

**“A Suffering God and His Disciples”**  
**Matthew 16:21-28**  
**November 11, 2018**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

The previous passage ends curiously. After Peter made his good confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus told Peter and all the disciples “to tell no one that he was the Christ.” Why would he say that? After all, Jesus had said that Peter was blessed of God in that confession because God had revealed this blessed truth to him. Why would Jesus not want everyone to be equally blessed? Today’s passage answers that question. Peter had only half the truth, and the half he was missing aligned him more closely with Satan’s purposes than with God’s. He was missing the truth of the sufferings of Jesus and of those who follow him, and until he learned this truth, he would be preaching a false Christ even while acknowledging him to be the Son of God.

Is it still the case that people believe in the full deity of Christ while falling victim to Peter’s error of denying a suffering Jesus? What is your instinctive response when you suffer? For many, it is to ask, “What have I done wrong that this bad thing is happening to me?” Do you hear the Peter-like assumption in that? “If Jesus is the Son of God, then I can expect a life that runs smoothly as long as I do what I’m supposed to do.” As we are going to see in this passage, the truth is exactly the opposite. We should be concerned that we have gotten off track in life not when things are tough, but when everything is working just as we want it to and there is no suffering. The truth of this passage is that we follow a suffering Jesus, with the result that we suffer as well.

**I. The Cross of Jesus – v. 21-23**

Verse 21 marks a turning point in Jesus’ ministry, for it was at this time that he began to tell them of his coming suffering and death. The word “must” is an important word. He **“*must* go to Jerusalem and suffer many things...and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”** Note that it doesn’t say he *will* go to Jerusalem, but that he *must*. That is the “must” of divine necessity. It was God’s plan that Jesus suffer. It lies at the heart of why he came and came as a result of God’s initiative.

This was undoubtedly unexpected news to the disciples. They, along with the rest of Israel, were clearly expecting a triumphant Messiah who would not only lead Israel back to its glory days under David and Solomon, but make them the dominant nation in the world. Theirs was a vision of triumphalism, which still plagues the Church today. Peter, never short on confidence, and

whose confidence was probably at a high point after Jesus' words in the previous passage pronouncing him the rock upon which he would build his church, undertakes the task of setting the record straight with Jesus. We're told that he "took Jesus aside." This is a verb used elsewhere of a stronger or wealthier person coming to the aid of a weaker or poorer person. For example, the book of Acts describes a time when the more experienced and well-taught Priscilla and Aquila took Apollos aside to teach him and help him grow in his understanding (Acts 18:26). The word has a connotation of superiority. So Peter is here correcting and rebuking Jesus.

Jesus responds quickly and decisively, turning and saying 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."** Those who contend that Peter is the first Pope in the church, and that the Pope speaks infallibly, are challenged by this passage. As Frederick Bruner says, "Peter's very first encyclical is fallible. When Jesus made Peter the Rock he obviously did not make Peter inerrant." Having just received Jesus' affirmation of blessing in the form of the Father revealing to him the true identity of Jesus, he is now said to be so under the influence of Satan that Jesus speaks to Satan who is inside of Peter. It would be difficult to imagine a more severe rebuke than this one.

The word for "hindrance," is literally a stumbling block. Peter, pronounced by Jesus to be the rock on which he would build his church, now becomes a different kind of rock. Instead of being an asset, he becomes a problem. What makes this more striking is that Peter was the leader among the disciples, representing what was best among Jesus' followers. I can't help but notice that it was the same with the leading figure in the Old Testament, Abraham. We are introduced to him in Genesis 12, and the first thing we discover is that he was a man of faith, leaving his home country for the land God promised to him and his descendants. No sooner does he arrive in that land that he selfishly puts his wife at risk by lying to the king, saying that she is his sister instead of his wife (Gen. 12:10-20). The same is true of the Church, isn't it? The Church is Jesus' main instrument for bringing about the kingdom of heaven, and at the same time the main impediment to doing so. Like Peter, the Church has two natures: God-used and devil-used.

What was Peter's error and how was it satanic? When Satan came to tempt Jesus at the outset of his public ministry, every temptation was to seize power and success. He could turn stones to bread, jump from the temple and be miraculously and sensationally delivered from harm by the angels, and be given the job of president of the whole world by the simple bowing of the knee to Satan. At the end of those temptations, Luke says that Satan **"departed from him until an opportune time"** (Luke 4:13). This is the opportune time, a time in which Satan resumes his efforts to turn Jesus from the life of suffering and ultimately from the cross.

Satan is still at work today trying to turn people from the cross. And he does it in exactly the same way, by offering the allure of success. He wants you to think that success is the indication of God's approval, not suffering, weakness and brokenness. The health and wealth gospel is one of Satan's key tactics today to be a stumbling block to Jesus and his purposes for his Church. The syncretism between Christianity and the self-fulfillment emphasis of American culture comes straight from Satan's playbook. Satan's catechism asks, "What is God's chief end?" and gives the answer, "God's chief end is to give man success in everything he undertakes and to keep him healthy and wealthy at the same time."

Jesus has a different plan, to heal us from the inside out as our relationship with God is restored. The cross is absolutely essential to this, providing our forgiveness and our healing. We see in the cross the deep love of God for us. Dan Doriani reminds us that "to the Greek, a crucified man was utterly humiliated. To the Roman, a crucified man was evil and powerless. To the Jew, a crucified man was cursed by God." Jesus was humiliated, powerless and became evil and cursed when God laid our sin upon him at the cross. It was love that put him there and love that kept him there. And it is the love of God seen in the cross that transforms us from the inside out.

The application is simple. Keep the cross central in your life. When you start to feel you don't measure up, take that to the cross for God's full forgiveness. When someone reminds you of your shortcomings, don't get defensive, but confess it fully and remember to take it to the cross. When things are going well, do what the apostle Paul did and count it **"as loss for the sake of Christ...because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ"** (Phil. 3:7-8).

## **II. The Cross of the Disciple – v. 24-28**

Jesus told Peter to get behind him because in his rebuke of Jesus, Peter had taken a position in front of Jesus. The proper place of the disciple is following Jesus, not leading him. This section is an application of the previous one, explaining what it means to follow Jesus. In short, it means to follow the same path Jesus took, the path of death and resurrection. The basic teaching is in verse 24. **"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."**

Let's take up the three elements of this verse, beginning with the command to deny oneself. To deny oneself doesn't mean to embrace the masochist lifestyle, as if a person must always choose the most painful and least desirable thing. Rather, it means to deny self-trust. To follow Jesus means to trust him

rather than ourselves. We all have a conviction that we know best how to run our lives. We often make our plans for each day with complete confidence that we know what's best. We are so confident in this that we don't stop to pray or ask God for his leading. This is such a strong tendency within us that we usually don't give up on self-trust until we have exhausted all of our options. Even the apostle Paul experienced this in his life. Writing about a time when he thought he was going to die, he said that this happened **"to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead"** (2 Cor. 1:9). I read the testimony recently of a member of this church who spoke similarly. "I believed everything was all up to me. It sadly never even occurred to me to ask God what to major in or where to go to school. I just thought about what I was good at and what seemed right to me, and I let that lead me." I know I can certainly identify with that.

Then Jesus tells each one who would come after him to **"take up his cross."** In Jesus' day, to see someone carrying the horizontal beam of a cross could only mean one thing—he was a dead man walking. Jesus says that's what it means to follow him. It is an invitation to come and die. What strange words are these! How should we understand this? We have to go back to the original, which is Jesus and his sufferings and death, spoken of in the previous paragraph. Jesus says that his followers will follow the pattern he established. Jesus denied himself and took up a cross. Why did he do so? John writes in his first epistle, **"By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers"** (1 John 3:16). To follow Jesus is to follow him into love, and that requires denying self and taking up one's cross. Love is the key that unlocks the meaning of this passage. To love another requires denying self even in a way that feels like death.

An example will help. Do you remember the story of Ruth in the Old Testament. She was a Moabite woman who married a Jewish man who had emigrated from Israel to Moab when a severe famine arose in Israel. In time, every male in the family died, leaving only Ruth, her Moabite sister-in-law and her Jewish mother-in-law, Naomi. Naomi then decided that the only path left for her was to return to Israel, but she urged her widowed daughters-in-law to stay in Moab and seek husbands there. She was saying, in effect, "Save yourself by forgetting me. You have to look out for number one, and there is no future for you in Israel." Ruth refused to take Naomi's advice and pledged herself instead to stick with her mother-in-law, and, most importantly, her mother-in-law's God, Jehovah. She speaks these well-known words, **"For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God"** (Ruth 1:16). One scholar puts it this way: "Ruth took on the uncertain future of a bitter widow in a land where she knew no one, enjoyed few legal rights, and—given the traditional Moabite-Israelite rivalry—faced possible ethnic prejudice....She gave up a marriage to a man to devote herself to an old woman—in a world dominated by men."

Ruth is one of the truly beautiful women of the Old Testament, and the entire Bible for that matter, because she is being like God in her love. Jesus says the same thing to us that Ruth said to Naomi. “I love you and I’m committed to you all the way to death. I am willing to be trapped by my love for you.” Jesus’ point is that this kind of love is the mark of his followers. It is a self-denying love that is willing to go all the way, even to death, for others.

The pronoun *his* that describes the cross is significant. Jesus says that each must take up *his* cross, indicating an idea of individuality here. There is a unique call upon each of us to take up our cross, to give away our lives for the sake of others. It sometimes is evidenced in very simple things that require only a little death. I was in line to vote this past week when I heard a woman behind me say, “I’ve just had hip surgery and don’t think I can stand in this line for long. Does anyone know who I can talk to about going to the front of the line?” I turned around and answered her question by pointing to a poll worker that I thought could help her. Another woman standing nearby said, “You wait right here, and I’ll go find out for you and come back and help you.” Which response was more loving? Clearly, it was not mine, but that of the woman who was willing to risk her place in line and put herself out in search of an answer for this other woman. In a small way, she was willing to die to self in order to love another. Jesus is saying that this is what his followers must do. Everyone who is married has abundant opportunity to do just this, to deny self, take up your cross and love a spouse who is a sinner.

There are two great rewards in following Jesus in this way. The first one is indicated in that language of following Jesus. We gain nearness to Jesus when we follow him, and it is nearness to him that is the source of all joy in life. I received a prayer letter a couple of weeks ago from a man who has been walking with the Lord for many decades and who wrote some reflections upon celebrating his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday recently. He wrote of his growing friendship with God like this: “Harvesting the fruit of friendship does not always require that he speak some relevant, life-changing truth into my life. Friendship means we just thoroughly enjoy being with one another. Silly as it may sound to the serious ones who read this, last spring Jesus and I had a great time being the first to tromp through fresh snow making tracks together in a local park! Friends do things like that.”

## **CONCLUSION:**

The second reward is even greater, and it’s the one Jesus speaks of when he talks about the final judgment. **“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.”** Sharing in the glory of Jesus through the fruit of good works on that day will be a great reward.

**Small Group Discussion Questions**  
**Matthew 16:21-28**

1. Peter's error was his refusal to accept anything other than a triumphant Jesus. He wanted success. Do you see any modern version of this triumphalism in the Church today?
2. Jesus responds to Peter in about the strongest language imaginable ("Get behind me Satan" – but note that he is speaking to Peter). How was Peter being satanic? A hint can be found in the temptations Satan brought to Jesus in Matthew 4.
3. Satan is always trying to divert us from the cross. How do you see him doing that in your life or in the lives of others?
4. Jesus tells us that we must deny self if we are to follow him, which means that we must stop trusting in ourselves. In the sermon, a portion of a testimony from a church member was mentioned. This woman wrote of her life as a young woman, "I believed everything was all up to me. It sadly never even occurred to me to ask God what to major in or where to go to school. I just thought about what I was good at and what seemed right to me, and I let that lead me." Can you see any similarities to your own life in this?
5. The key that unlocks the meaning of Jesus' words about denying self and taking up one's cross is to see this as an expression of love. Jesus has loved us by doing these very things, and he now calls us to follow him. What are some alternative views of love that are in conflict with this?
6. How has Jesus called you to love in this way? That is, what has denying self and taking up one's cross look like for you as you love those God has called you to love?
7. How does this passage challenge how we view success? What does success look like according to Jesus in this passage? Does that require any change in your life?