

The Savior, Self-denial and the Second Coming

Matt. 16:21-28

Intro. This morning we come to a passage where in basic terms Jesus tells His disciples how a life of following Him is to be lived. Before we get to our text, I want you to see **I Pet. 2:1 - To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps.** As a child, I'm sure you remember playing, Follow the Leader or Simon Says. As a follower, we did whatever goofy thing the leader did whether it was hopping on one foot or rubbing our head and stomach at the same time. The game's object was to concentrate on the leader and imitate whatever movements he/she made. Those games run pretty close to what Peter meant when He said we should follow in Christ's steps... even when following Him involves some form of suffering. Jesus is our leader. We are His followers. His life provides the example we must follow. The difference is this...following Jesus isn't a game. It's a life or death matter.

Another verse in **I Jn. 2:6** lays down the same instruction for living the Christian life. **Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did.** Here John is talking about the same thing. We must **walk or live our lives**, just as Jesus lived His life. I remember a Sunday snow storm when the accumulated snow was above the tops of our boots. My dad blazed a trail to the car and told my sibs and me to step in his footprints. That's the idea here. Walking as Jesus did is doing our best to follow His example and walk in His tracks. Some have gotten off the rails in their thinking about what it means to do this. They retreat from society and put on odd clothing. They let their facial hair grow and give away all their wealth. They do all this in an attempt **to walk as Jesus did.** They try to copy all the externals about Jesus, yet often miss the point so clearly made in the verses before us this morning.

It's been a while since we studied Matthew's Gospel together, so let's take a moment to be reminded where we are in the book and what's happening. For 3 yrs., Jesus had traveled from place to place doing good. Everything He said and did proved He is the One...the Messiah Israel had been waiting for. Yet those who led and represented the nation rejected Him. He didn't fit the profile of the conquering, kingdom-building-Messiah they were looking for. Though His miracles were undeniable, the crowds were confused and uncertain about who Jesus is. Following their spiritual leaders, most came down on the side of unbelief and rejection.

Chap.16 opens with the Scribes and Pharisees demanding that Jesus prove Himself by performing some spectacular sign. But knowing their hearts, Jesus refused. Though it seems counterintuitive, saving faith isn't produced by spectacular demonstrations. Faith is a matter of the human will responding to the divine Word. Jesus then warned His followers about the yeast...the contaminating influence of unbelief and unbelieving men like the Scribes and Pharisees.

Having traveled north to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked His disciples who people were saying He was. After they told Him the people were saying He was one of the prophets resurrected to life, Jesus said, "**But who do you say that I am?**" As he often did, Peter spoke for the Twelve and said, "**You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.**" - **v.18** Jesus explained that Peter was blessed because he hadn't come to this conclusion on his own. God the Father had revealed this to Peter. Then Jesus went on to explain that He would build His Church. As an apostle, Peter, like a rock, would have a foundational place in the construction of the Church. The section ends with divine authority entrusted to the Church.

The phrase, **From that time on** in **v.21** signals a distinct change in Christ's ministry. The ministry to the crowds had now ended. Though Jesus would again address Israel's spiritual leaders, the main focus of His ministry now turns to His disciples.

Though Jesus would repeatedly speak of His suffering and the cross-death that was ahead for Him, the disciples struggled to understand and believe such things could actually happen to Him.

1. The footsteps of Jesus – vs. 21-23 - From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" Jesus turned and said to Peter, "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."

Did you ever recognize someone you know by name but not fully realize who they were? It happened to me during a college visit. The President of Washington Bible College introduced himself to me as Mr. Miles. I asked Mr. Miles if he had a position at the college. With false humility he said, "Well yes, I'm a custodian." Because he wasn't dressed like a custodian I suspected he was something more than that (not that there's anything wrong with being a custodian). So fun-loving-guy that I am, I played along and said, "Well, I've noticed how clean you keep the place." At that, President Miles cleared his throat and muttered, "I'm the college president." I knew who Mr. Miles was, I just didn't realize what he was.

Peter just made a stupendous confession. He said, "**You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.**" Doctrinally, Peter was right on the money. He identified Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. He knew who Jesus was. The trouble was...neither Peter nor any of the disciples were in tune with what Jesus had come to do. Along with the nation, their idea of the Messiah was a conquering hero who would lead a revolution to throw off Roman domination and establish a utopian kingdom. Nothing was further from their thoughts than a Messiah who would suffer, die and be raised to life again. They knew the name Jesus but didn't know remember what His name meant. In **Matt. 1:21** the angel spoke to Joseph and said, "**She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because He will save his people from their sins.**" Somehow they still didn't realize the government that oppressed them wasn't as serious a threat as the sin that condemned them. They didn't yet realize that Jesus had come to resolve their sin problem not their Caesar problem. Still today, many Christians have this confused. The ship is going down while many are playing shuffleboard on the deck! We get all worked up about politics when we ought to be worked up about the lost who need the Gospel.

So what Jesus told His disciples that day was met with resistance. As you can see on the sermon notes, I've divided the content of **vs. 21-23** into five imperatives.

First, Jesus said He must go to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the city of sacrifice...the city exalted by God...the city where God had chosen to reside and meet with man. The Temple was built on Mt. Moriah where centuries earlier, Abraham met with Melchizedek, the King of Salem. On this sacred spot Abraham's faith was tested when God asked him to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. But when Abraham raised his knife to slay his son, the Angel of the Lord stopped him. Today we know the Angel of the Lord was the pre-incarnate Christ. The ram caught in the thicket was provided in place of Isaac. Later after the Law was given, David conquered the Jebusites who inhabited Salem which was renamed, Jerusalem, the city of peace. Because of the perpetual conflict surrounding Jerusalem, no city has ever been less worthy of its name. The Temple in Jerusalem was then built by David's son, Solomon. On its sacred altar, hundreds of thousands of animals were sacrificed to atone for the sins of God's people. Yet each of these sacrifices pointed to the one ultimate and final sacrifice...the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. But Israel refused to recognize the Lamb of God when He appeared. They were more interested in a powerful, conquering Messiah, than a meek and lowly Messiah who would die for their sins.

The official position out of Jerusalem was that Jesus was an imposter who must be eliminated. So, because of the hostilities awaiting Him there, Jesus and His disciples avoided Jerusalem. As we see in the first verses of chap. 16, this forced the religious leaders to come to Him. Even now, Jesus was in Gentile territory, about 100 miles north of Jerusalem. But here Jesus said something distressing. He told His disciples He must go there. He must return to the city where He was hated.

Could it be that Jerusalem's attitude toward Jesus has changed? Not at all! The hostility had turned to conspiracy. Jesus knew the religious leaders were conspiring how they might kill Him (legally, of course). Would Jesus lead a rebellion when He got there? No! He offered Himself peacefully. But the time was drawing near. Passover was just a short time away. Unlike all the previous Passovers since the time of Moses, this time the Lamb who is God would be sacrificed. The plan God conceived before creation was about to unfold. With perfect insight, Jesus knew all about the suffering that awaited Him at Jerusalem. Yet He told His disciples He **must** go there. He loved us that much!

Second, Jesus said He must **suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law**. Thanks to actor James Caviezel we can begin to imagine the physical suffering Jesus endured...the blows and beatings...the nails that pierced his hands and feet...the spear that penetrated His side. Less known is the injustice and emotional abuse He suffered. Because Jesus is the perfect man, His suffering was more intense than it could be for any other man. The One who loved more deeply than any other, suffered the pain of rejection more deeply than any other. It's important for us to remember that Jesus knew all this beforehand. Nothing came as a surprise!

Third, Jesus said **He must be killed**. Unlike the story of Abraham and Isaac, there would be no last minute reprieve...no stay of execution. God's hand would not be held back. There would be no substitutionary sacrifice for Jesus...no ram caught in the thicket. Instead, Jesus would become the substitutionary sacrifice for us...He would die the death we deserved.

Fourth, Jesus said **He must be raised to life on the third day**. Jesus told His disciples His death would not be the end. The disciples had witnessed hundreds of crucifixions and knew victims never survived. But Jesus said He would be the exception. He would die, but then **be raised to life on the third day**. It's so true to life to see how slow the disciples were to take Jesus at His Word...to believe He means what He says and says what He means.

A change comes in **v.22** and **23**. The word **must** doesn't appear as it did in **v.21**. But if we read between the lines, the sense of the word **must** is clearly there. Here Jesus spoke to Peter insisting that He must not be deterred by Satan or by of His followers. Let me read **vs. 22, 23** again. **Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" Jesus turned and said to Peter, "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."**

Peter's rebuke seems like a rerun of **Matt. 4** where Satan tempted Jesus to grab the glory of the kingdom without the cross...to sidestep God's plan and to obey him instead of His Father. Poor Peter. He's talking like a man whose vision is myopic and clouded. He doesn't realize the power of the cross. He doesn't understand that the greatest outpouring of divine love was about to take place. Just moments earlier, Peter confessed that Jesus is the Son of God. Now he presumes to say, "*Jesus, You don't know what you're doing! This shall never happen to You!*" Once again Peter knew who Jesus was but He didn't know what He came to do. Here was a colossal case of mistaken identity. Peter was completely out of step with the redemptive plan of God.

So Jesus turned to Peter and said, "**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.**"

We shouldn't imagine that Peter was actually a personification of Satan. He simply was a man out of tune with God and God's program. He was thinking like a man who had been influenced by Satan and human reasoning rather than by God.

Now picture this. Jesus was facing Peter when He said, **Get behind me, Satan.** Since Peter was so influenced by Satan at that moment, it was as though Satan was standing between them. Though Peter didn't realize what was happening, he was following Satan instead of Jesus. So Jesus said, get out of the way...get behind me where you belong. Your rightful place is follower, not leader!

Say listen, is such a thing possible? Is it possible to be so influenced by someone or something other than Christ? Listen to **Eph. 2:1, 2 - As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.** Written to contentious evil-speaking believers, **Jas. 3:15 - Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil.** Satan's main objective is to influence and in effect, to come between human beings and Christ. When he energizes the future world ruler, he's called the Anti-Christ...or "the instead of Christ." Whether saved or unsaved, Satan wants to turn our minds against the things of God. At that moment, Satan had gained control over Peter's thoughts. That's frightening!

But the point is this...the response of Jesus proved that He must not be deterred by Satan or by His followers. Peter didn't know what he was saying or doing and this was nothing new for him. But if Jesus had followed Peter's advice, we wouldn't be saved today. Imagine that! Speaking in the flesh under Satan's influence, Peter opposed the salvation God planned before creation! How wrong can we be when we aren't following Jesus? This wrong! Terrible, godless things have been done with good intentions by people who were guided by influences not from God.

2. The footsteps of followers – vs. 24-26 - Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Having just told His disciples what He must do, Jesus then told His disciples what they must do. Everything Jesus had been teaching His disciples led up to this. In **Matt. 4:19** Jesus said, "**Come, follow me...**" He urged men to follow Him again in **Matt. 8, 9**. Then in **Matt. 10:25** Jesus explained that following Him means being changed to be like Him. **It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master.** In **vs. 37-39** of that chapter Jesus said, "**Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.** So there was nothing new about Christ's command to follow Him. What is new is the clear explanation of where following His footsteps would lead. So with **vs. 21-23** as the basis and example, Jesus proceeded to outline the cost of true discipleship or the terms by which the Christian life is to be lived.

First, we who believe must **come after Jesus.** - **v. 24** The meaning of **come after** is uncomplicated and very simple. Jesus must be first, the leader, the authority in our lives. We must never presume to lead Him or ask Him to follow us...we must **come after** Him. To the crowd of unbelievers in **Mk. 8:34** to **come after** Jesus applied to trusting Him for salvation. To believers, including the Twelve, **come after Me** is a call to obedience...a call to submit to Christ's Lordship. The perfect example of what come after means is the way Jesus consistently submitted to His Father's lead.

Second, we who believe must **deny** ourselves (v. 24) This is the most essential requirement of discipleship. The word deny is from *aparneomai* which means to completely disown, to utterly separate oneself from someone else. This same word was used later in **Matt. 26** when Peter denied his relationship to Jesus. Yet this word doesn't mean to deny someone else, it refers to denying ourselves. We are to utterly disown the sinful person we were before we trusted Christ to save us. The **self** Jesus referred to is the natural, sinful, rebellious self at the center of every fallen human being. Self-denial is saying "no" to instincts and impulses that once governed our lives.

Third, we who believe **must take up his cross** – v.24. A great deal of confusion about what this means can be avoided if we simply consider the historical context. To people of that day, a wooden crossbeam was a concrete and vivid reality. Historians say that thousands of dissidents and criminals were crucified under Roman authority during the lifetime of Christ. Just as we have become painfully aware of what beheading is, the people of that day were well acquainted with crucifixion. There was no mystery about it. The disciples who first heard this imperative understood that Jesus meant they must be willing to take up his/her cross and begin a death march. To be Christ's disciple involves a willingness to suffer the injustice / the indignities / the pain / and even death like a condemned criminal. To confirm this, listen to **I Pet. 4:12-14** - **Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.**

Fourth, we must follow Jesus – v. 24. To **follow Jesus** describes a life of loyal obedience where His pattern of life becomes our own. Just as Jesus surrendered Himself to do His Father's will, it's a life where our will is surrendered to His. Remember the warning Jesus gave in **Matt. 7:21**. There He said, "**Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.** Our faith is proved genuine not by words we say, but by actions...by what we do. It may involve going where we don't want to go / saying what others are don't want to hear / and doing things we wouldn't naturally want to do.

Then finally, **vs. 25, 26** explains that we must not allow ourselves **to be deterred by self-preservation or fleshly desires**. Let me read **vs. 25, 26** again - **For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?** Here Jesus alerts His disciples to two specific temptations that can prevent us from following in His steps. The first is **self-preservation** or the drive to play it safe at all costs. Self-preservation is a natural instinct that must be set to the curb in order to follow Christ.

I caused a small firestorm in the church I pastored many moons ago. The mistake I made was simply this...I phoned to ask our elderly church moderator if he would like to join me as I made a visit to a patient at Cleveland Clinic. He agreed and we arranged a time to go. Before I left the house to pick him up, I received a call from his daughter. In sheer panic she told me she felt Cleveland Clinic was in a neighborhood too dangerous for her father. She painted a picture of bullets whizzing through the air and streets crawling with muggers. She didn't say this, but my immediate take away was this... "*Who cares if the pastor get's shot...that's his job!*" The next call I received was the moderator's wife who was in passionate agreement with her daughter. Finally, the moderator called and said, "*Pastor, I'd better not go with you.*" I was absolutely stunned. The match that lit this whole firestorm was that I asked a fellow believer to make a hospital call with me. Now that's a dramatic example, but self-preservation can be paralyzing. The instinct to play it safe sidelines many from doing God's will. I'm no hero in this respect, but I have to admit...each time I think about another trip to Russia, I have to pray my way out of the anxiety.

But here's the thing...you can't play it safe while denying yourself, taking up your cross, or following Jesus. These can't be done at the same time. Following Jesus requires a willingness to take the risk of being misunderstood / unappreciated / unfriended / and maybe even to put your life on the line.

The second temptation that prevents us from following in Christ's steps is fleshly desire. **v. 26** is the verse God's Spirit used to lead my father to Christ. **What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?** That day my father realized he was chasing after all the wrong things...things that could never satisfy...things that were empty and temporary. He realized the little he had to offer God was nothing when compared with all God had already given him. In down to earth terms, do you know what Jesus did in **vs. 25, 26?** He laid the cards on the table face up. He spoke candidly and honestly about what really matters in life. He wanted disciples then and now to realize what it costs to be His follower. He wants us to understand the paradox that true life is only found when we surrender our lives to Him.

Have you done that? Are you doing that? The Church in America is chock full of believers who in practice, have dodged these verses. We tend to play it safe while pursuing comfort and things instead of Christ's kingdom and His righteousness. While salvation is free...and you'll never hear me say otherwise...discipleship or following Jesus...is costly. To deny self and take up our cross to follow Jesus, costs everything.

Paul summed up discipleship in light of Christ's sacrifice for us in **II Cor. 5:15 - And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised again.**

Time only allows me to read the last two verses. They contain a promise and a mystery. To get in on the conversation about these verses, you'll have to come back tonight at 6 PM.

3. The footnote of certain victory – vs. 27, 28 - For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Eight words in these final verses explain why walking in the steps of Jesus is entirely worthwhile. The words are these...**the Son of Man is going to come...** The Palm Sunday King who was rejected and crucified, rose from the dead and ascended to heaven where He is seated at the right hand of His Father. His utter selflessness and suffering was rewarded with exaltation and glory. His promise to all who follow Him is this... **"Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done."** – Rev. 22:12

When we stand before Jesus that day, I'm convinced the main question He will ask each believer is this... *"Did you follow in my steps? / Did you walk as I walked?"*