

Matthew 16:21-28 | “Christianity & Suffering”
Preached on November 19, 2023 by Pastor Matt Brown

Please turn in your Bibles to Matthew 16, verse 21. *[pauseeee]*

In our American context, we are certainly blessed growing up and living in a country that has been prosperous and successful for many years. *[pause]*

We live in a country where many people can make lots of money.

We live in a country that has many comforts and freedoms.

In fact, our country often has the newest cutting edge technology, and always seems to be coming up with safer and easier ways to do things. *[pauseeee]*

There’s nothing inherently wrong with those things, for many of those things are good, and we should be thankful for them.

But here’s where a problem may lie when living in such a country. *[pause]*

Since we are so used to prosperity, comfort, convenience, safety, and earthly success, this can tempt us to think that that’s how Christianity is and should be. *[pauseeee]*

Just consider how the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel flourishes in our country.

Or consider how those who teach and promise miraculous healings create masses of crowds, yet a church, who faithfully preaches God’s Word week-in and week-out doesn’t get much attention. *[pauseeee]*

Have you ever noticed how many American churches teach almost exclusively positive messages?

Most sermons are about 5 tips to being a better you, or some self-help message.

Or many sermons lack any mention of sin, hell, judgment, and things of that nature.

Instead, they are almost always “positive and uplifting”. *[pauseeee]*

Now I’m not saying positive messages are wrong, but there’s a problem if you only ever hear positive messages, devoid of any mention of sin or suffering. *[pauseeee]*

Joel Osteen has a well-known book titled, “Your Best Life Now”. *[pause]*

What does he mean by that?

He certainly doesn’t mean that your best life now includes suffering greatly and experiencing opposition and shame in this world.

He means more so wealth, health, prosperity, and earthly success.

That's a prime example of what I'm talking about. *[pauseee]*

Consider also the message that "God has a wonderful plan for your life".

I agree with that as long as you explain that 'wonderful' also entails persecution, risk, discomfort, and possibly death for Christ.

But most people don't think that way in our country, for a wonderful life is usually seen as one that is comfort-filled, safe, healthy, wealthy, and successful. *[pauseee]*

So yes, we must preach the joy, contentment, and triumph of following Christ.

But we must also not neglect to preach that following Him involves great hardship. *[pauseee]*

For Peter and his fellow disciples they likewise had a rosy view of the Messiah and what it would mean to follow Him.

Yet here in our passage, Jesus will teach His disciples (and us) that He will suffer, and following Him will also involve suffering.

Let's READ verses 21-23. *[READ]*

The previous verses before these ones were like a high moment.

Peter just confidently declared that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God," at a location that was a center of false worship.

Yet not long after that great profession, Jesus begins to show them what kind of Messiah He will be and what He will go through...

He will suffer, die, and be raised. *[pause]*

And so what Jesus shows us is that...

I. The path of Christ was a path of suffering and death.

Peter, the other disciples, and really, all the Jews of that day, had no concept of a suffering or dying Messiah, but rather, a victorious One.

And this idea was so wedged in Peter's mind that he rebuked even the Lord Himself, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall *never* happen to you." *[pauseee]*

So the one who just professed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, rebuked Christ, the Son of the living God, for something He said. *[pause]*

The reason?

Jesus says, “You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”
[pauseeee]

Peter’s mindset was a mindset that came from human expectation and human perspective.

It’s one that thinks of all victory, no hardship -- of only and ever power, and no weakness shown.

Kinda like how when we think of our best life now or God’s wonderful plan for us, we can’t fathom that that means suffering and death.

But God’s ways are not our ways.¹ *[pauseeee]*

So often we are like Peter, falling back upon a mindset that isn’t in line with the things of God.

We can’t fathom how all things (even the hard, bad-looking things) will work together for good.²
[pause]

We think that things must grow fast and quick or else they aren’t successful.

We consider that success and blessing in this life is health and wealth.

And we believe that comfort and safety are the top priorities that trump everything else.

But God’s ways and mindset are different than that. *[pauseeee]*

We expect God to think like us, but He continually destroys human wisdom, for He uses weakness to win.³

The road of glory for Christ was a road filled with suffering and shame.

There would be no crown without a cross. *[pauseeee]*

Once Jesus’ disciples professed that He was the Christ, He was determined to show them and make it clear what He would go through.

They had to understand what kind of Messiah they were following.

They must be prepared for what was to come and what would happen to Him.

That’s why “from that time Jesus began to show his disciples” what would happen to Him.
[pauseeee]

This reminds us that Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection were not some “plan B”.

They were not some wrench in the plan that caught Jesus off guard.

¹ A reference to Isaiah 55:8-9.

² A reference to Romans 8:28.

³ See 1 Corinthians 1:18-31.

Rather, He prophesied that they would happen, and even states that He “must” go through all of this. *[pause]*

It was necessary! But why?

So that He could suffer, die, and be raised for our salvation! *[pause]*

It was only because he did those things that we could receive forgiveness and eternal life. *[pause]*

He had to be that perfect, sinless sacrifice for our sins, and pay the penalty that we deserved.

He had to conquer the grave, showing that the price He paid was truly a done deal. *[pauseeee]*

Little did the disciples know, Jesus didn’t come to merely be a political leader, giving them freedom.

He came to give His life as a ransom for many.⁴

He came to pay sin’s penalty, and free us from sin’s dominion.

He came to rise from the grave, so that we could have a living hope, knowing that in Him we have eternal life and will someday also be raised with him. *[pauseeee]*

He “must” go.

“It was necessary” that He suffer, die, and be raised.

And all of us can’t help but rejoice that He *did* go, and He *did* suffer, die, and rise again. *[pauseeee]*

It’s crazy how Peter, the great confessor of Christ’s identity, was now just called Satan.

Not that he is Satan, but he was acting how Satan would by trying to deter Jesus from following His path and seeking to thwart his mission. *[pauseeee]*

This teaches us that anytime that we oppose Christ’s mission or Word, we are acting like Satan would, and what a horrible person to act like!

Yet I wonder if we ever try to tell Jesus what will or will not happen like Peter? *[pause]*

Do we ever act like Peter, rebuking Jesus because of what He says will happen or what should happen? *[pause]*

How many times do people get upset at God because they feel like His ways are too harsh, too hard, or too illogical in their minds?

⁴ A reference to Matthew 20:28.

How many times do people think, “Jesus would understand if He lived in our day and understood that times change, so that command doesn’t apply today.”?

How many times do people say, “My God would never do that...” when talking about the clear teaching of Hell and judgment in the Bible? *[pause]*

Don’t you see that what you are doing is like Peter rebuking Jesus, saying, “Never, Lord!”

And Jesus says to such one, “Get behind me, Satan!” *[pauseeee]*

We need to remember that we do not belong in front of, or even beside Christ, but *behind* him.

We follow, He leads - not the other way around.

He is in charge, not us.

He does the rebuking -- we do not rebuke Him and His Word. *[pauseeee]*

Jesus’ suffering and death was God’s will, so we dare not evade them.

Like Paul, we should decide to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified.⁵ *[pause]*

We dare not try to skirt around the unpleasantness of the brutal Cross.

We dare not minimize His suffering.

Because if we do, we will find ourselves like Peter, being an adversary to Christ, and a stumbling stone to others. *[pauseeee]*

People need to know the crucified and risen Christ!

They need to know that He suffered for them.

They need to know that He died in their place, and rose again on the 3rd day. *[pause]*

To avoid the Cross, and preach only health and prosperity is to set our minds on the things of man, not on the things of God.

To avoid the Cross, and preach only self-help, positive messages will cause people to miss the most important message there is.

Hot takes and current events are not our message - our message is Christ crucified!⁶ *[pauseeee]*

For some, they don’t like the Cross, for it conveys weakness.

⁵ A reference to 1 Corinthians 2:2.

⁶ See 1 Corinthians 1:23.

Some don't like it because it's violent and bloody, and people would rather hear something "positive and uplifting". [pause]

Others don't like talking about the Cross because to speak of the Cross, you must speak about what led him there: our sin and God's wrath against our sin.

But we preach Christ crucified.

It was God's will and Jesus' mission, and "to us who are being saved it is the power of God."⁷
[pauseeee]

The path of Christ was a path of suffering and death, and Jesus uses this talk of suffering to speak about what following Him entails, and it's that...

II. The path of a Christ-follower is a path of suffering and possible death.

Let's READ verses 24-28. [READ]

There seems to be this thinking that, "Well, Jesus suffered so that I don't have to suffer."

And that is true in one sense, but not in another. [pause]

Jesus suffered and died for you so that you don't have to suffer and die for your sins, taking the wrath of God upon yourself eternally.

But His suffering doesn't mean you won't ever suffer for righteousness' sake in this life.
[pauseeee]

There's also this idea that suffering Christians are sort of a unique, small group among us.

As though they are the exception and non-suffering Christians are the norm. [pause]

And so when it comes to suffering, we sometimes talk like Peter, but instead of saying, "This shall never happen to you," we say, "This shall never happen to me." [pauseeee]

Yet look at what Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." [pauseeee]

As we dwell upon what Jesus says here, the first thing that we see is that Jesus sets the terms of discipleship, not us. [pause]

We don't say, "This is the type of the disciple I will be," but we say, "Lord, what is a disciple to be?" [pauseeee]

So many times we like to pick and choose which things we want to follow when it comes to Christ. [pause]

⁷ 1 Corinthians 1:18.

Some people think, “Oo, that’s a little too tough, Jesus, I don’t think I’ll do that one.”

Or, “Oh Jesus, that’s not on the right side of history, sorry, I’m not doing that one.”

But that’s not how it works - it’s all or nothing with Christ. *[pauseeee]*

And so what does Jesus say about being one of His followers? He must deny himself and take up his cross. *[pauseeee]*

This is a radical truth!

This flies in the face of everything that comes naturally to us as sinners! *[pause]*

As sinners, denying ourselves is the last thing that we want to do because we love ourselves most of all.

We want to pursue *our* interests, *our* desires, *our* thoughts. *[pause]*

We are inherently selfish, wanting our own way -- just think back to Adam and Eve. *[pause]*

We want to be the leader, not Christ.

And so we see here that self-love and discipleship are opposites, for you must deny yourself, if you would follow Christ. *[pauseeee]*

Taking up your cross is also a radical truth, for we usually seek to avoid discomfort and pain at all costs.

Yet Jesus is showing us that to be His disciple you have to go against the grain of what comes natural. *[pause]*

You can no longer be lord of your life anymore, but Christ must be Lord of your life.

And you must be willing to follow Him, come what may, even death. *[pauseeee]*

What Jesus is showing us is that self-preservation at all costs is incompatible with following Him, for what if following Jesus means giving up your life?

That’s why you can’t seek to save your life, or you will lose it, but to lose it for His sake, you will find it. *[pauseeee]*

If your life is all about yourself and seeking to gain the world, you will end up with *nothing*. *[pause]*

What good will it be if someone lives for themselves, gets all that the world can offer, and yet dies without Christ?

They can't take anything into eternity with them, and they will enter eternity facing judgment forever in Hell.

What good will that be? *[pause]*

What good will that Mercedes do you when you die and come to understand that you wasted it all on something fleeting, all the while you missed out on eternity with God?

What good will all of that stuff you obtained do you?

What good will all of that status you received and acceptance from others you strived to get do you when you stand before God? *[pause]*

You lived great momentarily, but you lost your soul, and think about the eternal importance of your soul. *[pauseeeee]*

When you live for yourself, you are not experiencing true life, but giving it up.

But when you live for Christ, that's when you experience true life. *[pauseeee]*

So often we don't think ahead, but are focused on the here and now.

But if we thought about our lives from an eternal perspective, would we waste it on living for the now?

As C.S. Lewis talks about: we are far too easily pleased with temporary, lesser things when there are lasting, greater things offered to us in Christ. *[pauseeeee]*

So to deny yourself and take up your cross and follow Him, you must sacrifice the selfish desires that you have.

You have to sacrifice the pursuit of money, status, possessions, and self-gratification - and say, "Lord, what do YOU want?" *[pause]*

Do we truly live this way?

Do we fully understand that to be a Christ-follower is an "all-in" thing?

It's not a nice, little thing on the side that adds some side benefits, but following Christ is renouncing your whole life to Christ and following Him, even to possible death! *[pauseeee]*

This text shoots a million arrows into the idea that you can just be a nominal Christian.

No, if you are just a Christian in name only, you are not actually following Christ. *[pauseee]*

You can't just say, "Yes," to Jesus on Sunday mornings, but "No," to Jesus on every day in between.

No, to follow Christ is to now live for Christ and no longer live for self.

He is to be the leader of your life - you the follower.

This is true discipleship; this is true Christianity. *[pauseeee]*

Let me ask you, can you truly say, “My life is yours, Jesus. I will do whatever you call me to do.”?

Or, “Lord, wherever you lead, I will go, even if it means hardship, discomfort, risk, and death.”? *[pauseeee]*

Are you willing to follow regardless of the cost?

If not, then consider *who* is lord of your life because the needle is probably pointing back towards yourself. *[pauseeee]*

Jesus wants us to know that following Him is *not* an easy path.

Truly following Jesus is not something where it’s like, “just do these 2 easy steps, and you are good to go, it will be over with and easy times will roll.” *[pause]*

It is that kind of erroneous thinking that leads to people, who encounter hard times for Christ and say, “This isn’t what I signed up for!” and walk away.

They never truly understood what it meant to follow Christ, and only came for the side benefits, and not for Christ Himself. *[pauseeee]*

No, following Jesus means giving over your life to Jesus.

It means opposition, discomfort, shame, suffering, and possible death for His sake.

And so a Christ-follower can’t seek acceptance from others, comfort, and safety at the expense of following Jesus.

But they know that there’s something more important than those things. *[pauseeee]*

In the past, I’ve always just focused on the deny yourself and take up your cross part.

Like, “OK, we just gotta do that. Grind our teeth and do it.” *[pause]*

Now, certainly those aspects are important, as evidenced by the fact that I just talked about them!

But a year or two ago, someone pointed out something that made this text really more powerful in my mind. *[pauseeee]*

Think of it this way: what is the driving motivator of someone doing these hard things of denying themselves and taking up their cross?

It is desire for Christ. *[pause]*

The ESV's translation isn't the greatest at bringing this out, for in verse 24 it says, "If anyone would come after me."

But really what the text says is, "If anyone wants [or desires] to come after Me." *[pause]*

You must *desire* Christ above everything else to do this.

You must think, "He's worth everything to follow!"

You must say, "I will follow You anywhere, Lord, because You are my everything." *[pauseeee]*

You see, when your greatest desire is Christ, it beats out all of those lesser desires of money, possessions, status, and worldly acceptance.

Because you understand that He is *worth it all*. *[pause]*

You become willing to lose your life "for His sake".

You become willing to go through pain and hardship for His name.

You become willing to not live for yourself because living for Christ, the Son of the living God, is eternally worthwhile! *[pause]*

He is truly the glorious Son of Man, who has an eternal kingdom.

He will someday "come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done."

So how could I *not* live for such a Person?

How could I live for myself, and seek to gain passing, fleeting pleasures?

But when I look to Christ and to eternity, it becomes clear: He's worth every earthly loss because to know Him is gain.⁸ *[pause]*

So like that hymn says...

"Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace."⁹ *[pauseeee]*

How could we not suffer for Him, who so innocently suffered for us, so that we could have forgiveness and eternal life?

⁸ A reference to Philippians 3:8.

⁹ "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus" by Helen H. Lemmel (1922).

How could we not live for the One, who is King and who is coming back again someday?
[pause]

When we trust Him, as the only way to be saved, we receive eternal life.

So to follow Him with our lives is eternally worth it, nothing else can compare. *[pauseeee]*

This great passage reminds us that...

Christ went through suffering before glory, and we will, too, but it's worth it!

Jesus went through great suffering, but His suffering wasn't the end, for He rose again and then ascended into glory.

It was the Father's will, so it was His path that He took, so that we could be saved. *[pauseeee]*

Will you follow the path laid before you? *[pause]*

The path we each will walk will be marked by hardship for Christ, as it will mean discomfort and risk.

But there is something more important than comfort and safety, and His name is Jesus.

He is worth more than anything else you face.

And for those who believe in Him, physical suffering and death aren't actually defeat anyway.
[pauseeee]

Following Him will also mean having to deny your ambitions and earthly desires, but you replace them with the greater desire for Christ, who never fails to satisfy. *[pause]*

So will you say, "Lord, you are worth it all."?

Will you say 'No' to self, and 'Yes' to Christ?

Remembering that following Him is eternally worth every loss, every tear, and every ounce of hardship.

For as Paul says...

"For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."¹⁰

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 4:17-18.