

The Path To The Cross, Part 1  
Matthew 16:21-27  
March 15, 2020  
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I am so thrilled to be here. I am grateful that God has brought our paths together; that you've been looking for a pastor and I've been looking for the right position. I've been encouraged every step of the way, from when I first talked to Lee on the phone, then met with he and John, to the candidating weekend in November, to arriving this past Monday and being warmly greeted and welcomed. I've already had so much free food, I might be putting on the old freshman 15 again! Thank you.

Matthew 16:21-27

*21 From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." 23 But he turned and said 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." 24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? 27 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."*

("The grass withers, the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever.")

### **Introduction: Arthur & Denise Blessitt**

On Christmas Day, 1969 in Hollywood, CA, a man named Arthur Blessitt decided to start walking around the world. But he didn't just start walking around with the usual hikers gear. The item that he is most known for carrying around with him is a 12 ft. tall cross weighing 45 lbs. Arthur, who is often accompanied by his wife, Denise, who also carries the cross at times, has been walking for the past 53 years; he is 79 years old and still walking. Thankfully, the cross does have a wheel on it. Arthur has persevered despite having had 4 minor strokes, been jailed 24 times for non-criminal charges, was nearly stoned in Morocco and nearly executed by a firing squad in Nicaragua. He has walked through 324 countries, logged more than 43,000 miles, holding the Guinness Book of World Records for travelling the greatest distance around the world.

[To get some insight into his motivation, here's what Arthur says on his website:

"The Cross stands alone as the most controversial symbol in world history! Without question it has also been- and IS ABUSED, MISUSED AND WORSHIPED. To some it is a symbol of terror... some of the world's greatest abuse has been done in front of the Cross. Yet... the Cross is popular among believers and non-believers as an ornament- cross rings, cross earrings, cross necklaces... etc... The sign of the cross is made by some before ball games or sports, by some before battle, by some at meals and by many in church... Cross carrying has never been viewed in a true historical sense 'a pleasure' or in early years a 'work of art' or an 'object of beauty.' People died horrible, bloody, agonizing, tortured deaths on crosses... Yet the modern cross is cleaned up, gone is the blood... the smell of death and the ring of hammer against nail as it tears through the skin... In the days of the cross, people would see one and vomit, look away in disgust or ridicule it. TODAY we say: 'Oh how

lovely' ... "Where did you buy yours?'... Do you see how shallow we've become? You don't buy a Cross, you carry a Cross, Jesus said."<sup>1]</sup>

Arthur and Denise walk around carrying their cross that is twice as tall as they are to live out Jesus' words for His followers to take up their cross and follow Him. Maybe some of you would love to do something radical and would love to join them in walking around with a real cross. Maybe you could carry a cross down Commerce Street this afternoon in the St. Patrick's Day parade? But for most of us, we need to figure out how to take up the cross in a less literal way. In a way that honors Jesus' command, that is somehow linked with the commands around it- denying yourself and following Jesus.

We're going to take today and the next two Sundays to look at the passages in Gospel of Matthew where Jesus tells His disciples that He's headed to the cross, because we're coming up on Holy Week and Good Friday. Jesus warns them, He tells them His future plans, what has to happen because of the Father's will in His life. But they are still surprised and scared when it actually happens. So each week we'll look at Jesus explaining His future, and each week that will be paired with a story or teaching connected to the cross. And today's passage has Jesus teaching on what the life of a follower of someone who dies on a cross would look like. If Jesus' life ended in suffering, death, and then glory, what does that mean for any who would follow Him and be called by His name. What do we have to lose, what do we have to gain?

There is a lot packed into the 8 verses we're studying. We could probably spend multiple sermons trying to tease out the implications of these hard sayings of Jesus. But let us begin with an idea that Jesus is just starting to get the disciples to understand:

#### **I. There is no Salvation Without A Cross (vv. 21-23)**

*21 From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you."*

*23 But he turned and said 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."*

This is really the first time in Matthew that Jesus has put before His disciples so starkly the idea that He has a path to follow that involves suffering and death. You can imagine that their initial reactions were bewilderment and opposition. Peter takes it upon himself to pull Jesus aside and say, "This can't happen!" Maybe Peter didn't really catch the ending part about Jesus being raised on the third day, or maybe that just added to the confusion. He also has not really understood that Jesus has used the word "must" as He speaks of the coming events. Jesus uses "must" with the idea that "God has laid out this plan that I will be walking through it."<sup>2</sup> I must go and suffer.

Now Peter has just made the amazing declaration that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God" in the previous passage. He follows up that brilliant insight with a total failure to understand what Jesus was doing. He does not realize what being the Christ, the coming Messiah will entail. In Peter's mind, God's chosen Messiah does not deliberately head towards His death. Like most of us, he thinks that death should be avoided at all costs. He assumes that Jesus living and continuing His ministry is going to be better than dying and having all of His work come to a crashing halt. But Jesus makes it clear that the things of God are different than the things of man, and that Peter does not have the right perspective.

So Jesus goes from commending him- "Blessed are you, Simon!" in verse 17 to rebuking him- "Get behind me, Satan!" in verse 23. It's really fascinating that Jesus has just told Peter in verse 17 that God the Father

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<sup>1</sup> From Arthur Blessitt's official website: <http://www.blessitt.com>

<sup>2</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Matthew* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), p. 498.

had revealed to him Jesus' true identity and nature. But now Jesus attributes Peter's ideas to someone else- the enemy. Peter quickly switches from being the mouthpiece of God to being the mouthpiece of Satan. Peter, whose name means "Rock" is now a stumbling block. Jesus calls him a "hindrance"- the Greek word is *scandalon* where we get our word scandal. Peter is a hindrance, something that gets in the way of Jesus' mission, and Jesus will not have someone derail His mission. He says, "get out of my way, get behind me." Follow me, don't block me!

Calling one of His beloved disciples "Satan" kind of seems like overkill, doesn't it? Perhaps Jesus is alluding to Satan's temptations when he came to Jesus in the wilderness- temptations to end his 40 days of fasting, to be given the whole world and to show off his power. In essence, to step off the path of humility, obedience and suffering that God had Him on and take the triumphal route. Jesus did not give in when He was in the wilderness and He would not be persuaded now.<sup>3</sup> He knows that His path leads to the cross. Verse 21 shows that He had a very strong picture and understanding of what would be happening to Him. He knows that if He listens to Peter and the satanic voice of temptation to avoid suffering, that He will not die for our sins & we will not truly be reconciled with the Father.

Just as there is no salvation without a cross, so...

## **II. There is no Christian Life Without A Cross (v. 24)**

*24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."*

This is the heart of the passage. And Jesus has the right to call us to these 3 things- denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following- because He did all 3 in His life. He denied Himself, Philippians says that He emptied Himself, made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant. He took up His cross- literally at the end of His life, but also figuratively every step of the way, every day of His life. And He followed the Father's path, completely subordinating Himself to the will of God the Father.

### **A) Self-Denial is at the heart of Biblical Christianity!**

Denying ourselves is completely contradictory to every other impulse we ever have. By nature, we want to please ourselves, to indulge ourselves, to make ourselves known, to be in control of ourselves and our lives. To deny yourself is to completely go against all of those impulses and seek a greater good.

Denial of one thing implies embracing something else. Jesus doesn't tell us to deny ourselves and then take just sit around and do nothing. And He doesn't tell us to deny ourselves and start working towards the good for the greater humanity in some vague way. No, He gives us a very explicit thing to do after we deny ourselves- take up a cross.

**B) What does taking up your cross mean?** Let me suggest four areas:

#### **1) Setting your mind on the things of God, not the things of man**

Take up God's rule and direction for your life. Jesus has already said as much in v. 23. Setting our minds on the "things of man" is having a limited, short-term view of things vs. having an eternal perspective, seeing things how God does.

#### **2) Stop making a name for yourself.**

Most of what we do in life is to get people to think better of us. Our conversations are to show how smart or witty or successful we are. I've been on both sides of those conversations. Our motivation for succeeding and achieving is for people to call us great, to be loved and affirmed. But it's pretty hard to

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<sup>3</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Matthew*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2013, p. 500.

pursue affluence and fame with a cross strapped to your back.

**3) Immerse yourself in the Scriptures.** It's hard to know God's will if you haven't read His word. The Bible is God's revealed will, any decision you make should be grounded in it.

#### **4) Preparing yourself for death (or lesser things)**

Carrying a cross in Jesus' day meant that you were on your way to die. Have you ever heard a story of a martyr and thought to yourself, "Am I strong enough to die for my faith?" Christians today in Islamic countries or in North Korea that's not such a hypothetical. They have been faced with governments or followers of other religions who will point a gun at them or put a sword to their throat and tell them to renounce their faith in Christ. If that happened to me, would I be willing to die for the truth?

"Come on, Dave, we live in America. No one's going to kill me for my faith. I mean, I don't know what it was like in Virginia, but in Delaware, you can relax." You're probably right. But if we set our expectations on the idea that our faith will get us killed or intensely persecuted, then anything less than that will be a relief. "Hey, they only fired me for my beliefs, they didn't kill me!" "Hey, they only stopped being my friend!" "Thank you, Lord, that I was only falsely accused in a newspaper editorial." If we expect our lives as believers to be happy and conflict-free, then these things will be a shock. But if we expect to be killed for our beliefs, those things won't be a surprise, we'll accept them.

After all, if you're carrying a cross, you can't be too surprised when someone wants to nail you up on it.

Aren't we all a bit like Peter, though? We want all the benefits of Christ- forgiven sins, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the assurance of eternal life, peace that passes understanding, true purpose and answers in life. Awesome benefits. All true! But we don't want the difficulties of Christ- we don't want to have to identify with Christ in His sufferings. But it's a package deal.

Listen to how much Peter grew and changed between this time and the time that he wrote 1 Peter: 1 Peter 4:12-14: *"12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you."* Peter came a long way in his understanding.

Luke 9:23 adds one word to the command of Matthew 16:24: "daily." "Take up your cross *daily*." There's the stinger, huh? Because it would be great to be able to point to a time in your life when you took up your cross; you know, back in college or when you had your first kid- oh yeah, I picked up my cross, totally denied myself, so I'm good to go! But I don't think Jesus is going to let us coast off that. Taking up the cross is not a bucket list item that you check off after you accomplish it once:

- Ran a marathon, check
- Visited the Grand Canyon, check
- Published that story I've been working on, check
- Took up my cross and totally followed Jesus for a week, check

No! We wake up every day and decide by our actions and attitudes whether we're going to carry our cross that day or not. Whether we're going to lay down our own agenda and pursue His, or not. All three verbs: "deny", "take up" and "follow" are all in the present tense. We must perform them continually.<sup>4</sup>

I don't think I can give you a definitive understanding of what taking up the cross looks like for you, because it's going to look different for every person and in every situation. But carrying a cross around

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<sup>4</sup> Dan Doriani, *Matthew, Volume II*. Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008, p. 98.

with you should bring perspective to everything you do:

- how you talk to the waitress or a salesperson
- how and why you compete in sports
- how you treat your spouse, your children, your parents
- how hard and how much you work
- how you act in school or online
- how you interact with people during this time of panic and fear

I could suggest very specific things that might be a challenge for me, but you need to wrestle with what carrying your cross looks like. You need to go home and ask God whether you are denying yourself and following Him in the ways He's called you to, or if you need to make some changes. Maybe it is something extreme, maybe it is something with volunteering with the church, maybe you've sacrificed some big things in your life and you feel God's pleasure. The great thing about me being brand new here is that I can't tailor this to anyone specifically; I just don't know you guys well enough – you might all be carrying your crosses or none of you. You'll just have to let the Holy Spirit convict you and teach you.

Our King asks much of us, but He calls us to a life of cross-bearing because He knows it is the most rewarding way to live. Jesus immediately gives...

### **III. Three Reasons To Deny Yourself and Take Up The Cross (vv. 25-27)**

*25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? 27 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.*

Following Jesus' main string of commands- deny, take up the cross & follow, we get a series of 3 explanations why that will immensely benefit you. We have 3 statements that each start with the conjunction "for" in verses 25, 26 and 27. We could spend a whole sermon on each verse, but let's hit them each quickly:

#### **A) Verse 25 tells us that we will find true life**

Is this not the most paradoxical statement in the world? *For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.* I wish that I totally understood it, and even more I wish that I truly lived it out. There's a huge link to what we've already talked about in denying ourselves, in giving up the control of our lives. Setting our plans and goals for our lives at the feet of the Lord and saying, "Take my life, make of it what you want."

#### **B) Verse 26 tells us that we will keep our souls**

These are rhetorical questions, the answers implied in the questions, right?  
What will it profit to gain the whole world? (The implied answer:) NOTHING!  
What shall a man give in return for his soul? EVERYTHING!

**C) Verse 27 tell us that we will be rewarded in the next life.** Jesus Himself will repay us according to what we have done.

We are afraid to dive into the deeper waters of Christian commitment because we don't really trust the Lord. We don't think our sacrifices will be worth it. If I give up:

- buying my dream house
- my season tickets, courtside seats
- this huge promotion that means I see even less of my family
- this or that worldly pleasure
- any of a hundred "creature comforts" and "idols" that we crave

will God really make it worth it?

And Jesus says, "Yes, I will." He will reward you in this life with true abundant life and He will reward you in the life to come. It will all be worth it! 5 minutes into eternity, into the afterlife, into heaven, and we will know that every sacrifice, every step of obedience was worth it.

I always want to remind us, because for most people, if you ask them how they will get to heaven, will say some variation of "I did enough to get there." And so I need to always remind us that doing anything to earn salvation is a dead end. Let's keep this straight:

-Jesus picked up His cross and died on it so that we would be saved.

-We pick up our cross because we are already saved. We follow His lead, but we don't pick up His cross, the one that provides atonement for our sins. We pick up our crosses in obedience; they help us to grow in being like Christ, they help us find our lives by losing them, we will be rewarded by our Father in heaven for the sacrifices we make here. But only Jesus giving up His life on the cross in our place earns us forgiveness of our sins and eternal life.

Hebrews 12:2 says that "*for the joy that was before Him (Jesus) endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*" Let us consider how we take up our crosses daily in view of the great promises and great joy ahead. Amen, let's pray.

Benediction

1 Peter 2:21

*"For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps."*