

Disciple: What It Means to Follow Jesus

The Heart of Discipleship * Matthew 16:21-27

Review

Ok, take your Bibles and turn with me once again to Matthew 16. Today we are going to pick up where we left off last week and continue to discuss what it truly means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

And before we get to our text this morning, let's do a quick review of what we learned last week when we attempted to answer two questions that will serve as the foundation for this entire series. The first was 'what is God doing?' and from Matthew 16:18 we learned that the thing that God is doing is building his church through the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah. That's what God is doing. We then went on to ask the question 'what is God calling us to do?' and from Matthew 28:18-20 we learned that God is calling us to make disciples. So, let's make sure we are all on the same page. What is God doing? He is building his church through the proclamation of Jesus as Messiah. And what are we called to do? We are called to make disciples.

With that said, this morning we are back in Matthew 16. Today we are going to begin an extended discussion about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. And this is very important, because quite naturally if we are going to make disciples, we first need to know what a disciple is. We need to know what we are making. But even more importantly, if we are going to make disciples, we need to make sure that we are one ourselves. And since there seems to be significant lack of clarity over the biblical concept of discipleship, let's go to God's Word and see what Jesus has to say on the matter. Our passage this morning is verses 21-27, but to help set the stage for that let's also read verses 13-20. Matthew tells us this:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" [14] And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." [15] He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" [16] Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." [17] And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. [18] And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. [19] I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." [20] Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

[21] From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from 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, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." [23] But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

[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. [26] For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? [27] For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done." (Matthew 16:13-27 ESV)

You might notice that Matthew's "from that time" in verse 21 marks a transition; and it is not just a transition in this passage, but in the entirety of Jesus' ministry. Up until this point Jesus had spent a lot of time teaching the crowds, and occasionally addressing his disciples in private. From now on, he will only occasionally address the crowds but spend a majority of his time privately instructing his disciples. And his primary message to them is found in verse 21. Look at it again:

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

Before this time Jesus had only alluded to the fact that he was going to suffer and die, but now for the first time he is very open about it. A key word in this verse is *must*. Jesus says he must experience three things: suffering, death, and resurrection. Now, while we know this is true, let's not miss the why of the must here. Why did Jesus have to suffer, die, and rise again? Why was it necessary for him to experience these things? Isaiah 53 makes it clear:

But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. [6] All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:5-6 ESV)

Jesus had to experience these things because of you and me. Because of our transgressions, our iniquities, our sins. And although this is not the main point of the message, I don't think we can read this passage without reminding ourselves of what Christ went through so that we can be forgiven of our sins and granted eternal life. All

of this is possible because of Jesus' willingness to do what was necessary. Therefore, as we talk in detail about what it means to follow Jesus, it should only be natural for us to be willing to do what is necessary to follow him. Do you agree? I hope you do. Jesus did what was necessary and so must we. So hang on to that thought because it's going to be very important as we go forward.

Let's get back to the text. It's pretty clear by verse 22 that Jesus' disclosure of his future doesn't go over too well with Peter. Look at his response:

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you."

Here is how I picture this amazing interaction going down. Jesus and the disciples are walking along the road, with Jesus in the front and the disciples either following behind or walking at his side. And I imagine that when Jesus says, 'I am going to suffer, be murdered, and rise again', Peter looks at the other disciples and says, 'what did he just say? Did you just hear what I heard? You've got to be kidding me; he's out of his mind. I've got to put an end to this kind of talk.' And so Peter grabs Jesus by the arm and pulls him aside, and begins to rebuke him. The Greek word for rebuke indicates that Peter said these words repeatedly. Peter is lecturing Jesus. The guy who had just declared that Jesus was the Messiah is now saying that he knows better than the Messiah.

All of this helps to point out how outrageous of a statement Jesus has made in verse 21. The statement seems logical to us, because we know the rest of the story. But the disciples, and pretty much every other Jew, had a radically different view of the Messiah. They believed that the Messiah was going to come as a conquering king. That he would be a military leader who would lead an uprising to overthrow the Roman Empire and restore Israel to its rightful place of prominence. As Isaiah 53 and other passages show, the Old Testament clearly lays out the concept of a suffering Messiah. However, the Jewish people had ignored or incorrectly interpreted these passages to the point where their understanding of the Messiah had become incompatible with God's Word. The official religious position had supplanted the truth of Scripture, something that continues to happen today.

And in verse 23 Jesus decides that it is time to burst the bubble of the disciples' false ideas of his Messiahship, and he does so in no uncertain terms. Verse 23:

But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

Now, Jesus isn't actually calling Peter Satan, but rather he is saying that Peter has been so influenced by Satan that he is not thinking the way that God thinks, but rather the way that sinful man, influenced by Satan, thinks. It's helpful here to remember Jesus' temptation by Satan in Matthew 4.

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. [9] And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." [10] Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'" (Matthew 4:8-10 ESV)

The reason Jesus calls Peter Satan is because Peter is tempting Jesus in the same way that Satan had. He is telling Jesus that he can have the crown without the cross. That he can have glory without obedience. That he can have pleasure without pain. That's why Jesus says that Peter is a hindrance, literally a stumbling block; something that is in the way of him doing what the Father has called him to do.

And before we go on to see what Jesus has to say about discipleship, I think it is important for us to recognize that what happens to Peter can, and often does, happen to us. By this I mean that we are very prone to see things as we want to see them, and not as they really are. That the way we view how God works is often just the opposite of how he truly does work. In fact, I have learned that a majority of the time God doesn't do things the way I think he should. Of course, God tells us this himself in Isaiah 55:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. [9] For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9 ESV)

I point this out because I don't think we like the idea of a suffering savior all that much either. That if it was up to us the Son of God would not have been born in a stable to an unwed teenage girl, would not have lived the life of a poor carpenter in a backwoods town in the middle of nowhere, and certainly would not have been persecuted and murdered by the religious leaders of his day, only to rise again and leave his rag tag band of incompetent followers to run his church. We have to admit that we just wouldn't have done it that way would we?

And the reason that this is important is that not only would we have done things differently in regards to Jesus' Messiahship, but we also would do things differently in regards to discipleship. Listen, the primary reason Peter is so upset is that he has grand ideas of what it's going to be like for him when Jesus becomes King. He's thinking about glory, honor, power, and wealth for himself. And so Jesus' statement about

suffering doesn't fit too well with Peter's desire for how he wants things to work out. Peter's probably thinking, if he is going to suffer, what does that mean for those who follow him, particularly for me?

And I have to warn you that we all are about to have a Peter moment ourselves, because in verse 24, Jesus is going to blow up Peter's view of discipleship, and perhaps ours as well. Let's now look carefully at what Jesus says it means to truly follow him.

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

In this verse Jesus tells us what it truly means to follow him, what it truly means to be his disciple. In no uncertain terms he tells us three things that are required of those who follow him. He tells us there are three musts of discipleship. Just as it was necessary for Jesus to suffer, die, and rise again, there are three things that those who follow him must do as well.

1. A disciple must deny himself.

Number one, a disciple must deny himself. The word, *deny*, means to completely disown and utterly separate oneself from someone else.¹ Interestingly enough, it is the same word that is used to describe Peter's denial of Jesus the night before his crucifixion. What Peter did to Jesus, a disciple must do to himself.

By *himself* Jesus is referring to the sinful nature, the self as it is apart from God's work of grace in our lives. As believers, we have two natures. We have a new nature that is created after God in righteousness and holiness. It is the part of us that wants what God wants. But we also still retain our old nature with its sinful and selfish desires. It's the part of us that focuses upon what we want and ourselves. Paul describes the sinful nature in Galatians 5:

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, [20] idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, [21] envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. (Galatians 5:19-21 ESV)

And so Jesus is saying that a disciple is one who completely disowns and separates himself from these things. A disciple says no to the old nature and yes to the new one. Paul also describes the desires of the new nature in Galatians 5:

¹ MacArthur, John (2001). *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, Chicago, IL: Moody Press

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, [23] gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

He then goes on to say:

[24] And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:22-24 ESV)

Verse 24 is key. A disciple, one who belongs to Christ, is dead to the flesh and its passions and desires. This doesn't mean that a disciple doesn't struggle with the flesh, but that the overall character of his life is marked by the fruit of the Spirit rather than the works of the flesh.

Here's the big point. The life of a disciple is marked not by indulgence but by denial. Listen, we all have sinful, selfish desires. That isn't the question. It's a given. The question is whether or not we choose to fight those desires and allow the Spirit to produce his fruit in us.

2. A disciple must carry his cross.

The second mark of a disciple is closely related to the first. Not only must a disciple deny himself, but a disciple must also carry his cross.

Let me start by clarifying what this does not mean. Sometimes we say, 'I guess that's my cross to bear.' Or, 'we all have our cross to bear.' However, Jesus isn't referring to minor discomforts and inconveniences. He's also not referring to your wife, your children, or your mother-in-law. He's not even referring to your health, job, or financial issues. Taking up your cross means being willing to pay any price in order to follow Jesus, up to and including death.

It's unfortunate that today the cross has become little more than a sentimental symbol or a piece of jewelry. Because of that, when we read verse 18 we don't get the full affect that the disciples would have gotten. When the disciples heard the word cross they would immediately have understood that Jesus was saying that being a disciple was akin to going on a death march. During Jesus' lifetime there may have been as many as 30,000 crucifixions in Jerusalem, and so the disciples would have had a very vivid picture of what Jesus was alluding to. They would have pictured a condemned criminal walking up a hill, struggling to carry the instrument upon which he would soon experience an incredibly painful death. And they would have clearly understood that Jesus was telling them that to be a disciple means pain, suffering, and sacrifice.

I recognize that this is not something that we want to hear. It's certainly not what the disciples wanted to hear. It's the primary reason that by the time Jesus died he only had a handful of followers left. That's because we all want a comfortable Christianity, right? We want a nice and tidy Christianity where we don't have to be overly committed, don't have to sacrifice or suffer, and don't have to get out of our comfort zone whatsoever.

But we have to recognize that this wasn't the path of our Savior and since we are following him we can't expect it to be our path either. Although Peter didn't get it at this point, he did get it later, which is clear by what he writes in his first letter:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. (1 Peter 2:21 ESV)

Jesus' path was one of pain and suffering. It was one of difficulty. And if we are truly going to follow him, we must be willing to experience the same thing.

So, taking up our cross means dying to our sinful desires, dying to what we want or think we should have, and submitting to whatever is necessary in order to follow Christ.

Perhaps the best description of this comes from Paul in Galatians 2:20:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20 ESV)

3. A disciple must follow Christ.

So, a disciple must deny himself, a disciple must carry his cross, and finally, a disciple must follow Christ.

The main idea behind *follow* here is faithful day-by-day obedience. Follow is a present imperative and so the verse could read "let him keep on following me." This is why Luke records Jesus adding the word *daily*:

And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23 ESV)

Denying self, carrying our cross, and following Christ aren't one-time events, they are daily activities. Jesus is talking about a discipleship that is a whole way of life.²

I think I need to take a moment here to clarify a huge misconception that people seem to have about obedience. Many people have this idea that you can be saved and then after you are saved decide whether or not you are going to obey. As if obedience to Christ is optional. But listen friends, when we receive Christ as our Savior we are in essence saying, 'I will obey.' That's what it means to follow. When we respond 'yes' to Jesus' offer to follow him, we are choosing to serve and obey him no matter what.

The key to this, I think, is recognizing whom it is that we are following. We are following Jesus the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. We are following the King of the universe. We are following the sovereign Lord of all. We are following the one with all authority in heaven and earth. Therefore, when he says go, we go. When he says stay, we stay. When he says do this, we do this. When he says don't do this, we don't do this. When he says make disciples, we make disciples. We can say it this way: *we do what we do because he is who he is*. Do you get that? When the God of the universe offers us the opportunity to willingly follow him and we say yes, it means that when he tells us to do something we do it, end of story.

So, three characteristics of a disciple. A disciple must deny himself, a disciple must carry his cross, and a disciple must follow Christ.

Why Be A Disciple?

Now, all of this said, I recognize that these are difficult truths. And you might consider this and think, 'Can you tell me why exactly I would want to be a disciple? Why would I deny myself, carry my cross, and follow Jesus? I mean, what is in this for me?' Well, Jesus tells us what is in it for us in verses 25-27. You will note that each verse starts with the word *for*, meaning that Jesus is giving us three reasons why we should deny our self, carry our cross, and follow him.

1. In order to save your life, you have to give it up. (v. 25)

First, in order to save your life, you have to give it up.

²Morris, Leon, pg. 431. (1992). *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Verse 25:

For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Plain and simple, if you try to hold on to your life, you will end up losing it. The way to find life is to give it up. Once again, this is not the way we think, right? We think if we manage our life and do things the way we want to we will be able to preserve our life and get what we want out of it. But friends, that kind of control is an illusion. If we try to hold on to our life, we will lose it. On the other hand, if we give our life to Jesus, he promises to give it back.

Now, of course, you have to understand what life Jesus is talking about. He is saying that if we give him our earthly life, in return he will give us eternal life. That's a pretty good deal, don't you think? A few years here on this earth for an eternity in heaven.

This reminds me of the famous quote by Jim Elliot, the missionary who was martyred at the age of 28 with four others as they were attempting to take the gospel to the Auca Indians of Ecuador:

He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

Friends, we cannot keep this life. But we can trade it for the next, the one that we cannot lose.

2. You can't buy eternal life. (v. 26)

The second reason for following Jesus follows the first. You can't buy eternal life. Verse 26:

For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?

Jesus asks two rhetorical questions, and the answer to both is what? Nothing. Here's how John MacArthur explains this verse:

Here is the ultimate hyperbole. "Imagine if you can," Jesus was saying, "what would it be like to somehow possess the whole world. Of what lasting benefit would that be, if in gaining it you forfeited your soul, your eternal life? Such a person would be a walking dead man who temporarily owned everything but who faced an eternity in hell rather than in heaven. "Or," Jesus continued, "what could possibly be worth having during this lifetime, if to gain it you would have to exchange your soul?" To gain every possession possible in this

*world and yet be without Christ is to be bankrupt forever. But to abandon everything in this world for the sake of Christ is to be rich forever.*³

The reason that following Jesus is worth it is that he is the only way to eternal life. There is no other way. And so, yes, following Jesus is hard. Yes, it is difficult. But when you understand the rewards of doing so, it makes it so worth it.

But here is the problem we face. Here is what we are fighting against. We have bought into the idea of a Christianity where we can have our cake and eat it too. You know what I mean? We have bought into the devil's lie that we can hold onto our lives and still have eternal life. We believe that we can have eternal life without it infringing upon our life here.

Let me be a little more specific. We have bought into the idea that we can follow Jesus and still live pretty much any way that we want. That we can be a disciple but not be totally committed to following Christ. That we can call ourselves a follower of Christ and yet pick and choose which of his commands we want to obey. That we can get a ticket to heaven without it really making an impact on our life and the things that we want to do. That we can say a prayer, walk an aisle, sign a card, and then if we want to worship him we can, and if we want to serve him we can, and if we want to give to him we can, and if we want to make disciples we can. These are all good things, but not necessary. The problem is, Jesus doesn't give us this option. If we want to gain life we have to give it up. If we want to truly follow Jesus we have to deny ourselves, carry our cross, and faithfully follow him.

3. Jesus is coming to reward his disciples and judge those who are not. (v. 27)

The final reason to follow Jesus is found in verse 27:

For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.

Why should we follow Jesus today? Because he could return at any moment, and when he does he will reward those who follow and judge those who do not. And I really don't think I need to add a lot of explanation to this. It's pretty simple. Jesus is coming back and soon. And those who follow him will be rewarded and those who don't will face everlasting punishment. Do you see my friends, what is at stake here?

³ MacArthur, John (2001). *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, Chicago, IL: Moody Press

Listen, this following Jesus stuff is difficult. It's hard. There is no way around it. But friends, it is worth it. It is so, so worth it. And the opposite is also true. To not follow Jesus is easy. But it's not worth it. It is so, so not worth it.

Let me be clear about this; Jesus is not teaching that following him saves us, but rather that following shows that we truly are saved. Listen very carefully to me on this point. Denying yourself, carrying your cross and faithfully obeying Jesus does not save you. But it is the evidence of whether or not you have been saved. And the New Testament is quite clear that if this evidence isn't apparent in your life, then you should certainly question whether or not you have been saved in the first place.

Here's what Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast. [10] For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8-10 ESV)

Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. We become a disciple of Christ not by what we do but simply by God's gracious work in our lives. However, God's grace has a purpose, and that purpose is that we might do good works, works that God prepared for us before he saved us. And therefore, if we aren't working, we have to ask ourselves has God worked in us in the first place?

Now, this doesn't mean we won't struggle. It doesn't mean we won't sin. It doesn't mean that we won't have times when we are not living like we should. It doesn't mean there aren't times when we won't be battling big time with our old nature. But it does mean that the Holy Spirit will be working in us to produce evidence that we are denying self, carrying our cross, and faithfully striving to follow Jesus.

I realize that I have stirred the pot quite a bit today. I realize that there are many of you who may be uncomfortable with what you have heard. I actually think this is a good thing. Being uncomfortable is necessary if we are going to grow.

So, as you go home and process this message, remember what we saw in Philippians 1:6:

He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:6 ESV)

Please know that if God began a work in your heart, he will carry it to completion. If you did begin to follow Christ, God will make sure that you continue to follow Him all the days of your life. But if you have not been following Christ, I plead with you to begin to follow him today. It's hard. It's difficult. It's anything but easy. But it is worth it. So, so, worth it.

And so as you leave today, I want to challenge you with one very simple question. Are you following Jesus? Are you denying yourself, carrying your cross, and faithfully following Him? That's what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

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