

Losing is Gaining

Please open your Bible to the book of Matthew 16, or turn to page _____ in the Bible under the chair in front of you.

We've come to some of the most critical passages in the accounts of Jesus's life and ministry in which He gives some of the central teachings for those who would seek to follow Him as His disciples.

What does it mean to be a Christian? How should we think about the Christian life? What does it require of me?

That's what Jesus will speak to us about today, and so I'm going to do my best to get out of the way and try to let His words land us with the weight that He means for them to have.

Read **Matthew 16:21-28**

Intro

Just over seventy years ago, in January of 1956, the world woke to a headline that seemed like a tragedy of wasted potential. Five young, brilliant missionaries, led by a 28-year-old named Jim Elliot, had been speared to death on a remote sandbar in the Ecuadorian jungle. They were attempting to make first contact with the Waodani, a tribe known then for their extreme violence and isolation.

To the secular press, it was a senseless slaughter. But to Jim Elliot, it was a calculated risk fueled by a radical conviction. Years earlier, he had scribbled a sentence in his journal that would become a manifesto for generations of believers:

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."



The world struggled to make sense of why he would do something like this, taking such a radical risk in order to share the gospel of Jesus with people he didn't know. And I wonder this morning, does his story makes sense to you? Jim Elliot was convinced that this risk was worth it because his hope was in Jesus, and not in this earthly life. And so for him, the decision to obey Christ in spreading the gospel, even at great risk to himself, is really the only rational way to live.

With Jim Elliot's story in our minds, I want to ask you another question today. If the Christian worldview is true, then does the way you are living your life make sense?

If there is more to this world than what we can see and touch in the physical world, if there is something beyond it, and you are a soul, and there is a God, and there is a world to come after death – if all of that is true, then does the way you're living make sense?

Now, that could be because you don't really believe those things. Or it could be that you sort of vaguely believe it, but your life has gotten so filled with other things that it doesn't really reflect that you believe in the Christian worldview. Or maybe your life is more like a mixed-bag. Some parts of my life reflect that belief, but others don't.

Or if we flipped the question – if there is no God, if there is nothing more to this world than physical stuff, if you are not a soul who will continue to live beyond death, then does the way that you live make sense?

I think that many of you would say – no! There is a lot in my life that only makes sense because I believe in God, in a spiritual world, in my own soul, and in the life to come.

The point is that there is something really big at stake in this passage for every one of us. Because if it's not true, then what Jesus has to say here is just nonsense. In fact, it's not just crazy, it's deceitful and manipulative and oppressive.

If Jesus is just a human being like everyone else, and He's not the Son of God, then what He says here is tyrannical. It's wildly arrogant and evil. Which is why, by the way, the claim that He's just a good teacher doesn't match with the way Jesus speaks. He can't be a great teacher if He's asking for complete obedience and self-denial and martyrdom for His sake...and He is not God.

But...if it is true, if there is more to this life than our physical world, and there is a life to come, and He is the Son of God, then these words are not only wise and kind and good, they are also of critical importance. These words, spoken two thousand years ago are more relevant to your life than all of the other stuff that's going on right now.

So because this is so important, I want to be as crystal clear as I know how to be this morning. I have three very basic questions that I want to ask to help us see what Jesus is saying in this text: Who? What? And Why?

Who is Jesus speaking to? What is He calling them to? And why does Jesus say this? And we need to consider the why because what Jesus says feels so completely counter-intuitive for us.

Who?

So let's begin with that first question – who?

Who is Jesus speaking to when He says here in verse 24...

Matthew 16:24

“If anyone would come after me...”?

The answer to this first question is found in that one word – ‘anyone.’ If “anyone” would come after me. Jesus had just been speaking to Peter in verse 23, and now in verse 24, He is talking to His disciples. But as He begins to speak, He is giving a truth that applies much more broadly than to only the disciples themselves.

“If anyone would come after me...” Now, He's not just speaking to the twelve, “if any one *of you* wants to follow me...” No, Jesus has in mind all those who would seek to be His disciples, in that day and down through history. He's addressing all people in all cultures of the world, at all points in history – including you and me.

That's a large claim. It's a large claim to say that Jesus was intending to make a statement that goes beyond the first century to include people as far removed as you and I are today in Lafayette, IN.

So let's just test that for moment. Do we have reason to believe that Jesus anticipated people at different points in history becoming Christians? Did Jesus have that in mind? And the answer is unquestionably yes.

So if we look over at John 17, we hear Jesus praying after the last supper with His disciples. He prays to the Father and He says,

John 17:20

“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word...”

Here is Jesus speaking in the presence of His disciples, but He is aiming beyond them to all those who will believe in Him through their preaching. And that includes people from all over the world and down through history. As the gospel goes into all the world, and disciples are made from every nation, Jesus is thinking about all of those people.

So when Jesus say, “If anyone would come after me,” He is speaking to every individual who would desire to become His disciple. He is about to describe what it means to become a Christian, and the truth He gives is for anyone who wants to follow Him.

And that means that this truth is for you and me today. It is of maximum importance and it is relevant for your life. Next question – what?

What?

What is it that Jesus is calling those who would come after Him to do? We need to hear this. Verse 24...

Matthew 16:24

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

Right up front, I think we need to be careful that we do not dilute those words. We should not immediately jump to statements that would soften what Jesus is saying here. He has just told them that He is going to suffer and be killed. And if they are to follow Him, they must walk that path as well.

One of the most influential scholars on the book of Matthew, R.T. France, says,

Jesus’ words are about literal death, following the condemned man on his way to execution. Discipleship is a life of at least potential martyrdom...The “cross” and the “losing life” which he speaks of are literal, and it seems clear from v. 28 that he did expect at least some of his disciples to be killed because of their loyalty to his cause (as indeed they were).¹

So the foremost sense of these words is that Jesus is calling for those who would follow Him to be willing to follow behind Him on the path as He walked toward crucifixion. That is where Jesus is heading, and He calls all who would follow Him to be willing to die, just as He gave up His own life.

There are other applications to be made here, for sure, but they follow downstream of this call for being willing to give up your very life for Him. And because that is the call, then there are many lesser ways that we must walk in self-denial. Following Jesus means saying “No” to sin and selfishness and “Yes” to the upside-down ethics of the kingdom. It is being poor in spirit and meek and merciful and a peacemaker, it’s loving your enemies and walking in purity and telling the truth and going the extra mile. But the main sense is that you must be willing to die for Him.

¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 636.

So we should not be quick to minimize or trivialize what Jesus is saying here. He means exactly what He says. You want to follow me? You must deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow me.

What is involved in those three things? Let's look at them.

A person who would follow Jesus must deny himself or herself. And we are prone to do just the opposite, aren't we? We are bent toward self-preservation, self-governance, and self-protection. We are not naturally given to **deny** ourselves, but rather to **supply** ourselves with whatever we desire – with comfort and ease and the goods of this world and the approval of others. We would naturally protect our lives and what we want.

But Jesus says, you must give that up. You must deny that selfish impulse that instinctively moves you to be greedy for more and protective over what's yours and inclined to put your own desires above everything else. That can no longer be the ruling principle of your life.

You need to turn away from the path of sin and self-rule in order to follow me. You must deny yourself.

And then secondly, this call from Jesus means that a person must take up his cross. And it can be hard for us to hear this with the same force that it would have landed with the disciples when they first heard it. The cross has become pretty tame in our minds; it has sentimental meaning to many of us.

But friends, the cross is not just some nice piece of jewelry or some part of a church logo. The cross is a sign of death. It's the shorthand way of speaking about a bloody, humiliating, and painful death. When the Romans crucified a person, they would make that person carry their own cross to the place of crucifixion. And so when Jesus says, 'take up your cross,' He's speaking about being willing to go toward your own death. He's saying, "Be ready to die."

If you would be His follower, you must lay down that which is most precious to you – your life. You must be willing to say, "I'd rather have you than live."

And that requirement is no less for us today than it was for the original disciples. It's not only for those who would feel called to be a missionary somewhere dangerous. It's not only for Christians living in faraway countries that are opposed to the gospel. It's for anyone who would come after Jesus and follow Him.

And then third, Jesus says, you must follow Me. And it's not like we're done with the hard parts, all of that self-denial and taking up the cross, and now we are to just follow Him in a leisurely stroll through the park. No, that's not what's behind these words.

To follow Jesus is to submit to Him as the King and Lord over all that you do. It is to put yourself under His authority and rule. To live under His good and kind commands.

This is the reason why we should not understand Jesus's words here to be simply a call to avoid anything good or pleasurable or fun. The path of following Jesus is not just, "I know you like to be happy, but following Me means that you must be miserable and suffer and avoid anything you like."

It is possible to take Jesus words here and sort of pluck them out of the Bible and then use them to support a kind of monastic life of misery and pain. You could take the concept of self-denial and taking up one's cross and following the way of Jesus to mean that if you come across something that you'd enjoy or that would bring you happiness, then you should forsake that thing for the sake of Jesus.

There was a movement early on in the church, in which people would go live in the wilderness or the desert in order to fast for long periods of time and forsake anything worldly which might bring comfort or joy. These monks would make rules for themselves and then try to keep them as though they were commands from God – things that God never said or required – like avoid marriage or good food or good drink. They were trying to kill that sinful impulse inside us, but these man-made rules didn't work. And we know that they can't. They tried to get away from temptation and worldliness, but they took the world with them. It was inside them all along.

The apostle Paul spoke to this issue in Colossian chapter two. There were these false teachers in that day who were promoting this idea that keeping rules and fasting and avoiding things that bring joy – that's the way to really follow Christ. But Paul says, "That's foolish! That's worldly thinking. It's not what Christ calls us to do."

Colossians 2:20-23

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— **21** "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" **22** (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? **23** These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

Trying to live like a monk – avoiding anything that would bring joy, not even touching those things – that seems like wisdom. It sounds like it might work, like it might be true.

But ultimately, it has no power to stop the indulgence of the flesh. It can't change your heart. You can't change from the outside in.

You see, the problem is that this kind of self-imposed severity doesn't actually go deep enough. Being cruel to yourself and saying no to things that you want sounds like it could be what Jesus is talking about here, but it's really too shallow. Even that kind of self-hatred is still another way of putting yourself in the driver's seat and retaining control. You know, you can do all that stuff on the outside and still keep your heart from submitting to Jesus. That's what the Pharisees were so good at.

At the core, that person is saying, I can still be in charge of what I do for Jesus – I will earn His favor and justify myself by my own efforts. I'll make Jesus accept me – look at all that I'm doing for Him! So you see, even those attempts are ways to hide from what Jesus is really after.

Jesus isn't talking about asceticism – or just avoiding joy and fun. He's talking about giving up control, giving up your perceived right to determine your own destiny, to lay down all of your bargaining chips you might want to use with Him. You have to give it all up and follow His path with your whole self.

Friends, this is revolutionary stuff that He's talking about here. Do you see that it's not just some program that you follow or adjustment to your lifestyle?

Jesus is talking about what it means to be a Christian. And He's saying, "Are you clear on this? And are you willing? You'll need to let go your living for yourself. You'll need to let go of your work to preserve your own life and your own comfort and your own pursuit of possessions and status and self-determination."

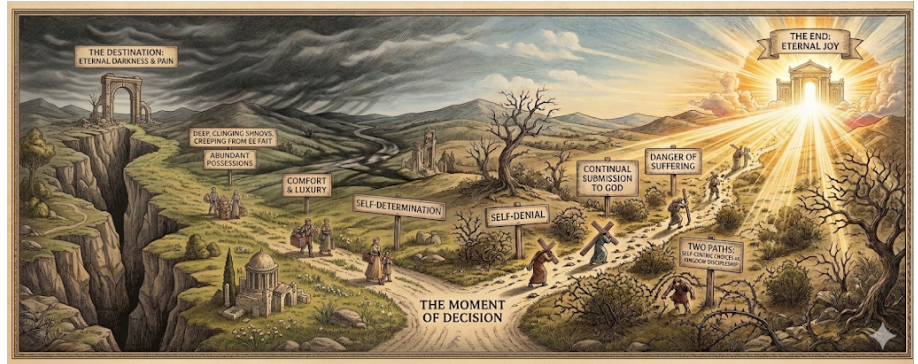
And so you would naturally say, "Why on earth would anyone do that?" That is such a huge, costly thing. And that impulse toward self-preservation and self-determination? I like that – it feels like it's built-in to me. To deny myself in that way feels like it would mean giving up my freedom and my sense of autonomy. So why would anyone do what Jesus is calling His followers to do?

There would need to be some really compelling reason to do this. Either some great danger that I need to avoid or some great good that this would bring – it would need to be something like that in order for this to make sense.

So think for a moment about a map with two paths. And there is one path that leads toward what appears to be worldly success. It's marked by abundant possessions, comfort and luxury, and a sense of self-determination. But the end of that path is the

destruction of your soul in a place of eternal darkness and pain. And as you look at down that path, you see that the darkness at its end has spread such that the whole path is tainted with its shadows and sense of danger. (show picture) – from Gemeni

But there is another path. And it is marked by self-denial and continual submission to God despite the danger of suffering and even physical death. And the end of that path is eternal joy, the kind of joy that bursts forth so explosively that it reaches back along the path and lights it up with delight in God in the midst of all the hardships and suffering.



This is the only way the words of Jesus here make sense. We would need some pretty compelling reason to follow Him, if this is what it involves.

And that’s what the rest of this passage provides. Now Jesus is going to answer the ‘why question’ – what would cause a person to choose to follow Jesus if this is what it means?

Why?

Notice that each of the following verses, 25, 26, and 27 all begin with the word “For.” They are all giving reasons for what Jesus has said in verse 24. There are three reasons that a person desiring to come after Jesus, would choose to deny himself, take up His cross, and follow Him.

And Jesus will speak both about the danger to be avoided and the goodness that will come for the one who follows Him. So let’s start in verse 25...

Matthew 16:25

For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Here Jesus is talking about the person who seeks to save their own life – he or she wants to retain their own self-determination, pursue their own comfort, and protect their own life. Whoever does that will lose it. That path will lead to darkness.

But...whoever loses his life (And all of verse 24 is summarized in that little phrase 'lose his life.),' whoever loses his life for my sake by denying himself, taking up his cross, and following me, whoever does that will find it. You'll find life.

In verse 26, he speaks of it as gaining the world. Jesus asks,

Matthew 16:26

For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?

Jesus asks this question in order to make us think – what good is it if I were to be wildly successful in gaining all that I want, but yet lose out on having Jesus?

So let's think about it. Paint the picture for yourself in your mind – what would gaining the world look like for you? Just let your imagination go. What would that look like?

I've got my own picture. I'll be vulnerable and share it with you. What is gaining the world? Well, first, I enjoy a career in the NBA, securing for myself the title of the GOAT-greatest of all time. And it will be undisputed – the talking heads all agree, it's no longer Michael Jordan or LeBron James – it is clearly Nathan Eikenberry. And after having won multiple championships, I then retire into a life of leisure, reading and discussing literature and films from the large library/theater found in my home that is both in the mountains and on the sea (don't ask me how that's possible).

I have other homes, of course, both here and sprinkled around the world which also have ample space for friends and family to come and go, while still maintaining opportunities for me to get away when I need to. They are all decorated with a simple elegance that is both comfortable and sophisticated.

My wife and I have the means to enjoy all of these homes and travel whenever we please and enjoy good food and theater. My kids are all wildly successful – each married to spouses who love them and care for them. One is an accomplished artist & musician – performing for thousands, one a famous mathematician who solves crazy hard problems, and one a wildly successful inventor and entrepreneur, each making the world a better place and having clean rooms the whole time.

...and what about yours? What if there was some way for this to be possible for you? What if you could actually attain it and you 'gained the whole world'? What good would that do for you?

Because no matter how much you try to stuff in to the 'dot' of this life, there is an end to it that is inevitable and quickly approaching. Compared to the line of eternity, the dot of this life will soon be over.

And when you come to the end of it, what good will it do you if you were somehow able to gain the whole world and yet lose the life that only comes from Him?

That's the reason Jesus gives in verse 26. And then in verse 27, He gives a slightly different reason...

Matthew 16:27

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.

You see, the judge on that day, is the same one who is here calling for us to give up the path of living for ourselves. Jesus sees the whole picture, and He is telling us that on that final day, the call to deny yourself in this life will make perfect sense.

On that day, Jesus will receive all who followed Him into His eternal joy. Jesus will say, "Well done. Come on in."

That is the reward Jesus is talking about in verse 27. He's not talking about rewards for deeds as though this is a kind of works salvation. No, He's talking about reward for what we've done with verse 24 – have we come to Christ as He calls us to?

To live for this eternal life with Christ in heaven is the only thing that makes sense of the radical self-denial Jesus has been speaking about.

There is something waiting for those who have come to Christ, by faith alone and grace alone. And the Bible speaks about this in several places and in multiple ways, but it is so hard for us to grasp on this side of eternity. The Bible calls it an...

- "inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you." (1 Peter 1:4)
- It speaks of glory – Paul says, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." (Rom 8:18)
- And it calls it an "eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor 4:17).

The language the Bible uses is meant to shake us out of living only for this little dot of a life. When we deny ourselves, we are living in light of the future life that awaits us.

Listen to **Colossians 3:2-3**

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. **3** For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. **4** When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Paul tells the Christians at Colossae – you have died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. Reading it alongside Matthew 16, Paul would say, Christian, you have denied yourself, you've already taken up your cross, and followed Jesus when you put your trust in Him for salvation. So now, set your mind there. That's where your real life is. But if anyone tries to find their life in this world, they will lose it.

You must lose your life for His sake, and you will find it. Because on that final day when Christ appears that you will also appear with Him in glory. You will receive the reward of real life in Him. That's where the path leads.

And the future realities of that final day are already pressing in on the present age. Christ's kingdom is not yet fully here, but it has already dawned. Those future blessings, and the joy of Christ's presence have already begun.

That is what I think Jesus is referring to in verse 28.

Matthew 16:28

Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

What is being said here? There are many opinions about it, at least seven according to one commentary. Is it the transfiguration in the next passage? Or the resurrection and ascension? Or the spread of the gospel to the nations and the building of the church? Or the Second Coming of Christ in glory? What is the promise here?

And sometimes when there are several good options, it may be that Jesus intends a few things at once. That's not always the case, but it seems that the promise here is a word of hope to those first disciples that their own death will not precede their witnessing the glory of Christ's kingdom. Peter, James, and John will see a preview in the transfiguration, but all the disciples will witness the Son of Man bring about His kingdom through His death, resurrection, and ascension and the expansion of the church. You will see the glory of Christ when those things come to pass.

So those things will come. But first, Jesus says, if anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me.

So the takeaway from our passage is simple and clear – you must give up your attempts to keep your life. You must lose your life in order to find it.

And there are lots of applications that flow downstream from that one. Where do you need to deny yourself so that you can gain your life?

That shows up in a thousand little acts of self-denial as you continually choose to love your enemy and turn the other cheek, as you forgive that person who wronged you deeply, as you sacrifice and serve day after day, as you seek to even bless those who persecute you.

That's what Elizabeth Elliot did. She was the widow of Jim Elliot who had been killed in an attempt to get the gospel to the Waodani people. The aftermath of his death is often cited as one of the most unexpected turnarounds in modern missions history. While the initial fallout appeared to be a total failure, five young men dead and a tribe still unreached, the story changed when Elisabeth Elliot and Rachel chose to move into the village of the very men who had killed their loved ones.

This act of radical forgiveness and non-violence broke the cycle of revenge killings that had plagued the Waodani culture for generations. Within a few years, many members of the tribe, including several of the warriors who handled the spears that day, trusted in Jesus.

Why would they do something like that? What would motivate Jim and Elizabeth Elliot to live that way? The only thing that makes sense of it is the reality of Jesus as the Son of God who died for their sins and rose again, so that all who trust in Him might have eternal life. That is why Jim could say, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

Friend, if you never look beyond this life, you will die twice. Now and in eternal darkness. But if you die to self and trust in Christ, then you will live twice – both now and forevermore.

Jesus has shown us the way, so let us deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him.

Let's pray...