

The Cross and the Soul

by Watchman Nee

The sermon emphasizes the importance of delivering soul life to death through the cross, in order to follow the Lord Jesus and attain spiritual maturity.

Scripture: Matthew 10:37-39, Matthew 16:24-25, Luke 14:26-27, Luke 17:32-33, John 12:24-25, Romans 6:6, Romans 6:13, Philippians 3:8, Hebrews 4:12

Topics: "Discipleship", "Surrendering the Soul"

Description

Watchman Nee emphasizes the necessity of denying our soul life and taking up the cross to follow Jesus, highlighting that true discipleship requires relinquishing natural affections and self-preservation for the sake of God. He explains that the soul's love for family and worldly possessions must be surrendered to experience a deeper relationship with Christ and to bear spiritual fruit. Nee illustrates that while the soul life is powerful, it must be delivered to death to allow the Holy Spirit to govern our love and actions. He warns against the dangers of relying on our natural inclinations, urging believers to embrace the cross daily to achieve spiritual growth and fruitfulness. Ultimately, the call to the cross is a call to a profound transformation in our relationship with God and others.

Transcript

THE CALL OF THE CROSS

ON AT LEAST FOUR SEPARATE OCCASIONS and recorded in the four Gospels the Lord Jesus called His disciples to deny their soul life, deliver it to death, and then to follow Him. The Lord fully recognizes that this is the sine qua non for any believer who desires to follow Him and to be perfect like Him in serving men and in obeying God. The Lord Jesus mentions soul life in all these calls, yet He places a different emphasis upon each. Since soul life can express itself in various ways, the Lord stresses a different aspect each time. Anyone who would be a disciple of the Lord must give close attention to what He has said. He is summoning men to commit their natural life to the cross.

THE CROSS AND SOULICAL AFFECTION

"He who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his (soul) life will lose it, and he who loses his (soul) life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 10:38-39).

These verses beckon us to relinquish our soul life and hand it over to the cross for the Lord's sake. The Lord Jesus explains how a man's foes shall be those of his household; how the son, for the sake of the Lord, shall be torn away from his father, the daughter from her mother, the daughter-in-law from her mother-in-law. This constitutes a cross and the cross denotes being crucified. It is our natural inclination to cherish our beloved ones. We are happy to listen to them and

willing to respond to their bidding. But the Lord Jesus calls us to not rebel against God because of our beloved ones. When the desire of God and the desire of man are in conflict, we must for the Lord's sake take up our cross by committing our soulful affection to death, even though the person we love is dear to us, and even though under ordinary circumstances we would be most reluctant to hurt him. The Lord Jesus beckons us in this way so that we may be purified from our natural love. It is for this reason that He therefore declares that the one "who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (v.37).

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14.26-27). Now Matthew shows us in the matter of affection how believers ought to choose loving the Lord first rather than one's family; while Luke signifies what attitude must be maintained towards the love which arises from our soul life—we ought to hate it. Strictly speaking, we are not to love just because the objects of our affection are those whom we would naturally love. Dear and near as parents, brothers, sisters, wives and children are to us, they are listed among the forbidden. Such human love flows from soul life which will cling to its heart desires and will call for love in return. The Lord maintains that such soul life needs to be delivered to death. Though we do not now see Him, He wants us to love Him. He desires us to deny our natural love. He wishes to rid us of our natural love towards others so that we will not love with our own love. Of course He wills that we should love others, but not with our natural soulful affection. If we love, let it be for the sake of the Lord and not for their sake. A new relationship comes to us in the Lord. We should receive from Him His love so that we may love others. In a word, our love must be governed by the Lord. Should He desire us to, we must love even our enemies: if He does not ask us to, we cannot love even the

dearest of our household. He does not want our heart to be attached anywhere because He wants us to serve Him freely.

This new love relationship being the case, the soul life must be denied. That is a cross. In so obeying Christ as to disregard his natural affection, a believer's natural love suffers intensely. Such sorrow and pain becomes a practical cross to him. Deep are the heart wounds and many are the tears when one has to forfeit the one he loves. These inflict intense sufferings upon our lives. How very loathe the soul is to yield up its beloved for the Lord's sake! But through this very action is the soul delivered to death; yea, it even becomes willing to die; and thus the believer is liberated from the power of the soul. Upon losing its natural affection on the cross the soul cedes ground to the Holy Spirit that He may shed abroad in the believer's heart the love of God, and enable him to love in God and with the love of God.

Let it be observed that, humanly speaking, this expression of the soul is quite legitimate, for it is most natural and is not defiled as is sin. Is not the love we have mentioned shared by all men? What illegitimacy can there be in loving those of one's family? Hence we know that our Lord is summoning us to overcome the natural, even to denying man's legal right ... for the sake of God. God wants us to love Him more than our Isaac. It is true that this soul life is given by the Creator; nevertheless, He desires us not to be

governed by that life principle. People of the world cannot understand why; only the believer who is losing himself gradually into the life of God can comprehend its meaning. Who can appreciate God's asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac whom God Himself had first given? Those who apprehend God's heart make no attempt to cling to God-imparted gifts; rather do they desire to rest in God, the Giver of all gifts. God wills for us to be attached to nothing aside from Him, whether it be man or a thing or even something conferred on us by Himself.

Many Christians are quite disposed to leave Ur of the Chaldees, but few there be who can see the need to sacrifice on Mount Moriah what God has given. This is one of the

penetrating lessons of faith and relates to our being united with God. He requires His children to forsake everything that they may be wholly His. They must not only rid themselves of whatever they know to be harmful but also yield to the cross whatever is humanly legitimate-such as affection-in order that they may be entirely under the authority of the Holy Spirit.

Our Lord's demand is most meaningful, for is it not true that human affection is tremendously uncontrollable? Without consigning it to the cross and losing it, affection can become a formidable obstacle to spiritual life.- Human feelings change as the world changes. Their easy excitement can occasion a saint to lose his spiritual balance. Their constant disturbance can affect a believer's peace in his spirit. Do not sorrows, moanings, sighs and tears usually result from hurt feelings? If the Lord is not pre-eminent in our affections He can hardly be Lord in other respects. This is a test of spirituality and a measure of its degree. We must accordingly hate our soul life and refuse its affections to have free rein. The Lord's demand differs completely from our natural desire. What was previously loved shall now be hated; and even the organ which generates love, our soul life, must be abhorred as well. Such is the spiritual way. If we verily bear the cross we shall be neither controlled nor influenced by soulical affection but shall be fit to love in the power of the Holy Spirit. Even so did the Lord Jesus love His family while on earth.

THE CROSS AND SELF

"Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it'" (Matt. 16.24-25). Again our Lord is calling His disciples to take up the cross by presenting their soul life to death. Whereas the emphasis in Matthew 10 is the affection of the soul, here in

Matthew 16 the self of the soul is brought into view. From the preceding verses we learn that the Lord Jesus was at that time unfolding to His disciples His approaching rendezvous with the cross. Out of his intense love for the Lord Peter blurted out: "Lord, pity Yourself." Peter was mindful of man, urging his Master to spare Himself from the pains of the cross in the flesh. Peter failed to understand how man ought to be mindful of the things of God, even in such a matter as death on a cross. He failed to see that concern for God's will must far exceed the concern for self. His attitude went something like this: "Though by dying on the cross one shall obey God's will and fulfill God's purpose, yet ought not one to think of himself? Should he not be mindful of the pain he will have to bear? Lord, pity Yourself!"

What was the Lord's answer to Peter? He sternly rebuked him and declared that such an idea as self-pity could only have originated from Satan. Then he continued by saying to His disciples: "It is not I alone who will go to the cross, but all you who follow and desire to be disciples must also go there. As my way is, so shall your way be. Do not incorrectly imagine that I alone must do God's will; all of you as well shall do His

will. In the same manner as I am not mindful of myself and unconditionally obey God's will even to the death of the cross, so shall you deny your self life and be willing to lose it in obedience to God." Peter told the Lord: "You must pity Yourself!" The Lord came back with: "You must deny yourself."

There is a price to pay in following God's will. The flesh trembles at such a prospect. While soul life reigns supreme within us we are unfit to accept God's orders because it wishes to follow its will and not God's. When He calls us to deny ourselves through the cross and renounce all for His sake, our natural life instinctively responds with self-pity. This renders us unwilling to pay any cost for God. Hence whenever we choose the narrow way of the cross and endure for Christ's sake, our soul life shall suffer loss. This is how we

lose that life. Only in this way can the spiritual life of Christ be enthroned pure and supreme, undertaking within us whatever is well-pleasing to God and beneficial to men.

Now if we take note of this incident between Peter and the Lord we can readily perceive how wicked can be the functioning of this soul life. Peter uttered those carnal words of his immediately upon receiving revelation from God to know the mystery hitherto unknown to men—that the lonely Jesus Whom they were following was indeed the Christ of the living God. Directly following such an awesome revelation Peter was led captive by his self life into attempting to persuade his Master to pity Himself. How this ought to impress us with the fact that no amount of spiritual revelation and lofty knowledge can ever guarantee freedom from the dominion of the soul. On the contrary, the higher our knowledge and the more profound our experience, the more hidden shall be our soul life, and the harder, consequently, to detect and eject. Unless the natural realm has been treated drastically by the cross it shall continue to be preserved within man.

Another lesson which we can learn from this instance with Peter is the utter uselessness of the natural life. On this particular occasion Peter's soul life is activated not for himself but for the Lord Jesus. He loves the Lord; he pities Him; he desires the Lord to be happy; he is deeply averse to the Lord suffering like that. His heart is alright and his intention is good, but it is founded upon human consideration derived from the soul life. All such considerations the Lord must reject. Even to desire after the Lord is not permitted if done by the flesh. Does this not demonstrate beyond doubt that we can indeed be soulish in serving and desiring the Lord? If the Lord Jesus Himself denies His soul life in service to God, He certainly does not want us to serve Him with that soul life. He beckons believers to commit their natural self to death, not simply because it loves the world, but also because it may even desire after the Lord. Our Lord never asks how much is done; He only inquires from whence it is done.

At the same time that Peter expresses his affection towards the Lord he is also unconsciously revealing his attitude towards himself. He esteems the physical body of the Lord more than the will of God. He tries to persuade the Lord Jesus to be careful for Himself. Peter's personality is therefore fully unveiled. How true it is that the self always operates independently of the will of God, for it loves to serve Him according to what it in itself deems to be good. Following God's wishes means the stripping away of the soul. Whenever His mind is obeyed, the soul's idea is crushed.

Because Peter on this occasion in Matthew 16 spoke out from His soul, the Lord Jesus called His disciples to forsake the natural life. But the Lord indicates additionally that what Peter has uttered is from Satan. We may therein realize how Satan can employ man's self life. As long as this is not delivered to death Satan possesses an operative instrument. Peter speaks because he cherishes the Lord, yet he is being

manipulated by Satan. Peter prays the Lord to be kind to Himself, not knowing this prayer is inspired by the enemy. Satan can urge people to love the Lord or even teach people to pray. He is not apprehensive if people pray or love the Lord; what strikes fear in him is that they might not love the Lord or pray to Him with their natural energy. While soul life continues, his business prospers. May God show us how dangerous this life is, because believers may too quickly conclude that they are spiritual merely because they love the Lord or admire heavenly things. God's purpose cannot be accomplished as long as Satan continues to find opportunity to work through that soul life which remains uncommitted to the death of the cross.

Self-pity, self-love, fear of suffering, withdrawal from the cross: these are some of the manifestations of soul life, for its prime motivation is self-preservation. It is exceedingly reluctant to endure any loss. This is precisely why the Lord summons us to deny self and take up our cross so as to crush our natural life. Every cross which passes before us beckons us to forsake our selves. We should not harbor any self-love

but lay down our lives by the power of God. The Lord says to us that this cross is ours, for we each receive from God our own particular cross. That is what we ought to bear. Although it is our cross, it nevertheless is closely connected with the cross of the Lord. If in the disposition which Christ displayed in relation to His cross we are willing to take up ours, then we shall find that the power of His cross abides in us and enables us to lose our natural life. Each time the cross is taken up, each time does the soul life suffer loss. Each time the cross is circumvented, each time is the soul life fed and preserved.

The Lord Jesus does not imply that dealing with our natural inclinations is a once for all matter. We find in Luke the word "daily" is added to our Lord's call to take up the cross. Cross-bearing is continuous. The cross which condemned sin to death is an accomplished fact: all which remains for us to do is to acknowledge and receive it. But the cross through which we forfeit our soul life is different. Self-denial is not a matter already and completely accomplished; this we must experience daily. Now this does not mean that the soul life will never be lost or only be lost slowly. It simply bespeaks the fact that the cross which deals with the soul life operates differently from that which deals with sin. And the reason? Because death towards sin is accomplished for us by Christ: when He died, we died with Him. But the denial of the soul life is not an accomplished matter. We are required to take up our own cross daily by the power of the cross of Christ and determine daily to deny self until it is lost.

Renunciation of our natural life is not something which is done once and forever. As for sin, we only need take the ground of the cross (Rom. 6.6) and immediately we are freed from its power and our servitude to it. In a moment this can be experienced with a full and perfect victory. But the self life must be overcome step by step. The deeper the Word of God penetrates (Heb. 4.12), the deeper works the cross and the further the Holy Spirit completes the union of the life of our spirit with the Lord Jesus. How can believers deny the

self when it is yet unknown to them? They can deny only that part of the soul life which they already recognize. God's Word must lay bare more and more of our natural life so that the work of the cross can probe deeper and deeper. That is why the cross must be borne daily. To know more of God's will and to know more of the self furnishes the cross increased ground to operate.

THE CROSS AND THE SOUL'S LOVE OF THE WORLD

Once again our Lord speaks: "Remember Lot's wife. Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it" (Luke 17.32-33). Although these are by now familiar words to the

reader, we must note the Lord here lays stress upon self-denial in relation to the things of this world. How irksome it seems for believers to have their hearts detached from earthly possessions. We need to follow our Lord's admonition to remember Lot's wife, for she was one who did not forget her possessions even in a time of the greatest peril. She was not guilty of having retraced a single step towards Sodom. All she did was look back. But how revealing was that backward glance! Does it not speak volumes concerning the condition of her heart?

It is possible for a believer outwardly to forsake the world and leave everything behind and yet inwardly cling to those very elements he had forsaken for the Lord's sake. It does not require a consecrated person to return to the world or to repossess what he had forsaken in the world to indicate that the soul life is still active. If he but casts one longing glance it is sufficient to disclose to us that he does not truly recognize where the world stands in relation to the cross.

When the soul life is genuinely crushed nothing of this world can again move a believer's heart. Soul life is worldly; hence it is attached to the things of the world. Only after one is actually willing to offer his soul life to death will he be fit to follow the "Sermon on the Mount" without flinching. Though in that "sermon" we do not find the Lord Jesus mentioning the work of the cross, we nonetheless know for certain

that unless one experiences identification with Christ in death-not merely having died to sin but having died to the self life as well-he attempts in vain to keep our Lord's teachings enunciated on the Mount. He may appear to be following these instructions, but his heart is not one with his appearance. Only a Christian who has yielded his soul life can spontaneously and unpretentiously give away his cloak when he has been sued for his coat. He whose self life has been sacrificed to death is cut loose from the things of the world.

Gaining spiritual life is conditional on suffering loss. We cannot measure our lives in terms of "gain"; they must be measured in terms of "loss." Our Teal capacity lies not in how much we retain but in how much has been poured out. Those who can afford to lose the most are those who have the most to give. The power of love is attested by love's sacrifice. If our hearts are not separated from love of the world, our soul life has yet to go through the cross.

"And you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property" (He'b. 10.34). The believers referred to in this passage did not simply endure but even joyfully accepted the plundering of their goods. This is the work of the cross. The attitude 9

of saints towards their possessions most assuredly signifies whether they continue to preserve their self life or whether they have consigned it to death.

If we desire to tread a pure spiritual path we must allow God to so operate in us that our hearts can be severed from everything pertaining to the world and be totally released from the intent of Lot's wife. This is the prerequisite for experiencing perfect life in, Christ. We can despise all the things in the world only after the Holy Spirit has shown the reality of heaven and its perfect life. Matters below and matters above defy comparison. The experience of the Apostle in Philippians 3 begins with esteeming everything as loss and proceeds to suffering the loss of all things. Therein does the Apostle come to know Christ and the power of His resurrection. Such is the perfect way. Often we are unconscious

how powerful our self is until tested in regard to material matters. At times it seems we require more grace to lose our wealth than to lose our life! Earthly things truly represent an acid test for soul life.

God's children who indulge in eating and drinking and in ease and comfort need a deeper cutting away of the cross to free their spirit from the bondage and influence of the soul and to be free to live in God. Any who stillanker after the things of the world have yet to learn how to lose their soul life through the deep penetration of the cross.

THE CROSS AND SOUL POWER

In the Gospel of John the Lord Jesus touches upon soul life once more. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (12.24-25). He subsequently gives the explanation with these words: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (v.32). John 12 records the most prosperous moment in our Lord's life. Lazarus had been raised from the dead and many Jews believed in Him. Triumphantly He entered into Jerusalem and was acclaimed by the populace. Even Gentiles sought to see Him. From the human viewpoint Calvary would now seem to be quite unnecessary, for could He not easily attract all men to Himself without going to the cross? But He knew better. Although his work appeared to be prosperous, He realized He could not grant life to men without His going to death. Calvary was the only way of salvation. If He died, He would draw all men to Himself and could indeed give life to all.

In John 12 the Lord explicitly describes the operation of the cross. He compares Himself to a grain of wheat. If it does not fall into the earth and die it remains alone. But if He be crucified and die, He shall impart life to many. The one condition is death. No death, no fruit. No other way is there to bear fruit than through death.

Our purpose, however, is not simply to learn about the Lord Jesus. We wish beyond this to draw particular attention to its relationship our soul life. The Lord applies the grain of wheat to Himself in verse 24, but in verse 25 He implies that every one of His disciples must follow in His footsteps. He pictures the grain as representing their self life. just as a grain is unable to bear fruit unless it dies, so there can be no spiritual fruit until the natural life has been broken through death. Here be emphasizes the matter of fruitfulness. While the soul life does possess tremendous power it nevertheless cannot fulfill the work of fruit-bearing. All the energies generated in the soul including talent, gift, knowledge and wisdom, cannot enable believers to bear spiritual fruit. If the Lord Jesus must die to bear fruit so also must His disciples die in order to produce fruit. The Lord regards soulish power as of no help to God in His work of fruitbearing.

The greatest peril for us in Christian service is to lean upon our selves and to draw upon our soul power-upon our talent, gift, knowledge, magnetism, eloquence or cleverness. The experience of countless spiritual believers confirms that unless our soulishness is definitely delivered to death and its life at all times inhibited from operating, it will be most active in service. If this is true of them, then how can those who are unwilling to yield up, or unwatchful in denying, their soul life prevent the intrusion of that life? Everything pertaining to our natural life must be handed over to death so that in no sense may we depend upon any of it but be willing instead to be led through death's darkness of no support, no sensation, no sight, no understanding, and silently trust God Himself to work until we emerge on the other side of resurrection to possess a more glorious life. "He who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." Our soul is not annihilated; rather, by passing through death it affords God an opportunity to communicate His life to us. Not to lose the soul life in death shall mean great loss for the believer; but in losing it he will save it for eternity.

Do not misunderstand this verse as signifying the inactivity of our mind and talent. The Lord clearly asserts that in losing our soul life we will keep it unto eternal life. just as "the sinful body might be destroyed" (Rom. 6.6) does not mean the destruction of the hands, feet, ears and eyes of the human body, so too the committal of the soul life to death must not be construed as connoting the negation or destruction of any of its functions. Even though the body of sin has been destroyed, we still yield our "members to God as instruments of righteousness" (Rom. 6.13); just so, when natural life is sacrificed to death, we shall find renewal, revival and restraint of the Holy Spirit in all the faculties of our soul. It cannot therefore imply that henceforth we become wood and stone without feeling, thought or will because we must not or cannot use any of the parts of the soul. Every part of the body as well as every organ of the soul still exists and is meant to be fully engaged; only now they are being renewed, revived and restrained by the Holy Spirit. The point at issue is whether the soul's faculties are to be regulated by our natural life or by the supernatural life which indwells our spirit. These faculties remain as usual. What is unusual now is that the power which formerly activated them has been put to death; the Holy Spirit has made God's supernatural power their life.

Let us amplify this subject a bit more. The various organs of our soul continue after the natural life has been relinquished in death. To nail the soul life to the cross does not at all imply that thereafter we shall be completely lacking in our thought, emotion and will. We distinctly read in the Bible of God's thought, intent, desire, satisfaction, love and joy. Moreover, the Scriptures often record that our Lord Jesus "loved," rejoiced," "was sorrowful"; it is even recorded that "Jesus wept, 11 that He "offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears" in Gethsemane's Gardens. Were His soul faculties annihilated? And do we become cold and dead persons? Man's soul is man's own self. It is where one's personality resides and whence it is expressed. If the soul does

not accept power from the spirit life, then it will draw its power for living from its natural soul life. The soul as a composite of organs continues, but the soul as a life principle must be denied. That power must be consigned to death so that the power of the Holy Spirit alone may operate all the parts of the soul, without interference from the natural life.

Herein do we see resurrection life. Without the supernatural life of God there can be no resurrection after death. The Lord Jesus could go through death and yet be raised because resident in Him is God's uncreated life. This life cannot be destroyed: it instead will always emerge into the fullness and glory of resurrection. Jesus poured out His soul to death and committed His spirit (in which was God's life) back into the hands of God. His death set Him free from soul life and released God's spiritual life unto greater splendor.

It is difficult indeed to understand why God, upon transmitting His life to us, then requires us to experience co-death with Christ so that His life may be resurrected in us. This is nonetheless God's law of life. And once possessing God's life, we then are empowered to periodically go through death and continue to come out alive. By continuously losing our soul life in death, we may continuously gain more abundantly and gloriously of God's life in resurrection.

God's aim is to take our soul life through death in company with His Own life in us; whenever His life in us is resurrected in our daily experience our soul also is raised with Him and produces fruit to eternity. This is one of 'the most profound lessons in spiritual life. The Holy Spirit alone can unfold to us the necessity of

death as well as that of resurrection. May the Spirit of revelation make us understand how much our spiritual experience shall suffer if we do not hate our natural life and deliver it to death. Only when our soul accompanied by God's indwelling life passes through death and resurrection can we bear spiritual fruit and keep it for life eternal.

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