

Great to be back with you again! Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Matthew 16. I'm not a big fan of reality TV, but there is one show that Kristen and I really got into a few years ago. It's called *Alone*. Contestants are sent by themselves into some remote wilderness to build shelter, find food, and survive as long as they can. They're survival experts, but that doesn't make it easy. They are exposed to the elements, often struggling to get enough to eat, and of course they are alone. And as the days turn into weeks and sometimes into months, the danger, the hunger, and the isolation begin to wear these contestants down. And that's the point. The winner is the one who can stick it out the longest. The record holder made it 100 days in the arctic circle.

Now, you might wonder: Why would anyone agree to go on that show? I've asked the same question! These people face the brutal challenges of the wilderness, some of them require significant medical attention by the time they finish, and they all miss weeks if not months away from their loved ones. They lose a lot. And sure, the winner makes a bunch of money, but even when I watch the winner celebrating at the end of the season, I still wonder, was that worth it? Was what they gained worth the cost? And that's the question we should ask as we read this passage today.

In these verses, Jesus is going to tell us... What we will lose if we follow him. And the cost is very significant. In fact, it's so costly that no one would ever do it if Jesus didn't also explain what we gain if we follow him. But when we see that, when we grasp what Jesus says here, we will see that following him is worth any cost we might ever have to pay.

So, I have two people in mind this morning. First, anyone here who is considering following Jesus, but has not yet decided. If that's you, I hope this will be clarifying to you. Jesus never promised that following him would be easy. But I'm praying you will see why it is absolutely worth it. And second, I have in mind all of us who are following Jesus, but we're feeling the challenge, the pressure, of the Christian life. I hope that this will be encouraging to you and will help you see that while it is difficult, you must keep going! Because what you gain as you follow Christ far outweighs whatever you might lose. So, let's jump in.

I'll frame our time under these two headings:

1. What you lose when you follow Jesus
2. What you gain when you follow Jesus

Let's start with the cost...

1. What you lose when you follow Jesus

Look at Matthew 16, verse 21; *From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised* (Matthew 16:21).

In the previous passage, Jesus asked his disciples, "*Who do you say that I am?*" And Peter responded, "*You are the Christ. The Son of the living God.*" This was an amazing declaration. Peter has recognized that Jesus is the Christ—the Messiah—the savior of God's people. But also, that Jesus is the Son of the living God. That he is no mere human, but God himself in human flesh. And Jesus responds, "*Peter, you're blessed! The Father has opened your eyes to the truth.*"

But then, in Matthew 16:20 we read that *Jesus strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ*. Why in the world would Jesus do that? Because, for all that Peter and the disciples had learned about Jesus, they still did not know the full truth. Particularly, they did not know that it was necessary for him to suffer and die. So, in verse 21, *Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer, and be killed, and on the third day be raised*.

He must. Matthew is stressing the necessity of Jesus's suffering. He had to die. Why? Two reasons. First, it was necessary for Jesus to suffer and die, because the Scriptures foretold it. Throughout this whole Gospel, Matthew wants us to see how every promise of God in the Old Testament finds its fulfillment in Jesus, including the promises about the suffering of the Messiah. For example, in Psalm 22 we read about God's anointed king, crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Words Jesus cried out upon the cross.

And later in Psalm 22, the king says, *A company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet—I can count all my bones—they stare and gloat over me; they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots* (Psalm 22:16-18). Or there's the description of God's servant in Isaiah 53. The one who has borne our griefs and carries our sorrows, who was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. There are more examples, but one reason Jesus had to suffer and die was because the Scriptures foretold it.

But also, Jesus had to die because our salvation required it. Here's Isaiah 53:6: *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all* (Isaiah 53:6). At the very beginning of Matthew, an angel appeared to Joseph and told him that Mary would have a son, and that they should call his name Jesus, *for he will save his people from their sins*. This is why he came. And there is only one way Jesus could have saved us from our sins: he had to stand in our place and take the penalty we deserved to face. Because of our sin—our rebellion against God—we deserve to face the wrath of God. But Jesus stepped in, and bore the wrath upon the cross, so that we could be set free. If he had not died, we could not live. And here in Matthew 16, Jesus begins to show his disciples that this must take place. But they were not ready for this.

The expectation in the 1st century was that the Messiah would come to save God's people from their enemies, taking his rightful place as Israel's king, and casting off the shackles of Rome and every other oppressive earthly power. In other words, the Messiah was coming to conquer! Not to be killed! This explains what happens next, in verse 22: *And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you"* (Matthew 16:22).

Peter is shocked. And it seems that Peter is angry with Jesus for even suggesting such a thing. The word "rebuke" is a strong word. It's the word Matthew uses to describe the way Jesus rebuked the raging sea and demonic powers. Peter is giving Jesus a piece of his mind. "No way, Lord! The Christ, the Son of the living God, doesn't die!"

Now, I have no question that Peter says this because he loves Jesus, and he doesn't want to see him suffer. But Peter also says this because he has a deeply mistaken notion of what victory looks like for Jesus. Jesus did not come to dominate the world by ascending to the heights of political power. Jesus came to save the world from sin by laying down his life. In fact, telling Jesus that he should take the throne through political domination is the exact same Satanic temptation Jesus faced back in Matthew 4. Do you remember that moment?

Matthew 4:8-9 says, *The devil took [Jesus] to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."* (Matthew 4:8-9)

Satan offered Jesus a path to glory without suffering. And now Peter is demanding that Jesus take it. Which is why Jesus responds so strongly in verse 23: *But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man"* (Matthew 16:23).

Now, let's be clear: Peter is not Satan. And it's not as if Satan had possessed him in this moment. But again, though he meant well, though he surely believed he was looking out for Jesus when he said what he did, he is unwittingly telling Jesus to abandon his mission, to ascend to the throne without first descending into death. But that is a human way of thinking, an earthly way of thinking. Avoid suffering! Get glory! But it is not God's way. Not for his Son, who he sent into this world to die that we might live. And it is not the way Jesus calls his followers to take either. Look at verse 24: *Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"* (Matthew 16:24).

Here it is. Here is what you lose when you follow Jesus: everything.

If you want to follow him, if you want to be his disciple, you must let everything go. You must deny yourself, laying down your perceived rights and all you think you deserve. You've got to open your hands and say, "Lord, whatever it costs, whatever needs to be taken away, take it." You need to realize that following Jesus may mean losing status, or money, or relationships, or even your life. After all, we often think of taking up our cross as a Christian way of saying, "Do hard things." And that's true. Taking up our cross may mean doing any number of difficult things for the sake of Jesus. But it also might mean taking up a cross.

That's what it meant for Peter. Tradition has it that Peter was crucified somewhere around 65 AD. Many of the disciples were killed for their allegiance to Jesus, and Christian martyrdom has continued to this day. This is not a game, this is not a reality show with a tap out option, this is life and death. This is what Jesus is saying: If you follow me, you must be ready to lose everything. Now, why would anyone agree to that? Because of...

2. What you gain when you follow Jesus

Look at verse 25. Jesus says, *For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it* (Matthew 16:25).

There are two statements here. First, whoever would save his life will lose it. The word "save" refers to preservation and protection. So, Jesus is saying, "If your goal is to preserve and protect your life, you won't follow me." Because the only way to follow Jesus is to take up your cross and lay your life down. And that might mean laying down your physical life. But it also may mean laying down any other aspect of your life.

For example, if your ultimate goal is to preserve and protect your reputation, you won't follow Jesus, especially in a post-Christian culture where Jesus's teachings and ethics are increasingly viewed with suspicion and negativity. You must lay your reputation down.

Or, if your ultimate goal is to preserve and protect your autonomy, you won't follow Jesus. Because Jesus demands we submit to his Lordship and let go of our desire to rule ourselves. You must lay your autonomy down.

Or, if your ultimate goal is to preserve and protect your money, enjoying as much comfort as possible, you won't follow Jesus. Because he calls us to sacrificial generosity and service. You must lay your money down.

We could give many other examples, but you get the point. If your ultimate goal is to preserve and protect your life here and now, you won't follow Jesus. But here's the sad irony. In your effort to save your life, you'll end up losing it. How so? Well, consider Jesus's questions in verse 26: He asks, *For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?* (Matthew 16:26).

Jesus says, "Imagine you gain the whole world. All the money, all the power, all the prestige, all the respect, all the recognition, all the pleasure..." But imagine in doing so, that you lost your soul? Now, the word Jesus uses for "soul" in this verse is the same word translated "life" in the previous verse. So, in one sense, Jesus is asking, what do you really profit if you gain the world now, knowing that in the end you will lose your life? He's talking about the reality of death.

Author Bobby Jamieson writes, "Modernity's defining aspiration is that every individual should come to possess an ever-increasing share of the world... [But] death blocks and mocks that aim." In other words, if your goal is to gain this world, you will fail. Because you will die. And whatever you gain now will be lost. But Jesus is talking about more than simply losing this life, he's talking about forfeiting the life to come. That's why "soul" is a good translation. When he says, "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his *soul*..." he is pushing us to think of our lives beyond the span of years we have here and now.' He wants us to consider the life that will extend beyond the grave for unending ages to come. And he's asking, "What do you really gain, if you have a good 80, 90, even 100 years of life now, but lose your life forever after that?"

Look at verse 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* (Matthew 16:27). One day soon, and it will come far sooner than we often think, Jesus will come again. And when he does, with the whole host of heaven and the glory of the Father shining around him, he will seal everyone's everlasting destiny. And those who tried to save their lives and gain the world apart from Christ will find that they have forfeited their souls. They will lose everything. Forever. But that doesn't need to be your story! There's an alternative.

Look back at verse 25: *For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it* (Matthew 16:25). There is a way to face death! There is a way to find life! There is a way to save your soul! And yes, it's costly! You must lay everything down at Jesus's feet, letting go of your desire for control, willing to lose it all for his sake. But it's absolutely worth it! Because following Jesus is the way to everlasting life.

Remember in verses 17-19, Jesus began to show his disciples that he would suffer and die. But that's not all he said. He also told them that he would rise! And he promises the same thing to all who trust in him. When you know that you're destined for resurrection in the future, you can find hope in the present... no matter what you're up against.

Some of you will know the name Ben Sasse. Ben was a Senator in Nebraska, and more recently the President of the University of Florida. He's 54 years old, and just before Christmas, he released a public announcement that he has stage 4 pancreatic cancer. How do you face something like that? Here's a man who had gained a lot in this world. Influence, power, prestige, a wife and three kids. And death is going to take it all away. Well, listen to what he wrote in that announcement:

"Advanced pancreatic is nasty stuff; it's a death sentence. But I already had a death sentence before last week too—we all do." Sasse understands the reality of death. But still, he has hope. Which he says is, "Not an abstract hope in a fanciful human goodness; not hope in vague hallmark-sappy spirituality; not a bootstrapped hope in our own strength... Nope [that's] insufficient. It's not the kinda thing that holds you up when you tell your daughters you're not going to walk them down the aisle. Nor telling your mom and pops they're gonna bury their son. A well-lived life demands more reality—stiffer stuff. That's why [as Christians] even while still walking in the darkness, we shout our hope... hope in a real Deliverer, a rescuing God..." Then he adds... "Remembering... what's to come doesn't dull the pain of current sufferings. But it does put it in eternity's perspective."

That's what Jesus is offering us here: Eternity's perspective. Remember verse 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* (Matthew 16:27). If you will give your life over to Christ, though following him may be very costly, you will not face ruin on that day. You will find reward. Jesus will look upon you, and say to you, *"Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your master."* And you will see that whatever affliction you faced in this world, pales in comparison to the eternal weight of glory of the world to come.

So, yes, if you follow Jesus, you might lose everything... but only temporarily.
Because if you follow Jesus, you will gain everything... for all eternity.

Conclusion

Now, I hope all of this has encouraged you. But I know there may still be someone here who says, "Yes, I've heard all this before... and it still sounds like wishful thinking to me. After all, how can I put my hope in someone I cannot see. Where's the evidence?"

Well, friend, we are called to walk by faith and not by sight. And yet, it's not as if our faith is without evidence. For example, look at the last verse of our passage today. Verse 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*" (Matthew 16:28).

What is Jesus referring to? He hasn't come back yet. What did he mean when he said this to his disciples? Well, in the very next passage, some of the disciples (Peter, James, and John) are going to get a glimpse of the glory of Christ! Then, before long, eleven of the twelve disciples would witness the resurrection of Christ and his ascension to the Father's right hand. After this, they would see his kingdom spread through Jerusalem, into Judea, and to the ends of the earth. And one piece of the evidence we have is the eye-witness testimony they left. Like the one we are reading here in the book of Matthew.

And as John says at the end of his Gospel, *"These are written so that you may believe that*

Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ. You've heard his Word today. Believe in him. And remember, whatever you lose for him, you will gain infinitely more.