



If my people . . .

PRAYER + FASTING

“From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”

- Matt. 16:21

If my people...
PRAYER + FASTING

***"Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind
the things of God, but the things of men."***

- Matt. 16:23

If my people...
PRAYER + FASTING

“Then Jesus said his disciples, ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’”

- Matt 16:24

If my people...
PRAYER + FASTING

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

- Matt 16:24, ESV

If my people...
PRAYER + FASTING

"When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

If my people...
PRAYER + FASTING

Two Commands of Jesus:

Deny yourself

If my people...
PRAYER + FASTING

Two Commands of Jesus: Deny yourself

“...He swore to them, ‘I don’t know the man!’”

- Matt 26:74

If my people...
PRAYER + FASTING

Two Commands of Jesus: Deny yourself

“To deny oneself is to be aware only of Christ and no more of self, to see only him who goes before and no more the road which is too hard for us. Once more, all that self-denial can say is: ‘He leads the way, keep close to him.’”

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

If my people...
PRAYER + FASTING

Two Commands of Jesus:

Take up your cross

If my people...
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Two Commands of Jesus: Take up your cross

***People carrying crosses
were people going to execution.***

If my people...
PRAYER + FASTING

Remember what Jesus said:

“If anyone would come after me...”

If my people...
PRAYER + FASTING

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.”

- Hebrew 12:1

If my people...
PRAYER + FASTING

***“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss
for the sake of Christ.”***

- Phil. 3:7

If my people...
PRAYER + FASTING

Sunday Sermon

1/15/23

Series: Prayer and Fasting

Passage: Matt. 16:24-26

Title: A Time of Denial

Morning Church! Please turn in your bibles to Matthew chapter 16. Today is a great day. Today is a day of celebration and great rejoicing! Today is baptism Sunday. In second service we will have 7 individuals getting baptized and I hope that you will take the time to stick around or bring your Sunday school class to participate in what is a beautiful and powerful step in the life of the follower of Jesus. This morning we will be continuing in our series "If My People," a series focused on various aspects of the spiritual disciplines of Prayer and Fasting.

First, we saw that Prayer and Fasting is a time of preparation in the life of the believer. God has some work to do and he calls us to prepare ourselves so that we are ready to join him in that work when he moves.

Last week we talked about Prayer and Fasting being a time for Repentance. In our preparation God will begin to speak concerning our sins and idolatry. Repentance is doing something with what he reveals to you. Don't just acknowledge it. Return to him. Lay it down. Destroy the idol and attach to him. Because its only in that place that God begins his healing work and moves us into place of true human flourishing.

This week is about denial. Prayer and fasting is a time for denial. So often our lives are oriented around consumption. The feeding of Self. Especially in America, our culture is set up around convenience and immediate gratification. And there is nothing inherently wrong with those things, except that the unscrupled practice of those things tends to feed and exalt the self-life of the individual when Jesus calls his followers to have the willingness and the freedom to lay that part of us down for his sake. The practice of denying ourselves. So let's read this morning Jesus' words from Matthew 16:24-26.

Introduction

Years ago, a man by the name of Clarence Jordan started an interracial Christian community, called Koinonia Farm, down in Georgia. Being in Georgia, he knew it would be hard for him - having an interracial community in the South was tough. And life, his relationships, was not smooth sailing for him. But on one occasion he was getting the red-carpet treatment from a fellow pastor who was showing Jordan how God had blessed him, and how he had blessed his congregation with a brand-new church building. The pastor showed Jordan the rich wooden pews and ornate decorations, all the rooms the building had and their comforts. As they walked outside, the sun was setting, and a spotlight shown on a huge cross atop the steeple. The pastor said to Jordan, "That cross alone cost us \$10,000." A bit troubled Jordan responded, "Sir, you got cheated. There have been times when Christians could get them for free."

As we highlight the issue of denial in a person's life, also highlighted is the fact that believers and unbelievers alike have an uneasy relationship with the Cross. We honor the Cross of Christ,

to be sure, but we find that just as often, it is the cross that gets in our way. Just a little earlier in this chapter we just read in Matthew 16, after all that the disciples had heard and seen from Jesus, there is a miracle moment when Peter's has a moment of clarity. Jesus asks him, "Who do you say I am?" It was as if Peter's fuzzy eyesight suddenly became clear. He responds, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!" The Messiah right here with us all along! How blind could we be? You're God's Son, the one God promised to send to deliver us and bring us peace. "You are the Christ!"

And then the Cross got in the way. It says in the very next verse, verse 21, **"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."**

And then it says that Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, **"Never Lord! This shall never happen to you!"**

And that's when Jesus rebukes Peter. **"Get behind me, Satan!"** And he tells him, **"You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."**

The question is: Why did Peter react so strongly to what Jesus told the disciples? "I'm going to go, and suffer, and die." And the answer is: Because, to Peter, if God's Messiah is rejected, if he suffers, if he dies, what good is he? How could this possibly help? Where's the hope in that? The cross is in the way. And it's in the way of Peter's plans and expectations.

This is where we pick up with the verses we read this morning. In verse 24 it says, **"Then Jesus said to his disciples."** Let's pause right there for a second. These disciples had seen amazing things following Jesus - jaw-dropping miracles, demons flushed out of lives like startled bats out of a cave, and hearing truth from Jesus so wonderful that it was like bread for the hungry heart. They had just seen four thousand men and their families run out of food, and yet were miraculously provided for for three days while they listened to Jesus teach. Who wouldn't want to follow Jesus? Everywhere Jesus went there were crowds. People couldn't get enough of Jesus. So when Jesus begins, **"Whoever wants to be my disciple..."** It's easy for many to wave their hands in the air: "Pick me! Pick me!"

So then what stifles our desire to follow Jesus? The cross gets in the way. **"If anyone would come after me,"** Jesus says. **"He must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."** Don't like that. Got anything else for me Jesus? The NIV translation of verse 24 uses the word disciple twice, but Matthew doesn't actually use the word "disciple" twice in the greek. The word he does use is the verb "erchomai" – "to come." Expounded it has the sense of "arriving for the first time or to return." "To make an appearance before the public." "To be established in" or "to follow someone." So the sense here is that Jesus is saying: **"If anyone wants to be identified with me, (have a connection with me, be established in me) they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."**

Listen: there are many who profess to follow Jesus—who say they believe in him, that try to live by his teaching, who sing his praises—but do not acknowledge the cross in their way. German

theologian, pastor, and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, says in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, **"When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."** Before we can follow Jesus, before we can be his own, he makes it clear we must lay ourselves down and take up our cross.

What does that mean? Let's look at these two concepts this morning: deny and take up. The first thing Jesus says is, "Deny yourself." This word *deny* is used in only two contexts in the Gospels. This is one, and the other is when Peter denied Jesus, like when he swore to the people who were sure he was one of Jesus' disciples: "I don't know this man you're talking about." Peter denied Jesus. So what would it look like for us to deny ourselves? It is as though we look in a mirror and say, "I'm not with him. He's not who I follow, not who I believe in. He is no longer what I stand for."

When it comes to prayer and fasting, it is good for us to, for a season, deny ourselves or abstain from things. Many people give up sugar or coffee, watching tv, or social media. Things that are addictive to us, for a time, we choose to give up so that we aren't held in bondage or addiction to those things. That is a great practice in the life of the follower of Jesus. But that said, let's be clear about this passage. To deny self does not simply mean to deny *things*. It means to give ownership of yourself wholly to Christ. The title "Lord" ascribed to Jesus means "Master, Owner." That is what he is.

I absolutely love this Bonhoeffer quote: **"To deny oneself is to be aware only of Christ and no more of self, to see only him who goes before and no more the road which is too hard for us. Once more, all that self-denial can say is: 'He leads the way, keep close to him.'"** - *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship*

Jesus is telling his disciples that following him will mean giving some things up. Denying our sin, our fleshly desires, our self-centeredness and crucifying it, allowing Christ to put those things to death in our lives.

And that leads us to Christ's second phase "take up their cross."

We often misapply what this means. I once had someone tell me that their asthma was the cross they had to bear! Now, I understand what that person meant, but that is a misuse of this verse. That's not what Christ means. Becky's cancer is not the cross our family has to bear. To take up a cross does not simply mean to carry a burdens or endure a problem. "Take up their cross" means identifying with Christ in His death. **"People carrying crosses were people going to execution."**

As Christ died. In him, I die. That's our cross. He laid down his life, so I lay down my life. He laid down his rights, so I lay down my rights. He was dependent on the Father to raise him to new life, so I am dependent on the Father for my life.

For the disciple, the really hard death, doesn't come from the persecution of another. The really hard death is sentencing and executing our own will, our own importance, our own agenda.

Prayer and fasting moves us to a place of denial. But we need to put our denial into its proper context. It's not just denial for denial's sake as if our act of denial impresses the Lord. "Wow look how much Chris is denying himself. He must be a pastor!" Listen: That's just pride.

Why do we deny ourselves? Remember what Jesus said, ***"If anyone would come after me."*** – Our denial isn't just denial for denial's sake, it's for a greater thing.

Think of a world class musician/athlete. Someone who is at the highest level – who has complete mastery of their craft. It is a beautiful and awe-inspiring thing to see someone pick up an instrument and play it as effortlessly as can be. They know it inside and out. What feels like. How it functions.

How did they get there? Denial. What do I mean? They got there by hours and hours of doing something and not other things.

The athlete may have to go to practice when others are playing video games. They have to keep in shape, eat right, sleep well, and train in order to become a master of their craft.

In pursuit of the greater, if you want the better thing, you have to give up the lesser thing.

Denial. Especially when in the moment your flesh may prefer the lesser thing.

Anna has been playing rec league soccer. For that level, it's two days/week. Practice Thursday, game Saturday. But to get to travel soccer, it requires not 2 days but 5. If she wanted to go to the collegiate level, it would require more. Pro even more. In the pursuit of something greater there is necessarily the denial of something lesser.

But in that the result is freedom. There is a big difference between a guitar master and someone just learning chords. When you are learning, your concentrating, and thinking, and trying not to mess up. But the master just plays. There's joy in it. Playing the instrument becomes easy.

When Christ demands denial, he not asking us to do anything we don't already do. He's just asking us to do it for him. And the more you practice, the more his mastery becomes a reality in you. The enticement of the world, the enticement of the flesh, the enticement of sin and self, the lesser things, doesn't have the same effect or power because you're free. You have mastery over it.

Hebrew 12:1 says, ***"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith."***

In preparation to run a race, you take off your jeans and work boots and put on the shorts because the other things aren't helpful.

Denying ourselves, in our going after Christ, is putting off the things that aren't helpful in following him.

Paul says in his letter to the Philippians, ***“But whatever gain I had I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.”***

And we have a beautiful picture of that today. Christians take communion to remember that the cross is the only way to Christ. And Christians are baptized—thrust into a grave and brought back up alive and clean—to remember that dying is the only way to follow Christ.

For Jesus, the cross was in the way. But scripture tells us that “He, for the joy set before him, endured the cross.” What was the joy set before him? That was you and me. To make a way for our relationship with God to be restored – dead to sin and alive in him. He lost his life for us. Will we find our life in Him? [I invite you to give your heart to Jesus Christ this morning - to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow him.]

[This morning we have 7 individuals who are excited to declare that this is true. I invite them to come up and prepare themselves for baptism.]

I was studying this week and came across a story of elderly woman who had found Jesus and was getting baptized, her name was Ruth. And before she was baptized, she leaned over to the pastor and said to him, "Hold me under the water a little extra long. I want to remember that I have died."

Now I'm not going to do that this morning. But what a beautiful understanding of what baptism is. Baptism doesn't save us, but it is a beautiful picture of what has already taken place when we put our faith in Christ – our old life, our dead sinful heart, put off - buried with Christ in his death. And in its place we are raised to new life in him – with a new heart, and a new spirit alive to God. So in that, I'd like to invite our first candidate up to share their testimony:

1. Sally Taft
2. Maeven Valenti
3. Theresa Smith
4. Theresa Lapietra
5. Gabby Miles
6. Laura-Jean Dyckman

7. Allen Ferrante