

The Cross-Shaped Life

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Matthew 16:21–28

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Sermon Theme

Discipleship is not self-preservation; it is surrender to the way of Jesus.

Big Idea

Peter correctly identifies Jesus as the Messiah, but he still misunderstands what that means. He wants a Messiah who brings victory without suffering and glory without the cross. Jesus corrects him and then turns to all the disciples with a call to deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow. The passage asks whether we will spend our lives protecting what we have or trust Jesus enough to surrender to His way.

What the Passage Shows Us

Matthew 16:21 marks a turning point. Jesus begins preparing the disciples for Jerusalem, suffering, death, and resurrection. Peter hears the suffering and cannot accept it. He tries to redirect Jesus because the cross does not fit his understanding of how the Messiah should win.

Jesus refuses Peter's version of victory. The way of God will not be built on domination, control, or self-preservation. Jesus will reveal God's kingdom through faithful obedience and self-giving love. Then He tells His disciples that anyone who follows Him must learn the same pattern.

When We Want Jesus Without the Cross

Peter loves Jesus, but he still wants Jesus to fit his expectations. He is comfortable confessing Jesus as Lord until the Lord begins describing a road Peter would never choose. That is why Peter's mistake feels so familiar. We can believe deeply in Christ and still resist Him when His way challenges our plans, habits, opinions, comfort, or control.

Sometimes we want Jesus to bless what we have already decided. We want forgiveness without forgiving, grace without change, resurrection without surrender, and discipleship without cost. Peter reminds us that sincere faith can still need correction.

Self-Preservation Comes Naturally

Most of us are good at protecting what matters to us. We protect our reputation, money, comfort, routines, opinions, traditions, and sense of control. Sometimes that protection is healthy. Jesus Himself rested, prayed, withdrew from crowds, and refused to let every demand control Him.

The problem begins when self-preservation becomes the center of life. Discipleship asks a different question. Instead of asking only, "How do I protect what is mine?" we begin asking, "What does faithfulness to Jesus require?"

Deny Yourself Does Not Mean Hate Yourself

Jesus is not telling His disciples that they are worthless. Denying ourselves means giving up the belief that we must always have the final word. It is surrendering self-rule so that Christ can shape our priorities, choices, relationships, and desires.

Self-denial also does not mean accepting abuse, violence, or manipulation. No one should be told that remaining in harm is simply "their cross to bear." Sometimes following Jesus means setting boundaries, telling the truth, seeking help, or refusing to cooperate with evil.

What Cross-Bearing Looks Like

The cross Jesus asks us to carry is the cost that may come because we choose His way. His way is love, mercy, truth, forgiveness, generosity, holiness, and justice. That kind of faithfulness can cost something.

Most cross-bearing is not dramatic. It may look like making the call that could begin reconciliation, refusing to repeat gossip, giving when generosity affects us, standing beside someone others reject, admitting we were wrong, or letting grace change a long-held opinion. The cross-shaped life is built through ordinary choices to follow Jesus when another way would be easier.

Losing Life and Finding It

Jesus says that the life we spend trying to preserve may become the life we never fully live. We think life is found by holding tightly, staying in control, and protecting ourselves from loss. Jesus says life is found by placing ourselves in His hands.

That surrender is not the same as throwing life away. We are not surrendering to emptiness. We are surrendering to Christ. The One who asks us to follow is the One who has already given Himself for us.

What Is Happening to Your Soul?

Jesus asks what good it would do to gain the whole world and lose our souls. We live in a culture that measures almost everything: money, productivity, influence, followers, attendance, titles, possessions, and accomplishments. Jesus asks a deeper question. What are we becoming?

A person can gain influence and lose compassion. A church can preserve every tradition and lose its mission. We can protect our reputation and lose integrity. We can win every argument and lose the ability to love. Jesus is not against success, but He refuses to let success define the value of a life.

Grace Comes First

We do not surrender ourselves so God will love us. God already loves us. Peter proves that. He misunderstands Jesus here, later denies Him, and still grace keeps working in his life.

That is the Wesleyan heartbeat of discipleship. Grace calls us before we understand everything. Grace forgives us when we fail. Sanctifying grace keeps reshaping us so that love becomes more natural, pride loosens its grip, and we become increasingly free to follow Christ.

Peter Sees the Cross; Jesus Sees the Whole Story

Peter sees suffering and assumes defeat. Jesus sees the cross, resurrection, glory, and kingdom. We often see only what surrender may cost. We see the apology but not the healing, the generosity but not the freedom, the change but not what God may create through it.

Christian hope does not pretend suffering is easy. It trusts that suffering is never the whole story. The cross is real, but resurrection means the cross does not get the final word.

Key Truths

- Following Jesus means allowing Him to define the way, even when His way is not the one we would choose.
- Self-denial is surrender of self-rule, not self-hatred.
- The cross is the cost of faithful discipleship, not permission for abuse or harm.
- Self-preservation can become an obstacle when protecting ourselves matters more than following Christ.
- The world measures what we gain; Jesus asks what we are becoming.
- Grace comes before surrender and makes faithful response possible.
- Sanctifying grace continues shaping us into people who love more freely.
- The life placed in Christ's hands is never wasted.

Questions for Reflection

When am I most tempted to say, "Lord, not that way"?

What am I trying hardest to protect?

Where does my desire for comfort compete with faithfulness to Jesus?

What is one ordinary way cross-bearing may look in my life right now?

Am I becoming more loving, merciful, generous, truthful, and faithful?

What might I need to release so that I can follow Jesus more freely?

Where do I see only what surrender may cost and need to trust God with what I cannot yet see?

Takeaway

Matthew 16:21–28 shows Peter struggling to accept a Messiah who chooses the way of the cross. Jesus does not reject Peter, but He does correct him. Peter must learn that discipleship is not about protecting everything he values. It is about trusting Jesus enough to follow.

The same invitation comes to us. The world tells us that the safest life is the life we control. Jesus tells us the fullest life is the life we surrender. We do not surrender to earn God's love. We surrender because grace has already found us, and the life placed in Christ's hands is the life we finally begin to find.

Key Verse

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Matthew 16:24