

**Online Sermon – 30 August 2020**  
**Matthew 16:21–28**

Are we gaining the world and losing our soul?

In Australia, we have been shaped by a culture that values wealth, success and happiness; which celebrates winning and popularity. Number one is the place to be, and number one is the one to look out for. With enough virtue, determination and effort, we can triumph over any challenge. It is up to us. "God helps those who help themselves" is the text many of us want to think is in the Bible somewhere. To such values, Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan!" Make way for God's ways.

Fortunately, we are not as bad as some countries in this regard. We still have a healthy respect for the underdog and there seems to be a general awareness that what the world calls 'success' does not breed happiness. But it seems that increasingly we are being seduced by a way of life that leaves little space or time for the things of God. We seem to have lost, if we ever had it in the first place, an appreciation of what it means to 'take up our cross'.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew contains Jesus' classic teaching on what it means to follow Christ. Jesus had some very important news to tell the people on that day, and so he calls the disciples and the crowd all together and explains,

*'... that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. (v. 21)*

This was the first of four times that Jesus did this in the Gospel of Matthew. This had to be a very important teaching if it was to be repeated three more times. The first time Jesus said this, the Apostle Peter did not like what he heard, and took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. Peter believed that it didn't have to be that way. If Jesus was the Messiah, surely such suffering was unnecessary. Jesus was powerful and popular, and God was on his side, that was enough to ensure that victory could be achieved without suffering.

Jesus tells Peter in no uncertain terms that Peter is not on God's side on this one, saying:

*"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (v.23)*

Then Jesus makes it even harder for Peter and all the others listening to him. He tells them that not only does Jesus expect to suffer himself, but anyone who follows him must expect to do the same.

*"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me (v.24)*

Back in the first century, when Jesus originally spoke the words, *'take up your cross and follow me'*, people knew what he meant when he said the word "cross." He meant a - Real - Live - Actual - Cross. After all, about 20 years earlier, when Jesus was around ten years old, the Romans had come along and crucified some 2,000 of his fellow Jews in his hometown region of Galilee, because they had dared to oppose the Roman occupation of their land.

There's no doubt that the people that Jesus spoke to knew what a cross was. Jesus was asking them to commit themselves to being his disciples in such a way that they would follow him where ever he led them, no matter what, even if it led to their death on a cross. Jesus goes on to tell them that

*'... those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for [his] sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.' (v.25)*

This is an interesting teaching; it is what we call a 'paradox'. Paradoxes are statements that appear to contradict themselves, but which also contain a message. The Bible contains many paradoxes.

We shouldn't be surprised that it does. Sometimes, they are the best way to communicate spiritual truths. Can you think of any? Here are some of what I think are the most significant ones: strength through weakness; receiving through giving; freedom through service; gaining through losing; Living through dying. As you can see, the Christian way of life contains quite a few paradoxes.

Now today's paradox says that those people who seek power and popularity, who seek the ways of this world, will not gain life. Instead they will lose it. And those who follow Jesus, even if it leads them to their deaths, will gain their life. As Jesus says,

*"For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?" (v.26)*

I also think that this paradox also speaks to an underlying truth about human nature, about the way we are wired to think and behave. Those who seek power and popularity, believing that in doing this they will achieve happiness and the desires of their hearts, discover that this does not happen. They are never really satisfied and still want more. They are travelling on a road that can never take them to the destination they so fervently crave.

In contrast, those people who are prepared to put aside their own worldly needs and wants, and follow where the Spirit is leading, are on a road that leads them to find the desires of their hearts. Can you think of some examples of this?

I can remember more than a few occasions where I have purchased for myself a new man toy, somehow thinking, on a subconscious level, that it would make me happy for a while. It never has! In contrast, there are very many times when I have put aside my own wants & desires, or at least forgotten about them for a moment, and been rewarded with peace, joy & a deep sense of purpose. Sometimes we struggle to know what is best for us. Fortunately, God knows that we are like this and has provided us with a way out through Jesus.

All this leads to an interesting question. What is this cross that we are supposed to bear? What does Jesus mean when he says, "Those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will find it" (v. 25). It would be nice if Jesus promised that if we live as disciples our reward will be good times, good health and a good deal, but we are not promised this, at least not in this life.

I feel that the whole concept of taking up your cross has been cheapened. Too often we claim a chronic illness or nagging circumstance is our cross to bear. And so we say, 'Well, that's just a cross I'll have to bear ....' No, it's not. It's a burden that I **must** bear just as many of you bear the burdens of limited sight or limited mobility, or problems with allergies and asthma, or the burdens of grief and loss, or pain over family problems. But these are not 'crosses'; a cross has to be something we choose.

I think the key is to focus the direction of our lives on Jesus, and not ourselves, and to follow him, where ever that might lead us. Like Peter, we will inevitably make mistakes, so perhaps we can learn from his example. Peter rebuked Jesus, but he hung in there and followed: he followed him to the garden, where he fought; he followed him to the courtyard, where he denied Jesus three times; he followed him to the empty tomb where his eyes were opened; and finally, he followed the risen Jesus all the way to his own death on a cross. Peter, the rock, gradually learned a new way to see, a new way to follow, a new way to be the Peter that God had always known he could be.

The promise is that in the long run, we gain more than we lose. Prestige, success, and even happiness, as the world knows them, belong to those who take them for themselves; but peace, love, joy, and life are gifts from God given to those who are ready to offer themselves. May we continue to follow Jesus, where ever that may lead us.