



Matthew 16:24–26

24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For whoever wants to save their life[a] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. 26 What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”

Reflection

Jesus' disciples almost didn't know where to look. Their emotions were in turmoil. Great joy, shock, confusion, disappointment, and sympathy for Peter roiled around inside of them. Just moments before, and written indelibly in their minds forever, Peter had become to the first person in history to put voice to these words, saying to Jesus,

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

They'd witnessed a momentous moment in history. For hundreds of years faithful Jews who had lived in awe of God, and loved his word, had daily searched the

Scriptures in anticipation of this day. Today, the promises of Scripture were fulfilled before their very eyes. The Messiah was finally here. Then Jesus took them to new heights, honouring Peter and setting before their eyes a vision of the indestructible kingdom that Jesus would build using their ministry as its foundation. Not even the power of death would be able to overcome it!

And then in a heartbeat, all their dreams were dashed. This cannot be happening! The Messiah whom God had sent to take back Jerusalem and reign on the throne of David forever had just told them that they would be marching on Jerusalem but that he was going there to suffer and to die.

Peter put voice to the words that were on

every one of their hearts,

“Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”

And then their confusion and disappointment turned into plain shock when Jesus turned and rebuked Peter as if he were Satan himself. ‘Get behind me Satan!’ Jesus’ words cut like a knife. And they didn’t just cut Peter but each and everyone one of them. It was all falling apart. Their dreams of retaking Jerusalem ahead of an all-conquering army were in tatters, torn apart by the words of the Messiah himself. Jesus rebuked them, ‘these are human concerns, not God’s concerns; this is your will not God’s will, your plans for me not God’s plan for me.’

Into this turmoil of emotions Jesus says to his disciples in today's passage,

24 ... “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.
25 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.

He'd said something very similar before, in Matthew 10:38 and 39 but they hadn't understood him. There he said,

10:38 Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

But here, after talk of marching into Jerusalem to his death then following it with,

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

Here, reality was beginning to dawn. I’m going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. ‘Will you follow me or not? I’m following my Father’s will and not my own. If you want to be my disciples, you too must deny yourselves. This means no longer following *your plans* for your life, but following *God’s plan* for your life; in other words taking up your cross and following me. It may not mean dying, but it will mean following in my footsteps which will mean suffering and sacrifice in this world. In fact from the world’s perspective it will be like

losing your life. Turning your back on all those self-seeking pleasures, plans and pursuits. You'll lose all those, but in doing so you'll gain eternal life. And in the end what good is it for a person to gain the whole world – influence, success, power, money – and yet forfeit their soul? And in the end, what is more valuable than a person's soul? What wouldn't any person pay, or offer, or exchange for eternal life?'

Some profound words from Jesus and yet in this emotion charged moment Jesus' words proved too much for his disciples to process at once. But they got there in the end and in many ways that is the message of today's passage. Discipleship isn't simply a door to be entered, but a path to be followed that ends with the ultimate prize. But it is a difficult path which begins with

denying self and going against our natural sinful tendencies to place ourselves as number one and as king over our own lives. Instead, as members of the kingdom of God, we acknowledge God's rule and reign over our lives. Denying ourselves, we follow him.

How does Jesus describe a life like this? The words he uses are 'carrying your cross', which is dying to self, and journeying through life under the constant weight of choosing his will over our own in a world that makes this a constant battle. Elsewhere Jesus says this burden is light, as the joy of the future invades the present, and as the goodness of right living satisfies like nothing else can. But the sense of this passage is that the Christian journey is equally one of suffering and sacrifice.

Sometimes when people talk of carrying their cross they speak of some unfortunate circumstance in life using the phrase 'we all have our cross to bear.' But this isn't at all what Jesus means in our passage. Carrying our cross is self-denial, the daily sacrifice of placing God and others before ourselves. It's living a kingdom orientated life over a self-orientated life. Here are some examples. Cross bearing involves prayer and bible study, in place of pastimes that we might otherwise prefer doing. Cross bearing involves the items Jesus lists in Matthew 25: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, receiving the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and supporting persecuted Christians. Cross bearing involves standing up for what is right and shar-

ing the gospel with those who may react against it with hostility. None of these actions are easy. They involve denying one's self, time, money and convenience. But they are good and right. At times these actions seem pointless, because the gifts are abused or we're abused in the act of giving them. But ultimately there is nothing more valuable that we can spend our time doing on this earth.

Think & Pray

This passage has implications for us all and asks some difficult questions of each one of us. Would you characterise your life as one of denying self? Putting God and his kingdom priorities first will have a visible impact on the nature of your life. On your finances, on the way you use your spare

time, on the conversations you have, on the values you instill in your children, on the way you conduct yourself at work. When your work colleagues look at you do they see someone who denies self, or someone who looks exactly like they do? Another tough question is this one. Is the focus of your life carrying your cross or gaining the whole world? As difficult as it is to own up to in wealthy western societies these two are polar opposites and represent the source of so much unresolved tension that sits just below the surface in our Christian lives. Try as we might, we cannot serve two masters, we can't serve God and money. It's a recipe for conflicted and unfruitful life, and yet this is one of our deepest struggles in countries like ours that have been so blessed by God.

Close our time this morning by praying. The Christian journey may be hard but the ultimate reward makes every moment 10,000 times worth it. And there is also the daily satisfaction in a life well lived. Doing what is right and good is its own reward. Pray that you would do what is right and good today. That you would choose God's will over your own, laying down your life in service of those around, and in so doing follow the example of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. To him be the glory. Amen.