

Jesus Reveals the Cost of Discipleship
Matthew 16:24-28
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In Matthew 16, Jesus turned from the *“evil generation”* who rejected Him (Matthew 16:1-4) to teach His disciples. Matthew builds upon the statement from Peter that Jesus is *“the Christ, the Son of the living God”* (Matthew 16:16) to instruct the disciples about the future, specifically the church, the crucifixion and the resurrection (Matthew 16:18, 21). In Matthew 16:24-28, Jesus teaches His disciples about the cost of discipleship.

The requisite qualification for discipleship (16:24)

After Jesus rebukes Peter for opposing the Lord’s will in His coming suffering, death and resurrection, Jesus turns to His disciples to explain the cost of following Him. This is the direct result of Peter’s refusal to accept the words of Jesus.

The reason this section on the character of true discipleship follows the account of Jesus’ rebuke of Peter is because truly following Jesus involves the yielding of our will to the Lord’s will. Like Peter, we must lay aside our preconceived notions of what is best and we follow the revelation of God without question. Because Jesus is *“the Christ, the Son of the living God,”* we must recognize His way is better than our way. *“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord. ‘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).

The foundation of following Jesus is described by three aspects in verse 24: denying oneself, taking up his cross, and following Jesus. Each of these is related but has a specific demand for discipleship.

1. Denying himself

Matthew 16:24 is a restatement of Jesus’ words in Matthew 10:38, *“And the one who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.”* Yet Matthew 16:24 expands what Jesus said in Matthew 10 by including the denial of self.

To deny oneself is more than simple self-deprivation. Many religions practice self-denial but only Jesus said we must deny ourselves. The difference between these two is that self-denial is the specific act of depriving oneself of what is desired, for the sake of a greater goal. Denying oneself is the commitment to set aside our lives for the sake of Christ and in service to Him.

Many secular people practice self-denial. In order to lose weight to become healthier, we will deprive ourselves of certain foods. For athletes to achieve success they must train themselves, which necessitates choices that bring some degree of hardship. This is not a bad thing, it just is momentary for an end that pursues a greater goal for ourselves.

Similarly, religions also commonly include elements of self-denial in their traditions. The term for such religious self-denial is Asceticism, the denial of certain desires to attain some spiritual goal. One notable example in Roman Catholicism and certain other Christian denominations is the practice of Lent, described as “a fitting time for self-denial; we would do well to ask ourselves what we can give up in order to help and enrich others by our own poverty. Let us not forget that real poverty hurts; no self-denial is real without this dimension of penance” (Pope Francis, Lenten Message 2014).

To be clear, such self deprivation is not inherently wrong, but it is not the same as Jesus’ call to deny ourselves. Moreover, such personal self-sacrifices does not produce the desired outcome, according to Colossians 2:20-23, “*If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’ (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of man? These are matters which do have the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and humility and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.*” This verse also proves that dying with Christ is fundamentally different from refraining from certain desires.

When we substitute a full and total surrender of our lives to Christ with a partial, momentary act of self-sacrifice, we are at best failing to understand the demand that Jesus gave to those who wish to seek Him, and at worst are performing a works-based attempt to appease God in our efforts.

2. Taking up his cross

The concept of denying ourselves is closely related with Jesus’ words “*take up His cross.*” Jesus does not refer to His crucifixion, as He will not reveal this detail about His death until Matthew 20:19. Jesus did not tell His disciples to take up His cross, but rather to take up one’s own cross. This metaphor uses the picture of a Roman execution where the condemned man carried his own horizontal beam to the site of the crucifixion, where it would be attached to the vertical beam.

To consider ourselves as dead for the sake of Christ is expressed frequently in the New Testament (Romans 14:7-9; 15:2-3; Galatians 2:20; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

The rhetorical questions regarding discipleship (16:25-26)

As Matthew 16:24 restates Matthew 10:38, so Matthew 16:25 restates Matthew 10:39. Verses 25-27 each start with the preposition “for,” indicating more information to follow about verse 24. The explanation of what Jesus meant is then found in these subsequent verses. Specifically, verses 25-26 involve what it means to deny oneself and to take up his cross.

One primary point is that we learn that Jesus is not speaking of only the physical realm, but of how our desires in the physical world result in our destiny in eternity. Those prioritizing this present life will lose their life for “*inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment*” (Hebrews 9:27). Everyone has a physical life that is temporary and to seek to save this life will result in grave consequences for the life to come. If we seek to save our bodily, earthly life, we will lose our spiritual, eternal life.

Jesus also emphasizes the dramatic disparity in these two outcomes. Gaining the whole world is literally impossible, but if one could accomplish such a thing, it will not profit them long term. There are several reasons for this: (1) Our possession of the whole world is temporary for it will remain for others when we are gone; (2) The whole world itself is temporary (2 Peter 3:10-13); and (3) The value of our eternal soul is greater than the value of any temporary possessions.

The rhetorical question, “*what will a man give in exchange for his soul?*” lends itself to the obvious answer that there is nothing that a man would withhold to gain his soul. Every sensible person would eagerly give everything in exchange for his soul. However, in reality, there are a great multitude of people giving up their eternity for the sake of the present. Perhaps many do not recognize the value of what they are losing, but many have an awareness of the significance of their choice and continue on their path of rebellion regardless.

Also, within these rhetorical questions exist the clear impression of the exercise of the will. “*For whoever wishes*” speaks of a volitional aspect in the exercise of the will of each person. The sovereignty of God in the salvation of man does not preclude the legitimate exercise of the human will. God elects those whom He will move to draw to Himself so that they willfully desire to follow Him, for without the graceful act of God to intercede on our behalf, we will be dead in our sin (Ephesians 2:1-9). Furthermore, the converse is also true. Those who choose not to follow Christ, but to live for themselves, do so willingly. God does not force anyone against their will, rather they live out the destiny of their true desires.

Furthermore, this promise of Jesus is made to all. He said, *“If anyone wishes to come after Me”* and *“Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.”* These are universal promises given to those beyond the Jewish people and not limited to certain people. This corresponds to the many words of Jesus that spoke of the universal nature of His death and resurrection for all who believe (Romans 5:6, 18; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15; 1 Timothy 2:6; 4:10; Hebrews 2:9; 1 John 2:2).

The final question we must look into is whether this text is speaking about eternal salvation. Some conservative commentators believe that this passage is not speaking of eternal destiny but rather the reward of following Christ. Under this view, living for ourselves will result in a leaner eternal life, while denying ourselves will result in a fuller eternal life.

However, from the actual words that Jesus spoke lead to the view that He meant one’s eternal destiny. First, there is a sense of an absolute, not a partial following. Jesus said that the one who wishes to follow after Him must deny himself. This is unequivocal and there is no partial application of this command. Denying one’s self is a clear requirement.

Also, Jesus spoke of forfeiting one’s soul. Forfeiting involves a total loss. This is not a partial penalty or a degree of deprivation. The soul is the immaterial part of man that exists forever, either in a relationship with God or apart from God in eternal destruction, *“These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power”* (2 Thessalonians 1:9). There is a loss of one’s soul involved, not simply a loss of one’s eternal rewards.

To interpret this in a way other than a matter of eternal salvation is based in a lack of appreciation for the fullness of God’s grace. Those who oppose the plain sense of this text consider themselves a proponent of the tenets of grace because they view the denial of self and taking up one’s own cross as acts of human effort. However, the grace of God in salvation not only moves a person to wish to follow Jesus, it also moves a person to desire to deny themselves for the sake of Christ and to take up their cross to follow Jesus. To teach that those who wish to follow Jesus must deny themselves and take up his cross are only stating what those who truly have faith in Jesus will actually want to do.

The problem with a works-oriented ministry is not these general statements of Jesus about the cost of being His disciple. Rather, it is when people seek to become specific about what must be denied or what alleged burden must be carried. This is where the gospel of works can infect the church, when leaders prescribe what deeds they believe are necessary applications of these truths.

The remarkable culmination of discipleship (16:27)

The third explanatory preposition leads to the final compelling reason to heed Jesus' words about following Him, specifically, the coming judgment. Matthew 16:27 includes elements that should be compelling in light of what they testify about Jesus. The usage of the term "*Son of Man*" has been used by Jesus over a dozen times prior to this verse in Matthew's gospel, as recently as verse 13 of this chapter. It designates Christ as the Messiah, based upon its use in Daniel 7:13.

Also, Jesus speaks of Himself coming "*in the glory of His Father with His angels.*" He does not simply come to represent His Father, but in the Father's glory (cf. Matthew 26:64; John 17:1-5). This is a statement of Christ's deity, for Isaiah 42:8 says, "I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another." Plus, Jesus refers to His coming with "*His angels,*" as they belong to Him to serve His will.

Finally, Jesus references Psalm 62:12, "*For You recompense a man according to his work.*" This speaks of the coming judgment, both upon those to believe and upon those who do not. Romans 2 references Psalm 62:12 also, "*But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.*" We see the judgment of this verse in both the reward of the believer (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:10) and the condemnation of the unbeliever (cf. Revelation 22:12).

That Jesus will be coming with His angels in judgment to repay everyone according to their deeds is a strong motivation to follow Him. Once we are aware of Jesus' authority in judgment we ought to be responsive to His commands. "For we know Him who said, 'VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY.' And again, 'THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE.' It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (Hebrews 10:30-31). In the same way, knowing that we will be repaid for our service to Christ in this present life is also a motivation to follow Jesus. Jesus taught this when He said, "*your Father, who sees what is done in secret will reward you*" (Matthew 6:4, 6, 18).

The revealing of Christ to the disciples (16:28)

Matthew 16:28 is one of the more perplexing verses in the Gospels. Taken at face value, it appears that Jesus was teaching that He would return as He spoke of in previous verse before some of His disciples would pass away. This would mean that either the Scripture's description of the return of Christ and the coming kingdom cannot be taken literally, or that Jesus was mistaken. Another view is that this was fulfilled at Christ's resurrection or the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which also results in a non-literal kingdom of God. The spiritualization of the kingdom is the common interpretation of amillennialism.

The best interpretation of Matthew 16:28 is found by observing the context. The very next section is Matthew 17:1-13, which is the account of the transfiguration of Christ. The transfiguration is recorded in each of the synoptic Gospels, and in each case, Jesus' words about some who are standing with Him would not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom (Mark 9:1, 2-13; Luke 9:27, 28-36). The proximity of these verses in all three Gospels is significant, along with in the proximity of time, "*Six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John and led them up on a mountain by themselves*" (Matthew 17:1; cf. Mark 9:2).

Beyond the context, that is unfortunately separated by a chapter break (inserted 1,000 years after the writing) in Matthew, there is also a conjunction "and" linking Matthew 16:28 and Matthew 17:1. This same conjunction is also found in the Greek text of Mark 9:2, while Luke 9:28 adds "*and it came about.*" Some translations omit these conjunctions but they serve to further link the words of Jesus in verse 28 with the events of the transfiguration.

In Matthew 16:28, Jesus explains that "*some of those standing*" would not taste death, which fits the selection of Peter, James and John out from the rest. The rest, aside from Judas Iscariot, would remain alive at the coming of the Spirit.

At the transfiguration, Jesus was revealed in His glory. "*And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light*" (Matthew 17:2). Luke 9:32 describes the three disciples as seeing Jesus in "*His glory,*" which is a term associated with the return of Christ who "*is going to come in the glory of His Father*" (Matthew 16:27). Also, Jesus' preface, "*Truly I say to you*" separates this predicted vision of the kingdom from the establishment of the kingdom in Matthew 16:27.

Finally, Peter himself interpreted the transfiguration as a preview of the kingdom. *“For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased’—and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain”* (2 Peter 1:16-18). Peter recognized that He saw the power and coming of Jesus in the transfiguration.

Conclusion

A disciple is a follower of Jesus. The foundational teaching of Jesus about following Him is found in Matthew 16:24, *“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up His cross and follow Me.”* This is the essence of discipleship.

We make disciples by going to all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching others to observe all that Jesus commanded (Matthew 28:19-20). As we take the initiative to engage people about Jesus, we discern if they are responsive. Baptism is the initial response of one who desires to follow Jesus. It is the only command that we can do one time and complete. It is categorically objective.

The words of Jesus to deny ourselves and take up our cross is objective in the sight of God, but can be murky in sinful nature and in our fallen world. Our ministry beyond the gospel is *“teaching them to observe all that I’ve commanded you”* (Matthew 28:20). This is our singular means to encourage those seeking to follow Christ as His disciple.