



Temple Baptist Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
Dr. Mark E. Gaskins, *Senior Pastor*
The Lord's Day, March 12, 2017

www.templebaptist.us

© 2017

What Kind of Disciple?
Matthew 16:21-27

Whatever else you might say, one thing you'll *have* to say about Jesus—he *never* sugar-coated his message or watered it down. He just put it out there and *declared* it: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (16:24).¹

That's the kind of disciple that Jesus said we must be if we are to “come after” or follow him. We must walk in the way that he walked, the way of the cross.

What did Jesus say?

Jesus and his disciples had been on the move. After preaching, healing, casting out demons, and doing other miracles in Galilee and the surrounding regions, he and his disciples had gone up to Tyre in Gentile territory. Even there they had recognized him and had come to him for help. He had left there and gone back to Galilee.

He ministered in Galilee for a while, then decided to go up north to the villages around the city of Caesarea Philippi. While they were there, Jesus asked his disciples who people were saying he was. Their answers varied—John the Baptist returned, Elijah, or Jeremiah or one of the other prophets come back to life. Then Jesus put it to them squarely: “But who do you say that I am?” (16:15). Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (16:16). After pronouncing Peter blessed because the Father had revealed this truth to him, and promising to build his church on that truth and to give Peter the keys of the kingdom, Jesus ordered them not to tell anybody that he was the Christ at this point.

Jesus then started a very uncomfortable but very necessary conversation. He began to teach them how

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 (16:21).

And Peter didn't like it! In fact, he took Jesus aside and *rebuked* him for even saying such a thing. After all, he had just told Jesus that he was the Christ, the Messiah, and that wasn't what was supposed to happen to Messiah!

Peter and the other disciples must have been shocked at Jesus' response. When Jesus looked around and saw the other disciples, he said “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” (16:23).

With his disciples no doubt thoroughly confused at this point, Jesus called them together and told them what kind of disciple one must be to follow him.

Following Jesus—what it takes

Now many of the Jews regarded Jesus as a *rabbi*, a teacher like the rabbis of the Pharisees.

The rabbis of Jesus' day had their followers, and they had some pretty strict requirements for them. Their disciples petitioned to study with them, and had to have certain abilities and meet certain standards. If the rabbi thought the applicant was of sufficient quality, he would take him on as his student and teach him the law.

But Jesus *called* his disciples. And they weren't the kind of people the Jewish rabbis would have agreed to have as their disciples. So in one sense, his standards were lower than theirs. But Jesus demanded far more from his disciples than what they did from theirs!

Here in our text Jesus told his disciples what anyone who wanted to *follow him* must do.² He states it in a conditional way: "*If anyone would come after me . . .*"

First, the person who wants to follow Jesus must "deny himself" (16:24). The grammatical form of this statement in the Greek indicates that what Jesus was saying was a command, not a suggestion or exhortation!

It's a matter of renouncing our claim to self! It's disowning oneself, giving one's rights up to God! It's not just denying certain things *to* ourselves, but giving up *our claims to our own self* to live under Christ's claims! It's saying "No!" to self, to self-will, to idolatrous self-worship, and even to self-preservation in order to say "Yes!" to God, to his will, to his kingdom and purpose.

Have you ever noticed how little children who've first learned to say the word "No!" use it frequently to their parents? Parents have to help their children learn to say "No!" to themselves rather than to their parents!

It's the same with us! If we want to follow Jesus, we have to say "No!" to our sinful self, and "Yes!" to Jesus Christ and his claims over us. He said "No!" to sin and self-preservation and "Yes!" to the Father's will. Unless we're willing to deny ourselves, we *can't* follow Jesus!

Along with this denial of self, the person who would follow Jesus must "take up his cross" (16:24). Again, it's cast as a command. Cross-bearing is *not* optional for those who would follow Jesus. But what did Jesus mean?

First, we have to remember that in the ancient Roman world, a cross was meant for one thing only—*execution!* A person who was about to be crucified carried the cross-beam to the place of execution. So Jesus is talking here about living as a condemned person.

To put it another way, those who would follow Jesus must constantly be willing to give up their lives to and for him—spiritually, and if necessary, physically—rather than be unfaithful. In other words, like Jesus, they must *die rather than sin!* As Charles Talbert puts it, "it was a call for a death to everything that competed with following him, that is, death to idolatry."³ In other words, Jesus Christ must be ultimate to us!

The German pastor-theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a leader of the Confessing Church movement in Nazi Germany, which stood up to Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party's demand for total allegiance. Many of the churches had gone along with the state, subjecting the claims of Christ to the claims of Hitler and the Fatherland. Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and eventually hanged because he steadfastly refused to bow to Hitler. In his book *The Cost of Discipleship* he wrote:

The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this

world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise godfearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther's, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time—death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call. Jesus' summons to the rich young man was calling him to die, because only the man who is dead to his own will can follow Christ.⁴

Now the Romans crucified those who were seditionists. And to confess Jesus as Lord could be considered just that! Jesus carried his cross, though innocent, to give his life for us. Those who would follow him must be willing to give up their lives for him.

Make no mistake about it—Jesus calls for our *total allegiance*, our *absolute loyalty*, pouring out our life for him, even dying for him, if necessary. He calls for *radical commitment*!

When he was a college student, Jim Denison served as a summer missionary in East Malaysia. At a worship service in the small church he attended there, a teenaged girl announced her decision to follow Jesus and be baptized.

During that service, Denison noticed that some worn-out luggage was leaning against the wall. When he asked the pastor about it, the pastor pointed to the newly-baptized girl and told Denison, "Her father said that if she was baptized as a Christian she could never go home again. So she brought her luggage."⁵

Now you may be saying, "That's a little much, isn't it?" Millions of Christians over the past two thousand years haven't thought so. Maybe it was summed up best by Polycarp at his martyrdom in A.D. 156. When the Roman official was trying to persuade him to recant his faith in Christ, Polycarp replied, "For eighty-six years I have been His servant, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King, who has saved me?"⁶

When a person denies self and takes up his cross, he or she will be doing the third thing Jesus demands: "and follow me." The form of the Greek verb here has the continual force with it. Those who want to follow Jesus must follow him *continually*, saying "No!" to themselves, bearing their cross. They must walk with Jesus in the way of self-giving servanthood, radically committed to the Father's will. Remember that in 16:13-23, Jesus had showed his disciples his way of being the Messiah. So whoever would follow him must choose this same way! Malcolm Tolbert described following Jesus well: "a way of life—a daily offering of self to the will of God . . ."

Indeed, following Jesus is a journey, a daily walk characterized by self-denial, willing sacrifice, and absolute loyalty—giving ourselves up totally to and for him! As with Abraham, who took God at his word and went to the land he would show him, it's a faith journey!

Jesus then stated a paradoxical but undeniable truth: "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (16:25). Things really do work that way, don't they? Look at the miser who hoards everything but never really enjoys it versus the generous person who truly enjoys sharing what he or she has.

What Jesus was talking about here is a reference to the soul—to one's very self or being

(Greek *psyché*). To keep self for self is ultimately to lose self. If you lose your self, what good is anything else you've gained?

Jesus says that to be ashamed of him now, trying to save our self, especially if called on to give up our life for him, means he will be ashamed of us at his coming. And friends, that is the *ultimate* loss of self!

And so . . .

It's not an easy word to hear, but the point of this text is clear: Jesus taught that *to be the kind of disciple he calls us to be, we must be radically committed to him as Lord*. We must give him our *total allegiance*, our *absolute loyalty*. Have you ever made that commitment?

You see, God loves us. Because of sin, we're separated from God, and we could never do enough to make things right. But God loves us in such a way that he sent Jesus, his only begotten Son, as Israel's long-promised Messiah. Rather than disobey the Father, Jesus died, showing us how to live in a right relationship with the Father. In dying, he offered himself as the perfect sacrifice for our sins, and conquered sin, Satan, and death. He arose victorious and vindicated, promising that because he lives, those who trust in him will also live. His death and resurrection have made it possible for us to be forgiven and have a right relationship with God. To experience that right relationship, we must repent and put our faith in him, making that commitment I've been talking about this morning. Have you made it?

“If anyone would come after me, let him (or her) deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

Are *you* following him?

†MEG

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®.

² Malcolm Tolbert's commentary on the parallel passage in Luke 9:22-27 in the *Broadman Bible Commentary* Vol. 9 (Nashville: Broadman, 1970), 81-83 and Charles Talbert's commentary on the same passage in his *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel*, revised edition (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 11-112 have been helpful in my interpretation of this passage.

³ Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew* in the *paideia* Commentaries on the New Testament series (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 205.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 1995), 89-90.

⁵ Raymond McHenry, *McHenry's Stories for the Soul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 48.

⁶ “Martyrdom of Polycarp” 21.1, in *Apostolic Fathers II*, trans. K. Lake, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).