



Following Jesus ... dying and living

Matthew 16:21-28

Pastor Jim Rademaker

What does it mean to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus? It's not what Peter thought. It's not what we think. Peter thought it meant winning. Being a winner. Jesus said it meant losing. Losing our lives.

You've heard about "living and dying". That's the natural order of things. That's how you say it because that's how it goes. You live, then you die. But in the Kingdom of God, things are upside down ... or right side up ... depending on how you look at it. In the kingdom of God, first, you die. Then you live. If you don't first die, you can never really live. Not the way it was in the Garden, before sin entered the world. The way it was meant to be.

"He's so full of himself!" "She's so full of herself!" Ever heard that phrase? Who of us isn't full of himself? Another way to ask the same thing is to ask, "Who here doesn't have a sinful nature?", for to have a sinful nature is to be full of yourself.

Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

Peter didn't get that. And neither do we. He, like us, had in mind the things of man. How things naturally work in our world; in the world of man. Messiah's don't die. They live. They win. They lead others to life; to winning. But how can anyone lead someone else to live when they themselves are dead?

"Great crowds followed him." What an opportunity! As Jesus looked over the great crowds following him, you would have thought he would have enticed them into discipleship. You would have thought he would have made it easy; that he would have put the bar of discipleship very low. You would have thought he would have said, "It's easy being a disciple. Love your wife. Love your kids. Show up to work on time. Be nice to the neighbor next door. Go to synagogue. It's easy to be my disciple."

How often do we in the church do that? Stress the pleasures and benefits of belonging to a particular congregation? "We have a great schedule that fits everyone's needs. We have an awesome worship band ... or choir. Youth programs for all ages. We have a great senior's program with so many activities that a senior has an activity planned once or twice a week. Why, you'll love it!" Peter, like everyone else, wanted a crossless Christ. A cross-less church. The devil couldn't be happier. (Cwirla)

"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Sa'eed's story comes from a book lent to me by Jane Harmon. It was written by her neighbor's grandfather. It's a story of following Jesus; of dying and living. It sounds like something that could have come straight out of our modern blogosphere.

Here is a medical St. Paul. Kurd of the Kurds, Moslem Pharisee of the Pharisees, this brilliant, powerful young mountaineer of Kurdistan becomes a follower of Jesus at the price of scourging and branding and at the peril of this life. ... The story of Doctor Sa'eed, Khan, of Persian is one of the most thrilling and dramatic episodes in the history of modern missions. In him the miracle of a soul converted from Islam to Christianity is plainly demonstrated. He was the first fruit of the evangelistic effort among the Kurdish race in Persia, and one of those worth-while efforts which has paid a thousand fold in dividends to the cause of Christ in Iran.

... This is the miracle God is performing daily in the lands of darkness through the gospel of his son. ... To those Christians who, nowadays, have made it a custom to criticize missions on the flimsy alibi of impossibility, and even impropriety of trying to convert Moslems, these pages are prayerfully dedicated.

... From the moment that he had finished his first communion service new vistas of Christian discipleship were opened before his eyes. He was strengthened in soul and body. He came to

the conclusion that he must stop his double life at once. The more he thought of the compromises he had been making just to get along, the more he blamed himself for being a coward and a hypocrite. "No man can serve two masters." "Here I am, trying to serve two masters. If sinless Jesus were willing to suffer and be crucified for me, why should I shrink from suffering for the sake of the truth which I have accepted with my whole heart?"

Again one by one the phrases of the sermon on the Mount stood with flaming letters before his eyes: "Ye are the salt of the earth." "Ye are the light of the world." "A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid." "Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel." "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."

That very afternoon was to be the end. His mind was made up to quit the mosque, the call to prayer, to sever all his connections with the religion of his forefathers, and to break the news to the family – let the great sheik and the whole city of Senneh know that Mullah Sa'eed had renounced his prophet and his religion and become a reengage.

Sa'eed handed a letter to his brother telling him of his decision.

In the one only God's name.

My Brother: You know that the dangers to my life grow greater every day. To remain in my paternal home is impossible. I am a Christian, and confess it openly to you. If you will murder your brother, my life is in your hand. I cannot escape from you – yet death is also a gain to me. If you spare my life I shall be very thankful, and will all my life respect you, and serve you as much as I can. My wish is to flee from here so that you may get more peace.

Your brother,

SA'EED.

He then boldly but reverently told his uncles and the others the secret of his failure to perform his solemn service: "I do not believe any longer in our prophet. By long study and comparison of the Holy books I have read that 'Easau' – Jesus, the Son of God – is the only 'Schaffi,' redeemer of men. I am a Christian and hope that you and all Moslems one day will see the light and know the truth as God has revealed it to me."

A sudden explosion of a bomb could not have terrified the family as these words did. "Kifr! Kifr! Blasphemy!" they all shouted frantically. Women pulled their hair, beat their breasts, and shouted "Kifr! Kifr!" His brother Kaka had his hand already on the hilt of his dagger, which he carried constantly in his belt. He was gazing at Sa'eed with blood in his eyes. A fanatic impulse urged him to stab Sa'eed in the heart.

(The Beloved Physician of Teheran – pg. 7, 9, 54-56 Isaac Melek Yonan)

"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

"Take up His cross" What does that mean? The first Christians didn't have to wonder at all what Jesus meant. They carried real crosses to places of crucifixion. They were kicked out of synagogues, disowned by families, excluded from participating in commerce and dragged into courts for following Christ.

Of the remaining eleven apostles, after Judas committed suicide, ten gave their lives in martyrdom. Only John lived into old age, dying (tradition says) in his 90's. But even he suffered intense persecution for his testimony. The Apostle Paul was beheaded in Rome. And Fox's book of martyrs gives us page after page of men and women, teens and children who laid down their lives as disciples of Christ. We read today of thousands of disciples in Muslim countries especially, men and women along with their families who live in peril for their very lives every day simply for following Christ.

"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Dying to self. We don't naturally want to go down that road, do we? It's not part of our DNA. Far more natural is self-indulgence, self-absorption, self-satisfaction, self-glorification. Being full of ourselves.

This passage in Matthew is a beginning of Jesus' decisive turn toward Jerusalem, where the things of God await. Mercy and love and service. Sacrifice. Death. Resurrection. Until now it's been kind of fun to follow Jesus. Watching Him kick demons around. Heal sick people. Run rings around the Pharisees and the other religious types. Parables. Feeding thousands with a handful of loaves and a few fish. Walking on water. Stilling storms. Who wouldn't want to follow Jesus? Crowds flocked to Him. You would have too. So would I. Guaranteed to draw a crowd on Sunday morning. Everyone loves a winner. (Cwirla)

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. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." 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."

The things of man are what? Attention for self. Ease for self. Comfort for self. Everything ... for self. Glory for self. With *man*, it's all about *self*. Self becomes what's most important. The things of man put self on top. Self as god; even in the church. The *stated* focus may be Christ, but the *real* focus is often on *us* and *our* glory. The things of *man*. The things of the devil.

"If anyone would follow after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." The cross is the way of Jesus the Christ and of all who would follow Him. The cross is the narrow door that many seek, but few find. And our sinful selves want nothing to do with it.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ had come to the city of Corinth by the apostle Paul. It had touched the hearts of many, with repentance and faith, and many were changed. But like you and me, they still had a long, long way to go. The Corinthian church was filled with division. Paul exposes the root cause for this division. *Pride and boasting*. They were all full of themselves. (Tim Keller)

The reason we can't get along. The reason there's little peace in the world. The reason we can't live at peace with one another. We're too full of ourselves.

Remember Jesus is in the upper room, with those closest to Him, His disciples, His closest followers. He's about to go to the cross for them and for the world, and they're thinking about what? "*... a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest.*" (Luke 22:24) The biggest winner! The things of man, not the things of God.

We confess with Peter that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Yet, when we find out what that means for our life, how often do we think as Peter and the others thought? When pain and suffering come into your life. "*No, Lord.*" When faithfulness to God's Word means giving up what you want and think you need. "*No, Lord.*" When we're told to bless those who persecute us ... to be patient in tribulation ... to feed and give drink to your enemy. "*No, Lord.*" When being a Christian means bearing the cross. "*No, Lord. I'd really rather not, Lord.*" Satan-talk. (Douthwaite)

The call to "follow", isn't a call to be *like* Jesus. Good luck with that one! The call to follow isn't to go along with a program. It's not a call to a cause, or to an organization. It's a personal call. A call to trust a person, the Son of God, Jesus Christ – with our lives. To trust the One who gave His life for us.

"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Said another way, "*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.*" (John 12:23-26)

As followers of Jesus, how do we prepare for the persecution we face in our lives? In our schools? In our places of work? In our communities? How do we prepare for the persecution that's increasingly coming to our nation? By considering Jesus call, and dying *now*. So that when the persecution comes, we will not shrink back and deny our Lord. *For whoever would save his life* [through denying

Jesus] will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?

The evil forces of this world can make our lives miserable. They can cause great pain. They can even kill us. Never-the-less, they can do nothing about our eternal destination. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, "that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39) On the other hand, that internal battle - the battle between the new and old nature can rob us of eternity.

When Jesus talks about self-denial, or dying to self, He's not saying that we must make ourselves miserable or give up any of the enjoyable things of life. Instead, He's telling us **to deny that old sinful nature** that is centered on self. That's full of self. Filled up with the things of man, instead of the things of God.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Who is not interested in saving their lives, in making them worthwhile, full and rich, worth living? ONE attitude is to save your life now: hoard it, clutch it, cling to it, grasp it, try to get hold of it for yourself, take care of yourself, trust yourself, see that in every situation your first and major concern is, What's in it for me?

The OTHER attitude is lose it: fling it away, disregard what advantage there may be for you in a situation, and move out in dependence upon God, careless of what may happen to you. Like Abraham, trusting God, going out into a land he knew not where, on a march without a map, apparently careless of what would happen to him. But trusting God and His Word.

If you save your life, if you cling to it, hoard it, get all you can for yourself, then, Jesus says, you will lose it. But lose your life for My sake and the gospel's, says Jesus, lose your life by means of giving yourself away in the cause of Christ, giving up your right to yourself, taking up your cross and following Me, and you will save it. Jesus did not come to call us to ultimate barrenness, weakness, darkness, and death. He called us to life, to richness, to enjoyment, to fulfillment. But He has told us that the way there means **death**. Discipleship ends in life, not in death. It ends in fulfillment and satisfaction. But the only way that we can find it is by means of a cross. (Stedman)

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. 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."

You're going to one day die. You know why? Because you're a sinner. But to die with Christ, means to die a death that ends in resurrection and life. And it's a death and resurrection that is already taking place in you, as you die and rise with Christ in REPENTANCE. As you die to your old way of life, being full of yourself, your old way of thinking, and rise to live a new life, a "Yes, Lord" life. (Douthwaite) Living right-side-up, in an upside-down world. The way of God, not of man. RESTORED to the way it was. The way it was meant to be (Adam & Eve - who were alive in God; they were not the center of their universe).

Following Jesus is dying and living in daily repentance. As Martin Luther is believed to have said, "I tried to drown the old Adam in the waters of baptism, but I discovered the miserable wretch can swim." He keeps popping up.

Daily confessing our sin. *Daily* turning to the cross. Daily dying; daily living. Living in Christ. In His forgiveness. Daily trusting Him, instead of ourselves. The way of God, instead of the way of man.

What does it mean to follow Jesus, to believe in Him, to trust Him, to be a Christian, discipleship? Letting go of our lives. Giving up control. It's hard to give up control, isn't it? One of the hardest thing in all of life. Faith language is the language of *letting go*. Jesus' call for you to follow Him is not so much a command (of the Law), as it is a gospel entreaty. A Good News invitation. An invitation to trust and believe in Him. It's the language of letting go, and receiving from Him.

"Let go. Die to yourself. Give up control. Stop trying to save your life. If you keep wanting to hold to who you are and what your life is, or what you hope it will be, you'll never really know real life in Christ. Let it all go, die to your wants, to your desires, to yourself, to being full of yourself, lose your life for My sake, and you'll find life. Real life. Life in Christ. Life that can never be lost. Lose your life, and you'll find it. Trust Me."

Sa'eed's story is one of following Jesus. Of dying and living. In one way or another, his story is every Christian's story. The *particulars* may vary, but the *heart* of the story is the same. What does it mean to be a Christian? To follow Jesus? *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."*

"When Christ [calls] bids a man," Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "he bids him come and die." Ah, but then he lives! Really, truly lives. He can't be stopped. There isn't anything you can do to him.

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

... All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better (country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Hebrews 11:8-16)