

The Mark of the Cross.

by Gareth Evans

The sermon emphasizes that taking up one's cross means dying to self and one's own natural desires, and that this is demonstrated in Jesus' teachings on greatness in the Kingdom.

Scripture: Matthew 15:11, Matthew 18:4, Mark 9:34, Luke 22:26, Philippians 2:6

Topics: "The Cross", "Self Denial"

Description

Gareth Evans delves into the significance of the mark of the cross, exploring the concept of bearing the mark of the cross in our lives today. He challenges traditional interpretations of taking up the cross, emphasizing that it symbolizes death to self and one's natural desires, as exemplified by Jesus. Evans highlights Jesus' teachings on greatness in the Kingdom as a key aspect of taking up one's cross and dying to self.

Transcript

Part Four: The mark of the Cross.

Continuing a consideration of the mark in Ezekiel 8.

The Hebrew Scriptures tell us that the mark put upon the foreheads of those who 'sigh and groan' is tau, the Hebrew letter. This letter is T - the mark of the cross. The early church would have been aware of this mark and its significant 'shape'. Do we bear the mark of the cross upon us today?

When I became a believer at the age of 17 I was taught that Jesus had called me to take up my cross. This was explained as abstaining from smoking, drinking alcohol, dancing and keeping company with others who did these things! In my case, there was one extra - I was told that I must stop playing football! Fortunately, I was radical (or arrogant) enough not to accept this teaching.

At the time of Jesus, religious leaders went to the scribes to have them interpret the teachings of the Old Testament, their Torah. They boasted in their ability to keep these scribal laws, but Jesus taught that obedience to such interpretations did not produce the righteousness demanded by Jahweh.

We have many 'scribal laws' today, such as the above, which have little to do with righteousness! We forbid people to hold office in our churches because (for example) they smoke, but we allow other leaders to exaggerate (tell lies!), be addicted to coffee (a drug!) and play political games. (How long a list do you want?) I think smoking is a filthy habit, and no Christian should be subject to it, but it has far less negative

impact on the testimony of the church than many of the things we do permit. Jesus said, "It is not that which enters a man which defiles him, but that which proceedeth out of his mouth." (Matthew 15:11)

I do not accept that obedience to such laws is what Jesus meant by taking up our cross and following Him. Above all things else, the cross speaks of death - death to self and one's own natural desires. It means being able to pray the disciples' prayer without hypocrisy. "Hallowed (worshipped) be Thy name" - not my name; "Thy Kingdom come" - not my petty little empire; "Thy will be done" - not my will.

I like to look at the humanity of Jesus - His coming to the world, His lifestyle and His teaching - as the prime example of the kind of man I should be. He demonstrated in His life (as well as in His death) what it means to take up one's cross. Paul writes of Jesus, that though he existed in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God something to be held on to, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, being made in the likeness of men. As a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

Jesus taught many things about the lifestyle he expects of his followers, but the teachings that strike me most forcefully, show clearly what he meant by taking up one's cross and dying to self. It is his teaching on Greatness in the Kingdom. I shall summarise here, but for fuller thoughts click on Greatest.

One day, in Capernaum, Jesus asked his disciples what they had been discussing on the way. One would like to imagine that they were discussing the Scriptures about the Messiah to see if their master fulfilled all requirements. Or they might have been planning how they could better organize the crowds that came to hear Jesus. Instead we read that they were embarrassed because they were arguing which of them was the greatest! (Mark 9:34) Now we wouldn't do that, would we??

Jesus tells them the characteristics of the greatest (and therefore the human characteristics of himself) in five illustrations.

Greatness in the Kingdom or taking up one's cross, dying to oneself, means:

1. To become like a little child (Matt.18:4). Cannot hold offense; transparent; dependant; lacking guile, etc.
2. Made willing to be as the last (Mark 9:35). Seeking no prizes; non-competitive; willing to wait; etc.
3. Made willing to be as the least (Luke 9:48). Wanting to exalt others; seeking no recognition; not offended when passed over for honours, etc.
4. To be as the youngest (Luke 22:26). No inheritance; not interested in maintaining the 'status quo'; a stranger in this world, etc.
5. To be as a servant to all (Mark 9:35). Seeking the betterment of others; 'Others'-minded; Refreshing - washing feet; etc.

"He who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." (Matthew 10:38).

"Let this attitude be in you which was also in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 2:5).

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