

## The King Who Triumphs Through Suffering

Matthew 16:21-28

Have you ever thought of the difference between a bargain hunter and a smart shopper? The bargain hunter doesn't care about what they buy as much as *how little they pay for it*. The smart shopper, on the other hand, is concerned with making a wise purchase, even if it means paying top dollar. The bargain hunter will be happy with junk if the price is cheap enough, but the smart shopper is only pleased with a purchase that provides lasting value.

When it comes to following Jesus and believing the gospel, many, unfortunately, do so with a bargain hunter mentality. They hear that salvation comes at no cost at all—what a bargain!—and claim Jesus as their savior. But believing in Jesus this way never results in a changed life, because that person attaches no value to Jesus. He only wants it because it costs him nothing.

Then there are those who, like the smart shopper, recognize the price of salvation. They see what it cost Jesus at the cross. They see what it costs them in suffering and tribulation. Yet it is precisely *because of the high cost of salvation* that they value Jesus so much and sacrifice so much to follow him. It's the difference between valuing a free offer, and valuing the One who offers salvation freely. It's the difference between cheap grace and costly grace.<sup>1</sup>

And it's only through that great cost that such a great salvation is even possible. This is the paradox of the gospel—that Jesus would triumph through suffering, that he would give life by facing death, that the world would be made whole by the Son of God being broken.

What did it cost Jesus to establish God's kingdom? What does it cost us to be a part of it? Let's look at Matthew 16.

If you're just joining us, we're working our way through the Gospel of Matthew, which tells us the true story of how God launched his heavenly kingdom on earth through his eternal Son, Jesus Christ. And things are starting to heat up. Last week we looked at Peter's confession of who Jesus is—"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16)—which is a turning point in the book. His disciples are finally clear and convinced on Jesus' identity. God's long-awaited king, his "anointed one" (which is what *Christ* or *Messiah* means) is finally here, which means that his kingdom is finally going to be established on earth. All God's promises for a new day will finally come true. Here is the hope and salvation for all nations, not just Israel.

So what *will* it take for the Messiah to establish his kingdom on earth? And what does it look like for us to be a part of that kingdom? These are the two questions Jesus answers for us in these verses. We'll look at the first one in vv. 21-23, the cost of establishing God's kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> This opening illustration is from Eric McKiddie, *Show Then Tell* (2013), 25.

## The Cost of Establishing God's Kingdom (16:21-23)

Matthew 16:21: "From that time [since Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah] Jesus began to show his disciples that 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."

What will it cost Jesus to accomplish his mission and establish God's kingdom on earth? Nothing less than his own sinless death and resurrection. Not exactly the image you have when you think of a triumphant or conquering king. It seems weak and powerless. It seems like evil still wins. It doesn't make sense.

It didn't make sense to Peter, either. In fact, he's rather offended. It sounds to him like Jesus is conceding defeat before the war's even begun. And so Peter attempts to correct Jesus. The wording here is strong; it says he "took him aside and began to *rebuke* him, saying, 'Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you'" (16:22).

But listen to Jesus' response: "But he turned and said to Peter, '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). I'm pretty sure the last thing I want to be called by Jesus is Satan. Not how I want to be known. Why such a strong counter-rebuke? What is it that Peter missed, and what is Jesus saying?

Peter, in his opposition to Christ's suffering, is, according to Christ, adopting the perspective of the world. He has set his mind on the things of man. He's looking at Jesus and his kingdom according to the categories, values, and methods that this world gives him, which causes him not only to miss the point, but to actually become a hindrance to Jesus accomplishing his plan. Jesus calls Peter a "stumbling block" here in v. 23—the rock on whom Christ will build his church is acting more like a boulder blocking the way.

So what does the world think about victory and triumph? Winning and success? We could describe that in lots of ways, but I think three values tend to drive humanity's basic approach to coming out on top: survival, satisfaction, and glory.

First, you have to survive. If you don't, you won't be around long enough to enjoy the satisfaction and glory. That's how it works on the playground. If you're playing GaGa or Dodge Ball, you can't win the game unless you stay in the game. The first goal is to survive. So it is in the game of life. Suffering and death are a hindrance to victory. And so as a culture, we spend millions upon millions trying simply to preserve youthfulness and life. Cosmetics, gym memberships, health foods, medications. Not that those things are bad. But we give an awful lot of attention to them, don't we?

But of course the goal is not merely to survive, but to win. To find satisfaction in life. Happiness, joy, fulfillment. Whether we try to find that in a certain job or relationship, in certain possessions—a car, a home, our clothing, or in certain accomplishments—grades, music, sports, getting into a particular college, having a certain number of kids. Each of us set different measures of success and satisfaction.

And if we survive long enough to find that satisfaction, we are said to have arrived. We are crowned with glory. People praise us for what we've accomplished. They envy us. Want their kids to be like us. And when we finally do die, at least we leave a legacy of our glory.

Survival, satisfaction, glory. Those are the driving values of our world when it comes to success and victory. But what are the predominant means for accomplishing those goals? Two things: Power and control.

First, it takes power to survive. That's why we call it the survival of the fittest. And we wield that power in order to achieve our own satisfaction and glory. But power must be coupled with control. It does not good to have the ability to do something with no opportunity. So we take life by the horns, take things into our own hands, so that we can wield our power to achieve our glory—even if that means using people or moving them if they get in our way.

These are the ways of this world. And this is what Peter expects when he realizes that Jesus is God's anointed king who will reign victorious. Where's the army? We need power. Let's go take control and show Rome who's really in charge. Nothing will stand in the way of your glory. Seize the crown. And so when Jesus speaks of suffering at the hands of wicked leaders, of dying, Peter has no category for that. Surely Jesus is mistaken. And if we're honest, we sympathize with Peter. Because the values and categories that surrounded him back then still surround us today.

Peter's mind is set on the things of man. But Jesus has come to accomplish the plan of God. And unlike the world, God's plan is accomplished through weakness, not power, giving up control to wicked men. It's marked by self-denial, not satisfaction; by death, not survival; by shame, not glory. In fact there was no more shameful way to face death in the Roman world than on a cross, executed like criminal. We have no real parallel in America today, not even forms of capital punishment like electrocution or lethal injection. It would be more like the public hangings in the Wild West, were criminals are hung outside of town as a spectacle and deterrent against others tempted to follow their ways.

And it *must* be this way, Jesus says. He's not merely predicting what will happen; he tells his disciples "it is necessary" that he go to Jerusalem, suffer many things, die, and rise again. This is according to plan. As Peter later explains to the crowds in Acts, after these things have happened and he gets it, "this Jesus, delivered up *according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God*, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it" (Acts 2:23-24).

So why is it necessary that God's anointed king die and rise again? Why was that the plan? Is there any sense in this paradox?

If you've ever had mold in your basement, or in your walls before, you know that you can't just paint over it, or stick another layer of sheetrock overtop of it. Because unless that mold is killed, and whatever was spoiled by it is cleansed, it will continue its spoiling and destructive work. Only when you've dealt with the mold and its effects are you in a place where you can actually repair and rebuild the wall to what it was supposed to be.

In a similar way, this world has been spoiled by sin. By human rebellion against God. What God designed for humanity in the beginning, for relating to him as Father, reflecting his character and

representing his rule on earth, filling this world with his glory, was corrupted by human rebellion against God and his rule, such that every human heart is filled with sin, and every relationship, every institution, even the creation itself, is stained by sin and its effects. So unless you cleanse what is spoiled, and kill that which is spoiling it, you cannot rebuild the world God envisioned. And so Jesus came to die for sin. He came as our sinless Savior to take on himself all the rot of this world, every broken promise, every act of violence or abuse, every selfish plan, every angry word, every act of defiance or disobedience against God, every careless mistake, *every trace of evil*—Jesus took it on himself on the cross to kill sin and its power, and cleanse us of sin and its effects, by giving his life as a ransom for ours. On the cross, the mold of sin was burned up in the fire of God’s holy wrath. And so with his resurrection on the third day, the rebuilding is able to begin. New creation has sprouted. It won’t be completed until Christ returns in the end. But through faith in Christ, relationship with God, reflecting his character, representing his rule—it’s possible once again! Life will now triumph over death. Not by avoiding death, but by destroying it through the cross and resurrection.

The reason that Jesus calls Peter “Satan” in v. 23 is not because Satan had somehow possessed Peter for a moment. But because by opposing God’s plan for his Christ to suffer and die, Peter is playing the role of adversary against Jesus, tempting him with the same temptation the devil used back in ch. 4: a crown without a cross (see 4:9-10). Peter is a bargain shopper. He wants all of the glory with none of the cost of suffering.

What will it cost God’s anointed king to establish his kingdom on earth? Not survival, satisfaction, and glory, achieved through power and control—the things of man. But the plan of God—it is necessary that the Christ suffer and die and rise again. Triumph comes through suffering. The cross comes before the crown.

So what does it look like for us to be a part of that kingdom? That’s the next question Jesus answers in vv. 24-28, the cost of participating in God’s kingdom.

### **The Cost of Participating in God’s Kingdom (16:24-28)**

Look at v. 24: “Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.’” Here we see that the death and resurrection of Jesus is not only the power for salvation, it’s also the pattern for living as members of his kingdom. In contrast to Peter’s man-centered take on things, Jesus spells out what a gospel-centered approach to following him looks like. Three things: (1) Denying self, as opposed to seeking our own satisfaction in the things of this world; (2) Taking up our cross, instead of preserving ourselves or trying to survive; and (3) Following him, in humble and joyful submission.

Sometimes we speak of taking up our cross in terms of letting people know that we’re Christians. Whether it’s through a conversation or a bumper sticker or T-shirt or something. And that’s a good thing to let people know that, but that’s not what he’s talking about here. Other times we might speak of it in terms of how we all have our crosses to bear—some sort of trial or difficulty in life. And again, those can be very real and difficult trials, but that’s not what he’s talking about either. Where was Jesus headed when he took up his cross? To Calvary. And so when he

says, “take up your cross and follow me,” it’s an invitation to come die with him. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously said, “When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die.”<sup>2</sup>

Again, this sounds absolutely counter-intuitive for us. Largely because we are so wired to look for life and significance in this world. Through our careers, our family, our hobbies, our achievements, our sinful pleasures. We define satisfaction and success in terms of what this world can give us, and then we bend everything we have toward getting it, preferably, without it costing us much. And if we do anything with Jesus, we try to squeeze him into a corner somewhere. Maybe he can help us fulfill our dreams and save our lives.

But Jesus shows us that it’s the world’s pattern that is actually illogical. Verses 25-26: “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 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?”

The things of man make sense to us: survival, satisfaction, glory. But when we cling to them and clamor for control, we’re actually saying no to Jesus and God’s plan through him. Which is stupid in at least three ways. First, none of the stuff we’re clinging to in this world can actually satisfy or give us the life we’re looking for, because none of it lasts. Even were we to gain the whole world, what value would it be in the long run if in gaining it we had to forfeit our eternal soul? Second, once forfeited, there’s nothing in this world valuable enough to buy it back. Only the blood of Christ is precious enough to purchase our souls, and if we reject that in this life by choosing not to deny ourselves and follow him, there is no opportunity in the next. As Jim Elliot, missionary to the Waodani people of Ecuador and martyred by them, said, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.”

Third, there is great reward in losing everything for Jesus—a reward that *does* last and satisfy, far beyond the grave. There is true victory and glory in joining him in his death and shame. Because there will come a day when what looks like weakness and foolishness to the world, will be shown for the power and glory it truly is. There will come a time of vindication for Christ and those who die to self and follow him. Verses 27-28 say, “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. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

These verses are notoriously difficult in Matthew. What does ‘the coming of the Son of Man’ refer to here? Is it Christ’s second coming—his visible, physical return at the end of the age? What he’s talking about here, he says will happen within the lifetime of some of his apostles, so it doesn’t seem to be that. Is it the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.? Maybe. Or what we call the transfiguration in the next chapter, 17? It’s certainly possible. For what it’s worth, my own take is that what he refers to here is the glory and vindication of his resurrection and ascension.

The imagery of “the Son of Man coming with his kingdom” comes from Daniel 7:13-14. It’s a vision of one “like a son of man” who stands in place of God’s people in their suffering at the hands of foreign nations, the beasts, but who is ultimately vindicated before God’s throne, and joins him in his heavenly reign. Daniel 7:13:

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (repr. New York: Touchstone, 1995), 89.

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. (Dan. 7:13-14)

As we think about how Jesus and his ministry fulfill this vision, there is (as is often the case with prophecies of Jesus) an *already* and a *not-yet* aspect to its fulfillment. This passage is used to describe Jesus' second coming in victory and judgment, something that has *not yet* happened (e.g. Matt. 24:30; 25:31; cf. Acts 1:11). But it's also used to describe his resurrection and ascension, when he appeared before the Father in glory and received "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18)—something that has *already* happened, and did indeed happen during the lifetime of his apostles (e.g. Matt. 26:64; cf. Eph. 1:20-23).

There will come a time of vindication for Christ and his followers—those who willingly lose everything to follow him. In other words, there will be a crown—for Jesus, and for his saints, which we will joyfully cast at his feet (Rev. 4:10).

If we don't believe that—if we have a low view of the resurrection, whether Jesus' resurrection in the past or ours in the future when he returns, then we will grasp for life in this world. Without the crown of resurrection, the cross is defeat. That's why Easter is so important.

But because of the hope of the resurrection, we can say with Paul in Romans 8:18, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." And again, in Philippians 3:10-11: "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead." Following Jesus means dying to self so that we can truly live.

So what does this mean for us, personally as individual followers of Christ, but also corporately as Westgate Church?

Personally, it means we ask ourselves some hard questions. Am I willing to lose everything to follow Jesus? Or am I a bargain shopper—I don't care what it is as long as it's free? Do I believe that if Jesus were to call me to leave my career, to sell my house or my car, or if he were to simply take those things away, that I would still have enough because I have him? What is it that I can't bear the thought of losing, that I must *save* at all costs, such that it gets in the way of really following him? Where is it that I say, 'Jesus, I'll follow you this far, but no further'? And why is that? What am I not believing about the sufficiency and satisfaction of Christ? About the glory and vindication to come? What is it that I'm treasuring more than Christ and being found in him? We need to ask those hard questions. And we need to ask God to renew our affections for Christ, to see him as he truly is, in his incomparable value, in all his majesty, love, and grace.

And we need to ask these questions as a congregation as well. Are we willing to lose everything *as a church* to follow Jesus? We've been asking God to make us a gospel-centered community living each day on mission. We praise God for the ways he's beginning to answer that prayer. We've been talking a lot recently about the call to live on mission, to make disciples for Christ right here where we live and work. But sometimes I wonder if we have gone in our talk and planning and training as far as we can go *without it actually costing us something*. Even when

it's God's plan we want to flourish, we're still tempted to think in terms of this world. We want the crown of God's glory, the advance of the gospel. But we'd like to avoid the cross in getting there. Are we willing to radically reorient our lives for the sake of the gospel? To die, so that others might live? What might Jesus do through a congregation that is willing to lose everything to follow him?

The cross comes before the crown. Following Jesus means dying to self so that we can truly live.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Why does God's plan to rescue his people and remake his world through a king who dies at the hands of violent men seem so illogical to us? Why is it utterly necessary?
2. When Jesus says, "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me," what in your life do you have the most difficulty saying No to?
3. To what extent does the cost of following Jesus keep us from being effective for mission?
4. What helps us hold more loosely to this world and so be able to see more clearly the value and sufficiency of Christ?