

Text: Matthew 16:24-28

Title: Denying Yourself and Taking up the Cross

Truth: Impending judgment demands that we choose to follow Jesus.

Date/Location: Sunday April 10, 2022 at FBC

Introduction

We last were reading in Matthew 16 where Matthew tells us the Lord changed His focus to preparing the disciples for his impending suffering, death, and resurrection. Peter did not like that whole idea, so he rebuked Jesus for talking about it. The Lord in turn rebuked Peter because Peter was doing the Devil's work by trying to dissuade Jesus from doing God's will. Notice that Jesus is not saying Peter is the Devil, nor is Jesus "talking to the Devil" through Peter, or the Devil is indwelling Peter, or some other mystical kind of thing. It is simply that Peter is talking like the Devil in his flesh. Heaven informed Peter about the identity of Jesus, but here Peter was failing Heaven and instead Hell was informing him to embrace the man-pleasing idea that Jesus should not die.

Even though there could have been some more direct devilish influence here, do not excuse Peter! We should not think that Peter's mind and desires are out of the picture, as if Satan were controlling him. That is not the case—it was Peter's distaste at the idea of Jesus dying, Peter's desire for Jesus to live, Peter's rebuke of Jesus that is at issue here. Peter really felt and thought those things because he cared more about the things of men than those of God. This makes the text all the more applicable to us, because our affections for the things of the world are indeed *ours*. We need to repent of them, and not simply blame them on the Devil!

I. Take up the Cross or Lose Eternal Life, v. 24-26

A. If you have chosen to follow Jesus, you probably have already figured out that you will not win any popularity contests! If the "religious" leaders did bad things to Jesus (16:21), then their ilk will most certainly do the same to his followers (John 15:20, Matt. 5:11). When the disciples heard that Jesus was going to suffer and die, this was not abstract. This was bad news not only for Jesus, but also for them!

B. Peter is a model for all the disciples, and us. There are two main paths we can choose. Following the ways of the world is one, and following Christ is another. If you choose the latter, that what Jesus says in verses 24-26 is critical for you to understand.

24 Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.”

C. If you desire to be a follower of Jesus, that is, to truly believe in Him and walk in His way, this means that you will do three things:

1. Deny yourself. This is the opposite of living a life of self-indulgence and autonomous self-rule. If you wanted a certain career, or a life of ease, or money, or to indulge your flesh with power or romance or notoriety, then when you come to Christ you say “No” to those ruling desires and permit Christ the ruling throne in your life. This is a characteristic of Christians somewhat different—but not entirely disconnected from—the idea of self-denial in terms of simple or little pleasures of life. You can be in the general mindset of denying yourself while at the same time enjoying life’s pleasures and practicing a life in which you say no to your flesh (self-denial).
2. Take up your cross. The word *cross* does not mean “minor trial.” It means cross, an instrument of death. following Christ potentially means that you die for Christ. It certainly means that you have consigned yourself over to Jesus and are at His disposal. As we said before at Matthew 10:38: “Therefore, those who would follow Jesus must take up their cross, that is, be willing to die for Him. Those who do so in effect ‘lose’ their earthly life, but they will find life in Christ.” You may not be called to martyrdom (but you may and are willing). You may not be called to as much shame or contempt as Christ was (but you may and are willing).
3. Follow Jesus. Like He taught and lived, you believe and live.

These are not three separate things, but three descriptions of the attitude of a Christian who does not seek firstly his own things but instead prioritizes the things of Christ.

Which of these two people are you most like?

Christian	Non-Christian
Desires to come after Jesus	Does not desire Jesus
Deny himself	Indulge himself
Take up his cross	Scoffs at the cross
Follows Jesus	Refuses to follow Jesus
Loses his life	Desires to save his life
Will find his life in eternity.	Will lose his life in eternity.
Loses the world (mindful of the things of God)	Gains the world (mindful of the things of men)
Gains his soul	Loses his soul

The situation in the left column is far more desirable to me. It produces a far greater result—eternal life. It fills a critical need.

Some people in effect complain that this all is too hard sounding, so it must be another stage or different phase of the Christian life. The *really important thing*, they say, is to believe. Just believe, and all will be well. But what are you believing? Some basic facts about Jesus, or are you believing into HIM?

25 For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.

D. There is an irony in God’s program about this matter of living life for oneself and living it for God (v. 25). If you want above all else to live, and live on your own terms, you will eventually do neither. “I did it my way” is not going to work. But if you give your life to serve the Lord, you will *really* live, and you will have blessings beyond number. But if you live for self, you will ultimately fail even if in the eyes of the world you seem to succeed marvelously. Bottom line: if you want to save yourself the trouble of being a disciple, you are going to find a lot of trouble in the end anyway. And if you give up the life of comfort for one of potential struggle against the world, you will gain all that life you lost, and much more.

You might take this as exclusively a future thing, but in reality, someone who presently gives up his life to serve God will find out the real meaning of life and will actually start to realize that he has found his life before entering into Heaven. Those who want to make a life of ease apart from the sufferings of Christ will get that suffering anyway.

26 For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?

E. Another danger to walking the Christian walk is money or related things. The tragedy about pursuing life for self is that you might be the richest, most famous, smartest, etc. in your little time and corner of the world. But if you do not know Christ, you will lose your soul. You will die in your sins and be separated from God and all that is good. There is no profit in that. There is nothing you can trade God for the eternal prosperity of your soul, even if you had everything. No money, no good works, no good looks, no kindness, no philanthropy, nothing will do the job. So since you are not going to get *everything* anyway, and even if you did it would not profit you, do not go down this futile path.

Prov. 24:20 There is no future for the evil man. (NAS)

Psalms 49:8 For the redemption of his soul is costly. (NAS)

John 8:24 "For if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins."

Luke 12:20 "But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?'"

II. The Critical Reason for Deciding to Follow Jesus, v. 27-28

27 For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works.

28 Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."

- A. The bottom-line reason for following Jesus and living a non-worldly life is this: Jesus is coming back and He is going to reward everyone in accordance with their works. This means that He is going to judge you.
- B. First, Jesus is going to return in glory. At that time, He will share the glory of God the Father. He will be attended by the angels. This certainly argues for the deity of Christ. He, not Peter, not Mohammed, not anyone else, is going to be the judge of all mankind. He was appointed to this office by God the Father (Acts 17:31, John 5:22).
- C. He will examine each one's works and reward them accordingly. This may be an uncomfortable teaching for you because you have been taught to believe that we are not judged by our works. Wrong. We are not *saved* by our works, but we are indeed judged by our works (James 2:18, Matt. 12:37. 2 Cor. 5:10, Rom. 14:12, Matthew 25:34-46).

1 Peter 1:17 And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear.

1. Someone who has been born again will be judged at the judgment seat of Christ and will be rewarded in accordance with their faithfulness to the Lord in this life. Condemnation or loss of salvation is *not* on the table in this judgment. That has already been settled for those who have trusted in Christ (Romans 8:1). Yet, those who have trusted in Him will bear fruit in their lives, including good words and works and sound doctrine.
 2. Others—those who have *not* been born again—will be judged at the Great White Throne (Rev. 20:13). It will be clear at that judgment that works cannot save a person and those people will be cast into the Lake of Fire.
- D. This makes our lives incredibly important and significant today. What you do *matters*. We do not believe in an antinomian system of doctrine that teaches you can do whatever you want and then you will be forgiven for it. No—the person who does whatever

they want demonstrates that their “wants” have not been changed by the work of the Holy Spirit.

- E. If you do not permit yourself to read beyond verse 28, it seems to say that the Lord’s return is so imminent that it will be within the lifetimes of some of the disciples. But that did not happen. So what gives?

The co-location of chapter 17 with this text shows that the Lord is saying this: “There are some of you standing here who will not die until after you have seen the Kingdom glory of the Son of Man.” They will see what His coming looks like. It is indeed a preview format, and not what we might like in terms of the fullness of His coming. But the nation of Israel had rejected Him and the kingdom was not going to start for a while (Luke 19:11-12).

We learn next that three of the disciples do in fact see Jesus in His unveiled glory, exactly how He will appear when he comes in the glory of His Father with His angels and reward everyone according to their works.

How would you harmonize verse 28 with what we know from the rest of Scripture? If what I have said above does not convince you, consider this:

2 Peter 1:16-17 For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Peter himself said that he was an eyewitness of the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ! They saw the Son of Man coming in His kingdom—just a bit early!

Conclusion

Full disclosure is given: the Christian life is not easy because of the obstacles of the flesh, the Devil, and the world. You also know the relative costs of choosing to follow the Lord or not. You know all

that ahead of time so that you can make a wise decision about what you want to do.

Nicolas Taleb wrote this:

The idea, as promoted by the philosopher Daniel Dennett, is as follows: What is the most potent use of our brain? It is precisely the ability to project conjectures into the future and play the counterfactual game—‘If I punch him in the nose, then he will punch me back right away, or, worse, call his lawyer in New York.’ One of the advantages of doing so is that we can let our conjectures die in our stead. Used correctly and in place of more visceral reactions, the ability to project effectively frees us from immediate, first-order natural selection—as opposed to more primitive organisms that were vulnerable to death and only grew by the improvement in the gene pool through the selection of the best. In a way, projecting allows us to cheat evolution: it now takes place in our head, as a series of projections and counterfactual scenarios.¹

You too can use your brain to consider the counterfactual scenarios: if I follow Christ, things will turn out generally in this-and-such way. But if I do not follow Christ, things will turn out in this other way.

I exhort you: use this knowledge of the choice you have to let your conjecture about living for self to die in your stead. Let the thought of living for self perish—but don't *you* perish!

MAP

¹Nassim Nicholas Taleb. *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2007), p. 189.