

Text

Matthew 16:24-27 ²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life? 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.

Summary

A careful reading of the New Testament (NT) church and an examination of the contemporary church (in the West) reveal stark contrasts. Perhaps most salient is the difference in devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ and the cause of the Kingdom between the first Christians and contemporary Christians. These differences are partially due to the way in which Christ's call to Himself has become “domesticated.” For this reason, reflection on Matthew 16,24-27 is a healthy reminder of the costliness (and sensibility) behind following Christ.

After revealing His identity and the fate of the Messiah, Jesus says to his disciples that if anyone wants to be His disciple, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow Him. In relationships—especially in marriage—one quickly recognizes how difficult it is to deny the self. To take up the cross had a literal sense to the original audience: one must be open and cognizant of the possibility of dying for the sake of Christ and the Kingdom. To follow Him meant to participate in Christ's sufferings (Matt 16,21).

At the same time, if indeed Jesus is whom He claimed to be, namely God Who will return to judge the world according to whether an individual has sought to live for his own glory or for the sake of the Kingdom, and if indeed the soul is eternal, then the only sensible way of life is to follow the One that holds the promise and power of eternal life. Our passage forces us to reflect on the basic questions of (1) whether we believe Jesus is in fact God who will judge the world; (2) whether we believe Christianity is the only true religion; and (3) whether we believe in the eternal nature of our souls.

Walter Brueggemann summarizes discipleship less as a church program and more as an alternative way of existence. Pastor Paul suggested that a good starting point for living in an alternative manner is by renewing our observance of the Sabbath, during which the people of God gather to renew their commitment to Jesus Christ. This alternative approach to the Sabbath begins on Saturday evenings when disciples of Jesus Christ should rest early and prepare their hearts for the day of renewing their covenant vows to the Lord.

Discussion Questions

1. “Christianity is inherently counter-intuitive and counter-cultural.” Give an example of how your commitment to Jesus Christ has *radically* changed the way you think and approach family, sexuality, money, etc.
2. Do you believe that as a church we display distinct marks because of our commitment to Jesus Christ? If so, provide concrete examples. If not, what are some areas in need of change that would demonstrate a *radical* commitment to Jesus Christ.
3. In clear and emphatic language Jesus states what it will cost to follow him. Commenting on the phrase “to take up his cross,” R. T. France, a noted biblical scholar, says that while every believer will not suffer martyrdom, every believer must be open to the possibility of martyrdom. Is this a reality that you “signed up” for upon becoming a believer? Is this a reality that you are willing to accept for your children as you seek to raise them in the church? For instance, if God calls you and/or your children (in the future) to the mission field where their comfort and safety are compromised, are you willing to go because of your desire to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?
(Spend time reflecting on the weight of these questions. They may help you to discern whether or not you ever really understood what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ.)
4. If we believe that Jesus is the one true God that will return to judge the world, and if we believe that the soul is eternal, why do we struggle in surrendering our lives wholeheartedly to Him?
5. Describe your Saturday evenings. How do they help or hinder your Sunday worship? What are some ways you can better prepare for Sunday worship?
6. Take time to pray for the following:
 - a. A deeper and more biblical understanding of what it means to be a Christian, a disciple of Jesus Christ;
 - b. More wisdom in appreciating the consequences of believing in the eternal nature of the soul and the deity of Christ;
 - c. Discipline to better observe the Sabbath as a day of renewing our covenant vows to the Lord by being more deliberate about preparing and resting well on Saturday evenings.