

We have a lot to lose.

That's because we have so much. That's because we've been so blessed.

Living in our country with our tradition of liberty has made us extremely fortunate. Our standard of living, our inventiveness, our technology have given us material prosperity that's unparalleled throughout history and in most parts of the world today. Even the working poor in our culture have a standard of living, have an income that exceeds that of most people in the world.

Even an individual living at the poverty line in America, making \$11,600 per year, is wealthier than 80% of the people living in the world today. We have so much.

But having a lot means that we have a lot to lose.

We have a lot to lose. And as a culture, this makes us afraid. And there's a sad paradox here.

Other cultures, with less wealth, with shorter lifespans, with death and poverty as more present daily realities tend to be less fearful and more joyful in their daily attitudes than we do as wealthy and materially blessed people.

The corollary is that it's much easier for folks in poorer cultures to put their trust in the living God. They tend to be very aware that life can be short or dangerous. They can't rely on their own resources. And so they put their trust in God.

I noticed this when I was on a missionary trip in Panama. I saw folks living in horrible poverty. And Panama is the wealthiest of the Central American countries. And yet, as I was meeting with Christians living in horrible conditions, I was struck over and over again about their sense of faith, and their sense of joy in life.

Perhaps that's part of the reason that Christianity is growing by leaps and bounds in the third world, and shrinking in Western countries.

Because we have many things we can put our trust in. We say in God we trust. But we hedge our bets. We want to make sure we have insurance. We want to put enough away in our nest eggs for retirement. We want to make sure we have the right locks and alarms and security systems to protect ourselves.

And let me be clear, there's nothing wrong with doing these things. It is prudent in our society to seek safety for ourselves and our loved ones. It is a sign of our love for them. It is also important to not be a burden on society, and trying to make sure we have financial security is not a bad thing.

But, and this is an important but... But, the spiritual danger for us as middle-class Americans is that security and safety can easily become idols. And the more we're relying on

ourselves, the more we're focusing on protecting ourselves, then the more God becomes an afterthought, or the more God becomes unnecessary in our lives. We are tempted to trust in other things, rather than trusting in the Living God.

So what are you giving up for Lent?

We often think of ice cream or chocolate, or fast food, or video games, or watching TV.

But maybe there are other things we should give up for Lent.

How about giving up self-sufficiency? How about giving up fear of loss? How about giving up the illusion that life is supposed to be easy and comfortable?

We have a lot to lose. But maybe by losing we will find something even more important.

We say, 'Finders keepers, losers weepers.'

But Jesus says something different. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Apparently Jesus is telling us, 'Finders weepers, losers keepers.'

We have a lot to lose. We need to lose in order to gain. Take up your cross, and follow.

What does Jesus mean? Take up your cross and follow?

For a few people, it's a very literal statement. It means following Jesus to the point of death. Peter and his brother Andrew were both crucified themselves. Most of the rest of the disciples were also killed for their faith. And in some parts of our world today, there are still Christians who are executed because of their faith. We have seen gruesome examples in recent headlines of Christians in the Middle East being martyred. For some, Jesus' command to take up the cross will result in people being killed because they are his followers, because they are following in his footsteps.

But that's not the something that most of us will have to face in our culture. So what does it mean for us? What does it mean for 21st Century comfortable American Christians to take up our own crosses? Is it masochism? Are we supposed to go out looking for pain? Is it suicide? Are we supposed to place ourselves in dangerous situations where we'll be killed? Is it stoicism? Are we supposed to bravely tough it out in the face of our own personal pain?

Yes, all of us undergo suffering to some degree. Yes, some of us have to undergo very deep and profound personal suffering. Is that what taking up your cross is all about?

I would suggest that the answer is, "Probably not." When Jesus talks about taking up our cross he's talking about something other than stoicism or masochism.

And the key is Jesus' own behavior. Remember, Jesus does not have to go to the cross. He could have gotten out of it at any number of points. But he goes to the cross voluntarily as a servant. He goes to the cross out of love for us all.

Jesus doesn't say, "Endure your cross." He says, "Take up your cross." Choose your cross, and follow me. Follow me out of love. Follow me as a servant."

Taking up your cross is not about stoically accepting something you're stuck with. It's not about choosing suffering in a masochistic way.

Instead, it's about choosing to sacrifice our own comfort, our own self-centeredness in order to help someone else. It's choosing to sacrifice and give of yourself on behalf of others, even when you could evade it.

When you take up a cross, you are voluntarily taking up a burden. You are very literally burdening yourself with someone else's life. You choose to walk with them, and suffer with them. And sharing in someone else's suffering is often a tougher kind of suffering than suffering yourself.

Being in a relationship with someone else. Sticking with them for better or worse.

Some of you are parents. Is it easier to be sick yourself, or to be around your kids when they're sick?

Some of you have lost loved ones. Which is harder: to suffer yourself, or to watch someone you love suffering?

It's often far more difficult to watch someone you love suffering. And yet, hanging in there with another person, in the midst of their suffering, is often what taking up your cross is all about. Walking with someone in their pain, in their struggles, is one of the most loving things we can do as Christians.

We are usually willing to take those sorts of burdens upon ourselves for a spouse, or a child, or someone close to us. And those are VERY good and important things. But the Gospel calls us to stretch ourselves further. How willing are we to expand our circle? How willing are we to take on the burdens of people who are outside our immediate circle?

It's relatively easy to serve the people you like and who are like you. It's much harder to serve those who are different. It's much harder to care for those you don't care for.

And yet, that's Jesus example. Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. He saves through his suffering. He brings life through his death. He gives up everything, so that we might gain everything.

This week, try to walk in his footsteps, just a little bit. Talk to someone you'd usually ignore. Reach out to someone you'd usually pass by. See if you can do one thing outside your normal comfort zone to help someone else.

I do know that it's all too easy for us to develop spiritual calluses. We can keep our shields up. We can build walls, stay behind them, and keep other people's suffering at arm's length.

But Jesus calls us to step out of our comfort zone. Open up, even a little bit. Reach out. Help someone out. Be there for them in their suffering. Walk with them. Ease their burden. For most of us, that's what taking up your cross is all about.

It's important to know who Jesus is, to proclaim him as Lord and Savior. But you've got to cross over to the other side of the divide. You have to walk in his footsteps and do what he would do.

This week, reach out in love to someone. Stretch yourself this week, even a little bit. In doing so, take up your cross and follow.

You have a lot to lose. But you have a lot to gain.