth and teach me.** Are you humble enough to keep learning and leaning?

Because finally...everyone is equal under the cross. We’re all just fellow cross carriers learning together and helping each other follow the Savior who loved us all—who didn’t judge anyone on the basis of their skin color or profile pic, didn’t look down on anyone on the basis of their socio-economic status or family background, didn’t take into consideration how good they were at sports or music, or what political party they affiliated with. So friends, whether you’re going to school or heading out to work this week...don’t forget the cross. Christ’s cross first of all! Then yours. And when the world seems mean...learn and lean. Lean on God’s great mercy and love. Lean on Christian mentors and friends. Amen.