

**“The Cruciform Life”**  
**Matthew 17:21-18:9**  
**December 2, 2018**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Today’s text begins with words from Jesus informing the disciples of his coming death and resurrection. **“The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day.”** This is not an isolated verse. It is the third time he has spoken of this, and he will come back to it repeatedly in the remaining chapters of Matthew’s Gospel. One of the reasons for this repetition is that Jesus calls his followers to follow this same pattern of death and resurrection.

At the heart of Jesus’ death and resurrection is love. The text says that Jesus will be *delivered* into the hands of men. The rest of the Bible makes it clear that it is God the Father who delivers him up, a truth spoken quite clearly by Peter just a few weeks after that death. **“This Jesus [was] delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God”** (Acts 2:23). He was delivered up for the benefit of the very ones who took him and killed him. Just as Jesus has loved us and died for us and then been raised again, we are to love others. That is, love is cruciform. It requires self-denial, a type of death. But there is always resurrection on the other side. The three sections that follow these words from Jesus describe three different self-denials we are called to as we love others, all of which are followed by a type of resurrection.

**I. Self-Denial for Unbelievers – 17:24-27**

Peter was approached by men who were collecting the temple tax. This was an annual head tax levied on all adults aged twenty years and above, and commanded in Exodus 30:11-16. As its name indicates, the proceeds were used for the upkeep of the temple. These men approaching Peter asked him, **“Does your teacher not pay the tax?”** The truth is that Jesus had not paid the tax, but for some reason Peter answers “Yes.” Maybe he meant that they intended to pay the tax but just hadn’t gotten around to it. When Peter arrived at the house where Jesus was, a mighty display of Jesus’ power had already taken place. Jesus knew of this conversation and brought up the matter before Peter could do so.

Jesus tells Peter that they are exempt from the tax, and his reasoning for this is glorious. **“From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?”** When Peter gives the correct answer of “others,” Jesus responds, **“Then the sons are free.”** In other words, Jesus is saying that a new kingdom has come, and his followers all have the status of sons of

this new king and are therefore are not subject to the tax. Nevertheless, Jesus adds, we should go ahead and pay it, not because we have to, but in order “not to give offense to them.”

The gospel is offensive enough all by itself, and out of love for unbelievers we are to labor to remove as much unnecessary offense as possible, even though it may be costly for us to do so. There is a painful example of this later in the New Testament when the apostle Paul was preparing to take Timothy with him on a missionary trip. Timothy had a believing Jewish mother and a Gentile father, and he had not been circumcised. Since Paul would be preaching in many synagogues, he insisted that Timothy, probably in his late teens or early twenties at the time, be circumcised in order not to be an offense to the Jews to whom they would be preaching.

Let’s think of some examples of times when we are called to refrain from giving offense and have to deny self in order to do so. Perhaps you work in an office where there is pressure put on everyone to give to United Way in order to get one-hundred percent participation. Though you are not thrilled with some of the organizations that will receive these funds, you go ahead and give anyway, in order to avoid giving offense. Or maybe it’s attending parties or social gatherings with unbelievers, even though you prefer not doing so and don’t really have the time for it. The apostle Paul exemplifies this in his report that he became **“all things to all people, that by all means I might save some”** (1 Cor. 9:22). It is denying self for the sake of unbelievers.

There is more here, though. Remember that I said that Jesus’ death and resurrection becomes our pattern for loving others. So, as we have seen, we must be willing to experience a type of death in loving unbelievers by not exercising our rights. But what about the resurrection part? The text goes on to talk about that in one of the most amazing of Jesus’ miracles. He directs Peter to go fishing, and tells him to look in the mouth of the first fish he catches, because he will find there a shekel. Peter is then directed to take that shekel and pay the temple tax for himself and for Jesus. Think about the sovereign power of Jesus required to accomplish this. First, someone had to lose the shekel in the water. Next, a fish had to take it in its mouth and keep it there, neither swallowing it nor spitting it out. Then, Peter had to catch that precise fish among the thousands in the sea. Such small, random things had to be under Jesus’ control for this to happen.

I think we often underestimate Jesus’ ability to provide for his children. Think about how you got your current job. In many cases, there were multiple little things that happened, some of which you could see and most of which you probably couldn’t. For example, my call to pastor this church involved a complicated series of steps that only God could orchestrate. I was first approached by someone to consider applying for the vacancy here and I declined to do so because I didn’t think it was time to leave the job I had at the

time. Almost a year later, I concluded that God was in fact closing down that chapter of my ministry. In the providence of God, this church had just been through their narrowing process, and for a variety of reasons, none of the candidates worked out. They were starting over just when I was ready.

I note here that Jesus' power was not used to make Peter wealthy. That shekel in the fish's mouth was not in Peter's hands for long, as he took it and gave it for the temple tax. This incident reminds me of a famous promise from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. **"Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you"** (Matt. 6:33).

## **II. Self-Denial for Humility – 18:1-4**

A second way we follow Jesus into death and resurrection, is in the area of humility. Jesus' disciples ask him, **"Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"** What Matthew doesn't reveal that is reported by Mark is that this question follows an argument among the disciples about which of them was the greatest. So their question has the flavor of, "Jesus, can you help us settle our argument about which one of *us* is the greatest?"

Jesus didn't give them the answer they were looking for. A child was nearby, and Jesus brought the child to the middle of the group and told them that greatness in the kingdom of God was to be found in the childlike quality of humility. Jesus wasn't saying that everything about children should be emulated by his disciples. There are many childish qualities that are inappropriate for followers of Christ. But he singles out this one quality of humility where we are urged to be like children.

There are at least two ways children exhibit humility. First, children are willing to be dependent, trusting another instead of themselves. When a child has a need, what do they do? Their first response is to ask for help, not to set about trying to meet the need themselves. When our two-year-old grandson gets hungry, he doesn't go and open the refrigerator door to make a snack for himself. He asks a parent or grandparent. When a child is terrified, what does she do? She runs as fast as she can to a mother or father, with arms out, wanting to be picked up and comforted. For those of you with small children, let me encourage you whenever your child does that to say a little prayer that God would help you respond similarly to him.

Second, children exhibit humility by being willing to ask for and receive undeserved gifts. Unlike adults, whose pride often keeps them from being willing to receive gifts from others, children are not bashful about asking for or receiving gifts. I was reminded of this over Thanksgiving when our two-and-a-half-year old grandson, Hastings, was visiting. He slept on the floor in our bedroom. His normal wake up time is 6:00 a.m. eastern time. So just before

5:00 every morning, I was awakened by a little guy crawling up into our bed and saying, “Play, Pops?” It would be the first of many such requests throughout the day, and everyone would come with a simple willingness to receive whatever I wanted to give him.

Notice that Jesus changes the question in his answer. They had asked about greatness in the kingdom, and Jesus responds, **“Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”** Forget greatness in the kingdom, he is saying, you can’t even get into the kingdom without this childlike humility. Jesus here reverses the natural way people think about heaven. The world says, “The good people get in and the bad are kept out.” Jesus says, “The humble get in and the proud are kept out.” Not only is humility the way we get into the kingdom, it’s also the way we advance to greatness in the kingdom. Jesus goes on to say, **“Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”** So in other words, everything good in your life depends on humility, upon self-denial that looks like no longer depending on yourself but on God. Blaise Pascal said it like this: “It is not from yourselves that you should expect grace; but, on the contrary, it is in expecting nothing from yourselves, that you must hope for it.”

### **III. Self-Denial for the Church – 18:5-9**

Verse 5 marks a new section that applies self-denial to another area of life, to our relationships with others in the Church. Jesus is still talking about “children” and “little ones,” but he is not referring to literal children any longer. When he says that we are to receive **“one such child”** in his name, he is speaking of his followers as children of God. The “little ones” of verse 6 are also followers of Christ no matter what their age. He commands two acts of love, both of which require self-denial, one which is positive and the other negative. The positive act of love is to receive or welcome other believers. We are not to observe the world’s distinctions of race, education, social standing or political affiliation in determining those with whom we associate. We simply receive and welcome fully into our lives those God has received and welcomed.

The negative act comes with a strong warning. It is to make sure that we are not the cause of stumbling for one of Jesus’ followers. Our translation here is a little weak when it speaks of being the cause of someone “to sin.” The same word is used by Jesus just a few chapters earlier in the parable of the soils to speak of the rocky soil. This is the one who has the word sown in his heart, but his soil is shallow **“and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away”** (Matt. 13:21). The word translated “falling away” is the same as our word. So the warning here concerns the person whose behavior or teaching results in another follower of Jesus falling away from faith. Jesus says that for such a person, it would have been better if someone had tied a millstone around his neck and thrown it into the sea. The

millstone he is speaking of is the “great” millstone, to distinguish it from the small household grinder with a relatively small grindstone. This is the community millstone, the one so big that it had to be turned by a beast of burden.

What is it that a person can do that would cause another to stumble and fall away like this? Verses 8-9 answer that question by saying that it is unrepentant sin. So Jesus urges drastic measures in dealing with our own sin. **“And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or feet to be thrown into the eternal fire.”** And then he urges the same with another body part, the eye. If it is the source of the sin, Jesus says, gouge it out. Of course, Jesus isn’t speaking literally. The truth is that such self-mutilation would have no beneficial effect in dealing with our sin, because its source lies deeper than any body part.

Let me point out three things we learn from these verses. First, Jesus reverses our tendency to minimize our sin. We naturally think that our sin is not that big a deal. We say things like, “No one’s perfect,” as if that makes our sin less of a problem. Death is universal, too, but that doesn’t make it a minor thing. Living comfortably with sin in our lives is like living comfortably with a king cobra in your bedroom. One of the most venomous snakes on the planet, it can grow up to 18 feet long and has enough venom to kill an elephant.

Jesus teaches us here not to minimize sin by speaking of what’s at stake, and that’s the second thing we learn here. We learn from the context of this warning that the lives of others are at stake with our sin. But our own lives are at stake as well. Jesus says that unrepentant sin is the path to hell. Better, he says, to pay any price necessary, no matter how painful, than **“to be thrown into the hell of fire.”** Michael and I were talking about this passage this week, and he reminded me of a hiker whose arm got stuck in a boulder. He tried unsuccessfully for quite a while to extricate himself from it, and finally decided that the only way he could survive would be to sever his arm, which he proceeded to do.

A third thing we learn here is that repentance is painful, like the gouging out of the eye or the amputation of a hand or foot. If there is no sorrow associated with our repentance, it is not true repentance.

## **CONCLUSION:**

How do you get such repentance? With childlike humility that simply calls on Jesus for help. Jesus has died and been raised again that you might be forgiven and that you might have power over the sin that destroys.

**Small Group Discussion Questions**  
**Matthew 17:22-18:9**

1. The central message of this passage is that both life and love are cruciform, following the pattern of Jesus' death and resurrection. Just as Jesus' love for us required his suffering and death, so our love for others will require some suffering and death to self. Can you think of some examples of this either in the way someone has loved you or in the way you have been called to love others?
2. This first section is about loving unbelievers through a willingness to make sacrifices in order not to offend them needlessly. Can you think of examples of what that might look like today?
3. Jesus miraculously provides the money needed to pay this temple tax. We often underestimate the power of God to control many small things in order to provide for us. Have you seen God's provision for you in his control of small things?
4. Jesus uses a child to teach the lesson that humility is both the way into heaven and also the path to true greatness in the kingdom of heaven. The humility of children can be seen in their dependence on the adults in their lives, rather than in themselves, and in their willingness to ask and receive. Where do you need to grow in greater humility?
5. When Jesus says in verse 5, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me," he is not talking about literal children, but about children of God or believers in Christ. What does it mean to receive and welcome a believer in Christ? Are there certain types of fellow Christians you find it difficult to receive?
6. Verses 6-7 give a strong warning against causing another Christian to fall away (causing "to sin" in this verse has the idea of causing to fall away, as the same word in Matt. 13:21 shows). Have you known people who have fallen away from Christ by the errors or sin of other Christians?
7. The verses about cutting off the hand and foot or gouging out the eye warn us against minimizing sin. Do you see any way you tend to minimize sin?
8. These verses teach us about repentance, specifically that repentance always involves some pain. Can there be true repentance without sorrow? Do these verses suggest a possible way that a deeper sorrow for sin might be encouraged?