

## The Cross is Not Optional

Matthew 16:21-28

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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. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." 23 But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

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. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life? 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. 28 Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom" (Matt 16:21-28).

It never ceases to amaze me how quickly we, as human beings, can swing from moments of brilliance and insight to moments of failure and defeat. It is not just the highs and lows that are remarkable to me; it is the speed of our ascent and descent. I have heard it said before that we love to make heroes, and we love to watch them fall. And there are plenty to watch because we human beings are a fickle lot.

So it should not surprise us to see Peter say, "You are the Christ, the son of the Living God" in Matthew 16:16 and then to hear Jesus say to him, "Get behind me Satan! You are a hindrance to me" only seven verses later. Peter after all is human, and he is prone, like all of us, to precipitous falls.

The problem here for Peter, however, is not just his humanity. The complicating factor is that Jesus is an enigma. He is often a bit confusing, and he doesn't fit their human expectations. Jesus is busting the categories in Peter's mind. So Peter's innate human fickleness, combined with the false categories as to what the Messiah was going to be like, create a situation where he "nails it" one minute and "blows it" the next.

Matthew shows us the categories, priorities, and non-optional things that are related to Jesus' ministry and following him. He is helping us see the priorities of Jesus and the ways those priorities were received. Our passage today is one of the clearest presentations as to what is central or non-optional when it comes to Jesus' ministry and being a follower of his. Some

suggest it is nearly as important as the Sermon on the Mount in defining Jesus' thinking and ministry.

It is also really important because if you fail to grasp the core of Jesus' message you could easily fall when life or Christianity doesn't turn out like you expected. This passage helps us define the right categories and priorities for a Biblical view of Christianity.

### **Four Insights Regarding the Cross and Christianity**

I want to give you four thoughts that emerge from this text which form some central and basic concepts in Jesus' ministry and what it means to follow him.

#### **1. The cross is central to God's plan (v 21)**

Verse 21 marks an important change in Jesus' ministry. He now begins to speak more clearly about the specifics of what his messianic mission entails. In other situations, Jesus was not very clear. But this is the first of four times where Jesus specifically identifies his coming death and resurrection (see also 17:22-23, 20:17-19, 26:1-2). In doing so he redefines for his disciples what the role of Messiah was going to look like.

Notice what he tells them:

- His ministry requires that he go to Jerusalem which is the epicenter of opposition and not a place of safety. Danger awaits them.
- He tells them that he will "suffer many things from the elders, priests and scribes." The most highly esteemed religious body will oppose him and cause him to suffer. The religious rulers will not welcome him; they will abuse him. The messiah will suffer.
- The most shocking statement of all is the fact that he will be killed. This does not fit with anyone's idea as to what is supposed to happen to the Messiah. The chosen one is not killed; he is victorious. Death is coming.
- Finally, he mentions that he will be raised on the third day. Jesus does not say that he will raise himself, but that he will be raised. Resurrection will come.

Now everything that Jesus says does not fit with the disciples' ideas and expectations as to what was going to be his fate as the Messiah. Psalm 2 reflects the tone of their view:

2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his anointed, saying, 3 "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us." 4 He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. 5 Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, 6 "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." 7 I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. 8 Ask of me, and I

will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. 9 You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel" (Ps 2:2-9).

That's their Messiah. In their minds, the Messianic office meant victory, status, and glory. Who could blame them? Therefore and as we'll see in a moment, Jesus' words hit a nerve.

But there is another important word in this verse; a word that tells us not just that this is going to happen, but that is **has** to happen. Verse 21 says "he began to show them that he must go...and suffer." The word "must" is small but loaded with meaning. One commentator says:

"this verb does not point us to the individual or heroic determination of Jesus, nor to the increasing opposition to the enemies, very real though that was, nor to a blind fate, nor to the arbitrary inscrutability of a distant divinity, nor to the psychological or religious needs of the Jews...but to a plan of God."<sup>1</sup>

You see, it is one thing to predict the future; it is another to say that this is part of the plan. It is one thing to say: "Bad things are going to happen;" yet another to say: "Bad things are going to happen on purpose." Jesus is showing them that his suffering is a divine necessity which will fulfill God's plans.

Now this will become even more apparent as Matthew's gospel unfolds, but for now the simple but profound point that we have to understand is this: the cross, with all of its suffering and shame, is central to the plan of God. The path of glory and honor for this messiah leads straight to the vilest symbol of human cruelty and punishment. And that is exactly as God intends it.

Christianity has always involved suffering that has divine purpose: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom 8:18-19). Therefore, we ought not be surprised at difficulties because they have been part of God's plan from the very beginning.

## **2. Other options than the cross are evil (vv 22-23)**

Oh how quickly Peter falls! He rightly declared that Jesus was the Christ, but he had too many preconceived ideas as to how things were going to turn out. Jesus' statement about his suffering and death was unthinkable to Peter. It is impossible to think that the Messiah would suffer such a fate. And that is why Peter pulls Jesus aside and began to rebuke him: "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." This was not just a suggestion or clarification. The word "rebuke" is the same word that Jesus uses to rebuke the waves in 8:26 and to a

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<sup>11</sup> Quoting Bonnard in Leon Morris, The Gospel According to Matthew, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 428

demon in 17:18.<sup>2</sup> So Peter is in Jesus' face here – likely even standing physically in his way. Jesus pushes back hard!

His response to Peter's rebuke is extremely pointed. He says four things:

- **"Get behind me."** Jesus tells Peter that he is out of line and that he needs to resume his position "following after Jesus, not taking him aside by walking ahead of him or at least beside him."<sup>3</sup>
- **"Satan."** This is not a good moment in Peter's life. The name Satan means adversary or enemy, and Jesus calls this name not to abuse him but because his ideas are adversarial. Peter had previously spoken on God's behalf, but now he is speaking for Satan.
- **"You are a hindrance to me."** Hindrance means stumbling block (skandalon in the Greek), and it implies a dangerous trap. The "rock" is now a stumbling block.
- **"You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."** Here is the ultimate problem! Peter declares what makes sense to him, and he failed to consider that his thoughts might not be in line with God's plans. Peter's pride and self-assurance make him an adversary of Jesus and an unknowing accomplice of the Devil.

This short exchange between Jesus is alarming because Peter's error is so common and yet so serious. Peter is guilty of using his human mind to assess the situation ("You are the Christ") and then to draw conclusions as to what should be done ("this will never happen to you"). God has a particular plan, and the plan doesn't fit Peter's preconceived ideas. He believes that there is another way. This is so common, so natural. To be human is to consider and evaluate other options. There must be other equally effective ways. And this is so dangerous! Our ideas are often are not just bad; they are opposing God's plan.

Here we find one of the great counter-cultural things about Christianity: there are things that God defines as the only way and all other options are rebellious, evil, and Satanic. In other words, God has a plan and anything other than that plan is not just a bad option; it is damnable.

Our world wants to believe that there are many other ways to be made right with God, but there is only one way – through trust in Christ. Our flesh would want us to believe that our plans and ideas are blessed by God, but there is only one plan – God's plan! And we must find it, relinquishing all claims to our agenda. The devil wants nothing more than to spoil the plan of God, and he has for centuries used the well-meaning but absolutely wrong rationalizations of sinful human beings to lead people astray. Satan, you see, doesn't care if it is some great heresy or just a suggestion of a man-made additional path for obedience. His only concern is

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<sup>2</sup> R.T. France, The Gospel of Matthew, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 20087), 634

<sup>3</sup> France, 634 (footnote 15).

that people are not on the one path that leads to life. His weapon of mass destruction is often mass distraction.

And cutting through all the pluralism this stark reality: other options besides the cross are not just bad; they are evil.

### **3. A cross-bearing calling is central to being follower of Jesus (v 24)**

Having defined what his ministry would entail and how wrong Peter's view is, Jesus turns to the rest of the disciples and defines for them the connection between suffering, their own cross, and the call to follow him. This is one of the most important passages in the Bible about what following Jesus means.

Jesus begins by saying "if anyone would come after me..." He is defining here what real discipleship looks like, and what it really means to be his follower. Jesus is defining and maybe redefining for some of them what success as a disciple really means. He gives three imperatives which are key characteristics:

First, a disciple must deny himself. This is both an identification of the major problem in discipleship and the over-arching tone of following Jesus. The major problem is self and the over-arching tone is self-denial. Therefore, a disciple must realize that self-preservation and self-exaltation are directly opposite of Jesus' way. To deny oneself is to set aside one's own interests and making loyalty to Jesus preeminent above everything – even one's own life. Denying yourself means a willing and definitive choice (thus the aorist tense) to surrender your claim of autonomy and to embrace a trust in Christ.

Second, a disciple must take up his cross. Imagine how shocking this statement would have been to the disciples. To take up one's cross carried with it "the imagery of the Roman custom of having the condemned person take up the horizontal beam of the cross and carry it to the place of execution, where the vertical post has already been erected."<sup>4</sup> This act of carrying one's cross was a death march, and it was filled with shame, mockery, and ridicule. You might think of it as what is called the "perp walk" in law enforcement where the accused is brought down a hallway or to a waiting vehicle. Or you could think of it as being put on some offenders list. Discipleship means a living death to self and a choice to embrace the shame of the world.

Third, a disciple continually follows Jesus. This command is in the present tense, and it has the meaning of a continuing action. To follow a teacher or rabbi in Palestine was to make oneself an apprentice, join his school, and walk around with him as his subject and student.<sup>5</sup> To take up one's cross is not just to bear some inconveniences or difficulties ("this is my cross to bear"). To bear one's cross means a chosen life of self-abasement, self-denial, shame, and ridicule all

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<sup>4</sup> David Turner, Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing, 2008), 412.

<sup>5</sup> Fredrick Bruner, The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 153.

in the name of Jesus. It means that you've gone public with being a disciple of Jesus and what comes your way because of that is embraced. It means that you have turned your back on yourself and now you live for the personal presence and identification with Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus is showing them that to be his disciple means a willingness to walk a path that is filled with self-denial, public identification with Jesus, and continual commitment to personally follow him. There are no self-exalting, incognitos, easy-street disciples. Not only is Jesus suggesting that he will suffer, but now he suggests that each of them will share in his suffering.

The apostle Peter picks up this theme in 1 Peter 4:12-14.

“12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you”

Jesus shows us that the cross defines not only his life but also our life as well. This is Jesus' way: the cross before crown, suffering before glory.<sup>7</sup>

#### **4. There are eternal consequences to a person's cross-related decisions (vv 25-28)**

After giving the proposition of what it means to be disciple, Jesus ups the ante significantly by talking about the eternal consequences of how the disciples respond to what he has just said. He wants them (and us) to understand that there is a coming judgment, and that there is a direct connection between this life and the next.

Jesus makes three statements that all start with the word “for” to show them the logic of his discipleship call, and then he makes a stunning final statement.

First, he says that self-preservation now leads to self-destruction and self-denial leads to self-fulfillment. Again, Jesus' way is backward: if you try to save your life – you will lose it; if you lose your life for his sake – you will find it. There can be no greater example of how absolutely counter-intuitive and counter-cultural Christianity is. Advancing self, saving face, making a name for yourself, making it big – these are our cultural brass rings. But the heart of the problem with all of them is that self is in the middle of them.

Francis Chan, the author of Crazy Love, recently resigned his church that he had planted and pastored for 16 years. A friend of mine heard him speak at the Southern Baptist Convention this year. I found an article on what he said:

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<sup>6</sup> Bruner, 152.

<sup>7</sup> Turner, 411.

Chan preached his last sermon at Cornerstone, which he founded, on the last Sunday of May. The well-known pastor had announced to his congregation in April that he would be leaving. For years, he was feeling restless and found himself getting too comfortable as his church grew to thousands and as he gained popularity in the Christian circle. "Somehow I got away from that and I became a professional pastor," he lamented. He was caught up with accomplishments and praying for his ministry. And he wasn't pursuing Jesus like he used to.

"The Bible says love the Lord, your God with all of your heart and all of your soul and all of your mind," he said. "[But] in our day and age it's hard to do anything with all of our heart, all our soul, all of our mind" especially in an age with text messaging, e-mail, Twitter and Facebook. "I'm going, 'Lord, I want to know you ... but I've caught myself where knowing you hasn't been enough. I've been wanting ministry, I've wanted to accomplish [things] ... I've been in that mode way too long and God, I just miss you,'"<sup>8</sup>

If you save your life, you'll lose it. But if you lose it, you'll find it.

Second, Jesus asks what the point is if you gain everything but you lose your life? He asks, "What shall a man give in return for his life?" Jesus' warning here is not for the unsuccessful; it is for the man or woman who, in their busyness, activity, and drive gains everything but has nothing! Jesus' warning is not for those who hit the bottom but for those who hit the top. It is not the bad things that get us; it is the good things. Listen to this indictment from Fredrick Bruner:

"At the Last Judgment some of us will be dumbfounded to discover that what we thought was the innocent seeking of good and beautiful things for ourselves and our children was actually a whoring after alien gods and the use of religion to advance our status."

Third, Jesus reminds us that he will return in glory, power, and judgment. The passage says, "he will repay each person according to what he has done." This is actually a promise of reward and hope, not just a statement of coming punishment. Jesus message is shifting from logic to hope. The message here is that nothing that is done in the name of Jesus is wasted. Nothing that is suffered is missed by the loving gaze of the One who suffered more than you and I can ever imagine.

Finally, Jesus makes a very interesting comment about some of the disciples not tasting death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. Now there are a number of different views on what Jesus means here, but the only one that seems plausible<sup>9</sup> to me is that Jesus is referring to what Peter, James, and John will see in the transfiguration.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.christianpost.com/article/20100618/professional-pastor-wants-to-love-jesus-again/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> It seems that the fulfillment of this has to be during the lifetime of the disciples or Jesus is wrong, and it has to be some sense of his full identity and power (kingdom). The only event that fits these two criteria is his transfiguration. Additionally, this passage is a serious challenge to those who believe the "kingdom" must always

In the transfiguration these disciples will see the full glory of the Son of God. It will be so awe-inspiring that they will not want to leave. They will see the beauty of a beloved Son (more on this next week). I wonder if Jesus talks about this because of the powerful motivation that it would be to see him like this. Consider John's words in 1 John 3:2-3 -

2 Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. 3 And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

What you see when you look at the cross has eternal consequences.

Do you see how important the centrality of the cross really is? It cannot ever be optional. If you miss the centrality of the cross in Jesus' life or in following him, you miss everything. The cross is central to God's plan. It is the only way; all other ways are evil. Being a disciple means embracing your own cross; it's not optional. And there are eternal consequences with what you do with the cross.

Jesus bore his cross, and those who follow him bear theirs. There is no other way; this is the only way. The cross is not optional because it is central to Christ's ministry, and it is central to the life of those who call themselves Christians.

Biblical Christianity involves the cross before the crown and suffering before glory. The world looks at this and laughs. We see it and rejoice.

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refer to and be limited to a future kingdom. Either Jesus is mistaken, the Bible is not inerrant or there must be some sense in which the kingdom is an already but not yet event.