

The Gospel According to Luke

“Cross Words Muzzled”

Chapter 23:26-43

Introduction

Suppose you are a teacher's aide in the Pittsburgh area. One day you get called into the administration office. You are in violation of the Pennsylvania Public School Code because you wear a 1¼ inch cross pendant on a necklace. You aren't aware of it, but the code specifically prohibits wearing what it labels as “religious garb.” If you insist on wearing the cross, but it must be tucked-away so as not to be visible, or you will lose your job.

What do you do? Brenda Nichols refused to comply. She was suspended from her job and decided to sue. She eventually won back her job in a settlement in federal court.

When asked about the regulation, Nichol said, "I could not follow that code in my heart. **I could not deny Christ.**"¹

You may not wear a Cross as a pendant, or any other type of cross-jewelry. But there is a spiritual sense in which the cross of Jesus Christ should be evident in your life. Twice in the Gospel of Luke Jesus had referred His followers to the Cross:

Luke 9:23 Then He said to *them* all, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.

Luke 14:27 And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.

Taking-up and bearing the Cross were vivid images in the first century. The Romans executed by crucifixion. Often a condemned person could be seen taking-up their cross and bearing it to the place of crucifixion. When Jesus used this imagery, His listeners and

¹ Reported in *World Net Daily*, May 2003

followers understood that the way they lived was to be noticeably different from the rest of the world. They should be seen and heard as if they were taking-up and bearing the cross in their daily lives.

The characters in our verses from Luke will help us to understand some of what it means to take-up and bear the cross:

1. We see Simon carrying the cross.
2. We hear the repentant thief glorying on the cross.

We'll organize our thoughts around two questions: #1 Can You Be Seen Carrying The Cross?, and #2 Can You Be Heard Glorying In The Cross?

#1 Can You Be Seen Carrying The Cross? (v26-31)

Your daily activities, and your attitudes while performing them, are opportunities for others to see that you are a follower of Jesus who has died to your self in order to live for Him. People should therefore see you carrying the cross.

The only other man reported in the Bible who can be seen actually carrying a cross is Simon. Others were crucified; but only he carries a cross. You'd expect to be able to learn about it from him.

Luke 23:26 Now as they led Him away, they laid hold of a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, who was coming from the country, and on him they laid the cross that he might bear *it* after Jesus.

When Jesus succumbed to physical exhaustion, the Roman soldiers requisitioned a passerby to carry the cross the rest of the distance. The language, in our English translation, is interesting and instructive. Referring to the cross, Luke said Simon **might bear it after Jesus**. Of course he meant that Simon would bear the real cross of Jesus, following behind the Lord as He was led to the place of His crucifixion. But the words also look forward to anyone who wishes to follow Jesus as a believer. Jesus told us we were to daily take up the cross and follow Him. In a very real spiritual sense, we are to **bear**

the cross **after Jesus**. He bore it first, for us; we now bear it **after** Him.

I've heard it said that if you could be anyone in the Bible, you'd want to be Simon, because he served the Lord in this remarkable way. You have to understand, however, what it was really like for Simon at the time. It was not an honor. It meant *separation* and *shame*.

Cyrene was in what is now Libya in Northern Africa. We know that there was a large Jewish colony there²; it is probable that Simon was a Jew who had come over 800 miles to Jerusalem for the annual Passover Feast. Carrying the cross, Simon would come into contact with blood. Coming into contact with blood rendered a person ceremonially unclean. Simon would be unable to offer his sacrifice. He would have to remain separate from the other worshippers. His trip was, for the time being, ruined. Only later would Simon understand that he had come into contact with the blood that fully and finally made him clean – the blood of God's true Lamb.

Carrying the cross always means separation, and it can be severe. For example: Earlier, when Jesus said you must bear your cross, He also said,

Luke 14:26 "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.

You get saved; you fall in love with Jesus. You tell your family. How do they respond? In many cases, they respond **as if** you hated them because you love Jesus more. You seem to them to love Jesus, and other Christians, more than your own natural family.

If you are going to really commit to Jesus, as His disciple, you cannot allow your family to interfere with your walk with the Lord. You become somewhat separated from them. And separated from other persons... places... and things in the world. If you don't... **Then you cannot be seen carrying the cross!**

² Acts 2:10, 6:9, 11:20, 13:1

Secondly, carrying the cross of Jesus was, at that moment, something shameful. Walking along, Simon would be pitied by some in the crowd, mocked by others.

When discussing the crucifixion of Jesus, the writer of the Book of Hebrews said that Jesus despised its **shame**, but went ahead with it **for the joy that was set before Him**. His joy was to be obedient to His Father in Heaven in order to redeem and save lost mankind.

If you are a Christian, you will sometimes be treated this way by the world. You will despise the shame of it. But if you endure it, you will be seen carrying the cross!

We next encounter a group of women following along:

Luke 23:27 And a great multitude of the people followed Him, and women who also mourned and lamented Him.

A crucifixion was a big, public event. People followed the procession and watched the procedures. The ladies mentioned were probably a group of sympathetic women who attended every crucifixion to mourn for the victims. The spectacle was misunderstood, and their sympathy was misdirected. It wasn't Jesus they should be concerned about – but themselves:

Luke 23:28 But Jesus, turning to them, said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.

Luke 23:29 For indeed the days are coming in which they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, wombs that never bore, and breasts which never nursed!'

Luke 23:30 Then they will begin 'to say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!"'

Luke 23:31 For if they do these things in the green wood, what will be done in the dry?"

Jesus was still ministering to others – still preaching the warning of the Gospel! He gave a *prophecy* and a *parable*:

1. The prophecy was about the horrors of the coming destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans around 70AD.
2. The parable was about green and dry wood. Jesus was the green wood, which could have brought forth fruit for the nation if they had

received Him. Instead, they would be dead and dry – and dry wood is fit only for the fire.

Instead of their curiosity about, or concern for, the cross of Jesus – they ought to look at Simon and realize that each one of them must carry the cross! So, too, each of us should show in our lives, if we are followers of the Lord, that we are carrying the cross. If there's no separation from people, places, and things in the world... We are not carrying the cross. If we do not bear some shame and reproach from the world... We are not carrying the cross.

#2 Can You Be Heard Glorying In The Cross? (v32-43)

Two thieves were crucified with Jesus. Luke emphasizes their dialog while on the cross. One has 'cross' words for the Lord. The other rebukes his fellow thief. Thus: **Cross words muzzled!**

The insight we want to draw is that you should be heard glorying in the cross.

Luke 23:32 There were also two others, criminals, led with Him to be put to death.

Luke 23:33 And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left.

The Latin is *calvaria*, meaning 'skull.' In Greek, it's *kranion* – where we get our word, 'cranium.' The Aramaic word is *golgotha*. Whether Calvary resembles a skull, or whether it was named that because of the executions that took place, we just don't know. There is a place outside Jerusalem, called "Gordon's Calvary" after the name of the person who first discovered it. It's a hill that, from a distance, resembles the shape of a skull.

Luke 23:34 Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." And they divided His garments and cast lots.

Jesus uttered seven sayings from the cross. Luke emphasized forgiveness. If you read all the accounts, and understand the language, Jesus repeatedly asked His Father to **forgive them**.

Forgive who? I see no reason to limit it. Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the whole human race. It was a universal provision for the universal problem of sin. Any and all those who personally trust Jesus for their salvation are saved.

The dividing of His garments was a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Luke wants to remind any reader that this death was planned by God from the foundation of the world. Jesus was no martyr; He was the Savior.

Luke 23:35 And the people stood looking on. But even the rulers with them sneered, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God."

Luke 23:36 The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine, Luke 23:37 and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself."

Luke 23:38 And an inscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

Some **stood** silent... Some **sneered**... Others scorned. It's the same today as you share about Jesus Christ with unbelievers. He's ready to save them, offering them forgiveness. The cross is an offense to them. They don't want to identify with it. It means they are sinners who deserved to die there.

Two such sinners did die there with Jesus. Their responses represent the only two that are possible: Belief or unbelief.

Luke 23:39 Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us."

Luke 23:40 But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation?"

Luke 23:41 And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong."

The other Gospels describe both thieves as ridiculing Jesus at first. Then one has a change of heart. It's a reminder that **all** of us were born dead in trespasses and sins. **All** of us were unbelieving sinners.

Why the sudden change of heart? How did one come to an awareness of his sin and need for salvation? It remains a blessed mystery, doesn't it? All I can say is that Jesus understood that anyone in that crowd, and either thief, could be saved – because He

asked His Father to forgive **them**, plural. One (at least that we know of) was saved by personally trusting Jesus by his free will decision of faith. Let's just leave it at that and go forth preaching the Gospel.

Luke 23:42 Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

It took faith to see Jesus as King over a kingdom while He hung on the cross. How sad that so many reject the Lord in light of the events *following* the cross – especially His resurrection from the dead.

The thief repented: He acknowledged his own guilt...He turned to Jesus – believing that Jesus had both the power and the will to save him... He prayed the first sinner's prayer of the new era that was beginning.

Luke 23:43 And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

Let's make a few doctrinal points first:

1. Jesus' answer **today** rules-out the idea of soul-sleep. Soul-sleep is the denial of man's conscious existence between when he dies and the resurrection day. It's the view is both the body and the soul lay resting in the ground. Seventh-day Adventists are one group that believes in soul-sleep. It's not what the Bible teaches.
2. Jesus' answer **today** rules out any possibility of a purgatory. In Roman Catholic theology, purgatory is a place of purification of the soul after death. You go there, they say, to be purified before you can qualify for Heaven. Nope! It's not what Jesus thought happened after death!
3. I don't need to tell you that Jesus' answer **today** also rules out baptism as being necessary for salvation – or any other work, for that matter. It was all by grace, through faith.

The Bible is clear: the moment a believer dies, he or she is absent from their physical body, but spiritually present with the Lord; and He's in Heaven. Unbelievers who die face judgment and punishment, *not* purgatory.

What did Jesus mean by **Paradise**? My understanding comes largely from the seventeenth chapter of Luke, where the Lord spoke of the rich man and Lazarus dying and awakening in a place. The rich man, an unbeliever, was suffering in that place. Lazarus, a believer, was being refreshed. There was a great gulf fixed between those two compartments. It seems the place was, and is, Hades; and the better part of it was **Paradise**. It's where everyone went after dying prior to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Now, after Jesus died, the Bible indicates He, too, went to Hades – to Paradise. He went there to bring all those waiting there to Heaven. So now, Paradise is empty.

When an unbeliever dies in their sin, they are immediately awake and aware and alive in Hades – in the place of punishment. They are there awaiting a final resurrection from the dead and their final judgment. You can read about it in Revelation chapter 20. They will be cast alive to suffer forever in the torments of the Lake of Fire – what we commonly call Hell.

When a believer dies, he or she is immediately absent from the body and spiritually present in Heaven with Jesus.

*Enough of that! **You're not dead yet!*** Look back at the repentant thief. We would say that he **gloried** in the cross. While others stood silent, or sneering, or scorning – he *gloried*, and *glorified* God, by proclaiming the cross of Jesus as the method by which he would receive eternal life.

The apostle Paul put it this way, in Galatians 6:14,

Galatians 6:14 (KJV) But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.

For our purposes this morning, to **glory** means we can be heard through our lives declaring the blessings of the cross. We glory in having peace with God, pardon from sin, eternal salvation, and everything else promised to us in the Bible. **And** we can be heard glorying the loudest in the midst of enduring reproach and shame for identifying with Jesus; and in our suffering.

There's nothing wrong at all with wearing the cross as jewelry, or displaying it in any other manner. We glory in it! But you must remember that it remains an object of separation and shame because it declares men and women sinners who must identify with the Savior Who died as their Substitute, as the sacrifice.

Applying the Word...

Christians ought to be a little tougher-skinned when being reproached and humiliated for their faith. And we should respond with offers of God's forgiveness, rather than lawsuits and boycotts.

If you are not a believer... You are represented by the thieves on either side of Jesus. The only question is: Which one are you?