TAKE UP YOUR CROSS AND FOLLOW JESUS

Matthew 16:21–28

Key Verse: 16:24

“Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’”

“Take care of yourself!” “Take it easy!” These common greetings reflect today’s life philosophy. In this passage Jesus tells us to do just the opposite. It’s just as countercultural as his Sermon on the Mount. He first explains what he’s going to do (21). Then he challenges his disciples and us to follow him (22–24). Finally, he gives us reasons to embrace this most difficult life path (25–28). May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

1. Jesus predicts his death and resurrection (21)

Verse 21 begins, “From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples…” This marks a turning point in Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus spent the first three years of his ministry helping his disciples to make a personal confession of faith in him. Only when he’s sure they know who he is does he begin showing them what’s going to happen to him. In making disciples Jesus first taught them his person as the Messiah, then he taught them his work.

What was it that Jesus the Messiah came to do? Read verse 21. This all would happen in Jerusalem, where they’d be in about six months to celebrate the Passover. But it wouldn’t be a pleasant holiday. Jesus their Lord would suffer many things and be killed. On the third day he’d be raised to life. His many sufferings and death would come “at the hands of” the religious leaders. They’d use the Romans to do it, but *they* would be responsible for it. Why did they want to do these things to Jesus? Partly, they were jealous of his immense popularity. Mainly, they were uncomfortable because his ministry challenged them to repent. Instead of focusing on outward appearances, keeping traditions and rules, Jesus demanded a real change of heart, a deep repentance. And the religious leaders were too proud and self-righteous for that. Since he was a threat to their cherished positions, they banded together to eliminate him.

Why did Jesus have to go through all this? It was to save us from our sins (1:21b). The prophet Isaiah predicted it: “He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain…Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering…But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isa53:3–5). Evil people seemed to be taking over in killing Jesus, but actually it was God’s plan all along (Isa53:10). Jesus suffered many things and was killed so that we could die to sins and live for righteousness (1Pe2:24). In raising him from the dead, God exalted Jesus to his own right hand as Prince and Savior (Ac5:31). Most kings use other people for their own honor and glory, sitting on thrones expecting to be served. But Jesus was willing to humble himself, suffer, and give his life as a ransom for many (20:28).

Why did he begin to show his disciples these things? It was to help them grasp the core of the gospel, the good news, which is his death and resurrection. It would be this gospel they’d go out to proclaim—that Jesus suffered and died for our sins and was raised from the dead to give us new life and living hope. Jesus also wanted his disciples to experience firsthand his example of quiet obedience and suffering, so that they could follow in his footsteps (1Pe2:21–23).

1. Follow Jesus (22–24)

Read verse 22. Peter didn’t respond well. He even rebuked Jesus. He’d just made an amazing confession of faith in Jesus as his Messiah. But obviously he had a different idea of what the Messiah was supposed to do. Peter was probably Jesus’ best friend, his closest, most loyal disciple. He wanted to protect Jesus from suffering. We too want to protect ourselves, our friends and loved ones from suffering or humiliation. It takes up so much of what we do in life.

But how did Jesus respond? Read verse 23. It’s shocking that right after saying he’s the rock on which he’ll build his church, Jesus now calls Peter “Satan” and a stumbling block to him. It seems too extreme. Why the sudden change? It wasn’t just rhetoric; Jesus genuinely felt the temptation of Satan through Peter’s suggestion. It came from Peter’s human love and loyalty, which are so noble and beautiful, but it was in direct contradiction of God’s will. Jesus contrasts here “the concerns of God” with “merely human concerns.” What are they? Human concerns are basically about self-preservation and the enjoyment of this life; God’s concerns are about accomplishing his vision of world salvation through the gospel of Jesus. Saving sin-sick people from their sins is the great concern of God, and it’s really not easy to accomplish. Though Peter was following Jesus literally and physically, and especially with his human loyalty, he actually was not really following Jesus spiritually. Read verse 24. To be a true disciple of Jesus, we have to deny ourselves, take up our own cross and follow Jesus. What does it mean?

**First**, self-denial. There’ve been many misunderstandings of what this means. Some thought it means fasting, renouncing a life of ease and pleasure, or even inflicting pain on oneself. Actually, there are people in many other religions who’ve done these things, and they’re not following Jesus. So we shouldn’t just focus on the acts of self-denial, but on the self-denial involved in *following Jesus*. John the Baptist once said, “He must become greater; I must become less” (Jn3:30). Apostle Paul taught us, “For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord” (Ro14:7,8). We deny ourselves, not to make ourselves more spiritual or more righteous, but for Jesus’ sake. Elsewhere, Paul put it simply: “And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised to life” (2Co5:15). In order to live for Jesus truly, we have to deny ourselves. We do it all the time anyway, for other things or people. For our school studies we deny ourselves. For our jobs we deny ourselves. To become good at sports or music or art we deny ourselves. For our spouse we deny ourselves. For our children we deny ourselves. Those who put themselves first can’t really stay committed to these things. The same truth applies in Christian life. We need to be reminded that it’s *for Jesus* that we deny ourselves. Jesus himself lived for the Father’s will, and so should we (Heb10:9; 1Pe4:2). “For Jesus” is the general principle of self-denial, but the Bible also teaches us very specifically what it involves. Self-denial means to love Jesus most, more even than our parents or children, which is sometimes so hard to practice (Mt10:37). And Colossians 3:5 makes self-denial so real: “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.” We put these things to death in order to be worthy of our Lord Jesus, who died to save us from them. But it’s not just about self-denial.

**Second**, take up your cross. Only Jesus the holy and righteous One could die in the place of sinners. So why do followers of Jesus have a cross? It’s because Jesus is our example, and he went to the cross. The cross is a symbol of suffering—and not just any suffering, but the specific suffering of doing God’s will. Because Jesus was persecuted in doing God’s will, we too have to suffer persecution (Mt5:11; Jn15:18; 2Ti3:12). Because he humbled himself and made himself nothing in order to obey God’s will, so do we (Php2:7,8). Because he gave his life in love to save sinners, in obedience to God’s will, so should we (1Jn3:16). The Bible clearly tells us that only if we share in his sufferings will we share in his glory (Ro8:17). It says we’re not only to believe in him but also to suffer for him (Php1:29). Are we embracing any and all suffering for his sake?

Such a life may seem overwhelming, so to really take up our cross, we need to look to Jesus’ example. Just hours before his arrest, he went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. He was so honest, sharing his troubles and sorrows. He asked God to take it all way from him. But in the end he said, “Yet not as I will, but as you will.” Throughout that night he repeated this struggle in prayer. The Bible tells us that only through prayer could he overcome temptation and surrender his life to God (Mt26:38–44). To take up our cross, then, we need to come to God alone in prayer like Jesus did. The author of Hebrews says that in daily life we should be “fixing our eyes on Jesus” who saw the joy of heaven ahead of him, and so he “endured the cross, scorning its shame”; we need to “consider him who endured such opposition from sinners,” so that we won’t “grow weary and lose heart” (Heb12:2,3). Ultimately, to take up our cross means to share in Christ’s sufferings and become like him in his death (Php3:10). Self-denial and taking a cross can sound burdensome. In doing these things some people may act like they’re doing somebody a great favor. Jesus taught us the true spirit of self-denial and carrying our cross: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (11:29,30).

1. Why we should follow Jesus (25–28)

To help us choose this difficult life path Jesus says several things. Verses 25–27 in Greek all begin with the word “For.” They’re all based on Jesus’ challenge in verse 24. First of all, he teaches us a paradoxical life principle. Read verse 25. There are too many examples of people who worked so hard to save their lives in this world, but in the end lost everything. Despite all these negative examples, people still stubbornly try to save their own lives. Why? Because self-preservation is our instinctive nature. Jesus is calling us to go against this instinct. He promises that if we lose our lives for him, we’ll find them. Only as we live unselfishly for Jesus’ sake do we find life’s true meaning and fullness. To help us further, Jesus reminds us of what’s most valuable. Read verse 26. Self-preservation is usually about our possessions and our bodies. Society puts so much value on them and lures us to obsess about them. But Jesus values our souls and encourages us to make any sacrifice for him, for the sake of our souls. Finally, he gives us a promise. Read verse 27. Living for self may seem glorious for now, but in the end it will land people in deep trouble. On the other hand, living for Jesus make look foolish for now, but in the end, it brings his eternal reward. To choose the way of self-denial and the way of the cross, we need to have the hope to see Jesus coming in his kingdom. Read verse 28. The disciples would soon experience this six days later, when they saw his transfiguration (17:1ff.). They would see the glory of his kingdom even more when they were born again through the coming of the Holy Spirit (Jn3:3). And they would experience a glimpse of his kingdom in the fellowship of the church (Ro14:17). To stay on the way of the cross, we too need to live in church community.

Read verse 24 again. May God help us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow our Lord Jesus, with the hope of his kingdom in our hearts.