

Count the Cost (Matthew 16:21-28)

Jesus now enters the next phase of his ministry. “From that time on” it says in verse 21. More plainly than ever before and without reserve, Christ revealed that *the Son of the Living God* was going to be killed and raised again from the dead. Never before had so phenomenal an event happened, and never again would it happen. History would be made. “Jerusalem...that killed the prophets” was going to commit the ultimate crime—they were going to kill God’s own Son (Mt 23:29-31).

I don’t think that Jesus is suggesting that we all need to die to follow him. In fact, he seems pretty eager to encourage people to live well. But I do believe that Jesus is suggesting that we have to look beyond our own selfish worldview and embrace a God’s-eye view of the world that seeks the welfare and redemption of others.

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When I was a youngster, I learned a simple acronym at Sunday School: J. O. Y. is Jesus, Others, You. It's so simple and yet so profound. It's a pretty solid lens through which to see the Christian life. Our first allegiance is to Jesus. Then we seek the well-being of others, loving our neighbors. And finally, we care for ourselves.

When I manage to live this way, it changes me. It's so freeing not to have to worry about protecting my own ego or status. It feels good to lift up others first, and even better to do so in the name of Christ. I usually don't get this right, but when I do, I sometimes get a glimpse of what Jesus meant when he said in verse 25, "for whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."

In last week's sermon, Peter, speaking for all the disciples has boldly confessed that Jesus is the long-awaited King. He was right to recognize Jesus

as the Messiah, but profoundly wrong in his understanding of

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the nature of Jesus' messiahship. Jese has come to save not through force of arms, but through arms outstretched in death.

Jesus explicitly teaches the disciples that he must die and rise again in verse 21 of today's scripture reading. This radical proclamation of the purpose of His ministry utterly confounds Peter. Jesus sees behind Peter's rebuke the mean and hateful hand of Satan, seeking yet again to derail His efforts in fulfilling the work God has ordained for Him. Peter, the "rock" on which Jesus will build his church, has become of rock of stumbling.

In one sense, Jesus' death on a cross will not be an isolated event. Any and every disciple must be prepared to face that same eventuality: to give up all for God's sake. The command to deny ourselves in

verse 24 must not be reduced to something as trivial as a decision not to buy another pair of shoes or

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remodel the house. It is to renounce control over one's own life. Throughout history, thousands of Christians have carried a cross to their own Calvary. Martyrs like Jim Elliot, an American missionary who died at the hands of Huaorani Indians in Ecuador on January 8, 1956 famously wrote, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose." Let me repeat that because I remember the trouble I had with his quote when I first read it. "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose."

Now, let me explain what I think Jim was saying. It means you give your mortal life to Jesus to gain eternal life. So, you give what you cannot keep—your mortal life. And you gain what you cannot lose—your eternal life. So, the most moral

and honorable act a man can do in his life is to give away what he cannot keep.

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In Mark 8:34-38, Jesus talked about the things Jim Elliot said. Jesus made clear the ways of his kingdom—it was the way of the cross. Anyone who sought to follow Christ must “deny themselves and take up their cross.” Jesus then stated some related principles. We gain eternal life by lose our earthly lives for Christ. Weighted against all the world offers is the value of one’s soul. If a disciple is ashamed of Jesus in an ungodly world, Jesus will be ashamed of his when he returns.

And now let’s look back to our Scripture reading and look at the words “deny yourself” in verse 24. I believe those words mean to give up all worldly things for God’s sake and to renounce control over one’s life and to give control to Jesus. In verse 27,

the Lord Jesus underlines the seriousness of the life-and-death decision every disciple must face by reminding us that

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one day we will answer to Jesus Himself for these decisions. Until that day, when he establishes his kingdom on earth, Jesus' authority and kingly rule will be displayed in His church, especially after Pentecost, as many of his disciples will witness and experience (verse 28).

The church needs to regularly hear these comforting words from its Lord in verse 27, "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." In the 21st century, many Christians face loss and death on a daily basis because of their love for Jesus. On the other hand, many others who surrender to a costless

Christianity, indistinguishable in attitude and behavior from the unbelieving world, need to heed his warning.

So, Peter's reply to Jesus' question "Who do you say I am?" was correct, but Jesus, is aware that they may draw the wrong conclusions from Peter's answer. They

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will assume it means that the road ahead will be marked with triumph and glory. Of course, one day, Jesus will reign in honor and power, but that day is not yet. For the first time, he tells them that the Messiah's road of entry to his kingdom must pass through betrayal, death, and resurrection. Before the crown, there must be the cross. Before glory there must be Golgotha.

What is true for the Master must also be true for the disciples. They must deny themselves, saying "no" to their own agendas and "yes" to the agenda of the kingdom. If Jesus must, literally, carry a cross to

enter his glory, then those who walk the road he walks must metaphorically, do the same. They must be willing to bear ridicule and rejection.

Discipleship may even involve paying the ultimate price: one's own life. Yet, even that is a small price to pay when the promise is eternal life. The choice is stark: bear the shame of being a disciple now, or

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accept the world's approval and endure the reality that "the Son of Man will be ashamed of them in the end" (Luke 9:26).

So, what are the lessons we can learn from this Scripture reading in Matthew?

This Scripture reading offers profound lessons about discipleship and faith. In the area of the cost of discipleship, Jesus emphasizes that following him requires self-denial and a willingness to take up one's cross. This signifies the sacrifices and

challenges that come with true discipleship. While salvation is through grace, this passage underscores that genuine faith must be demonstrated through actions. Believers are called to manifest their faith through good works. Jesus assures that those who lose their lives for his sake will find true life. This highlights the paradox of eternal life through self-sacrifice. The

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passage also touches on the authority given to believers in spiritual matters, emphasizing the power of prayer and alignment with God's will. These lessons encourage a deeper understanding of what it means to follow Christ and the transformative nature of faith in action.

Please bow your heads as I pray.

Heavenly Father, I want to deny myself, take up my cross daily and identify with my Savior. Help me not to live for

myself, but rather to live for you. Help me lose my life for your sake, knowing that this world holds nothing of value, but that to follow you will result in the greatest reward. Lord, you paid the price for my soul with your shed blood upon the cross. The free gift of the salvation of my soul cost you so dearly. Help me to understand how precious I am to you. Help me to live a life that is pleasing to you, a life that seeks your will, not mind. We ask this in the name of your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. **Amen.**