

Matthew 16:13-28

Imagine a Marine Corps recruiting advertisement that says, "Sign up now. Travel to exotic locations. Get plenty of physical exercise. Enjoy the company of other young people, and free medical benefits"? We all know that's only part the story.

But that's exactly what the American church has done with the Good News. We stress only the pleasant aspects of salvation. I don't hear too many altar calls that go like this: *"Help wanted: long hours and low pay. Difficult work conditions and likely pain and suffering. Excellent retirement benefits. Call Now!"*

It's true that Jesus said *"whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst."* (John 4:14) And He promised, *"I have come that they may have life and have it to the full."* (John 10:10) He also assured us that *"My yoke is easy and my burden is light."* (Matt. 11:30). But friends, that's only part the story, and if that's all that we tell people we're not being honest with them.

Don't get me wrong. I do believe God wants to give us life at its best, life to its fullest, but that's according to His definition, not ours. What we tend to think of as a full life, is not what Jesus had in mind in this morning's Core Verse. We are at week 23 of Core 52 and this week's Core verse is 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."

This is a difficult text to preach, because it's not an easy text. It's not a popular message. This message isn't the one the one that puts books on the bestseller list. Preachers who preach this message don't become household names. Frankly, it's a message that might rub some of us the wrong way. It doesn't fit with some of the stuff we like to read and watch and listen to, and I'm talking about so-called Christian books, videos, podcasts and radio. That's because this is a message that doesn't promise your best life now. In fact, it seems to promise just the opposite.

James Montgomery Boice says this about our Core Verse:

We live in a day when a substantial part of the evangelical world wants a domesticated Jesus who "blesses, satisfies, fills, thrills, and strengthens his followers"¹⁸ but does not insist on a cross. What we need is the genuine Jesus who demands that his followers die to self and actually follow him.ⁱⁱ

Jesus doesn't promise us earthly success. He doesn't promise your best life now. Does he promise blessings? Absolutely. Does he fill us with his Spirit? Most certainly. Does he guide, lead and protect? Everyday. Does he do more than we could ask or imagine? Without a doubt. But he also calls us to sacrifice, surrender, suffering and submission.

Let's spend a few moments this morning looking at this Core Verse and thinking about what really means to be a follower of Jesus. This is one of those sayings of Jesus that is actually pretty easy to understand, but very difficult to live out. Some of his teachings are hard to understand, but others are simply hard to do. This is one of those.

Understanding it doesn't take a theology degree. Explaining it doesn't require a Greek dictionary. Living it requires a lifetime of loving him more and more. This morning I want to be totally honest with you about what it really means to follow Jesus. No easy answers. No rose colored promises. Jesus describes three basic steps in following him. There aren't three simply because I need three points in the sermon, but Jesus actually lists three things we must do to "come after him" – to be his disciple. You must deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow him.

I. **Deny Yourself**

The first step to follow Jesus is deny yourself. What this means is deny yourself. If you study the original Greek here you'll see that what Jesus means is deny yourself. If you compare this verse to other passages of Scripture it becomes very clear that what Jesus really wants of you is to deny yourself. Deny yourself means what?.....Say it out loud.....**DENY YOURSELF**.

Self-denial is a very unpleasant word. It's a very un-American word. It's a word that goes against every fiber of our being, and yet Jesus calls us to **self-denial**. The first thing you have to do to follow Jesus is to deny yourself.

We'd like it much more if Jesus said the first step in following Him was love yourself, accept yourself, believe in yourself, forgive yourself, comfort yourself, be true to yourself, to know your own truth, but no, he says what? "deny yourself."

Let's back up in the text and take a look at the events that led up to this so we can appreciate why Jesus made this statement to his disciples. Jesus is having a discussion with his

disciples. Jesus asks them who people say that he is. Jesus is at the peak of his popularity. Crowds follow him wherever he goes. They've seen the signs and miracles. They've been amazed at his teaching. Everywhere he goes there are rumors about who Jesus is. Some say that he's John the Baptist, others say that he's a great prophet, maybe he's even Elijah or Jeremiah returned.

But then Jesus makes this very personal. "What about you guys?" "Who do you say that I am?" "Who do you, Philip, who do you Nathaniel, who do you Thomas, who do you, Peter, who do you say I am?" You've spent more than two years with me. You've shared your lives with me. Day in and day out we've been together, so who do you think I am?

At this point, Peter makes one of the biggest, boldest, baddest proclamations of his life, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*" You are the Promised Messiah. You are the anointed, chosen Son of God. Peter gets it. He sees Jesus for who He really is. This is important, because this is the first time one of them really gets it. It's the first time any of them openly declare his divinity and call him the Christ.

And so Jesus blesses Peter "*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, ^c and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades ^d will not overcome it.*"

This is when Peter becomes Peter. To this his point he's been going by the name his parents gave him, Simon. Jesus now gives him a new name. It means rock. Jesus says "Simon, you are the rock. And you will be part of the foundation on which I will build my church." If you go on and read the first 10 chapters of Acts you will see how all of this happened. Not only that, though, Jesus says, "Peter, you didn't come up with this all by yourself. This was revealed to you by God. You were a mouthpiece of God." And that's how he would become foundational in the church, by being a mouthpiece of God.

From there, Jesus talks to them about his purpose as the Christ, the promised Messiah. He talks about his death at the hands of the religious leaders and his resurrection. Now Peter doesn't like this at all. It doesn't fit with his idea of a Messiah. Jewish fathers would tell their children, "One day the Messiah will come & set us free. He will ride on a prancing stallion. He will be a magnificent king with legions of soldiers behind him, wearing uniforms & holding

weapons of war. They will defeat our enemies & make them bow down before us. And we as God's chosen people will rule the world." That's what Peter wanted in a Messiah.

And so Peter biggest, boldest, stupidest proclamations of his life. Peter actually rebukes Jesus saying that this will never happen. Basically, he says, "When hell freezes over." And Jesus responds in the harshest of terms, "*Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.*" In about 3 minutes, Peter goes from one of his best moments to one of his worst. He goes from being a mouthpiece of God, to being a mouthpiece of Satan. Again Jesus calls Peter a rock, but this time he's not a foundation stone you build on, but a stumbling stone you trip over.

Boy, how much can we be like Peter? We can go from having a wonderful moment to one of our worst moments in no time flat. We can say something brilliant and wise one moment, and the next moment say something stupid and foolish. We can show great faith one day and the next be remarkably faithless. Can any of you identify with that?

How did Peter stumble into this? Because he had in mind the things of men and not the things of God. He tried to force upon Jesus the kind of savior he wanted. When we let our own selfish desires control us we will try to force Jesus to be the kind of Savior we want. We will worship a God who gives us the things we want, but we're not really his disciple. We're not really following Him. We're trying to force Him to follow us.

To follow Jesus you must deny yourself. Denying yourself means you won't be ruled by your selfish desires, your life won't be controlled by your physical appetites, you won't live according to the whims of what's popular. You will be willing to set all of those things aside to pursue the things God wants.

We have a choice between the things of God versus the things of men. The things of men say, "this is my life, and I can do with it what I want. I can make my own choices and go where I want." The things of God say, "God, my life is yours, do with it what you want. Lead me and I will follow." The things of men say, "These are my dreams, these are my rights, this is my stuff, I can do with them what I want." The things of God say, "Lord take my dream, take my rights, take my stuff. It's all yours. I surrender it all. My dreams, my education, my career, my

house, my car, my 401K, my iPhone, my Xbox, my relationships, my marriage, my boyfriend, my girlfriend all my romantic hopes, Lord, it's all yours. Do with it WHATEVER you want.

II. Take Up Your Cross

The second step to be a disciple of Jesus is to take up your cross. We sometimes talk about bearing a cross as if it's enduring some hardship in life. "I guess this is just my cross to bear." We'll hear people say.

But that's not at all what Jesus had in mind. 1st Century Jews understood exactly what this symbolism meant. Someone who took up their cross was on their way to die. To willingly take up a cross was the ultimate self-denial. Taking up your cross is a complete surrender of your life.

Crucifixion is an ancient form of execution that predates the Romans and has been used in many cultures outside of Rome. The Romans, however, elevated this particular style of capital punishment into a science. According to Roman historians, the accused were often forced to carry their own cross beam known as the patibulum to the place of execution. These would weigh around 100 pounds. Not impossible to carry, but certainly burdensome, especially if you've been whipped and beaten like Jesus.

If you are carrying your own cross, then that means one thing. You are on your way to die. You are not on your way to a fellowship dinner. You're not on your way to a birthday party, or a football game. You are on your way to the place of execution, and you are carrying your own death penalty. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who gave his own life resisting the Nazi state of Adolph Hitler put it best, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

The call of discipleship is a call to surrender the whole of our lives. Not just a part. Not just some of the time. God isn't just looking for the religious or spiritual part. He isn't just looking for your Sunday mornings. He's looking for your whole life. And, if necessary, He's looking for your life itself.

We live in a time and place where most of us will never be faced with that choice between faith and life. We think of that as something that happened to 1st Century Christians thrown before lions, or to believers in the Middle Ages who were burned at the stake. It's something that we read about in Foxe's book of Martyr's but, it's not a reality of our lives.

Although it's not unheard of. You've heard the story of Cassie Bernall, the student who was killed in the Columbine massacre in part because of her faith.

We need to realize though, that's not how it is in most of the world? Do you know more Christians died for their faith in the last century than any other century of church history? Statistically speaking there's a greater chance of a Christian dying for their faith today, than any other time in history. And it's a growing threat. Those of you who are younger may be faced with that very real choice.

I remember one time years ago when our church was helping a young lady whose husband was an addict. He would disappear for weeks at a time. It was during one of those times when our church was able to minister to her and the kids. Not only did we help her physically, but we reached her family for Christ, and they became of part of our church family.

When the husband returned he would abuse her and the kids, and pawn everything she'd worked so hard for. She was working full-time and going to school. One time, he came home after being gone a couple of months and sold the washer and dryer she just bought for more drug money. It was a very harmful, abusive situation. Our church managed to get this lady and her children into a shelter. The husband then shows up at my office and threatened to shoot me if I didn't tell him where she was. Let me tell you a lot can go through your mind in about 10 seconds. I didn't know if my entire life hung on the balance of what I said next. In that moment I had to die to myself. What I said was "Go ahead and shoot me, but I'm not telling you where she is. I got machine gunned with a bunch of swear words, but that was it. But I made a choice in my heart that has forever changed my life.

It's a choice we all need to make now. We will never be able to surrender our lives physically, if we don't first surrender our life spiritually in small ways every day. You may not face down a communist firing squad or the razor sharp blade of an Islamic fatwa. You may not have your house burned by ransacking Hindu mobs. You may never have to face such a scenario. But every single one of us makes that choice through a hundred smaller choices every day. Smaller choices that either put God on the throne of our hearts, or usurp that place and put me, myself, and I in his place.

Interestingly enough, Peter would learn exactly what it meant to take up his cross. Church history tells us that he was crucified during a time of persecution under the Roman emperor Nero. He felt unworthy to be crucified in the same manner that Jesus was and so he requested to be crucified upside down.

III. Follow Jesus

First, you must deny yourself. Secondly, you must take up your cross, and the third thing you must do to be a disciple of Jesus, you must follow him. Jesus doesn't ask us to deny ourselves or take up our cross just to take away our good time. We say no to those things to say yes to Him. We can't go in two directions at once. The Christian life isn't just a list of don'ts. It's not even really about denying all of that other stuff. We only deny that so that we are free to follow Jesus. It's about a relationship with Him. We can't follow the world and follow Jesus at the same time. They go in two separate directions. It's about knowing him. It's about loving him.

Saying "No" to the world, saying "No" to the things of men is much easier when you are saying "Yes" to him. You're saying yes to your Creator, yes to your Savior, yes to the one who loves you fully and perfectly, who knows you intimately, and knows the purpose for which you were created.

Let me tell you about someone who denied himself, took up his cross and followed Jesus. There was a young pastor in Zimbabwe, Africa. He was killed for his faith in Christ. After his death this note was found in his office.

"I am part of the fellowship of the unashamed. I have the Holy Spirit's power. The die has been cast. I have stepped over the line. The decision has been made. I am a disciple of Jesus Christ. I won't look back, let up, slow down, back away or be still. My past is redeemed, my present makes sense, my future is secure.

I am finished and done with low living, sight walking, smooth knees, colourless dreams, chained visions, worldly talking, cheap living and warped goals.

I no longer need pre-eminence, prosperity, position, promotions, plaudits or popularity. I don't have to be right, first, tops, recognised, praised, regarded or rewarded. I now live by faith, lean in His presence, walk by patience, am uplifted by prayer, and I labour with power.

My face is set, my gait is fast, my goal is Heaven, my road is narrow, my way is rough,

my companions are few, my guide is reliable, my mission is clear. I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, deluded or delayed. I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of the enemy, pander at the pool of popularity, or meander in the maze of mediocrity.

I won't give up, shut up or let up until I have prayed up and paid up for the cause of Jesus Christ.

I must go till he comes, give till I drop, preach till everyone knows, work till he stops me. And when He comes for His own, He will have no trouble recognizing me because my banner will have been clear!"

Conclusion

This morning we offer you a cross. Not a life of ease, or a church that is perfect with all the solutions to your problems. We can't guarantee you success on your job. We can't promise that your marriage won't fail. We can't promise that you'll stop having problems at home. All we really have to offer is Jesus Christ & his cross. Will you take up the cross? Will you follow Him? Will you deny yourself to have a relationship with the one who gave all to know you? Will you come as we stand & as we sing?

⁸D. A. Carson, *God with Us: Themes from Matthew* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1985), 101.

³Boice, J. M. (2001). *The Gospel of Matthew* (317). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books.