

Matthew 16:21–28

Taking Up the Cross

Introduction

- Peter has just confessed that Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16).
- He knows **who Jesus is**, but he does not yet understand **what kind of Messiah Jesus has come to be**.
- Jesus now explains that He must:
 - Go to Jerusalem
 - Suffer
 - Be killed
 - Be raised on the third day
- Peter can imagine a victorious Messiah, but not a suffering one.
- Jesus uses Peter’s misunderstanding to teach what true discipleship looks like.
- The central truth of the passage is clear: **confessing Jesus as Lord must eventually change how we live**.

Background

- Matthew 16:21 marks a major turning point in the Gospel.
- The phrase “**From that time on**” signals a new stage in Jesus’ ministry.
- Jesus begins preparing the disciples for Jerusalem, the cross, and resurrection.
- Many Jewish hopes for the Messiah centered on:
 - Deliverance
 - Restoration
 - Justice
 - Victory
- A crucified Messiah would have seemed contradictory to those expectations.
- Crucifixion represented:
 - Roman power
 - Shame
 - Humiliation
 - Defeat
- Jesus teaches that God’s victory will come through **obedience and self-giving love**, not worldly power.
- Resurrection is part of Jesus’ announcement from the beginning. The cross is never the end of the story.

Matthew 16:21 — The Road to Jerusalem

- Jesus says He “**must**” go to Jerusalem.
- His suffering is not an accident or evidence that God has lost control.
- Human sin will lead to the cross, but God will work through it to accomplish redemption.
- Jesus names the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law as those who will reject Him.
- Matthew is describing conflict with specific religious leaders, not condemning the Jewish people as a whole.
- Jesus promises resurrection even as He announces His death.
- Peter hears the suffering more clearly than the resurrection.
- We often do the same when fear becomes larger than hope.

Matthew 16:22–23 — Peter Rebukes Jesus

- Peter says, “**Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!**”
- His words reveal a contradiction:
 - He calls Jesus **Lord**
 - Then tells the Lord what He may and may not do
- Peter loves Jesus, but his understanding is still shaped by human expectations.
- Jesus responds, “**Get behind me, Satan!**”
- Peter has unknowingly repeated the temptation Jesus rejected in the wilderness:
 - Glory without suffering

- Victory without the cross
- Jesus calls Peter a **“stumbling block.”**
- Peter had just been associated with a rock; now he has become a rock in Jesus’ path.
- The lesson is sobering: **sincere faith can still need correction.**

Matthew 16:24 — Deny Yourself and Take Up Your Cross

- Jesus says:
 - Deny yourself
 - Take up your cross
 - Follow Me
- **Self-denial does not mean self-hatred.**
- It means surrendering the right to make ourselves the center of everything.
- The question changes from:
 - “What do I want?”
 - To “What does faithfulness to Christ require?”
- Taking up the cross means accepting the cost that may come because we follow Jesus.
- Cross-bearing may include:
 - Forgiving when resentment feels easier
 - Telling the truth when silence would protect us
 - Giving when we would rather keep
 - Standing with those others reject
 - Choosing mercy when anger would win approval
- The cross is **not** permission for abuse, violence, manipulation, or exploitation.
- Sometimes following Jesus means:
 - Setting boundaries
 - Confronting wrongdoing
 - Seeking help
 - Refusing to cooperate with evil
- The controlling command is still: **“Follow me.”**

Matthew 16:25–26 — Losing Life and Finding It

- Jesus says those who try to save their lives will lose them, while those who lose their lives for Him will find them.
- He is not saying life has little value.
- He warns against making self-preservation the ruling purpose of life.
- We often try to protect:
 - Comfort
 - Reputation
 - Money
 - Control
 - Security
 - Familiar routines
- A life centered only on protecting itself can become smaller and smaller.
- Jesus then asks, **“What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”**
- The world measures success through:
 - Wealth
 - Achievement
 - Influence
 - Recognition
 - Possessions
- Jesus asks a deeper question: **What is happening to the person you are becoming?**
- A person can gain much and still lose:
 - Compassion

- Integrity
 - Generosity
 - Faithfulness
- Nothing we gain is worth becoming someone God never intended us to be.

Matthew 16:27–28 — Glory and the Kingdom

- Jesus shifts the focus from suffering to glory.
- The **Son of Man** language echoes Daniel 7:13–14.
- The One who will appear defeated at the cross is actually the One who possesses ultimate authority.
- Jesus says people will be rewarded according to what they have done.
- Good works do not purchase salvation.
- Our actions reveal what grace is doing within us.
- Jesus then promises that some standing there will see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.
- Matthew immediately follows this promise with the Transfiguration.
- Peter, James, and John receive a glimpse of Christ's glory.
- The sequence matters:
 - Cross
 - Resurrection
 - Glory
 - Kingdom

Wesleyan Emphasis

- John Wesley viewed self-denial as a normal part of Christian discipleship.
- Self-denial means placing love for God above desires that pull us away from faithfulness.
- Grace always comes first.
- We do not take up the cross so God will love us.
- **Prevenient grace** draws us toward God.
- **Justifying grace** reconciles us through faith in Christ.
- **Sanctifying grace** continues shaping us into people who love God and neighbor more fully.
- Randy Maddox describes Wesleyan theology as **responsible grace**:
 - God acts first
 - Grace makes response possible
 - We are genuinely called to respond
- Discipleship is therefore a response to grace, not payment for grace.

Living the Passage

- Peter's story asks whether we are willing to let Jesus correct our expectations.
- We may want Jesus to:
 - Bless our plans without changing them
 - Comfort us without challenging us
 - Give us grace while we withhold grace from others
- Following Jesus may require surrendering:
 - Pride
 - Resentment
 - Control
 - Comfort
 - Status
 - Money
 - The need to be right
- The same challenge applies to the Church.
- Congregations can become more concerned with preserving:
 - Traditions
 - Preferences
 - Buildings

- Familiar routines
- The Church does not find life by protecting itself.
- **The Church finds life by following Jesus.**
- Peter sees the cross and assumes defeat.
- Jesus sees beyond the cross to resurrection and glory.
- **The life placed in Christ's hands is never wasted.**

Discussion Questions

- Why was Peter unable to accept Jesus' prediction of suffering and death?
- What is the difference between confessing Jesus as Lord and allowing Him to lead?
- What does denying yourself mean without becoming self-destructive?
- What are some examples of genuine cross-bearing today?
- What are we most tempted to protect when Jesus calls us to follow?
- How can someone "gain the world" and still lose what matters most?
- How does grace make costly discipleship possible?
- Where might Jesus be asking you to trust Him more fully?