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Matthew 16:1 - 16:8, 16:21 - 16:26



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this speech, Steve Gregg reflects on the passage from Matthew 16:1-8, 16:21-26, where Jesus predicts his own crucifixion and calls his followers to deny themselves and carry their cross. Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, opposes this idea and does not want Jesus to suffer or go to the cross. However, Jesus explains that anyone who desires to follow him must deny themselves and accept their fate, even if it means losing temporary pleasures and possessions. Gregg urges the audience to follow Jesus' example and commands, surrendering their will to save souls and gain eternal life.

Transcript

Let's look further at what Jesus had to say to the disciples at Caesarea Philippi in Matthew chapter 16. In verse 21, it says, But he turned and said to Peter, Now, there's quite a few things of interest here. Jesus said for the first time plainly to his disciples that he was going to die, that he would be captured in Jerusalem, and that his enemies would crucify him.

However, he did say to them that he would also rise on the third day. It's interesting because Jesus, at least three times before his crucifixion, told his disciples plainly, I'm going to die, I'll be crucified, I'll be dead for three days, and then I'm going to rise on the third day. This is the first time he actually said it in any plain terms.

But he says it again a couple more times before his death. Now, yet the disciples never quite grasped it. It was not part of their theology that the Messiah would die.

They thought the Messiah came to conquer and to win, not to lose. And therefore, it didn't seem, they probably figured he was speaking figuratively or something. They didn't quite grasp what he was getting at.

They didn't seem to gel with him, but in some of the cases, because after he died, they had forgotten even that he said he'd rise the third day. Now, on this occasion, Peter seemed to understand what Jesus was saying, but didn't quite believe that that was right. He apparently thought that Jesus was getting a little discouraged.

After all, Jesus had fed multitudes, but then when he spoke plainly to them about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, they had departed from him. I think Jesus' ministry was experiencing a little bit of a lull in his popularity at this point. And Peter was very possibly thinking, well, you know, Jesus, things are looking less encouraging than they were a few weeks ago.

But hey, it's not all over yet. Don't be talking about suicide here. I mean, you're talking about going down to where your enemies are and letting them capture you and kill you.

Jesus, you're getting a little melancholy here. Maybe you're going through a little bit of depression, but don't worry. We're not going to let that happen to you.

He said, far be it from you, Lord, that that would happen. Now, Peter, I'm sure, felt like he was expressing his loyalty to Jesus and trying to encourage Jesus. When Jesus talked about dying, Peter says, no, God forbid, that won't happen to you, Lord.

No doubt slapping his sword with his hand as he spoke, because we know that Peter wore a sword. On one occasion, he drew it to defend Jesus. Peter was saying, we're not going to let that happen to you.

You may think that things are at a low point right now, but you've got what it takes to be the king. You've got what it takes to win these people over. We'll just stick with you through this low spot.

And don't be talking about dying on us here. You've got everything we're looking for here. But Jesus turned to Peter and said, get behind me, Satan.

You are an offense to me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men. Now, that must have seemed to Peter rather unfair and a strong reaction against him. Here, he was probably just meaning well, and Jesus said, you're offending me.

Satan is speaking through you. Get behind me, Satan. Now, Peter was not Satan, but apparently Satan was speaking through him, and Jesus recognized it.

You know, in our battle against Satan, we need to recognize when he's speaking. And he doesn't always just come and appear to us and say, hey, I'm Satan, and I've got something to suggest to you. We'd no doubt be too much on our guard if we recognized him for who he is.

It's much more common for Satan to want to tempt us through somebody we trust and know and like, somebody who seems like a faithful friend, someone we'd least expect to be an agent of the enemy speaking to us. Job found such a person in his wife. The devil wanted Satan to curse God and die, and once Satan brought calamity onto Job, and Job was not cursing God or dying, his wife comes up and says, why don't you just curse God and die? And, you know, Satan spoke through Job's wife.

He spoke through Peter here to Jesus. He was trying to cause Jesus to seek the easy way, trying to cause Jesus to do what was different than what his father wanted him to do. And really, Peter was speaking from his own human sentiments, too.

It's interesting, Jesus didn't say, you are mindful of the things of Satan, you're mindful of the, you know, instead of the things of God. He said, you're mindful of the things of man, not the things of God. He says, you're an offense to me, for you are mindful of the things, not of the things of God, but the things of man or men.

The point here is that men and God are mindful of different things. Men, by nature, are interested in comfort, survival, prosperity, health, you know, avoidance of pain and trial and so forth. That's something that men naturally seek after in value.

And the man who has very few of these kinds of trials is a man who's usually envied because the things of man, the things that men value, are different than the things God values. Jesus said over in the 12th chapter, no, I'm sorry, the 16th chapter of Luke, verse 15, I believe, Jesus said, the things that are highly esteemed among men are an abomination to God. God has a different value system than man does.

And Christians, like Peter, sometimes fall into the trap of giving advice that is more Satanic than Godly because we are simply going on default, really. We just let our human sentiments govern us. We're not challenging what we would naturally think with the Word of God.

We are actually thinking what we naturally feel, the things of man. Of course, if someone says, you know, I'm really depressed, we might say, well, you've got to get out of this state of depression. Well, is that really what God says you have to get out of the state of depression? Doesn't the Bible say, blessed are those who mourn? Maybe there's, you know, we all want to be happy, but God might say there's a blessing in being in a state of mourning over some things.

That doesn't mean that that's the same thing as what people call clinical depression necessarily, but I'm saying that we always want people to be cheered up. We always want to be cheered up. But the Bible teaches that there might be some value in going through a time of weeping and mourning.

The Bible says, let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to heaviness, over in James chapter 4. Be afflicted and mourn and weep. Blessed are you who weep, Jesus said in Luke 6, and in Matthew 5, he said, blessed are you who mourn. Certainly, there are things that man desires that are different than what God desires.

Sometimes the things we don't want are the things we need. And suffering can be one of them. Now, certainly for Jesus to go to the cross is something no man would want to do.

And no man would want his friend to do that. Jesus didn't want to go to the cross. He

prayed if it was possible that that cup would pass from him.

Peter didn't want Jesus to go to the cross. And he didn't like Jesus even talking about that happening. However, Peter's negative reaction to it was not a manifestation of Peter being in touch with God's heartbeat on this matter, but it was a manifestation of Peter's own human value system.

No, you know, going to the cross, that's undesirable. That's horrible. That's the last thing anyone wants.

But that's why Jesus said, no, you are actually stumbling me by arguing from a human point of view. And Satan is using you in this to stumble me. But I'm not going to accept it.

I'm not going to stumble, Jesus said. And then he said to them in verse 24, if anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. Now, denying yourself is just the opposite of what human beings want to do.

The human natural reaction to every situation is to affirm yourself, to affirm your rights, to do the things that you want, to get your way. And Jesus said, well, if you're going to follow me, you're going to have to deny that. You're going to have to not have self as the ruler, as the one in charge in your life.

You're going to have to deny yourself. You're going to have to take up a cross. Now, you don't like me talking about me bearing a cross.

Tell you what, Peter, if you're going to follow me, you're going to have to have one yourself. You're going to have to bear your cross, and you're going to have to follow me. Now, what Jesus is saying to the disciples is something they had not heard previously from his mouth.

Because all Jesus had been doing previously was teaching them moral lessons, how to love their neighbor and things like that. And then he, of course, showed them his miracles and gave them plenty of reason to believe that he was who he said he was. But he had never spoken to them before, plainly, about their need to suffer or his need to suffer.

And that was introducing a new element here that he had not introduced before. And, of course, it was questionable whether the disciples were going to stick through it. No doubt it's for this reason that Jesus asked them before he communicated this to them, he says, Who do you say I am? And when he found out that Peter had it revealed to him by the Father that Jesus was the Christ, Jesus felt, okay, if the Father's revealed this to him, then maybe he's ready to hear what it's going to cost, how much he's going to suffer.

You're going to lose me briefly. I'm going to die, but I'll rise again in three days. And if

you're going to follow me, you're going to have to carry a cross, too.

You're going to have to suffer. Now, what are these conditions Jesus speaks of? Deny yourself. Take up a cross and follow him.

What does it mean to deny yourself? You know, the term self-denial has been applied to certain kinds of asceticism. You know, people who deny themselves of, you know, wholesome or tasty foods. They want to live on a bland diet or they want to wear sackcloth or they want to sleep on a bed of nails.

I mean, monks, for example, often followed a course of what we call self-denial. And what that meant is they denied themselves of certain comforts and pleasures. But that's not necessarily what it means to deny yourself.

That's denying yourself certain things. But denying yourself is a different issue. It's not a matter of denying certain things to yourself.

It's a matter of denying your very self. It is a matter of saying no. That's what the word deny means.

It's saying no to yourself. And what the self is always trying to assert is its rule in your life. There's only two, really, ways of living in the world.

One is to serve God and the other is to serve self. The person who is serving self may manifest in various ways. He may be seeking money.

He may be seeking pleasure. He may be seeking fame. But he's seeking self.

There's only two ways you can go. If you're not serving God, you're serving self. And self is quite assertive.

Self wants to have its way. And you have to say no to that. You have to say no, self.

It's not going to be your way. It's going to be God's way. And, of course, that's relevant to Peter here because Peter was against the idea of Jesus dying on the cross.

His own self did not want that. That's not the way the things men value. But he's going to have to deny what he wants himself.

And he's going to have to go with what God wants. He says you've got to deny yourself. And you've got to take up your cross.

Now, what's it mean to take up a cross? Jesus was not actually probably talking about physically carrying a cross like he was going to do later on. Although Peter may have carried his cross because he was crucified upside down according to church tradition. But many of the disciples were not literally crucified and didn't carry a literal cross.

But anyone who follows him has to be prepared to carry a cross, he said. I believe that the cross to people in the first century in Israel would represent total death to self. Because the person who was carrying a cross was on his way to execution.

And the fact that he was carrying the cross means that he accepted this fate. Because no one could make you carry a cross. The Romans could physically take you against your will and nail you to a cross.

You could be crucified against your will. But you could not be made to carry a cross against your will. If you were going to die anyway, there's no one who could threaten you in any way to make you carry a cross.

Unless you refused to carry. And therefore, carrying a cross was a voluntary act. And when a person had a cross that he was carrying, he was rejected by society.

He was condemned. He was soon to die. A person who accepted his fate and carried his cross to the place of execution was one who accepted the public humiliation, the public rejection, and basically had resigned himself to the death of all of his ambitions and his goals and his plans.

He was dying to himself. He was dying to his reputation. He was dying to his ambitions.

He was dying to his possessions. He was dying to his relationships. He was dying to everything.

He was accepting death. And carrying his cross to the place of execution would be a sign that he was not resisting that anymore. And Jesus said, if you want to follow me, you're going to have to deny yourself and you're going to have to take up your cross.

You're going to have to accept public humiliation. You're going to have to accept the death to yourself of all things that the world has to offer in exchange for Christ. Because he later says, what shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul? Well, we could put it this way.

What will it profit you if you lose all things, lose the world and gain your soul? Well, that's tremendous profit indeed. To have eternal life at the expense of your natural life is no bad bargain. But you have to be prepared to die to yourself in order to live to God.

He says, and you need to follow me. Now, how do you follow Jesus? Jesus, when he was on earth and he told people to follow him, he was actually in one place and he was walking to some other place. And to follow him would mean you just get behind him and walk where he's going.

But Jesus isn't walking around on the planet quite the same way today. He's not visible to us. It's not clear where he is or where he's going.

And so, if I was to want to follow him, how do I do that? Well, following Jesus means a number of things. First of all, it means following his example. Living as he lived, walking as he walked.

To follow the example of Christ is part of what it means to be a follower of his. Also, following his teachings. That's part of being a follower of Christ.

We follow his teachings. He tells us to do certain things and we do them. We're obedient to him as our Lord.

That's what it means to follow Christ too. Also, it means that we follow geographically. We go where he tells us to go.

Where he's leading us to go. We have his leading in our lives. And he may lead you to the mission field or he may lead you to college or he may lead you to get married or he may lead you into a certain job or he may lead you to do something else.

Following Christ means you go where he leads you to go. So, today when we follow Christ, we are seeking to follow his example, follow his commands, and follow his leading in our lives. And we have to be prepared to do that if we're going to be Christians.

And Jesus said anyone who seeks to save his life will lose it. But he who will lose his life for my sake shall find it. And what he means by that is that we need to be prepared to count our lives as nothing.

If we're going to follow Christ, we've made an exchange. We've exchanged this life for another one. And it means that we shouldn't be holding on to this one.

If we've exchanged it, then it's not ours anymore. We've been bought with a price and we now are possessors of a new life and a new destiny in heaven forever. If we are going to have our soul saved, we're going to have to surrender what we have to him who will save our souls.

And once we've surrendered it, it's his, we don't hang on to it. If we seek to save our life, then we haven't really, we're not acting like we've really made that exchange. If you're supposed to deny yourself and take up a cross, it means that you're giving up on your life.

It doesn't mean you're going to commit suicide. It means that your life is no longer yours. It belongs to God and if he wants you to live, then you want to live.

If he wants you to die, then you want to die. You want to be wherever he is. Paul said for me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

To live is great, but it's Christ's life that I'm living. To die, that's fine too, because I can't really die spiritually. I'm only going to die physically, but I'm going to go to heaven and

I've got a life that continues on forever there.

There's nothing to lose when I exchange this life for that of Christ. Because Christ's life is eternal and this one is temporal. So if you seek to save your life in this world, you'll lose it and you won't have any left.

If you surrender your life in this world, you'll find eternal life in exchange. Now, when he talks about seeking to save your life, obviously there's many legitimate things you might do that amount to saving your life. That is, you prolong your life rather than walking into the jaws of mortal danger.

The Apostle Paul fled from Damascus in a basket over the wall out a window. He was obviously seeking to save his life. Even Jesus at times walked away from situations where people were picking up stones to stone him.

But there's nothing wrong with doing reasonable things to keep yourself from dying prematurely. But what's referred to there is that to lose your life means that you're or I should say to seek to save your life would mean that rather than follow Jesus into a dangerous situation. You're seeking to survive by not following him.

You're making compromises that you think will prolong your life and prolong your enjoyment and prosperity and so forth. Rather than give those things up in order to follow him. There's nothing wrong with keeping yourself alive by eating and dressing properly to keep yourself alive.

But what is meant here is that if you would seek to save your life at the expense of following Jesus, then you're going to lose it. If you will by following Jesus be willing to lose your life, then you'll gain it. Jesus said, what shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul? If you desperately try to stay alive when it seems evident that there's not really any way that you can make yourself stay alive.

But you're trying to anyway. I mean you have to compromise. You have to do things that Jesus wouldn't want you to do to stay alive.

I mean to deny Christ, for example, when you're on trial for your life, for your faith. In order to stay alive by denying Christ is definitely the wrong choice to make. There's a story of a young man who was being tortured.

And he denied Christ under torture. And so they let him off the rack. And he died instantly when he came off the rack.

And here he sought to save his life by denying Christ, but he lost it. He didn't gain the whole world, but he did lose his soul. Most people who would like to gain the whole world don't.

But Jesus said if you did, if you could gain the whole world and lost your soul, you've certainly not gained anything worth gaining. You've really lost out in that bargain. Because, of course, your soul will live forever.

Your soul will be either in heaven or in hell for all eternity. The world passes away, and the lust thereof, but he that does the will of God abides forever. What does it profit you to gain that which will pass away in a very short time and lose that life that you could have had for all eternity because you chose rather to pursue the world? You can't follow Jesus and follow after the world, too.

You can't serve two masters. You've got to take up a cross. You've got to deny yourself and follow him if you're going to have life, if you're going to gain your soul.