

Matthew 16:24-28

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[0:00] I invite you to turn with me to Matthew chapter 16. We're going to begin in verse 24. If you don't have a Bible with you, if you don't own one, there's some on the back table! They should be bookmarked to today's passage. We'd love for you to follow along with us as we turn to God's Word. Now, last week, as we were in chapter 16, verses 13 through 20, sorry, through 23, Jesus asked, who am I? Who do you say that I am? And Peter said, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus was announced to be Lord above all. But his disciples didn't quite understand what that was going to look like. And there's that exchange. Peter's got this high point, and then a very low point, because he says, when Jesus says, I'm going to Jerusalem, and I'm going to die, he says, no, no, never, Lord. So, Peter thought that Christ's rule and reign was going to look like a supersized version of the kings of earth. But Jesus explained that he would not take his rule like other kings do by force. He will not build his kingdom like others do.

His crown will be one of thorns, and his symbol will be a cross. If that's what the king is like, what are his followers like?

I like how one pastor put it, if you have this certain view of Christ the king, his crown of thorns, then you're going to have a certain view of what it means to be in his kingdom. The kingdom, the king bringing the kingdom in through the cross means that those who are in the kingdom are going to live a cross-shaped life. And friends, that's exactly what we're going to see here in this passage. So, let's open the text today to Matthew 16, beginning in verse 24.

Then Jesus told his disciples, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 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? 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. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. This is God's holy, inerrant, and inspired word. Let's pray.

Father, in these next moments, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

[3:43] Father, in this moment, may the word of God be with you. This is a tough passage. It's a tough one to wrap our heads around. There's a lot going on in just a few short words.

Let's see if we can broaden our scope quickly, see how the passage fits together, and then that might help us to understand it just a bit better. Let's look at how Jesus constructs this passage. In verse 24, he says, if anyone would come after me, do these three things.

And then in verses 25 through 27, he makes three statements. Each of those verses starts with the word for, or since, or because. And so what we're seeing here is that each of these verses is a support, is a reason why you would do the first verse.

We have Jesus' main idea in verse 24, if anyone would come after me, do these three things. Then we have three reasons that he said to do that in verses 25, then 26, and then 27. And then he concludes with this provocative statement in verse 28. And so if you're typing out this passage today, the way we write these days, you'd probably turn it into like a bulleted list. And I think, yep, Rob put it up there, right? So we'd have verse 24, then three bullet points, each beginning with because, and then verse 28 is a surprising conclusion.

So this passage is really about verse 24. And then Jesus supports it with the rest of the verses. [5:33] And so we're going to spend most of our time at the outset on verse 24. And so if you're like, this isn't going to be an awfully long sermon if we treat all of these verses the same way we treat 24, that's not how it will work. We're going to spend the bulk of our time understanding what he is calling us to. And then we're going to see some support for that in 25 and following.

So verse 24, Jesus told his disciples, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. What does this mean? It means a lot of things. First of all, that someone would want to go after him, which in this context is quite surprising.

All right. Think back to verse 21. He told the disciples that he was going to Jerusalem to die. So when he says, if anyone would come after me, who would want that?

Who wants to follow a crucified Lord? Who wants to associate with that? Those in whose hearts the Lord has worked, has changed so that they find him worth it.

And what's more, not only does he identify people who would want to be with him to follow after a crucified Lord, but he says that they may, right? He allows us to go after him.

[7:09] The most high God permits us to draw near. You can, this verse says, come after, follow Jesus.

This passage gives us the way to walk with God himself. This is the offer to have everything. Jesus Christ isn't a good thing. He is, as we've sung today, the fountain of every blessing. He is the one from whom all good things flow. All goodness, all life, all joy, all blessedness is found in him. From everlasting to everlasting. And he says, you can come with me. Friends, that's worth any and every price.

So how do we go after him? The first thing he says is, deny yourself. Now, when Jesus says, deny yourselves, we try to complete the sentence.

[8:26] This, you know, deny ourselves what? How would you fill in that blank? Deny ourselves certain items? Deny ourselves certain activities?

What kinds of things are we doing? Deny ourselves. Or maybe we bargain, right? I'll deny myself this if I can indulge in that. And many people, maybe you, think that's what Christianity is.

Denying ourselves certain things to earn God's blessing. And maybe even if we would reject that statement, we kind of live that way anyway.

But he didn't say, deny yourself certain things. He said, deny yourself. We're not supposed to complete the sentence.

It's already complete. Jesus doesn't say, deny yourself some things or opportunities or pleasures or treasures or preferences. This isn't about renouncing your rights to things.

[9:32] This is about renouncing yourself. What does that mean? What does it mean to deny yourself? The next time we see this word, deny, is in Matthew chapter 26.

Matthew 26, 34 and 35. This is during the trial, or leading up to the trial of Jesus. Jesus is speaking to Peter and he says to him, truly, I tell you, this very night before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.

Peter said to him, even if I must die with you, I will not deny you. For those who know how this story ends, in what sense is Peter going to deny Christ?

He's not going to deny him food or shelter or opportunities or preferences. He's about to deny or renounce or refuse to acknowledge Jesus the person.

We see that in verses 71 and 72. When he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him. This is Peter. She said to the bystanders, this man is with Jesus of Nazareth.

[10:49] Again, he denied it with an oath. I do not know the man. When Jesus says Peter will deny him, he means Peter will turn his back on Jesus and denounce him.

And that's what Jesus means when he says in verse 24, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself.

What does it look like to deny or renounce ourselves before God? It means to deny that you, yourself, are in charge.

He is. It's to deny that you, yourself, are owed any reward. Right? Before a holy God, we're owed judgment. It's to deny that you, yourself, know what is wise and right and good. He declares what is wise and right and good. We just sang, we trust you. We trust you. Your ways are higher than our own.

[12:07] To deny ourselves is to renounce the idea that we are worthy before God because we are radically unworthy. It's to despair of our ability to earn God's blessing.

Now, why must we do this? Why is that first on Christ's list? We have no claim on God. We have no right to demand a blessing from him. What we have is a right to his judgment. But in his mercy, he chooses to give grace to the humble.

In Luke chapter 18, Jesus teaches the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Two men go to the temple and pray two very different prayers. One prays, God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

[13:15] I feast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get. But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

Which of them is denying, renouncing himself? The one who said, God, be merciful to me, a sinner. He calls himself a sinner, desperately in need of God's grace. He doesn't qualify it. He doesn't soften the blow. He puts it plainly and simply.

Without God's mercy, he is doomed to condemnation for his sin. And all he has to reach out for is God's mercy. Whereas the other man walks into God's temple and brags about himself.

Right? Now, just pause with me for a moment and consider just how stupid is it to brag to God Almighty.

[14:25] This isn't someone who has renounced himself before the Lord. This is someone who celebrates himself before the Lord.

And what's crazy here is celebrating yourself in the place reserved for celebrating God, the temple. Right? What irony. What stupidity. What vile sin that is.

So that even in the moment where he brags about himself, he shows himself to be unwise, unworthy, and heaps more judgment on himself. And that's why we need first to deny, to renounce ourselves.

Because anything else, if we go to God and say, I have standing before you on my own merits, it shows us to be unwise.

And it heaps up judgment on ourselves. And so, friends, have you denied yourself? Have you renounced the thought that you stand worthy before the infinite God?

[15:31] It is only from this position of complete poverty that Jesus offers you may inherit all things with him.

So what does Jesus want us to do when he says, deny yourself? Well, that's what the scriptures are always saying when they say, repent and believe the gospel.

That's the repent part. And so the Apostle Paul means when he says, whatever gain I had, Philippians chapter 3, whatever good reputation and outward holiness he had, he says, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. And Christians, do you walk?

Not just like have you, in theory, denied yourself, but do you walk that life? Not just like have you, in theory, of self-denial. Ligon Duncan, when he preached this passage, gave an example that I thought was particularly helpful.

[16:44] He likened it to marriage. He said, we may be thinking that our spouse is not meeting our needs. Now, that's not true in my case, but maybe you can. Now, we may be thinking that our spouse is not meeting our needs.

And he said, it may be true. But God calls us, as Christian disciples, not to think about our rights, our privileges, our needs.

That's the deny yourself. But to think about the rights, needs, and privileges of others. He calls us to die to self, to give ourselves to the seeking of the best interest of others.

That's what this idea looks like lived out. And then he says, take up your cross.

Now, your cross, we have this saying, everyone has their cross to bear, right? Your cross is not your mother-in-law, or your health condition, or whatever your particular unique burden in life is. [17:57] That's how we use that phrase in American English, but that is not what Jesus is talking about here. It's also not us achieving our own salvation.

He doesn't say, take up my cross, right? The cross where he paid the ransom for sinners. He says, take up your cross. There's a distinction between what Christ's work on the cross was and what he's calling us to do here.

Now, there's no modern equivalent of a Roman cross execution, right? It was designed to maximize suffering, not minimize it.

It was designed to be a public spectacle. It was designed to maximize shame. That was the point of it. And so when Jesus says, take up your cross, he's saying more than just consider your old self dead, which he totally is, but he's saying more than that, he's also saying carrying our cross is being willing to suffer the shameful scorn of the world for Christ's sake.

And that leads somewhere. If you're going, right, the whole point of this is to follow Christ, to be where he is, to walk with him, right?

[19:17] If you're going to experience the glory and blessedness of God, where are you going to find it? Not on some mountaintop experience.

You will only understand the magnitude of his love in one way, looking to him at his cross. Right? Philippians 3 again. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.

Verse 10. That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.

Paul finds fellowship with, and an understanding of Christ where? In the path of humility that Christ walked first.

To know and to understand God, you must look to the cross. You can't know the love of God without knowing what it cost him to love you.

[20:37] You can't know the weight of your sin without seeing the price that he paid for it. You can't even see the genius of his plan, his compassion, his grace, his glory, without seeing the Son of Man lifted up for your sins and mine.

In his book, *Shame Interrupted*, and Welch writes, we are volunteering to walk a path that looks shameful to the world, but that explodes with glory and honor when we walk it with the right person. Which is why Jesus concludes verse 24 with saying, follow me. This is two things.

It's an invitation and a guide. First, an invitation, right? He's saying, come with me. You may be with me where I am. And it's a guide. The way to dwell with me, he's saying, is the path of discipleship. Follow me isn't just a description of where to place your feet, right? It's a metaphor for discipleship. What does that mean? If you want to dwell with Christ and know him and be with him and experience his love for you, that is found in discipleship.

[22:13] Following Jesus is the life of discipleship. You won't find him elsewhere, right? You won't find fellowship with Christ on the path of sin. You find it in humility and righteousness and obedience.

So if you want fellowship with Christ, take seriously his call to discipleship. It's not the way to earn his love.

It is the way to dwell in his love. How? Right? How does that work? How does our discipleship, our obedience, foster fellowship with Jesus?

First, we dwell in harmony with his will, right, as we walk the path of obedience. And that obedience will require his empowerment.

So the path of obedience is where we will find and experience his power working in us. Right?

[23:27] If you want to experience the power of God at work in your life, ask him to empower you for obedience. And when we experience this power, you know, when we think about experiencing his power, we think, you know, spiritual high.

When in reality, he wants to show us his power by giving us the strength to walk in a difficult obedience. That's where God wants to experience. That's where God wants to be at work in your

life and where you will experience fellowship with him as you rely on him.

So if you want to know and experience God, get busy obeying him. Because that's where you'll find yourself in harmony with him, where you'll find his empowering presence, and where he will begin to reshape and mold your heart to look like Christ's himself.

Friends, the way of discipleship is the way of fellowship with Jesus Christ. And Jesus gives us in 25, verse 26, and verse 27, three reasons you would want to do this, if that's not enough already.

Verse 25, For whoever would save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. So reason number one is that following Jesus is really the only way to life.

[25:00] There are all sorts of ways to try to save your life. There are ways we try to extend our lives. But in a hundred years, no one in this room will be alive.

No matter how many carrots and celery you eat, it doesn't matter. You will be dead if Christ tarries, right? So an inordinate focus on health and well-being, or halting the aging process, or cryogenics, right?

That's one way to grasp after the life that is so fleeting. Another way to try to save your life is to just say, I'm just going to go all in, all the pleasure that I can find in this life.

I'm just going for it, because, you know, you only live once. Or we could walk the path of the Pharisee, right? Trying to build up a resume to present to God. That's using this life as a tool, myself, to hold on to my own life.

How well does that work? The poet, Percy Shelley, wrote the poem Ozymandias to express how well our efforts to save our lives go.

[26:16] Now, in the poem, he meets a traveler. In a vast desert, the traveler reports that he found the remains of a giant statue.

Just the legs, a fallen head, and a pedestal. The poem goes, and on the pedestal, these words appear. My name is Ozymandias, king of kings.

Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair. Nothing beside remains. Round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare, the lone and level sands stretch far away.

What is he saying? He's saying that someone could rise to such power that they can command the building of a statue, a colossus.

Someone could, without irony, carve, look on my works, ye mighty, and despair. That's to say, great men of the earth, compare your works to mine and find them lacking and wanting.

[27:28] I am that far above you. Consider yourselves great no longer. And even this king, who towers above all the others, gone are his kingdom, his wealth, his life, and except for a shattered statue in the midst of a desert wilderness, his very name.

They're all gone. Even the greatest of the great, who sought to save their own life and their own legacy, lose it.

I watched a movie once where a king shouted, I will carve my name in the stone. Friends, stone weathers away. If you want to save your life, it must be hid with Christ, who on Easter Sunday conquered even death.

So teach us, O Lord, to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.

Psalms 90. That's the first reason Jesus gives. The second reason he gives is this, verse 26. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?

[29:01] Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? We sing songs like when I survey the wondrous cross in church, don't we?

Right? Where the whole realm of nature mine, does that song? Where the whole realm of nature mine. That were an offering far too small.

Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all. Now in the context of that song that stands and means, if I gained the whole world, the whole realm of nature were mine, that would be far too small an offering of worship to God.

But in the context of verse 26, we could also sing it, meaning that if I gained the whole world, it still wouldn't be a big enough offering to redeem my soul.

There is nothing, not even Ozymandias, has enough to purchase the debt that is owed for his soul. The only offering that can purchase our souls is the one already made at the cross by Jesus Christ.

[30:08] Our sin is so terrible, not just because of what we've done, because of also who we have sinned against.

Our sin is so great because we've sinned against the law of so great a God. So to cover a debt that large requires an offering greater than the universe itself.

Do you have that? I don't. Only Christ, in offering himself on the cross, can make payment for my sin and for yours.

So even if I spent my entire life acquiring the whole world, Jesus says, I wouldn't have enough to give return for my own soul.

Reason number three, 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.

[31:32] Now there are two ways to take this verse and understand it. The first is that we have seen throughout Matthew's gospel, Jesus talk about something we've called gifts of grace.

On top of the salvation that he has earned for his people, on the last day he will also reward his people for the good they've done in this life.

Now these gifts are extra, they are on top of our salvation, and we won't have earned them, but they are gifts of grace that he freely gives for our obedience, on top of our salvation.

That's the first way we could read it. The second way we could read it is that he could be talking about the great day of judgment, where he will separate the sheep from the goats. In other words, verse 27 could be about your salvation.

Which is it? I don't think that Jesus is talking about rewards of grace here. That's because he has been talking about either being his disciple or not.

[32:43] Verse 24. Saving your life or losing it. Verse 25. Having the world or your soul. Verse 26. Everything so far has been black and white about being in or out of the kingdom.

Saving or losing your very life. So I think verse 27 is about judgment, about the fate of our souls.

Now that might be confusing to Christians who are used to hearing about God's free offer of salvation through faith apart from works.

What's with this? Repay each person according to his works then. Especially because Jesus has said that there's no price where we can give him anything in exchange for our souls.

So in the same breath, he can't mean he's going to demand a price now in verse 27, right? Because again, there's no price that we could pay. So how are we to understand this?

Jesus has just said there's no price we can pay in exchange for our soul. And the rest of the Bible testifies that the price was paid by Jesus.

[33:57] And he gives it freely by his grace through our faith. In Romans 11, Paul says it, our salvation, cannot be based on works. If it were, grace would no longer be grace.

But then in verse 27, he says we'll be judged by our works. Which is it? Perhaps we, especially evangelicals, have misunderstood or narrowed the definition or the scope of the word salvation. See, salvation is more than just an escape at the end of time. It's more than a ticket to ride, you know, a train to the good place.

Salvation certainly is that. But it is also something else. It includes what Paul and Jesus call the new birth.

The regeneration of the inner person. And a new relationship to God where we celebrate the fact that he's the Lord. In other words, he makes us disciples.

[35:08] That's part of our salvation. We're saved from hell into walking with Christ. We're saved into discipleship.

Bringing us right back to the beginning of this passage. If anyone would come after me. That's the point of your salvation. And so if our picture of salvation doesn't include walking with Christ, that's an incomplete picture because we've missed the point of it.

If you have a desire for salvation but not to follow Jesus, you aren't looking for the salvation that's found in the Bible. Last week we saw Jesus say that the point of history and the universe itself was God making a people for his treasured possession.

If you don't want God to be with God, to follow after God, you aren't after the salvation that's on offer in the Bible. And so when Jesus says we'll be judged according to what we have done, this

isn't salvation by works, but a tree is known by its fruits.

Right? I think John Piper put it really well. I'm going to read from his book, *Future Grace*, here. How then, he's talking about this verse, Matthew 16, 27.

[36:40] How then can I say that the judgment of believers, our entering the kingdom, is according to our deeds? The answer is that our deeds will be the public evidence brought forth in Christ's courtroom to demonstrate that our faith is real.

In other words, salvation is by grace through faith, but the evidence of invisible faith in the judgment hall of Christ will be a transformed life.

Our deeds are not the basis of our salvation. They are the evidence of our salvation. Right? So when the Lord regenerates us, he turns us into a people who think the hard road of discipleship is worth it.

Think of a task that gives you great satisfaction, maybe a difficult, challenging one. Right? For some people, it's gardening or yard work. Right? For others, it's wrenching on your car.

For others, it's the work you do day by day. For others, it's surfing in Shoreline Kids. It's hard work, and when it's done, you're kind of spent. Right? But you have a satisfaction that you just did a worthwhile job, and you did it well.

[37:56] The same is true of discipleship for Christians. When the Lord saves us, he enlivens our hearts so that we think of our discipleship like that, challenging and satisfying work.

Vern Poitras in his book, *The Lordship of Christ*, said, to outsiders looking at Christian discipleship, it can seem like we are sacrificing everything and giving up any prospect of happiness.

The mystery of service is that in giving up everything, we receive everything that matters. If Christ has renewed your very heart and given you new birth, you look at obedience totally differently.

Regenerating grace creates a new world in the soul, says Matthew Henry.

All things are new. The renewed man acts from new principles, by new rules, with new ends, and in new company. Is that going to yield new fruit?

[39:15] A new kind of life? You bet. And so the saints of God will be evident on the last day. They won't have earned anything, but they will be evident on the last day by the lives that he has transformed in them.

And then Jesus brings us to a close in verse 28, saying, Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.

Now this verse has caused no small amount of head scratching throughout the years, throughout the ages. How could Jesus, who told us that in his earthly ministry he didn't know when he would return, right?

None of the Father knows at that point. How could that, Jesus, tell us, tell his disciples that they wouldn't die before seeing him come in his kingdom? Well, perhaps, and I think this is the right way to take it, he's not talking about his second coming when he comes in glory.

Perhaps, this is a reference to the kingdom coming now into the world. So some people think that Matthew is talking, or that Jesus is talking about what Matthew records in the very next verse.

[40:45] If you look to Matthew 17, what's the subject heading there? The transfiguration. Jesus is going to unveil his glory to some, notice the some of you standing here, to some of his disciples.

And so, Matthew might be pairing these things up just to show us the explanation of that. I think that's probably a very good way to understand this. Others think that verse 28 is a reference to Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit empowered the people of God to expand the reign of his kingdom across the globe.

And others think that it has to do with the judgment, the king coming, the son of man coming in his kingdom in judgment, that came on unrepentant Israel in A.D. 70, when Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem.

Those are all plausible ways to read this verse. I think the best way, however, to read this verse is there's a reference to Christ's resurrection. The king vanquishes the last enemy and then begins his reign.

What does he say when he rises from the grave? All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

[42:07] Those are the words of a king. The last enemy, death, conquered. Satan himself and his powers disarmed on the cross. The power of sin broken. Now the king has broken out of death. The son of man comes up from the grave in his kingdom. I said, when pastor. And so Jesus is giving us the confidence that taking these radical steps, renouncing our very selves, taking up scorn, following a crucified Lord are worth it. Right? The evidence of that is his empty tomb. His promises are not void. They are not empty. Only his tomb is.

What are we to take from this passage? First, friends, let us stand in humility and repentance before our great God.

[43:16] Let us deny ourselves. Let us celebrate that Jesus the king invites us to walk with him. Let's diminish our focus on the things of this world knowing that even in gaining the whole world, that's still less than Christ and it's temporary where he is not.

Let's grow in the wisdom that our lives are short and let us live accordingly. And let us remember that the Christian life, it is a victory march, the king is risen, but it is also the hard walk bearing his cross with him.

the one whose eyes have been opened to see the beauty of Christ laying down his life for ours. We'll see the challenging and the unglamorous march of discipleship as worth it, as rewarding and wonderful because that's the road of Christ.

The road he walked ahead of us alone to its very end. And now that he is victorious over even death itself, it is the road he walks with his disciples.

[44:45] Friends, why walk the road of discipleship? Because Christ is there nowhere else. either you have been born from heaven and so desire to walk that path with Christ or you are still spiritually blind, dead in your sins and have no part with Christ.

But he offers, you may come after me. Will you? Will you walk with him? Let's pray. Let's pray. Thank you.