

Written Copy: Disciples Who Take Up Their Cross: Matthew 16:24-28

Great Commission Sermon Series Week #1

Sunday January 19th, 2019

Text: Matthew 16:24-25

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

²⁴ Then Jesus said to His disciples: "If anyone is desiring to come after me, let him strongly reject/refuse to recognize himself, and lift up his cross and keep following after me. ²⁵ For whoever might continue to desire to preserve his breath of life will end up losing it/destroying it. However, whoever might destroy his breath of life on account of me will end up discovering it.

Exegetical Statement

After coaxing out from Peter his God given confession of who Jesus is and why He has come, Jesus begins to teach and describe what His ministry will entail as its major component: to suffer at the hands of the religious authorities and be put to death as a criminal by the Romans even though He is innocent of all charges. Peter forcefully tries to correct this vision of Jesus' ministry telling Him that rather than allow Him to suffer God will be gracious and merciful to Him and bless Him temporally. To Jesus this is the voice of Satan: a temptation directed at His human will to abandon God's will and instead follow His and His disciples' own desire for earthly wealth and success at the expense of the world's eternal salvation. Then Jesus describes what it means to be one of His disciples: to deny their own personal idea and will as to what their lives should be and instead pick up their cross: submit to the will and plan of God for them as His servants of the Kingdom. The reason they must do this is that standing firm in a life centered on building their own personal kingdom in this world will mean losing the gift of the eternal kingdom to come. Living life according to my will and desire stands against God's will. Continuing to do this grieves the Holy Spirit who works in all believers to make them disciples who live life according to Jesus commands and will. We are to do this not to be saved, but as those who have been saved by the gift of grace and are called to live out lives of obedient faith as a result. Jesus tells us all that on the Last Day He will bring the reward that each has earned according to what they did with the faith given them: live in repentant and obedient faith or demand our own way which leads to eternal separation from God.

Focus Statement:

The forgiveness and grace that comes from Christ's one-time sacrifice not only opens the door to His kingdom but is the power that makes and keeps us as His disciples. He gives us His Spirit which works through Word and Sacrament to call us back to a life of discipleship whose goal is to build up His kingdom; now in the hearts of others and to keep us in faith until the Last Day when that kingdom explodes into all reality

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

Because Christ's gift of salvation comes to us as a free gift, we mistakenly see that life of faith lived out as being free from responsibilities; that we are saved to live as we desire and build up our own kingdom here on earth. Knowing sin is forgiven we make obedience secondary to our own goals in this life. We struggle and balk at the idea that we were saved for discipleship and cross bearing. We see being a Christian and being a disciple as two separate things. And when we look at what Jesus calls disciples to do we realize that we cannot live it out as He calls us to.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Through the power of Confession and Absolution we repent of all the times we forsake building His kingdom to build our own. Through our ongoing study of His Word and the gifts given in Word and Sacrament we learn what is involved in discipleship and how to better live it out. We look past the desire to create a heaven on earth and instead remain in faith to receive the inheritance of eternal life.

Subject Sentence: Discipleship Means Cross Bearing

Imagine you were given free Basic Cable subscription for life. You would have hundreds of channels to choose from. You would have access to all the local channels and those not so local that are a struggle to pull in even with an antenna. But you would be missing out on Premium Movie Channels, and many of the sports offerings. You would also have to watch all the commercials. You would have to satisfy yourself with the content that the basic channels offer that live up to the maxim “you get what you pay for”. And in the case of this example you truly get nothing. Now at Pastor Pretznov’s household Basic Cable service wouldn’t be all that bad. It includes Turner Classic Movies which is what my wife watches a good portion of the day. And best of all its commercial free. But for me I desire something more so would pay extra for internet so we could have the Premium Pay Services that are Netflix and Amazon Prime. But we do not pay for the Premium Packages from Xfinity that include the Premium Movie Channels and sports channels and all the bells and whistles. For us the cost is just not worth it

I think sometimes we view Christianity in a similar way. We see two different options: Basic Christianity and Premium Christianity. Basic Christianity is of course free. Christ paid the exorbitant price suffering and dying on the cross to pay for our membership. We cannot and would not pay for it on our own. Not only is it His free gift but in Baptism we have free installation. The gifts Christ won for us on the cross would be inaccessible to us if the Holy Spirit didn’t deliver them into your heart and my heart by faith. Basic Christianity comes with no strings attached and its available for any and all who believe. And that is the honest to goodness truth

But then there is a step up that you could refer to as Premium Christianity. This is also known as Discipleship. It is a life of faith that many believe is not for everybody. It involves making sacrifices such as the one pastors make to give up their time, their career and their money to attend seminary. And then take on a vocation when you are on-call 24-7. It’s the lifestyle of the missionary like James Rush who instead of working in here locally as an educator and living at home with family and friends finds himself called to a foreign country, leaving family, friends, and the comforts of home behind. Premium Christianity is also something that certain pious Christians might subscribe to because we suspect they

want to be seen as living a more holy life than others. Or maybe they are just wired that way. Either way both versions deliver the same gifts of salvation, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life. So why sacrifice for Premium Christianity when Basic does a soul just fine? Sure there might be times when Premium Christianity comes in handy: such as during rough times in our life or when a loved one passes. But after the crisis is over some cancel their Premium Subscription and settle back into basic Christianity.

But here's the problem with this premise. The Bible only knows one kind of Christianity. The kind that you and I were called into by the Father through the work of the Son as given by the Holy Spirit in the water and in the word. Christ paid the premium price for you and I so we could be Premium Christians, so we could be His disciples. The proper response when you and I believe and confess that He has made us right with the Father is to love Him enough to follow Him. And a follower is a disciple. Just as Christ called the twelve, and then later called Paul, and called three thousand souls on Pentecost He has called you and I. He has poured His love into our hearts. And our response? As He said in **John 14:15-16** ¹⁵ **"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, ¹⁷ even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you."** Our love is to be shown in obedience as motivated and directed by the Holy Spirit who has been given to all who believe.

So as Jesus addresses the disciples in our Gospel Lesson today know that He is also addressing you and me. He says (**Matthew 16:24**) **"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.** Suddenly this Premium version of Christianity doesn't sound as good as it once did. We love the idea of being forgiven for all our sins so that we can live out our lives on earth without punishment or guilt. But the idea of a cross brings to mind "sacrifice". Does that really have to be a part of the deal?

What does Jesus mean by **"take up your cross"**? Well first of all here is what He doesn't mean. He doesn't mean we need to suffer and die for sin as He did. His cross was to earn the forgiveness for the whole world. He left nothing to do in that arena. It has nothing to do with

punishment for your sin or earning God's favor or love. God loved you when you were yet a sinner.

One of the things it does mean is to be willing to die for your faith. Our English word "martyr" comes from the Greek word for being a witness. In the days of the persecution of the early church members witnessed their faith by being willing to suffer and die rather than renounce it. Sometimes they were made to watch their loved ones suffer and die, all the while being told all they had to do was confess Jesus was a fraud and they don't believe in Him. Refusing to deny Him their loved ones would be tortured and killed, and they would be left to deal with the sorrow, maybe to face death themselves days later. Here in North America this idea of suffering for the faith seems like a thing of the past. But in many countries today it is a reality for practicing Christians including in: North Korea, Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq among others. Last week when we welcomed new members one of the questions put to them is "Would you suffer all even death before you renounced your faith?" There may come a day when that question has teeth for us to; if not us but our children and grandchildren. The Bible says persecution will spread in the last days before Jesus returns.

But as Jesus says it also means (**Matthew 16:24**) "**let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.**" It means denying yourself. And to understand that let's look at the immediate context of Jesus' remarks. Peter had a short time before confessed by the power of the Spirit that Jesus "**is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.**" Jesus declared that upon this bolder of a confession He would build His Church. Then Jesus proceeded to describe what was the mission the Father had given His Son as the Christ (**Matthew 16:21**) "**From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.**" While this was the Father's will for the Son it was not part of Peter's vision for his future or Jesus' future. In Peter's plan Jesus went to Jerusalem and conquered all His enemies and established a Kingdom on earth where they would reign forever. If He suffered and was killed that would mean something similar for His followers. Peter did not leave his fishing business and all he had to go suffer and die. So he set about to correct Jesus

by telling Him that God was going to bless Him, not allow these awful things to happen. Jesus responded by saying **Matthew 16:23**) **“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man”** Peter was doing the work of Satan by standing in the way of God’s will and plan by asserting his will and plan that stood in opposition. And its not just his will that stands in opposition. Your will and my will naturally stand in opposition to God’s will since our will is all about building our own kingdom here on earth.

We desire a life where our sins are forgiven and with God’s blessings that flow to us, we can live out comfortable lives as we await His return. Our will usually does not include suffering and when suffering and death asserts itself into our life it’s a major problem. In fact the gifts that we receive from Him that are time, talents, and treasures we see as now belonging to us; for us to do with as we wish. To build our kingdom. But that means we are not working to build His kingdom. Christ addresses this as a big problem in **Matthew 16:26** **“For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?”** Our kingdom only lasts for as long as we live. Christ kingdom is the eternal kingdom that comes into our hearts bey faith now and will explode into total reality in the restoration of the original creation in the new heavens and new earth. Opposing God’s will by consistently building our own kingdom can have the effect of grieving the Holy Spirit. And when He leaves faith leaves with it. And a Jesus says there is nothing a man can offer to redeem His place in the eternal kingdom. So A Jesus warns in **Matthew 16:27** **“For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.”** That repayment is based on what you have done with His gift of faith. Did work with the Holy Spirit to strengthen that faith as you worked for God’s kingdom? Or did you walk away from it in favor of your own kingdom where suffering denying is a thing of the past?

You may find these very hard words. I hope you do. These are words of law that tell us what Jesus expects of us as His disciples. And we don’t have the power to do them. Not in the manner that Jesus expects. That’s why it was absolutely necessary for Him to go to Jerusalem. He lived the perfect life of kingdom building that is impossible for us as sin-filled

human beings. He had the power to cancel out our disobedience and pay the price to call us back to faith. He sends His Spirit to point out all the ways that we are using His gifts for our own selfish means and moves us to repent: to ask forgiveness and then turn away from our selfishness and turn towards Him. To see ourselves and the world through His eyes. To move us to be better managers and stewards of His gifts. To see and believe that working for His eternal kingdom is much better than trying to establish our own kingdom of heaven on this broken earth that is getting worse and worse each day. Through Confession and the Power we are given in the promises of the Absolution we can be those (**Matthew 16:25b**) **“whoever loses his life for my sake will find it”** We find the true gift of Christ that is life now and eternal life as the Spirit works in us and with us through the Means of Grace that are the Word and Sacrament.

And its in His hands I'd like to leave you today. I would like you to struggle with Him over the ways you may be using His gifts of time, talent, and treasure to build your own kingdom instead of His. I'd like you to ponder meditatively what the Spirit is saying to you in **Colossians 3:23-24** ²³ **Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men,** ²⁴ **knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.** There is no Basic Christianity and Premium Christianity. We have all been called by faith to be disciples of Christ. May the Spirit continue the work in you of denying yourself and being willing to pick up your cross and follow your Savior. He is not walking to leave you behind but is with you and carrying you, calling you back to serve Him right here in His kingdom. Amen.