Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Winning by Losing: The Paradox of Discipleship
Scripture: Matthew 16:24-28
Code: 2321

INTRODUCTION

Matthew 16:24-27 is our text for this lesson: "Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels, and then he shall reward every man according to his works."

A. The Self-Centeredness of Contemporary Christianity

This passage strikes a death blow to the current trend in much of contemporary Christianity toward self-centered consumption. Many people wish to identify themselves with Christianity only for what they can get out of it. They view Jesus as a utilitarian genie, fulfilling every whim. Some in the Charismatic movement say Jesus wants to make you healthy, wealthy, and happy. If you are not all those things, then you supposedly don't have enough faith to appropriate what's yours. They claim Christianity is designed so you can get everything you need and want. Even evangelicals and fundamentalists through the years have been guilty of propagating a Jesus who is a panacea for everything. They promote the get without the give, and the gain without the pain. Self-esteem promoters tell us Jesus came to boost our self-image. But they have fallen victim to narcissism--the pervasive self-love of contemporary society.

B. The Self-Sacrifice of True Christianity

Coming to Jesus Christ to get material things is a prostitution of divine intention. It is true that when you come to Christ you receive and continue to receive blessings from Him. But there must be a cross before a crown, suffering before glory, and sacrifice before reward. That is what our Lord teaches in Matthew 16:24-27. We are called to win by losing.

This is not the first time Jesus taught his disciples that lesson.

1. Matthew 10:37-39--"He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross and

followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it."

2. Mark 10:21--"Jesus, beholding him [the rich young ruler], loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest; go thy way, sell whatever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow me."

3. Luke 14:25-27--"There went great multitudes with him [Christ]; and he turned, and said unto them, If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple."

4. John 12:24-25--Jesus said, "Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal."

Matthew 16:24-27 is an oft-repeated principle. Even the apostle Paul said, "We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). You will never understand what it means to be a disciple of Christ until you grasp the principle of winning by losing.

LESSON

I. THE PRINCIPLE (v. 24)

"Jesus said unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."

A. Reiterating the Teaching on Commitment

In Matthew 8:20 Jesus tells a would-be disciple that "foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has not where to lay his head." Jesus emphasized the cost involved in being His disciple. He talked about the pain involved, the need to sever certain relationships, the inevitable hostility, and the willingness to suffer. In Matthew 16:24-27 He reiterates that same teaching to His disciples. Why did He need to repeat it if He had taught it before? Because it was clear to Christ that they had yet not understood the lesson.

1. The affirmation of the disciplesa) Great expectations

The disciples had been raised with a specific understanding about the coming of the Messiah. They expected Him to overthrow the Roman yoke, dethrone the Herods, and establish the Kingdom in all

its glory. The longer Jesus delayed in doing so, the more difficult it became for them to wait. When Christ was given the opportunity to be made king, He fled from the scene (John 6:15). The people misunderstood Him. The religious leaders, instead of proclaiming Him as the Messiah, hated Him and sought to kill Him.b) Ultimate realization

As the disciples spent two-and-a-half years with Jesus, they had no human explanation for His miracles or His words. Because of God's work in their hearts, they finally came to the conclusion that Christ was the Messiah. That made them willing to wait. In Matthew 16:16 Peter affirms the consensus of all the disciples: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

2. The authority of Christa) In building His church

In response Jesus said, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades [a term used by the Hebrews for death] shall not prevail against it" (v. 18). That means if the opposition took Christ's life, He would rise from the dead. It also means that if they took His disciples' lives, they too would rise. Death--to say nothing of anything in life-- cannot contain the power of the church. What a glorious truth for the disciples to hear on a dusty road in Caesarea, Philippi!b) In delegating His authority

Then Jesus said, "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind [forbid] on earth [shall have been forbidden] in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose [permit] on earth [shall have been permitted] in heaven" (v. 19). The apostles' decisions would reflect the will of God. Verse 17 explains how that could be possible: "Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father, who is in heaven."

The disciples learned that God would reveal His truth to them. They could see the glory of the Messiah, the gathering of the redeemed, and themselves as the heroes of the Kingdom. It was a great moment they had waited a long time for.

3. The attack of Satana) Satan's favorite tool

In verse 21 Jesus tells the disciples He would have to go to Jerusalem and be killed. The disciples never listened to the rest of what Jesus said after that; they heard only the shocking prophecy of His death. Verses 22-23 say, "Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord; this shall not be unto thee. But [Jesus] turned and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan." Jesus recognized the real attacker. Peter was merely a tool: Satan had been trying to divert Christ from the cross ever since he first tempted Him in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11).

b) Peter's faulty mindset

In verse 23 Christ categorizes Peter's attitude: "Thou art an offense unto me; for thou savorest not the things that are of God, but those that are of men." Peter offended Christ because he was following a worldly train of thought. Men of the world want gain without pain, a crown without the cross, glory without suffering, and a reward without sacrifice. But according to God the opposite is true. Whether incarnate in the Son or alive in the hearts of His people, God cannot exist in the midst of an anti-God society without generating some hostility. That's why 2 Timothy 3:12 says, "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." Peter did not understand that holiness in the midst of an unholy society will create a negative reaction.

B. Reaffirming the Terms of Commitment

Jesus knew He needed to remind His disciples of the first lesson He taught them. They were called to leave everything--their family, livelihood, life-style, and home--to follow Him. So He tells them, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (v. 24).

The phrase "if any man will come after me" is like saying, "If you want to be a Christian." It is an evangelistic statement. But why would He say that to the disciples? Because the evangelistic thrust is to the multitude that also was present (Mark 8:34). Yet it was of tremendous value to the disciples. Having already made a commitment to Christ, we tend to do what we want when we are secure in Him and avoid the reproach that comes from being a good representative of Jesus Christ. If you want to follow Christ, you must do so on His terms. Like us, the disciples needed a reaffirmation of what those terms are.

What should our attitude be when coming to Christ? There are three factors to consider: dying to self, bearing the cross, and living in obedience.

1. Dying to self

a) The right perspective

(1) Recognizing your inadequacy

Matthew 16:24 says, "Let him deny himself." The Greek word translated "deny" means "to disown." Verse 24 could be translated, "Let him refuse any association or companionship with himself." Jesus is not referring to your conscious self. You must reach the point where you are willing to deny that you have the capacity to save yourself, or to be what God wants you to be. To come to Christ you must affirm that no good thing dwells in your flesh (Rom. 7:18), acknowledging you contribute nothing to your redemption." The self-esteem cults that propagate love of self take people away from the message of the Bible. The more you love yourself, the less likely you are to sense your need for a Savior. To disown yourself is the first essential in the Christian life. That's the way you come to Christ,

and that's the way you continue to live.

(2) Recognizing Christ's sufficiency

The heart of man must see its sin. It must see itself judged and condemned to hell, knowing it can do nothing of itself to change that outcome. In desperation it must reach out and seek a rescuer outside of itself. And that rescuer is Christ. Self is cast away when Christ enters in. The apostle Paul said, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). He subjected himself to the lordship of Jesus Christ. Paul also said, "We ... worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3). When you come to Christ, you must do so on His terms: self-denial.

b) The right attitude

(1) Internal poverty

The greatest sermon ever preached on the subject of salvation is the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:3 Christ describes the attitude of those who will enter the Kingdom: "Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Poverty of spirit is the foundation of virtue. The Greek word translated "poor" in verse 3 is pt[ma]ochos. It refers to someone so poor that he is forced to beg. Such a person is destitute, humbled by his wretched state. The Lord is saying that those who enter His Kingdom know they have no resources of their own. Until we know how damned we are, we will never appreciate how precious Christ's forgiveness is. Until we know how utterly poor we are, we can never know how great His riches are. Out of the carcass comes the honey (Jud. 14:9), and out of our deadness life is born. The psalmist said, "The Lord is near unto those who are of a broken heart, and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit" (Ps. 34:18).

(2) Desperate passion

Only desperate people come to God. In Luke 18:10 a tax collector and a Pharisee go into the Temple to pray. The Pharisee "prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are ... even as this tax collector. I fast twice in the week; I give tithes of all that I possess" (vv. 11-12). He had an inflated self- image. The tax collector "would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God, be merciful to me a sinner" (v. 13). Jesus said, "This man went down to his house justified rather than the other" (v. 14). People will come to Christ when they have run out of resources--when they know they can't do anything about their sin. The intention of the Old Testament was to show men how unredeemable they are on their own terms. It is through grace alone that the sinner can know God through Christ.

c) The right action

According to Matthew 5:4 those who are poor in spirit mourn over their condition. They are also meek, knowing that nothing good is in them (v. 5). They therefore hunger and thirst for righteousness (v. 6)--something they desperately want but can't get because it isn't within their grasp. As a result, they are utterly dependent on God.

The broken sinner comes to Christ denying himself. The proud sinner wants both Christ and his pleasures, his covetousness, and his immorality. But he won't ever know Christ unless he comes on Christ's terms. Once a sinner has come to Christ, he is to live a life of self-denial. It is actually a happy way of life. I'm not happy when my self acts; I am happy when the Spirit of God acts through me. Joy comes through obedience and holiness. Bible scholar Arthur Pink said that growth in grace is a growth downward: it is the forming of a lower estimate of ourselves; it is a deepening realization of our nothingness; and it is a heartfelt recognition that we are not worthy of the least of God's mercies. Colossians 3:5 says we have to kill our fleshly desires. We have to put off our old man, which has been corrupted by lust (Eph. 4:22). An attitude of self-denial is crucial for entrance into the kingdom, and then it becomes the believer's life pattern. We say no to self and yes to the Spirit of God.

Living a Life of Self-Denial

An unknown author wrote about self-denial in this way: Suppose you have been neglected or unforgiven. You sting with the hurt of the insult from such an oversight, but your heart is happy because you have been counted worthy to suffer for Christ. That is what dying to self is all about. When your wishes are crossed, your advice disregarded, and your opinions ridiculed, and yet you refuse to let anger rise in your heart or try to defend yourself, you are practicing dying to self. When you lovingly and patiently stand face to face with folly and spiritual insensitivity, and endure it as Jesus did, you have died to self. When you are content with any food, money, clothing, climate, society, solitude, or interruption by the will of God, you have died to self. When you never care to refer to yourself in conversation, record your own good works, or desire commendation from others, you are dying to self. When you can honestly rejoice with a brother who has prospered and had his needs met, and never feel any envy though your needs are greater and still unmet, you have practiced dying to self. When you can receive correction and reproof from one of less stature than yourself, and humbly admit he's right with no resentment or rebellion in your heart, you have died to self. Are you dead yet?

2. Taking up the crossa) The willingness to suffer reproach

Taking up the cross refers to the willingness to endure persecution, rejection, reproach, shame, suffering, and even martyrdom for the sake of Christ.

(1) As a common criminal

What were the disciples thinking about on that dusty road in Caesarea Philippi two thousand years ago when Jesus said, "Take up his cross"? First century Jewish historian Josephus tells us that eight hundred Jews were crucified in Jerusalem over one hundred years before (Antiquities 13.14.2). After a revolt following the death of Herod the Great, the Roman proconsul Varus crucified two thousand Jews (Antiquities 17.10.10). Crucifixion was a common practice in the Roman Empire.

When Jesus said, "Take up his cross," the disciples saw poor condemned souls marching along a road with the instrument of their own death strapped to their backs. Carrying one's cross meant walking to one's death. That's what the Lord wanted them to see. The disciples needed to perceive that following Christ was like putting on the instrument of their own execution. All but one of the twelve died as martyrs. Most of you won't be martyred, but you will bear reproach and ridicule if you live for Christ (2 Tim. 3:12). You must be willing to suffer the indignities of a condemned criminal in service to Christ, should you be called to do so.

(2) As an associate of Christ

In our day we are not being martyred for our obedience to Christ, but we still must bear a reproach. Practicing self-denial means identify with Christ and naming His name up to and including the point of death. Most of us would say, "If I ever got to that point, I don't think I could handle it." But if you did face that situation, 1 Peter 4:14 says, "The Spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you." You would have such an overwhelming sense of God's grace that you would find great joy in the midst of your situation.

Coming to Christ is not just a matter of signing on the dotted line or sticking your hand in the air. When you are enamored by the precious gift of salvation through Christ, you will sacrifice even your self. After receiving Christ's gift, isn't it amazing how we back off from that original commitment? Christ knows us, and that's why He reminded the disciples as well as instructing the crowd about our commitment.

(a) Matthew 10:24-25--Jesus said, "The disciple is not above his teacher, nor the servant above his lord. It is enough for the disciple that he be like his teacher, and the servant like his lord." He warned His disciples that they would be persecuted (v. 23).

(b) Matthew 10:34-36--Jesus continued, "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth; I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household."

Hostility results when godliness invades ungodliness. Yet there is a marvelous ambivalence in that truth. While it is true the world despises us, it can't help but be attracted to us at at the same time. However, the emphasis in Matthew 16:24 is on the reproach. The cross indicates our suffering because of our connection to Jesus Christ. Picture Jesus Christ moving along the road to His execution, bearing on His back the cross on which He will bear the sins of all the world. Following Him are millions, all bearing their crosses, willing to share in His sufferings. What a glorious scene! You're not called to Christ to receive blessing; you're called to abandon yourself in service to Him. A willingness to bear one's cross is the mark of a true disciple. A good test to separate the wheat from the tares (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43) is to see who is willing to suffer the reproach of Christ. The tares won't pay that kind of price.

b) The way of life

Luke 9:23 says, "Take up his cross daily" (emphasis added). Self-sacrifice is a way of life for us. In the hymn "Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone?" eighteenth century lyricist Thomas Shepherd said,

Must Jesus bear the cross alone
And all the world go free?
No, there's a cross for ev'ry one,
And there's a cross for me.

The consecrated cross I'll bear
Till death shall set me free,
And then go home my crown to wear,
For there's a crown for me.

3. Living in obedience

Matthew 16:24 says, "And follow me." The text literally says, "Let him be following Me." Being a disciple of Christ becomes a pattern of living. We are to imitate Christ. If we say we belong to Jesus, we ought "to walk, even as he walked" (1 John 2:6). We need to be obedient to the divine will. That's what our Lord meant when He said, "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father, who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21).

The true disciple is marked by dying to self, taking up the cross, and living in obedience. In John 8:31 Jesus says, "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed." If you were going to take a trip, the first thing you'd do is say good-bye and pick up your bags. The second thing you'd do is proceed on your trip. The same applies here. You say good-bye to self, pick up your burden (your cross), and follow in loyal obedience.

II. THE PARADOX (vv. 25-26)

A. The Eternal Choices (v. 25)

"Whosoever will save his life shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it."

Whoever lives only to preserve his earthly comforts will lose his eternal soul. But whoever is willing to deny himself and follow Christ will save his soul. You have a choice. The Greek word here translated "life" is frequently translated elsewhere as "soul" or "self." Christ is referring to your soul, the internal part of you.

A willingness to pay the price may mean martyrdom, as in the case of Paul. It may mean sickness, as in the case of Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25-27). It's not likely to mean martyrdom in our day, but if a person truly follows Jesus Christ, he must be willing to abandon his own security and comfort.

Willing to Pay the Price

You may be familiar with the story of the slaveowner and his godly slave. This particular slave was always happy and singing all the time. No matter what anyone did to him, he never changed. One day his master said to him, "What have you got?" The slave said, "I love the Lord Jesus Christ because He has forgiven my sin. And that puts a song in my heart." The master said, "I want what you have." The slave replied, "Then go put on your white suit and come down here and work in the mud with us. Then you can have what I have." The master said that was beneath him and rode away. But he came back later because he so admired the slave's attitude toward life. He said once again, "What do I have to do to have what you have?" The slave again relied, "Put on your white suit and work in the mud with us. Then you can have it." But he rode off in a huff. Some weeks later he returned and said, "I want you to give it to me straight. What do I have to do to have what you have?" The slave said, "I already told you what you have to do." Finally in desperation the master said, "I'll do it." The slave replied, "Good! Then you don't have to. You only had to be willing to do it." I'm not saying God will make you a martyr. But if you come to Jesus Christ on His terms, you better be willing to be one if God so chooses. Be willing to lose your life if necessary to gain eternal life rather than try to preserve your life here at all costs and forfeit eternal life.

B. The Eternal Questions (v. 26)

1. Can you profit from the world? (v. 26a)

"What is a man profited [lit. "what use is it for a man"], if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"

That is the ultimate hyperbole. Suppose a man owns everything on the earth, but he loses his soul. What does he have? Nothing. What good is it for a dead man to own everything?

2. Can you buy your soul? (v. 26b)

"What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Could the dead man who owned the whole world buy back his soul with the world? No. If you throw your life away in this world, you will be bankrupt forever. But if you abandon your life and give it to Jesus Christ, you'll be rich forever. And He may choose to pour out some of those riches to you in this life as well.

III. THE PAROUSIA (Gk. "coming"; v. 27)

"The Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels, and then he shall reward every man according to his works."

There is coming a day when the Judge will arrive. John 5:27 says the Father has given the Son all authority to execute judgment. When Christ says, "He shall reward every man according to his works" (Matt. 16:27), He is not referring to salvation by works. We are not saved by our works, but we are judged by our works (Rom. 2). We read that believers are judged on the basis of what they do because that reveals who they are (1 Cor. 3:11-15). The phrase "shall come" means "about to come." That is the first indication of the Second Coming in the New Testament.

No one will escape the final judgment of God. Psalm 62:12 says, "O Lord ... thou renderest to every man according to his work." Romans 14:12 says, "So, then, every one of us shall give account of himself to God." In the day of reckoning, God will look at a man's works and say, "There's a believer; I can tell by his works. They are the product of the Spirit. There's an unbeliever; I can tell by his works. They're the product of the flesh." Works are the objective criteria by which God can evaluate the subjective reality of a man's faith.

God's judgment is two-fold. Luke emphasizes the shame the ungodly will feel (Luke 9:26). They will be judged according to their works and sent to hell. Believers also will be judged, but they will be rewarded according to their works. We will receive crowns if we have been faithful.

Jesus is saying to the crowd, "You better give up your life, take up your cross, and follow Me. If you don't, a day is coming when you'll be cast into hell." To the disciples He is saying, "You better be faithful to deny yourself, take up your cross, and live in obedience because a day is coming when you'll be rewarded." The man who selfishly clings to his life--whose overwhelming concern is comfort,

security, prosperity, and self-indulgence--is an eternal pauper. The man who gives his life for Christ--who abandons himself to the will of God--will be a prince with God forever. Only a fool struggles with that kind of choice. Nevertheless there will be those who, as in Jeremiah's day, forsake "the fountain of living waters, and [hew] out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (Jer. 2:13).

Focusing on the Facts

1. What has happened to much of contemporary Christianity?

2. What must Christians experience before they are rewarded?

3. Why did Jesus need to repeat the lesson in Matthew 16:24-27 to the disciples?

4. What did the disciples expect from Jesus?

5. What two things did Christ say He would do in response of Peter's declaration (Matt. 16:16-18)?

6. What did Satan attempt to do through the rebuke of Peter (Matt. 16:21-23)?

7. Why did Peter offend Christ with his rebuke (Matt. 16:23)?

8. For what two reasons did Christ make an evangelistic statement to the disciples in Matthew 16:24)?

9. What are three factors to consider in coming to Christ?

10. Explain what Christ means when He said, "Let him deny himself"?

11. How must the heart of man see itself?

12. According to Matthew 5:3, what kind of attitude is necessary to enter the kingdom of heaven?

13. Explain what it means to die to self.

14. What does it mean to take up one's cross? What significance did it have for the disciples?

15. In what way does God allow a believer to find joy in the midst of dying because of his identification with Christ (1 Pet. 4:14)?

16. How often must a believer take up his cross? Why?

17. What should be the pattern of a believer's life (1 John 2:6)?

18. What will happen to those who seek to preserve their comfort and self-indulgence (Matt. 16:25)?

Pondering the Principles

1. Do you find that as a believer you have a tendency to demand back some of your rights as a result of the security you have in Christ? Are you avoiding the reproach and hostility you would receive by being openly associated with Christ? Remember the attitude you had when you came to Christ for salvation. Read Matthew 5:3-6. Which of those attitudes do you need to cultivate again in your life? Prayerfully consider how God would want you to implement each one into your life today.

2. Review the section on Living a Life of Self-Denial (p. 7). How many of those statements have been or are true of you? How many of them have you experienced but failed to endure to the end? Those examples illustrate how hard it is for us to die to self. Perhaps you are experiencing a situation that is similar to one of those listed. What must you do in that situation to practice dying to self? Know that the Holy Spirit will back up your commitment to obey God. Thank God for that assurance.

3. Read 1 Peter 4:12-19. According to verses 13, 16, and 19, what should a believer do when he suffers? According to verse 14, what kind of attitude should a believer adopt when he is reproached for the name of Christ? How is he able to do that? The next time you suffer as a Christian, read this passage and follow what it says. You will find yourself blessed because of your obedience.

4. Are you willing to pay the price of being a disciple of Christ? Examine your heart right now. Is there anything that might be preventing you from making a 100 percent commitment to Christ? If there is, confess it right now and eliminate it from your life. If called on to do the most distasteful job you can think of, would you do it if it meant you identified yourself with Christ? If you can answer yes honestly, you are willing to pay the price.

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