

## **Matthew 16:21-28 Lost and Found August 28, 2005**

### **A Sermon by Pastor Brad Smith**

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**The Sermon in a Sentence:** The heart of the Gospel is to lose what is ultimately worthless in order to find what is of eternal value.

**Why I Am Preaching It:** So that the congregation will make decisions based on the call of the Gospel.

Poor Peter. The key verses from last week's sermon were Peter's acknowledgment of Jesus' true identity, and Jesus' response: "Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven'" (vv. 16-17). Using a baseball metaphor, Pastor Wayne said that Peter had hit a home run.

Well, if we are going to stick with baseball we have to say that this week Peter strikes out big time when Jesus tells the disciples that he must suffer and die. Listen to Peter and to Jesus' response in today's passage. "Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!' Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men'" (vv. 22-23). Wow! Last week Jesus praised Peter for seeing things from God's perspective, not a human perspective. In this week's passage, Jesus calls Peter Satan, and says that his mind is being filled not by God's ways, but by human ways. Warmhearted Peter loved Jesus, and all he wanted to do was to protect him from harm. He must have felt devastated.

After he rebukes Peter in verses 21-23, Jesus goes on in verses 24-28 to focus on what impact his death will have on all his present and future disciples, including us. I think that each of the two parts of this passage raises one particularly puzzling question, and those are the questions that I will try to deal with in the sermon. Part one of the passage raises the question, "Why was Jesus so hard on Peter?" Part two raises the question, "What does denying ourselves, taking up our crosses and following Jesus look like today?"

So let's jump in with the first part, with Jesus and Peter. Why was Jesus so harsh? The Bible teaches us that Jesus was fully God, and fully human. Both

are important. Because he is God, he has the power to save us, and he has the right to say the startling things he does, like, “If you lose your life for my sake you will find it,” or that he will come back with the glory of God and judge the world. When people fell at his feet and worshiped him, he accepted it as appropriate. So we never want to forget that he is God.

But Jesus is also fully human. As you read the Gospels you see that he got tired, he got frustrated with the disciples, he got thirsty, he needed friends. And he was tempted to take the easy way if he could. That is part of being human. We all would like to get what we want without paying the cost. You’ve seen the ads for products that will make you lose weight without having to do the difficult work of dieting and exercise. If we find it hard to pay a relatively small cost, we can imagine how hard it was for the man Jesus to consider paying the cost of dying on the Cross.

Earlier in his Gospel, in Chapter 4, Matthew tells us how Satan tempted Jesus to avoid the Cross by choosing an easier ministry—turning stones into bread and meeting people’s physical needs, or taking political control of the world, or manipulating people to follow him by miracles like jumping off the temple roof and surviving. In each case, Jesus would have given up the eternal benefits of his sacrifice on the cross, in exchange for a ministry that would have temporary value, but no lasting value. He struggled back and forth for forty days, weighing the possibilities, but he chose the Cross. He chose ultimate value, even if it involved present suffering.

And now well meaning Peter comes back with the same proposal that Satan had made. The Bible does not tell us what tone of voice Jesus used, but my guess is he was not so much angry as agonized. By “Get behind me Satan,” he meant, “Peter, you have no idea how tempting your alternative sounds to me. If only I could take it! You aren’t the first one to suggest it. Satan already said the same thing. But if I turn back, everything is lost.”

Not too long afterwards in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed in this way concerning his death: “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” Maybe Peter’s remark back here in today’s passage had planted once again in Jesus’ mind the thought that there might somehow be a way of escaping the Cross.

There was no escape. Things turned out just as Jesus had said they would. He went to Jerusalem, and suffered desertion by all of his disciples, denial

by one, and betrayal by another. He suffered a rigged trial, the pain and humiliation of being beaten and spit upon, and finally, death by torture on a cross.

On the third day he rose to life again. He conquered sin. He conquered death. He brought us into a relationship with the Father that would have been impossible if he had followed Satan's, or even Peter's, leading and taken an easier way.

So now we can see why Jesus had to be so hard on Peter. Jesus needed all the strength available to him to remain on the path of losing his life so that we could all find the life that lasts forever.

But there is another reason that Jesus rebuked Peter so sternly, and we find that reason in the second part of this passage. Jesus' death and resurrection were intended to save us from our sins, but they were also meant as a model for all believers. Jesus was not the only one who needed to deny himself and take up his cross and lose his life. We, too, must lose what is of temporary value in order to find what is of ultimate value.

Verses 24-28 are not a description of super Christians. They are a description of the ordinary, plain vanilla Christian life. Jesus had to rebuke Peter when he tried to make it easier for Jesus. Otherwise, Peter would likely have taken the easy way when his turn came—and he would have ended up losing everything.

Remember the two questions that I hoped to answer in the sermon? I think we have answered the first one, "Why was Jesus so harsh on Peter?" We saw how Peter's well meaning efforts to ease the way for Jesus actually tempted Jesus to give up eternal worth in exchange for a temporary relief from suffering. And we saw, too, how Jesus serves as a model for all his followers. Peter had to understand, all believers have to understand, that there is no alternative for the Christian but to deny, to lose that which is of no ultimate worth for the sake of finding that which has eternal worth. And that brings us to our second question: What does this experience of denial, this death, this loss look like for us in everyday life?

Jesus describes the same experience in several ways. He says, Follow me. Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Lose your life for my sake. They all signify the same thing. But what exactly does it all mean?

First, let's look at something it does not mean. It does not mean that being a Christian equals being miserable. At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in Chapter 5 of Matthew, Jesus had promised his followers that they would inherit the earth, that they would be filled, that they would rejoice. The Jesus you read about in the Gospels enjoyed life, he went to banquets and weddings, he had a keen eye for the beauty of nature, he had a sense of humor. So denying ourselves and taking our crosses has nothing to do with a drab, joyless life.

Second, it does not necessarily mean a shorter life on earth. Apart from times of persecution, Christians may tend to live longer than their neighbors, as we generally avoid alcohol and other substance abuse, we are part of a loving community, we pray, and we take one day a week to rest and be rejuvenated.

So if denying ourselves and losing our lives does not mean a miserable life or a short life, what is it? Here is what I believe Jesus meant. C.S. Lewis commented that Jesus is not interested in improving us. He is interested in killing us and creating something new. That is part of the symbolism when we baptize by immersion at Ala Moana. The Bible says that we are buried with Jesus in baptism, and raised with him into new life.

Denying ourselves, taking up our cross (in today's terms we might say, taking up our electric chairs), and losing our lives are all ways of saying we give up all rights to ourselves, or even put to death our supposed rights to ourselves. We lose whatever is damaged or damaging in us, everything that is ultimately worthless, so that we may find what really counts.

Jesus is talking about something that we see in many areas of life. A member of the sermon preparation group was discussing this passage with a friend who had been a Marine. That Marine commented, "It sounds like boot camp. The goal is to kill the civilian that came in, and to recreate him as a Marine." That is what goes on in boot camp, every moment of every day.

There have been some heartwarming stories in the paper recently about Bryan Clay, the Castle High School graduate who got a silver medal in the decathlon in the Olympics, and recently won the gold medal at the Tenth World Championships in Athletics, giving him the informal title of the world's best athlete. That little medal represents thousands of hours for

Bryan of denying himself many things so that he could achieve the goal of top athlete in the decathalon.

Whether you are a Marine, or an Olympic athlete, or a follower of Jesus, denying yourself and losing your life means day after day making hundreds of little decisions to let go of what is less important so that you may find what is more important. If you are an athlete or a Marine, you start losing flab, and you find discipline, endurance, and muscle tone. If you are a Christian, you start losing pride, resentment, and self-centeredness. And little by little, you become that faithful, patient, joyful, loving follower of Jesus that you wanted to be.

Now of course there are some really important differences between the Christian life and the examples of the Marine and the athlete that I just gave. For one, we do not live the Christian life for our own glory and recognition, but for Jesus. A person could become a top Marine or a top athlete for his or her personal glory, and could become very proud because of what he or she had achieved. The Christian will recognize any such attitudes as sin, and will resist and confess them. An athlete reaches the top by beating everyone else, while in a Christian community we help one another to reach the top together.

For another, I might not have the natural ability to be a Marine or a champion athlete—in my case, I am sure that I don't. I might well be disqualified. But because the Christian life depends not just on my efforts but on the power of Jesus, the reward is available to "anyone" as it says in verse 24, or "each person," according to verse 27. There is a promise that Jesus will come in power, and in the end he will reward all who have followed him.

Different commentators give different interpretations of what Jesus meant that some standing there would not taste death before he came in power. He may have meant the Transfiguration, which came shortly afterwards, or the fall of Jerusalem that came 40 years later, or some other evidence of power before his final return. But the point is this: the reward is sure for everyone who loses what doesn't last in this life for the sake of finding eternal life with Jesus.

So I hope we have answered the second question that I raised in the sermon. Losing our life, denying ourselves, taking our cross, is a day by day

experience of making decisions always to move towards the ultimate goal of finding a life lived in obedience to Jesus.

I would like to finish with the story of one of my heroes: Juan Carlos Vieira. He was willing to lose what was of temporary value in order to find the type of life that Jesus wanted to give him. He is a Venezuelan, the son of Portuguese immigrants. He had been married for a few years when I met him, and had become a Christian after his marriage. His wife was not a believer. You could all identify with him if you met him—a young family man trying to make ends meet, trying to be a good husband, trying to advance in his career, not always succeeding.

Now Juan Carlos's wife had a congenital malformation of the sinuses which was causing her increasingly frequent and distressing headaches. Her doctor noted she needed surgery, but that Juan Carlos's medical insurance did not cover congenital problems, but only illnesses and accidents that occurred after they were insured. The doctor proposed a solution. He would be glad to sign a claim form stating that this condition was caused by an accident; then Juan Carlos could submit it, and the doctor would proceed with the surgery.

Juan Carlos came to me as his seminary professor for counsel. What should he do? There was no way they could afford the procedure without insurance. He felt it would be a bad witness to his wife to refuse to authorize the help she needed because of his Christian faith. But neither did he feel right as a Christian in getting insurance coverage under false pretenses. What was he to do? How would you have responded to him if you were in my place?

I felt so badly for him and for his wife. I wanted so much to make it easier for them. We prayed together, and he left without having decided what to do.

When I saw him some time later, I asked what had happened. He said that he had made the decision that he could not honor Jesus if he lied to his insurance company. Shortly after that decision had been made, he and his wife discovered that through her work she was eligible for medical coverage that they had never checked out. Her policy covered congenital problems, and actually offered better coverage for her condition than they would have gotten under his policy if he had lied.

I think Juan Carlos did everything right. He had the courage to look the decision square in the face. He considered the cost for himself and for someone he loved. He asked for help from other Christians to make sure he was clear on the issue. And then he decided that finding the eternal value of pleasing Jesus meant more to him than an easy way out. He did not know when he made the decision how it would all work out. In his case, the reward came almost immediately in the form of the other insurance coverage. God sometimes does such things, but he doesn't promise always to do it. The promise is an eternal reward.

I lost track of Juan Carlos, but a few years ago I e-mailed some friends to see if they knew what had happened to him. Turns out he became a pastor. I do not know why for sure, but I am guessing that in that decision to trust Jesus with his wife's health he found such joy, he found Jesus so attractive, that he wanted to get to know him better and to share him with others.

You know, I shudder when I think of how close I came to being a messenger of Satan for Juan Carlos and his wife, just like Peter was for Jesus. I was well meaning. I liked Juan Carlos and I wanted the best for him. I was so tempted to assure him that the insurance company was unfair, that technically Juan Carlos was not lying, the doctor was, that God understood, that it was ok to lie just this once.

And what would have happened? Perhaps he would have listened to me. Perhaps his wife would have had her surgery under his policy, instead of having it under her policy. In one way, nothing would have been all that different. But in another way, everything would have been different. He would have concluded that Jesus is great for praying to and for comforting you, but when things get tough you really have to take them into your own hands. He might have drifted away from the faith, or he might have kept on as an active Christian. But he would not have known the joy of being willing to lose what had only temporary value for the sake of finding that which lasts forever.

Let us pray.