

When kids pick up their books and head off to school they show what Jesus expects a disciple to do. Pick up your cross and follow. Sometimes kids lug those books as if they were marching up Calvary.

Going back to school fills some kids with anxiety. I can still remember when I showed up for first grade, I threw up all over my shoes. School includes a lot of fun. You get to see your friends again. You get to have recess. You get to play sports. Students may not admit learning is fun, but they can enjoy showing off what they know.

Studies are like organized sports in this way. Team sports look like play, but they demand work. For example, if you want a competitive football team – which Cameron especially would like to have one of these years – you have to practice and build up confidence. You can't just show up on the field clueless and play. To be a good team, players sacrifice. They eat right, they exercise and drill together. Win or lose, those kids compete well.

The same is true of studies. People feel good when they learn something, but they have to sacrifice to get there.

And it's true of Christianity. Jesus says, "If you want to come after me, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. If you want to save your life, you will lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake you will find it." Christianity includes some fun, but it also means work.

Americans typically live counter to this philosophy. To be an American, we don't deny ourselves; we feed ourselves and buy new clothes. If we cannot afford something, we don't deny ourselves. We charge it instead. Our materialism blocks this advice from Jesus. He says you can be happy with less, not with more.

This gospel also has to do with plain, ordinary charity. To deny yourself doesn't have to mean going without a flat screen TV or a programmable mattress. It can mean letting another car get in front of you, cleaning your room without being told for the fifth time, picking up litter in public places, or taking a risk by telling someone you love them.

But for the simplest example of self-denial, look at a student picking up a book. That kid is giving up video games, giving up TV, giving up chat rooms, and taking up the cross of learning. That kid, who loses life for the sake of study, will find it. Good students show us what it is to be good disciples.