

# *Jesus Builds His Church*

## *Part 5 – “Whatever, Lord!”*

### **Matthew 16:21-28**

**Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ November 12, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church**



<sup>21</sup> From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples 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. <sup>22</sup> And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” <sup>23</sup> But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. <sup>26</sup> 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?

<sup>27</sup> “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. <sup>28</sup> Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” (Matthew 16:21-28, NRSV)



“Who do you say that I am?” That’s the question Jesus asked his disciples that launched this teaching we have been exploring the past few weeks. Do you remember Peter’s answer? He aced the test. “**You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.**” Peter’s answer is spot on, so much so that Jesus affirms that this answer came straight from heaven.

But now Jesus wants Peter to show his work. Do you remember in math class how it wasn’t always enough to give the right answer on a test? You had to show your work, demonstrate how it was that you got to that answer. Part of this was to make sure you weren’t getting the answer off your neighbor’s test. Peter gives the correct answer to Jesus’ question about his identity, but when he’s asked to show his work, he comes up short.

It all comes down to the definition of “Messiah”. Peter is correct, Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One sent from God to save his people and establish peace and prosperity. But Peter’s idea of Messiah, and Jesus’ idea of Messiah, are worlds apart. All this become clear in verse 21 when Jesus describes just what sort of Messiah he actually is: “**From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples 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.**” Jesus is indeed the Messiah, but he is a Messiah that saves through suffering, saves through dying, saves through resurrection.

Peter should have known this. Every faithful Jew in Jesus’ day should have known this. Hundreds of years earlier the prophet Isaiah foretold the nature and work of the Messiah this way:

**Surely he has borne our infirmities  
and carried our diseases,  
yet we accounted him stricken,  
struck down by God, and afflicted.  
But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us  
whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed.  
All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have all turned to our own way,  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.<sup>1</sup>**

A Messiah who bears infirmities and carries diseases? A Messiah who is punished by God? A Messiah who is torn apart because of our sin? A Messiah who is disgraced by heaven? This is not at all what Peter had in mind when he gave his answer, not in the slightest. So Peter asks to speak with Jesus in private. He thinks he’s being helpful, not wanting to embarrass Jesus in front of the others. Jesus has been working hard. He’s worn out. He’s not thinking straight. He’s lost perspective. He just needs a little friendly correction to get him back on track. Peter is like that friend who tries to encourage you when he thinks you’re being a little too hard on yourself.<sup>2</sup> “**God forbid it, Lord!**”, he

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 53:4-6. This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> I’m indebted here to Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 2, (Eerdmans, 1990), 142.

says to Jesus. In some translations it reads, “**Never, Lord! This must never happen to you.**”

You see, Peter, like most Jews of his day, were waiting for a Messiah who would come and ascend to the earthly throne of his father, King David. From that place of political and military power, he would then subdue the world, beginning with Rome, and rule on God’s behalf from Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> Nowhere in this messianic paradigm is there any place for suffering, shame and death.

And so let’s be clear about what Peter is doing here. He is listening to Jesus’ words, but because Jesus’ words don’t fit his narrative, he is twisting them to make them do so. “What you’re saying, Jesus, can’t be right because that’s not the way I see it. Jesus, what you really mean to say is...” And before you start thinking about all the ways that other people do the same thing with God’s Word, it’s probably good to ask yourself how you do this with God’s Word. For example, Jesus has hard teachings on divine judgment, on God’s wrath, on hell. Do we take Jesus at his word in regard to these things, or do we try to soften or reinterpret his words to make them more palatable to the modern ear? What about the high standards of his sexual ethic, or his hard teachings on divorce? What about when he makes clear that the pursuit of material wealth is an empty pursuit, or that success in this world comes when you aim for the last place rather than the first place? Are we people who submit fully to the teachings of God’s Word, or are there also instances where we also want to pull Jesus aside and offer some helpful correction?

In terms of messiahship, there are two competing understandings here which are on a collision course. As commentator Dale Bruner puts it, “One way believes *success* is the seal of the divine, and one way believes *suffering* is.”<sup>4</sup> These competing understandings are still at odds in our day. I can’t help but think of the African church in our day, which is exploding with growth. But it’s not without its problems. It’s greatest problem is likely the prominence of what’s called the prosperity gospel, which promotes the idea that what God wants most for you is for you to be physically healthy and materially prosperous – health and wealth. As Zambian pastor, Conrad Mbewe (**Em-Ba-We**), recently wrote in an article for *The Gospel Coalition*,

You hardly ever hear sermons [in Africa] about sin and repentance. So salvation has now become deliverance from sickness and poverty. It is temporal rather than eternal. Prosperity theology is

like the Arabian camel that gave the impression it simply wanted a little space in the tent, but now the whole of it is inside and the true gospel is outside.<sup>5</sup>

This is not just an African problem by the way. The camel has wedged itself inside the tent of the American church as well. Just pay attention in the year to come as we go through another presidential election cycle to the number of professing Christians on both sides of the aisle who will speak about how critical it is that we get “our candidate” elected or else the movement of the Kingdom of God will be severely threatened. That’s not the exact language you’ll hear used, but it’s the crux of the idea. The way to advance God’s Kingdom is through power and success, which is in essence the way Peter saw things. On a more personal level, what God wants of my life, for me and those around me I love, is to find comfort, health and acceptance in life. I mean, how many self-professed American Christians do you know who really embrace the way of Christ as a way of suffering, exclusion and death?

Here’s some good news in all this. A few weeks ago we were reminded that the truth, God’s truth, is a gift to us which is revealed by God’s grace. Apparently, such revelation is progressive. In other words, we don’t get it all at once. In an instant, Peter goes from being the teacher’s star pupil with the right answer, to the one who is going to be made an example of for the benefit of the rest of the class. Jesus is about to rebuke Peter in the harshest possible way by declaring that the ideas he is embracing are of the devil. But Jesus – and here’s my point – will not exclude Peter. Peter is a work in progress, as are we all works in progress. Jesus’ ways are so unlike our ways that he knows it always takes a while for them to sink in.

Still, his rebuke is stern. Jesus is patient, but he will not compromise. So he turns on his heel and says to Peter, “**Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.**” Yikes! You think after this the disciples thought twice about pulling Jesus aside to offer some constructive criticism? I certainly would.

It’s helpful to remember that Peter is a *disciple* of Jesus. As we have talked about many times here at Faith, a disciple is not just a student learning information. In the Jewish understanding, the goal of the disciple was not only to know what the rabbi knew, but to *become like the rabbi*. That’s why in verse 24, when Jesus spells out discipleship, he begins by saying, “**If any wish to come after me...**” He doesn’t say, “If any wish to agree with

<sup>3</sup> *Africa Bible Commentary*, Edited by Tokunboh Adeyemo, (Zondervan, 2006), 1169.

<sup>4</sup> Bruner, 141.

<sup>5</sup> Conrad Mbewe, “Prosperity Teaching Has Replaced True Gospel in Africa”, *The Gospel Coalition*, June 25, 2015. Read the article at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/prosperity-teaching-has-replaced-true-gospel-in-africa/>

me...” Discipleship is about following Jesus, not simply agreeing with Jesus. It’s about showing your work, not just getting the right answer.

In what we call The Great Commission, the final words Jesus speaks in Matthew’s Gospel, we are given one of the best definitions of discipleship when Jesus tells his disciples to go and make more disciples by, **“baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”**<sup>6</sup>

Discipleship of course involves belief, a good confession that Jesus is the Messiah and that the living God is triune, one God in three persons of Father, Son and Spirit. But discipleship also involves obedience, specifically learning to obey everything Jesus commands us to do in this life.

This is exactly why Jesus commands Peter here to get *behind* him. It’s what Jesus says to all disciples. You are not in the driver’s seat; I am. The place of a disciple is following Jesus, not patronizing Jesus. Obeying Jesus, not correcting Jesus. Doing what Jesus tells us to do, not doing what we would prefer to do. My friend Mamusha Fanta points out that the two words Peter uses here, **“Never, Lord!”**, can never be used together with integrity. If Jesus is your Lord, you can not say “No!” to him. Right? If Jesus is your Lord, your response is always, “Whatever, Lord, whatever you say, I will do.” Obedience, total obedience, is always essential for discipleship to Jesus, and to be a Christian means to be a disciple. You see, Jesus never called people to only trust him as Savior, but called people to trust him as Savior *and* Lord. And once you know Jesus has Savior, truly understanding what that means that he has saved you, you cannot help to then submit to him as Lord.

In his book, *The Prodigal God*, Tim Keller tells the story of a woman who came to his church and for the first time in her life heard the radical message that we are accepted by God by sheer grace through the work of Christ regardless of anything we have done or not done. In response to this message she said, “*That* is a scary idea! Oh, it’s good scary, but still scary.” Keller was intrigued by this. What’s so scary about unmerited, free grace. Here’s what she said,

If I was saved by my good works – then there would be a limit to what God could ask of me or put me through. I would be like a taxpayer with rights. I would done my duty and now I would deserve a certain quality of life. But if it is really true that I am a sinner saved by sheer grace – at

God’s infinite cost – then there’s nothing he cannot ask of me.”<sup>7</sup>

I pray you see this clearly. It’s the heart of the gospel. We are not saved by our obedience. Your good works and good character and good obedience will never save you because they are too corrupted by sin. That’s true for me as well. We are saved by grace alone, given the gift of God’s favor and delight simply because God is a God of love. But such an immense and unmerited gift does carry with it a cost. Once received, our response must be obedience, receiving Jesus as Savior *and* Lord. That means that our place is never out in front of Jesus, but always behind him, not trying to lead him where we want to go, but following him wherever he goes.

Right? Isn’t that what it means to follow somebody? Even children understand this. Somebody unfamiliar with the area was following me in their car the other day. We’re on the highway, and suddenly I look and he’s pulled up in the lane next to me. He even turns and gives a wave. He’s supposed to be following me, which means behind me, which is the best place to be when I’m about to get off at the next quickly-approaching exit. To be a Christian is to be a disciple, and to be a disciple is to stay behind Jesus and follow him wherever he goes.

And where is Jesus going? He’s already made clear that he’s going down a road of self-sacrifice and suffering, a road that leads to the cross, to death. Beginning in verse 24, he states the obvious, what it therefore looks like to follow him, to be his disciple. **“If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”** In other words, set aside all those other ideas you have about what it means that Jesus is the Messiah. This is what it means. And if you are a Christian, one who comes after Jesus, he says that as you follow him he will lead you into these things in life, mainly self-denial and death.

First, Jesus will lead you to deny yourself. In life there are going to be countless instances where your own will and desires run directly counter to the will and desires of Christ for you. He tells you to forgive; you don’t want to forgive. He tells you to love a certain person; you don’t want to love that certain person. He tells you to share; you don’t want to share. He tells you to go; you want to stay. He tells you to stop; you want to keep it up. I’ve heard it said that self-denial is abandoning one’s assumed right to self-determination.<sup>8</sup> And the only reason we would deny our own will in favor of Christ’s will for us is because we trust Christ. We believe he is God who knows what is best for us far more than we know what is best for us. On top of that,

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 28:19-20

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God* (Riverhead Books, 2008), 135-136.

<sup>8</sup> *Africa Bible Commentary*, 1170.

we also believe that he *wants* what is best for us because he has already demonstrated that he loves us so much that he will even give his life for us.

But each time we deny ourselves in favor of obeying Christ, it's like a little death. And that's what I think Jesus means here when he talks about leading us to take up our cross. Now, in some cases that may mean literal martyrdom, obeying Christ even when doing so puts your life in danger. But in Luke's version of this teaching, Jesus says a disciple must take up his or her cross *daily*.<sup>9</sup> You can't be martyred daily. So I think that for most of us the cross represents the day by day, moment by moment, sacrifice of our own desires and wills, in favor of Christ's desires and Christ's will. And again, each of those sacrifices feels like a little death, crucifying the things we want so that Christ can have in our lives the things that he wants.

This is what it means to follow Jesus. Their way of Christ does not lead us to lift ourselves up, protect ourselves, seek self-glory, or look out for ourselves. The way of Christ instead leads down a road of humility, sacrifice, selflessness, suffering, and death. And Jesus is daring us here to believe what the world simply cannot accept, that the way to find your true life is to give your life away. He even spells it out, saying that if you try to get everything *you* want in life you will end up losing yourself in the end. Is that a good tradeoff, losing your soul to gain temporary comforts and indulgences? It's not. That's why Jesus tells Peter that such thinking is from the evil one, who always wants to lure people away from the hard way, though that is the way that leads to life.<sup>10</sup>

All this means that each one of us has a choice. Do you trust Jesus enough to get behind him and follow him? This choice has been made especially difficult in our day because large parts of the Western church have separated discipleship from Christianity. Many of us have been told that a good confession about Christ is enough, that as long we get the answer right we don't have to show our work. The result is that there are countless people in churches all over America who profess that Jesus is Savior and Lord but who have never actually decided to get behind Jesus and follow him. Instead of fully committing to live all of life in joyful obedience to Christ, many demonstrate by their priorities in life that they have something more important to do than undertake a life devoted to becoming like Jesus. As Dallas Willard puts it in his book, *The Great Omission*, it is security, reputation, wealth, power, sensual indulgence, or mere distraction

and numbness which still hold the place of ultimate allegiance in the lives of many in the church. By contrast, "The disciple is one who, intent upon becoming Christ-like and so dwelling in *his* 'faith and practice,' systematically and progressively rearranges his [or her] affairs to that end."<sup>11</sup>

Again, we have a choice here.<sup>12</sup> Either we try to get out in front and lead Jesus and (unsuccessfully) try to get him to go where we want to go, or we get behind Jesus and follow him wherever he is going, even though we know the way initially may be quite hard. This choice has eternal consequences. That's Jesus' point in the final verses of this passage, when he declares, "**For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.**" There is a day of reckoning coming, a day when Christ, the Son of Man, will return and you will have to give an account of your life before him as your judge. I know this is a distasteful idea to many people today, but this is what Jesus says here and elsewhere. So to take issue with his words here is to get out in front of him rather than fall in line behind him. He is clear, a day is coming when each of us will either lose the life we have tried to keep, or gain back the life we have given away, and not just gain it back, but gain it back a million times over.

Commentator Dale Bruner puts this in stark terms that we can easily understand when he writes,

At the Last Judgment some of us will be dumbfounded to discover that what we thought was the innocent seeking of good and beautiful things for ourselves and our children was actually a whoring after alien gods and the use of religion to advance our status...Only where judgment is real is grace thrilling...We are in a life-or-death struggle when talking about disciples; this is not tea time.<sup>13</sup>

I think, however, that Jesus' words here about a coming judgment are meant less as a *threat* to those who reject him – though they are that – and meant more as a *promise* to those who trust him and follow him. In other words, he's saying that if you give up your life for me, you will gain it back. And it's not just a one for one exchange. As Jesus said at another point to his disciples, the ultimate return on this investment is generously compounded:

**Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father**

<sup>9</sup> Luke 9:23 – "Then he said to them all, "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."

<sup>10</sup> Dale Bruner says, "Satan is any influence which seeks to make us turn back from the hard way." (145)

<sup>11</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission* (Harper, 2006), 7.

<sup>12</sup> Jesus illustrates this choice clearly at the end of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:13-27.

<sup>13</sup> Bruner, 156.

**or children or fields for my sake and for the sake of the good news who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.**<sup>14</sup>

In C.S. Lewis' words, "When we are wholly his we will be more ourselves than ever."<sup>15</sup> The only way to truly find yourself is to fully surrender yourself to the one who knows how to set you free by transforming you into the person you were always meant to be. You have been given one life to invest. Christian discipleship is risking your whole life on the dare that Jesus truly is who he said he is, and that he will do everything he promised to do.

When I was in Kenya this past spring I visited the farm of a friend where they grow beans. It was harvest time, so I took a handful of the beans that had been harvested and, breaking United States Customs regulations, carried them undeclared in my bags when I came home, intending to plant them in our backyard garden. Yes, your pastor is an international smuggler. I live life on the edge. But for the last five months these beans have sat in a bowl on our kitchen countertop. I know my wife is thrilled that she gets to look at them sitting there every day. But as you know, a seed saved is a seed wasted. What do I have to do with this seed to make its existence count for something? I have to give it up, right? You might say I have to kill it, and then give it a burial in the dirt. When I do that, I will never see this seed again. But in time what will I see instead?

Jesus put it this way in John 12:23-24,

**Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.**

You have been given one life. If you want your life to be a single seed and remain a single seed, then keep it safe and hold on to it for yourself, give your time and energies to seeking to fulfill yourself and your desires. However, if you want your one life to bear much fruit, fruit that that lasts and resonates into eternity, give your life away to Christ, to progressively rearranging everything in your life around obedience to him, and then see what he does with your life.

Jesus is building his church. That's his primary work in this world these days. He is calling people out of the world to become distinct in this world. The foundation of our church is the good confession that he truly is the Savior, the only Son of the living God, the hope of the world. As this has been revealed to us, we are then sent back into the world to bear witness to this good news, with our words, yes, but also with lives that are lived in obedience and conformity to Christ. All this is for the sake of the world, a mission so crucial that it is worth giving your life away for.

Peter doesn't get that yet. He will. I was reminded this week of the opening words of the letter of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter, a letter Peter wrote decades after this account. In the first verses he offers words that serve as a good a summary of this sermon series as I could ever come up with myself. Finally he not only gets the answer right, but is able to show his work. There he describes the church as those **"who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood."**<sup>16</sup>

He then offers this blessing to the church, **"May grace and peace be yours in abundance."** I offer it to you as well. May God's grace and peace be ours in such abundance that it flows out from us into a world desperate to find what we now possess. In the words of the Spanish mystic, Teresa of Avila,

Remember that you have only one soul; that you have only one death to die; that you have only one life, which is short and has to be lived by you alone; and there is only one Glory, which is eternal. If you do this, there will be many things about which you care nothing.<sup>17</sup>

There will be one thing, however, about which you care a very great deal.

Amen.

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## The Next Step

*A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read Matthew 16:21-28. What stands out to you from these verses?

<sup>14</sup> Mark 10:29-30

<sup>15</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Bantam Books, 1982), 38.

<sup>16</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1:2

<sup>17</sup> Source unknown.

2. Why do you think that Peter is so disturbed by Jesus words in verse 21 about his fate and mission? Do you find these words disturbing?
3. In Jesus's rebuke of Peter, he tells him he is setting his mind not on divine things, but on earthly things. What earthly things does Peter have in mind? What divine things does Jesus want him to consider instead?
4. When you think about your Christian faith, do you think about it in terms of follow Jesus down a road that leads to self-denial and death? If not, where do you think the road leads?
5. What is one way in life that you recognize you are saying to Jesus, "Never, Lord!" What would change if you instead said, "Whatever, Lord!"
6. If your life is a seed, what are you doing with that seed? Are you holding on to it so that it remains a single seed? Or are you giving it away and burying it so that it might one day bear much fruit? How does one know the difference?
7. How do you respond when you hear Jesus say here that he is coming soon to "repay everyone for what has been done."
8. What is one clear takeaway you have from this sermon series on "Jesus Builds His Church"? How does this change the way you live?

**Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.**



*We often talk about following Jesus. What does it mean to follow somebody? What does it mean to follow Jesus? How do you follow somebody you can't see?*