

# *A Spiritual Spring for the Week*

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Sermon Text: Luke 23:23-31

Sermon Title: "From Pew Sitter to Disciple" (The Supporting Cast of Lent: Simon of Cyrene)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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Simon of Cyrene is another character from the Bible that we may recognize, and yet he shows up for a moment and is gone. Like Barabbas, he plays a significant role in the suffering of Jesus Christ, but we don't hear much about him later on.

Thousands of worshippers descend on the city of Jerusalem, preparing themselves to celebrate one of the most sacred observances of the Jewish faith: Passover. Thousands of worshippers, who have the means to make it to Jerusalem, come to remember God's faithfulness to Moses and the people of Israel in helping them escape the slavery of Egypt so long ago.

There is a man by the name of Simon, who happens to be there too. He comes from Cyrene, which was a prominent city in the country of Libya across the Mediterranean Sea. We don't know where Simon is during the time of Jesus' sentencing: he could be in Pilate's court with the angry crowd or in another part of town. We know that Simon of Cyrene is somewhere in the city.

So this crowd of worshippers for the Passover is now fuming in front of Pilate. They want to see Jesus on a cross. Pilate doesn't need a city full of people gunning for him, so he satisfies the crowds and gives them what they want.

Jesus is flogged and generally humiliated, and then he is forced to carry his own means of capital punishment. All criminals are made to carry the very crosses they would soon be nailed or roped to. They are marched down lanes and streets lined with onlookers, screaming and kicking and spitting at them. This adds to the humiliation. Jesus receives a barrage of insults and hits, as he maneuvers the cross down the dirty, sometimes very narrow, lanes.

According to the Roman Catholic tradition, Jesus falls three times while carrying his cross. He falls the first time, and the Roman soldiers see that Jesus simply cannot go any farther. They decide to grab somebody from the crowd to carry the cross for him. They need a strong, healthy individual, and it doesn't take long to seize Simon of Cyrene, a guy who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Think about what could possibly be going on in the mind of Simon. He was just an anonymous person in the crowd of men and women, yelling and hitting at Jesus. He may not have been one of those yelling and

hitting, but he thought he was so well hidden that nobody would notice him. Jesus happens to fall nearby, and a Roman soldier just happens to point his spear at Simon, and command him to carry the so-called criminal's cross. If you or I were Simon, this is the last thing we would want to do. We wouldn't want to get involved. What does Jesus have to do with us, that now he have to do carry his burden?

And what a burden: it is the very form of capital punishment that the Romans used, just as the electric chair or lethal injections are used in the US today. Simon is forced to carry these things. Wouldn't people understand that he is not the criminal being punished here? They just might see the cross on his back and just start yelling and spitting and kicking him without care? Simon didn't come to Jerusalem for this. He came to celebrate the Passover, and that was all.

And think of the spiritual ramifications of carrying Jesus' cross. According to Deuteronomy 21, a criminal hanging on a tree is cursed. All who pass by the body will know that person is cursed by God.<sup>1</sup> Simon is carrying an object made of wood, just as a tree is; and this object will be used to hang somebody, namely Jesus; and so does this mean Simon is now cursed? Does it mean that, because he is helping Jesus, the Son of God, with his own execution, that

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Deuteronomy 21:22-23.

God will condemn Simon for the rest of his life? Simon did not come to the city for this. If we were in his shoes, we would be terrified and utterly ashamed.

A year or two before his death on a cross, Jesus talks to the crowds about carrying crosses. He says, “The one who does not take up his or her cross and follow after me is not worthy of me.”<sup>2</sup> It is an interesting statement, because the people he is speaking to may be thinking they need to take up a form of punishment handed out by the state. You see, we read the Bible already knowing what the cross is, and that it means victory over death in Jesus Christ. The people, who first hear Jesus say this, have a different idea: They hear him say that they must pick up an object of Roman execution, as though they are criminals, and follow Jesus. It is as though Jesus may say to us to pick up the electric chair or the lethal injection; but is this what Jesus is really saying? What does it mean to carry the cross and follow Christ?

William Barclay, a Scottish minister and professor says that carrying one’s cross means to “sacrifice personal ambition, the ease and the comfort that [we] might have enjoyed, the career that [we might have achieved],” laying aside dreams, realizing that the

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 10:38; also Luke 14:27.

“shining things” we strive for are not for us.<sup>3</sup> Simon of Cyrene is going about his business, hoping to worship the Lord in the Lord’s city during a high holy week – maybe he is there to conduct some business along the way – and all of that is interrupted when he takes a detour to watch Jesus carrying a cross through the streets. His ordinary life is interrupted, when Jesus falls before him and a Roman guard singles him out to be the next crossbearer. Simon does not plan any of this, but then he is not considering Jesus’ words, and how he must carry his cross in order to follow Jesus. Otherwise, his life has no meaning. He goes about life aimlessl.

From now on, Simon of Cyrene is not known as an anonymous traveler who worships God in God’s city. He is not known for his business savvy or work ethic. He is simply known as the crossbearer of the Savior of the world. When people see him, they know him for the sacrifice he made. They know him for the detour he took for the Savior, and to walk with him to his death.

It is the same with us. Jesus calls us to carry our crosses, which means he wants us to lay aside our ambitions in order to discover God’s ambitions. Christ wants us to put away all our plans to understand God’s plans for living, and follow them with God’s help.

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<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew: Volume 1*, 408.

There was an interview I watched of a young singer who told her interviewer that one must have goals, and the longing for things, and the desire to improve oneself. We could strive for those things without God, and then what do we have? We have an improved self, a lot of things, all our goals met, and God is nowhere to be found, because we've walk so far away from him. We are not worthy of Christ, if we think life is all about acquiring the "shining things." We follow our own paths, and we lose God, and then we lose ourselves.

Christ calls all Christians to take up their crosses. If we are to strive for things, they must be the things of God. If we want to improve ourselves, we watch how God is improving us through the righteousness of his Son. If we have goals, the first and foremost goal we should strive for is everlasting life with God. Heaven is our final destination and our ultimate prize. We take up our crosses and follow after Christ, and we walk with him to the end, and beyond.

Another minister and professor, Dale Bruner, says that it is important to see the cross as a gift. "A cross is not something one goes out to get; a cross is something that is given to one to accept."<sup>4</sup> Simon of Cyrene does not understand, but the task of carrying Jesus' cross through the city is a gift. The Roman

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<sup>4</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 1, The Christbook, Matthew 1-12*, 395.

guards force him to do it, but they don't realize that they are gift-givers. Jesus falls at a precise moment, and Simon of Cyrene just happens to be there, and Simon is told he must receive the cross for Jesus. In God's grand scheme of the world, Simon receives a gift, and whether he accepts it willingly or grudgingly, he will carry that gift. He will serve the Lord Jesus in the last hours of his life.

When we talk about taking up our crosses, we think of it as such drudgery. We roll our eyes and say out loud, "Do I really have to do this?" We fail to see that God is giving us a gift. It is a free offer to serve him by serving another person. It is a free offer to draw closer to God and to another person through our loving service.

It is a gift to get out of our pews and stand up from our seats, and fulfill the ministries that God entrusts us with. It is an honor for Christ to think so highly of us, and ask us to serve, and give us the ability and energy to serve.

We know how great the gift is, when we serve people at the Food Pantry on Thursday afternoons. Sure, we could be doing something else, but the cross we bear on a Thursday is God's gift that we can share with others; and people go home with food on the table, and we go home for our meals feeling good that somebody else isn't starving.

We know how great the gift is, when we make sandwiches for homeless people in the city. We drive up to a street corner and start handing out bags of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and apples and bottles of water, and those homeless people descend on us like pigeons in the park. It is a wonderful cross to bear to feed somebody for one meal of the day.

When we help a young person or one of our adult friends understand something about God that opens doors for them; when we help to carry some groceries from the store to the car for an elderly lady; when we show sympathy to a person who is having difficult times;... when we do these things, we accept our crosses, which might be heavy and burdensome at the time, but we accept them nonetheless, and give thanks to God for them. They are gifts God gives us in honor, in joy.

John Calvin has something to say, as well, about carrying the cross. He says that when we bear our crosses, we become companions to Christ.<sup>5</sup> Simon of Cyrene does not plan it this way, but when he is asked to carry a cross, he is invited to come into fellowship with Christ. He comes out of obscurity in the crowd, and he is right brought next to Christ in order to get to know him, to see his pain, to feel his agony. In

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<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: Volume XVI*, 472.

carrying the cross, Simon experiences a bit of what Jesus is experiencing, and together they share in the walk toward Golgotha, the place where Jesus will die.

As we move through life, we find we have a Companion by our side. We find we have Jesus guiding us, leading us, giving us strength when we need it, giving us rest when we need it. But as we walk with Christ in doing ministry together, we find we also suffer for people as Christ did. We find ourselves feeling for people more often than we would wish. We open ourselves to others more times than we would like.

I've talked to people before about feeling the pain of others. They say to me, "Why do I care? I don't know who they are. They are complete strangers to me, and yet I feel bad for them." I've heard people say of their family members, "My mother doesn't do a thing. My father sits around the house all day. He doesn't go out. She doesn't keep the house nice. I've got to take care of everything, clean everything, write the checks, buy the groceries. I keep telling him to get out, go for a walk, do something. I keep telling her that she can do some housework – it will be good exercise. But she does nothing. All he does is complain. And yet, I continue to visit and suffer with them."

As we carry out crosses, we will have Christ as a Companion, helping us to help others. We will also

have the heart of Christ, as we help. We will have Christ's sympathy, Christ's compassion, Christ's mercy. Paul wrote to the Romans that we are children of God, and thus we are joint heirs of salvation with Christ. Therefore, we suffer with Christ and we are glorified with him.<sup>6</sup> It cannot be helped: Jesus Christ rubs off on us, as we share ministry together. Jesus' heart becomes our heart. We feel the same hurt and compassion for our problems as we do for the problems of another person. Christ rubs off on us, and for our good.

Simon of Cyrene carries the cross of Jesus until he has to carry it no more. Jesus takes the cross from there, and dies for everybody on the planet. Simon is a changed person for his experience. Not only will his worship of Passover be totally different, but his life will be transformed forever. As he goes through life, he may be more mindful of others, and may willingly seek out more crosses to bear.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Romans 8:17.