

Matthew 16:21-26 *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.* ²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” ²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” ²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”

Embrace the dear cross!

1. Jesus’ cross
Our cross

You’ve heard of Operation Desert Storm, the code name for the US invasion of Iraq back in 1991. But do you know anything about Operation Moolah? It was a genuine military operation in the early 1950’s aimed at enticing North Korean pilots to defect during the Korean War. It was called Operation Moolah because the first pilot to defect with his Soviet-built MiG-15 fighter plane would be offered \$100,000 – a lot of money in those days.

We have a mission. Paul described it in our second lesson today. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.” (Romans 12:1) In view of God’s mercy, that is, understanding justification by grace through faith as Paul explained in the previous chapters, and in view of God’s love that makes all things work for our good and from which nothing can separate us – in view of all that, our mission is to offer ourselves as living sacrifices. In our gospel lesson today, Jesus puts that mission in terms of the cross. Our mission is to embrace the cross.

In the paragraph before our text, Jesus discussed with his disciples what people were saying about him. Then Peter gave this beautiful confession: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:16) After feeding 5000, walking on water, calming the storm and healing hundreds, the disciples understood who Jesus was. Jesus is God. He is the fulfillment of all prophecy. He is the promised. Messiah. They needed to understand who Jesus is before they could begin to grasp his mission.

His mission is this: *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.* His disciples understood who he is. What they didn’t understand is that Jesus’ mission is the cross, Jesus’ mission is the cross because he has seen our failures to show love for God. He has seen us spend our time on worthless things, entertainment that exploits God’s gifts of sex and marriage, social media rants that destroy reputations. He has watched our lives swing out of balance, neglecting family for work and neglecting work for recreation. He has watched us trade in the eternally valuable for that which is temporary, Bible study for breakfast, Sunday School for soccer, family devotions for TV. For these and many more, Jesus’ mission was the cross.

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” ²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” Jesus called Peter a “stumbling block.” The term refers to a stick in a trap to which bait has been attached. An animal, attempting to take the bait, would spring the trap and be captured or killed. In the same way, Peter was setting a trap for Jesus. If Jesus would have stepped into it, he would have been diverted from his mission. Peter didn’t want Jesus to suffering and die – a noble thought but a misguided one. Peter wanted Jesus to be a glorious king whom he might serve in an important capacity. Peter was seeing things purely from a human perspective.

No wonder Jesus addressed Peter as Satan. No wonder Jesus broke through this obstacle with such force. Peter was doing what the devil did in the wilderness, offering kingdoms without the cross. Peter had become a tool of the devil, suggesting there might be an easier way for Jesus to redeem the world. But there is no other way than the cross.

Jesus once said, “You are worth more than many sparrows.” (Matthew 10:31) If you ever question that, look at what God was willing to spend for you! He was willing to pay with his Son’s life the price for you to experience life without difficult decisions or disappointments, a life without suffering, selfishness or loss. Life as God intended it to be. That is the life that God gives to every Christian through faith – the life of heaven. Through that relationship of faith in Jesus, he guarantees you forgiveness of sins and eternal blessings.

Jesus wants us to find comfort in his cross. He wants us to embrace his cross as a symbol of our salvation. For it was on the cross that our dear Savior declared, “It is finished.” Our sins are forgiven through his suffering and death alone.

Salvation is secure for each and every one of us. So, the cross of Christ is something to boast about. The cross is your forgiveness.

This impacts the way we live our lives. It gives us a mission to live our lives as living sacrifices. Just as we embrace Jesus' cross. Let us also embrace our cross.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. St. Augustine didn't live a very moral life when he was growing up. His mother was a Christian and she prayed for him every day. It wasn't until later in life that he was brought to faith in Jesus and became a leader of the church. One day shortly after his conversion, as he walked down the street, a former mistress walked by him. Augustine ignored her and kept walking which surprised the young lady. She turned and said, "Augustine, it is I" But Augustine kept walking and called back to her, "Yes, but it is not I." (Gospel Illustration, CPH, p. 26)

C.S. Lewis said, "Christ says, 'Give me all. I don't want so much of your money and so much of your work – I want you. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self . . . I will give you a new self instead. In fact I will give you myself my own will shall become yours.'" (C. S. Lewis, Beyond Personality, p. 40)

Jesus' cross was made out of wood but what does your cross look like? Christians often list things like migraines, loneliness, a learning disability, unemployment, family problems, a bad back... While these are challenges that God allows into our lives, they are not the cross Jesus speaks about here. Look carefully again at his words. How does Jesus say a Christian takes up his cross? By denying himself and following him (Matthew 16:24). Here's what that looks like. When little sister wants to play Polly Pockets but you want to color, you deny yourself, that is, you say "no" to what YOU want to do and say "yes" to what your little sister wants. In this way you follow Jesus because, like him, you are putting others first and understand that your goal in life is to serve, not to be served.

Here's another example. When your spouse wants to eat Italian but you would prefer Chinese, you deny yourself when you defer to your spouse's choice, not because you have to but because you are delighted that God has given you such an easy way to show love to your spouse! You also deny yourself and carry the cross when you stop your friends at school from going on to say how much they like you better than that other kid. Sure, you would love to hear them go on and on but that kind of talk simply stokes your sinful pride. That's not denying yourself and following Jesus. (Daniel Habben)

Oh, but this is so hard to do! That's why Jesus compares it to carrying a cross and not to lounging on a couch! Denying ourselves is hard because by nature every breath we take is in the hope of accomplishing our will. Take babies for example. They don't learn how to talk so they can complement Mom on how she looks. They learn how to talk so they can communicate more efficiently their needs and get what they want whether food, companionship, or even just a clean diaper (Daniel Deutschlander).

Jesus, encourages us not only to endure the cross, but take it up, embrace the dear cross as a beautiful gift from God. The cross! That's our divine mission. Deny your desire to accumulate more and more stuff and ignore your longing to get your way. Instead lose yourself in Jesus. That's not as scary as it sounds. You do it all the time when you board an airplane. You "lose yourself" in the belly of that plane when you entrust its controls to the trained pilot. Sure, it might be fun to fly that plane yourself but it would also be a sure way to ruin your life and the lives of others. Likewise, if you want to save your life, then lose it in Jesus. Entrust your life to him whose every word, every thought, and every deed was never for his comfort and convenience but for the benefit of others...and still is. That's why we can deny ourselves and say "no" to our wants and desires. Jesus knows what we need and he will provide it. Spend your time and energy serving him now as you put others first. Carrying the cross is not optional. If we refuse our cross, we're also despising his cross as we'd be claiming that Jesus' suffering and death makes no difference to us.

In view of God's mercy who has freely given us salvation in the cross of Jesus, let's offer ourselves as living sacrifices. That's our mission. That's our cross. Embrace the dear cross!