



Scripture and Sermon

August 30, 2020

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Matthew 16:21-28

21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of 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, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." 23 But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

27 "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. 28 Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Sermon:

Were some of these verses familiar to any of you? Which ones did you hear and recognize right away? (Listen) For me, when I read it the first time, I recognized, "Get behind me, Satan!" "deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" "gain the whole world but forfeit their life."

These verses are familiar to many of us because they are phrases that people have loved to pluck out this passage and use for various reasons. "Get behind me, Satan" became a popular retort in recent years; the phrase take up your cross and follow Jesus is often used for altar calls or when people evangelize, it is rewritten for the phrase "this is your cross to bear" as well; similarly the rhetorical question of "what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?" is a phrase often used to try to convince people to convert to Christianity or commit their life to Jesus. I feel like I most often hear those last two when people are trying to guilt or shame someone into

being a Christian or a better follower of Jesus, or convince someone that a hardship or struggle is something that they should passively accept.

Many of the verses of this passage could stand alone and have something powerful to say, but I find it to be too bad that people like to pull them out alone and don't get to consider the whole context of the passage. Because oh boy does this passage have some things to say when you pull it all together!

Since we popped over to Romans last week, we missed the story in Matthew where Jesus asks the Disciples if they know who he is and Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah. At this Jesus proclaimed "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church" and "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven" and the text says he "sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah." I won't linger on this, but from what I have learned, this was not a permanent order, but more of a "Don't go telling anyone about this for now."

So it is after that encounter that our text from today comes. From verse 21, we are told that Jesus is now teaching only his disciples, which will be the case for the next few chapters. This is important, because it tells us that these messages are for those who are already disciples of Christ, not those Jesus is hoping to convert. These are teachings to help the disciples grow into better disciples.

So Jesus is now talking with the church people, those who we know already get that he is the Messiah, but now is sharing what it *means* for him to be the Messiah. It's like he is saying, "Now that you've figured out who I am, this is what is going to happen and this is what it means." Part of what it means is what will happen to Jesus, being that he will go to Jerusalem where he knows that he will suffer, be killed, and be resurrected. A couple of important notes here. This is one of many passages that have been used against Jewish people as a whole, used to support anti-semitism. That is an unfair use as the text specifically names that Jesus will undergo suffering at the hands of "the elders and chief priests and scribes." It groups specifically the Jewish LEADERS as those who would be responsible for Jesus's death, not Jewish people as a whole. That said, the way that this sentence was put together is clearly intentional to highlight that Jesus's demise is a paradox of God's plan and human responsibility.

It is at this news, of how Jesus's ministry will come to an end that Peter the rock, becomes the stumbling block. Peter says, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." First, this response is a bit funny to me because he says this to Jesus, Lord, recognizing that he is also God, but is asking God to forbid it. It's a response that on its own should have tipped Peter off that he wasn't going to get anywhere. But alas, he tries to tell Jesus that he shouldn't let himself suffer and be killed. Now, it is easy to tease Peter for this response from our perspective knowing the whole story, but really, his response is not all that out of the ordinary. Nothing had prepared the disciples before this moment to expect that the Messiah that they had been waiting centuries for would

be inflicted a shameful death. The Messiah that was prophesied through the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament had led the Jewish people to expect a Messiah who would be a great king, leader, prophet who would vanquish enemies and whip those gentiles into shape, and praise the Jewish leaders for doing so well. Now that the Disciples just figured out Jesus is the Messiah for sure, it probably meant they were excited to get to be a part of the glorious work of this Messiah War King. And here comes party pooper Jesus, bringing down the excitement, not just that he is not going to be leading them into holy war and glory over their enemies, but instead their enemies were going to be killing him, their Messiah, and not just killing him, but doing it in one of the most shameful ways. So Peter's response is not all that ludicrous, he is just not understanding what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah, that he is different than the Jewish people had come to expect. Understandable though it is, it is still not the response that Jesus was looking for or needing from the people that are his most important followers. Jesus knew that his death and resurrection was the success in God's plan, and not the glorious victory that humans saw as success.

And so Jesus responds with "Get behind me, Satan!" It seems strong because he calls Peter, Satan. I know if someone were to seriously call me Satan, that I would be quite taken aback. It feels so condemning of Peter. It is strong, but it really isn't exactly how we would understand that response today. First, I hadn't realized before this week what the "Get behind me" part is not a "get out of here" or "go away" or even "get out of my way." The phrase "get behind me," especially in the original Greek and in the book of Matthew, is a command to follow. Being behind, following, is the posture of a disciple. So, Jesus is not telling Peter to basically eff off, but quite the opposite. He is saying, "You don't get what's going on here. Do not try to lead me where I am not supposed to go. Follow me. Keep following me, even though it means following me to my death."

The Satan part, is also not just a random insult. It is to remind us of Jesus's temptation by Satan in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry that tried to convince him to take the easier and selfish path. Jesus calling Peter Satan here is saying that Peter was saying things that were temptations for Jesus to not follow God's plan, to take the easier route of self-preservation, and to not start the new Kingdom on earth that values rulership and authority differently. This is supported by how Jesus continues, "You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Also, by calling Peter, Satan, Jesus is saying that it does not matter who you are, you can be a favorite disciple, and you can still fall into the sinful mindsets and systems of human culture. Peter went from a foundation stone to the stone of stumbling, or maybe was both all along, and so Jesus turns to all of the Disciples to teach them how to become better disciples by setting their minds on divine things instead of human things.

The last half of the passage brings together who Jesus is and how we are to be disciples of that Jesus, as Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." This is the part where it is super important to remember that this passage is directed to the Disciples and not just to anyone. The following are instructions for those who are already part of the community. He is instructing those of us who are like Peter just was, who are committed to Jesus, but still have some human standards talking above God's in our minds. These verses are not the words that Jesus would use to those he is inviting into the faith for the first time. The English word become here is not the best translation, the original Greek, based on the way the word is used in other contexts, means more like, "if any want to continually choose to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." For the first hearers of these words in the Gospel of Matthew, these would have felt all too real as many early church leaders were martyred, or killed for their faith, many also by crucifixion. So this was a literal statement for them that following Jesus would lead to them denying their own life and getting their own cross. But, the idea of being martyred for your faith quickly lost its full meaning as people started to seek out martyrdom as a guarantee of getting into heaven and to look like the perfect Christian, while not really being one on the inside. Today's version of making suffering about personal glory is when these verses are used in the "this is your cross to bear" way, which basically tells people "just keep suffering and God will reward you in the end, so just keep suffering and God will make it alright." Jesus's instructions here are not meant to be taken as the easy steps to secure your ticket for heaven, it is not about suffering passively and just letting any kind of suffering happen, it is about helping God bring about God's Kingdom on earth, which can be hard work and work that will often require risk or rejection from those around us. It is not about running toward persecution either, but being willing to face persecution or hardship to continue building God's Kingdom.

For us today, where we live, we are not persecuted for our faith. We are not at risk of being put to death because we believe in Jesus. Our risk or rejection is more likely to be social. Have you ever held back on something you believe in, in something you know Jesus taught you, because you were afraid of the reaction people would have? Have you ever lost a friend, job, relationship, argument because you stood with your stance of Jesus's teachings of love, grace, and justice? Our call is to live our lives as witnesses or testimonies of Jesus in the world, by orienting our minds and actions to the values of God, as revealed by Christ, instead of orienting only toward ourselves, or toward human values. We are called to live out God's values, no matter how easy or hard that is. This is both a denial of self, as it denies what our culture has determined is the "Good life," a life lived for ourselves and on our own terms, and taking up our cross, as we take on the hard work of sharing God's idea of a "good life." Christ's call is to turn

from the egocentric mindsets of humanity and instead toward the radical love, grace, and justice that Jesus teaches us about again and again. We are called to follow in Christ's footsteps of not taking the path of valiant self-glory as pleaded by Peter, but instead called to follow the path of humility and potential shame based on the values of the human world.

It is important to note here, that this idea of self-denial is not as easy as just being the opposite of self-fulfillment. Self-denial is not a call for self-hate or for full removal from all things that make up human life, culture, and community. Just giving up things that you like in the name of following Jesus, does not make you a good Christian. It will just mean you are left with an empty life, without enjoyment or relationship with Jesus or others. The instruction of self-denial as part of our faith calls us to understand it a bit differently. Jesus is calling us to not only focus on ourselves either in self-absorption or self-hate. He is calling us to find a balance between self-fulfillment and self-emptying and most importantly to shift our focus outward from only thinking about saving ourselves to the needs and relationship of others. In calling us to take up our own cross, Jesus is asking us to sacrifice our own comfort and social safety to stand up for things that would build Jesus's Kingdom for others and amongst all of us. It is a call to community. To live in the faith as Jesus calls us is to not be concerned about our own self-preservation, but to live out our faith and Jesus's way of thinking about life in our community and as a community to bring God's Kingdom alive amongst us, and not just for ourselves in our private life, but for everyone.

Truly living out Jesus's teachings, living into the divine mind, instead of the human one, means we may end up disagreeing with some people. It means that we might even disagree with some other Christians! If the Disciples, not just Peter, were as confused and misguided as they were sometimes, then surely Christians today can be too. This is a call from Jesus to do the work to figure out if thoughts and assumptions we have about other people, about other groups, about certain topics are truly from God or if they are a bunch of human ideas wrapped up in churchy or polite language. This is a call from Jesus to be willing to step out and be the first in our communities to stand up for or against something to make things be more like how God wants it to be. This is a call to listen for the ways that God is speaking through others in our community and join them in bearing the cross, in doing the work of making room for God's Kingdom.

Now, this is no easy task. These are not easy instructions from Jesus on how we are to be the best disciples we can be. But here is the good news: Yes, Jesus challenges us to deeper discipleship, asking us to push back against the norms around us, BUT he also never leaves us to figure it out by ourselves or gives up on us when we mess it up. This is why it is so important that we talk about these last verses about denying ourselves and taking up our cross, and for losing our life for Jesus's sake, with the verses about Peter trying to convince Jesus not to go to Jerusalem to be killed.

These instructions that Jesus gives are given to his disciples to tell them how to continue growing into being better disciples because Peter just messed up good! And we know that he is going to continue to muck it up later! Jesus does not give up on Peter or take away Peter's "Disciple" card, he keeps teaching and leading and guiding and using Peter to do God's work on earth. Just like the disciples who were literally right in front of Jesus and heard all of his teaching first hand but didn't fully get it, to the point of Peter being compared to Satan, we are not expected to have it all together and be the perfect disciples. Peter, we see in this passage, is both the rock that the church is built on and the stumbling block but, Peter is still used by Jesus to build the church and spark the Kingdom of God on earth. Jesus does not tell him he is through, he doesn't fire Peter from being a disciple for being imperfect. Just as God will not fire us from our disciple position. We cannot understand and act on all that it means to be a disciple from the moment we commit to our faith. None of us will ever be fully perfect, none of us will ever be fully without any sinfulness. But Jesus still uses us to build the Kingdom and never gives up on us, never leaves us to figure this discipleship thing out on our own, Jesus continues to help us grow into being better disciples no matter how much we mess up or how long we step away. Being a disciple of Christ is something we will always be learning more about and living into better as we continue down our faith journey. Let us all be excited to learn more and let us all be brave to follow Christ's challenge to risk the consequences of bringing God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven to our community.

Let us pray:

Teaching God,

You have such a better vision for how our communities and world could be. You call us to serve, to work to bring love, grace, and justice. Help us to live into your values and the ways you have already and are continuing to teach us to bring pieces of your kingdom here on earth. Help us to deny our human ideas and be willing to take some risk to make your ideas a reality amongst us. Thank you for never giving up on us, even when we muck it up, even when we act in ways opposite to how you tell us to live. Empower us to grow in the ways we need to as individuals and as a community to be a witness of you to all those around us.