

Prayer

I believe in You Almighty God,
for You have made the heavens and the earth.
I believe in You, Lord Jesus Christ,
for You have redeemed me by Your life and death.
I believe in You, Holy Spirit,
for You comfort and empower me every hour of the day.
I believe in You Lord God,
For You reveal Yourself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Secularism

Pray, and ask the Lord to raise up people who will defend the faith against the argument that all religions are the same. Ask the Lord to show Himself in power to this world.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for the opportunities God has placed before you
- Pray urgently for the country of Iran and its people
- Pray for those planning ahead for the potential flu pandemic

Meditation

Jesus, fill the emptiness that comes to us unwanted;
Be close when fear and dread descend upon the soul,

When something we have done goes badly wrong:
When the prayers we offer feel like groping in the dark:
When others we respect reject the work that we have done:
When sin's temptations rise within, though least expected:
When evil hurts a friendship, and bruises those we love:
When unfolding situations compromise our faith and hope:
When those we love and trust turn inexplicably against us:
When we have badly let down those we love, in ignorance:

Jesus, fill our emptiness with the power of Your Spirit;
Break the dread silence of the soul with Your greater love.

Bible Study - Matthew 16:24-28

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If anyone wants to come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ What good is it for a man to gain the whole world but forfeit his own life? Or what will he give in return for his life? ²⁷ For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will repay to each according to what he does. ²⁸ Amen, I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in His Kingdom.'

Review

It is always a great privilege to read and think about one of the great texts of the Bible. The passage we have read today contains four verses, each of which could be the basis for a great sermon, about self denial (16:24), salvation (16:25), the value of life (16:26) and the second coming of Christ (16:27). The problem is the last verse (16:28), which has confused almost every generation of Christians as they have struggled to see how or why Jesus appears to have predicted that one of the disciples present with Him at Caesarea Philippi would not die before His coming again!

There has to be a better way of understanding this passage other than seeing it as collection of separate texts, because it is like a small speech by Jesus to the disciples. But in order to understand it, we should reflect on the extraordinary sequence of events that had just taken place. Jesus gave this speech after Peter affirmed Jesus' anointed divinity, saying with extraordinary faith 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God' (16:16), which immediately drew from Jesus the highest praise and a commission to lead God's people, the church (16:18,19). In this singularly important moment, Jesus explained to the disciples what was about to happen to Him as He went to Jerusalem (16:21), but Peter completely misunderstood the work of God's anointed and rebuked Jesus. He had cut right across what Jesus was saying, and Jesus had to both rebuke Satan (16:23) and regain the disciple's attention and focus.

It is hardly possible to imagine a more highly charged atmosphere than this! If you remove Peter's rebuke of Jesus from the story, it is obvious that after telling the disciples about taking up His own cross, Jesus intended to tell the disciples to follow Him and do the same! Indeed, this is exactly what happens in Luke's version of this story (Luke 9:22-27). In the light of this, what Jesus said in the following verses about losing life and gaining it (16:25,26), reads like an appeal to the disciples to understand the importance of what He was saying and doing. Jesus was not conducting a personal crusade or even a mission to save Israel from the Romans; He was God's Anointed, and His task was to save people (16:25) and to save the world (16:26). Jesus did not wish the disciples to miss the point any more, as Peter had just done! The whole mini-speech distilled Jesus' teaching about the path of discipleship, and told them that their journey would end when 'the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father ...' (16:27). This, He emphasised, was not something God would delay (16:28 – we will study this further, later in the study).

In fact, Jesus had taught most of this before! Verses 24 and 25 of our passage are virtually the same as Matt 10:38,39, and although some sceptics suggest that Matthew merely repeated what Jesus said previously, it was surely good teaching technique to teach important truths more than once, culminating in bringing it to the attention of the disciples at this critical moment. When we discussed these verses in chapter 10, we concluded that the rejection of the world would drive Jesus to the Cross and lead to the persecution of the disciples. We also concluded that Jesus taught that self denial and total commitment were key elements of discipleship. The verse 'those who want to save their life will lose it ...' (16:25) is central to the whole of Matthew's Gospel; the verse is repeated six times, and in all the four Gospels (Matt 10:39; 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; 17:33; John 12:25).

The message is as clear as it can be; if we believe that Jesus is the Messiah, then our only response must be to risk all to follow Him.

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- Is there a structure to this small speech of Jesus?
- Christian discipleship

This mini sermon of Jesus is another pearl within Matthew's Gospel and one that deserves our fullest attention. There is so much in it about discipleship and the responsibilities and duties of a disciple; one who is committed to following the Lord. The Gospel message of salvation may seem very clear and simple to many people (even if we struggle over it within our churches), but the consequences for our lives are substantial and need to be understood. It is no use pretending that Christianity is a religious system that meets our needs; our faith in Jesus is the only means whereby we have a relationship with God, our Maker.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Lie down for half an hour and think about what your faith means to you. Read through this passage again, and check out what it means to you. At what point are you challenged, and how does it describe where you are as a Christian?*
- *Pray about the proclamation of the Gospel and the privilege of all God's people to spread the 'Good News' through their lives, and in everything they do. What are you called to do in order to fulfil your own call to discipleship?*

Final Prayer

I commit my day to You, Lord Jesus Christ. You can see the whole world in a moment, and yet You have taken care of me this day through the good and bad, the easy and difficult. I return the day to You, so that every thought, word and deed may be blessed according to Your will, wisdom and purpose. Thank You Lord Jesus Christ: AMEN

If we accept this, then the passage says that 'some standing here' would see all this take place, and indeed they did. We do not have to work out which disciple will still be alive on earth when Jesus comes a second time! I do hope you see that this whole speech is a unity, with a beginning and an end which make sense, giving clear unambiguous instruction about the absolute demands of discipleship and the call on the first disciples to follow this through to the establishment of the Early Church.

Application

Each part of this passage has its message for us today. Verse 24 speaks about the complete and absolute nature of Christian discipleship; it is an all-consuming call to service under God, through which people are led to follow Jesus, sometimes almost literally. Many sermons and lectures can be given on the path of Christian discipleship, but as far as I can see from scripture, unless this path starts with the complete and unreserved submission of self in the service of God, like a fixed, permanent contract, then I do not believe that anything can be said which is authentically Christian.

Most people live life for what they can get out of it, and unrepentant of such a way of life, they try to 'gain the world' whilst losing their souls (16:26). But there is an alternative, and some will always realise the truth about the Christian message if it is preached. Then, people will say, 'how do I go about following Jesus?' The evidence from history is that when people are led to take a 'step of faith' in Christian discipleship, and do so completely and sincerely without reservation, then the Lord does a radical work in the life of a person, and they are changed. The recovery of this basic message of Christian faith is surely at the heart of any strategy of mission in the life of the church.

Lastly, this passage is a warning to us to be careful about how we interpret what the Scriptures say about Jesus' coming again. There is a difference between what Jesus has done and what He will do, and it is good if we know the difference. In a similar way, some things can be done before we die, and some things will only happen after we die, or when Christ comes again in glory, so we need to be clear about the difference and what is needed now.

As Jesus spoke to the disciples, he was filled with a sense of urgency about what was about to happen, and we need to sense that urgency today. The world in which we live is not as stable as it once was, and we are entitled to think that the many Biblical texts that speak of our Lord's return appear close to being fulfilled in our own times. We should spend no time in debating these matters; our clear duty is to follow our Lord and spend every effort in doing the Father's will, which is to make sure that as many people as possible have the chance to respond to His grace. The times in which we live make our task of evangelism ever greater.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Is it really possible to preach a Gospel that demands its converts to relinquish all to follow their Lord? What is the difference between this and brainwashing?
2. Is there any reasonable Christian way to pursue worldly ends? Discuss how Christians are led, or misled, to do this today?
3. Discuss verses 27 and 28 in your group and explore whether you agree with the analysis I have given here.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

- Losing and gaining life
- The supreme value of life
- A warning about the end times
- The coming of the kingdom

Notes on the text and translation

V24 *'and follow me'* The Greek word for 'follow' can also mean 'accompany'. What Jesus seeks is not just people who will walk after Him but those who will go 'with' Him. Both meanings are present in this word.

V25 *'his life'* The Greek word used here is 'psyche', which translates the Hebrew 'nephesh' meaning 'soul'. This means that the verse is not speaking about life in the sense of the life we have in this world prior to death. It is about the eternal destiny of the individual, the complete 'soul' of any person, body, mind, spirit, etc. The word Matthew uses speaks about the complete individual, not some part of it!

Incidentally, the whole of this passage is written in the singular, but where this is not particularly significant in Greek, the only way for us to translate this in English is to put it in the masculine; 'he ... his ...'. In order to try and convey the entirely general nature of Jesus' words, some Bible versions attempt to put the whole thing into the plural, but this is not easy and makes for a messy translation. On this occasion, I have kept the singular masculine as representative of all people, both masculine and feminine (which is what Jesus intended here).

V27 *'according to what he does'* This phrase has a history of being misinterpreted. This is because the ancient texts used for the translation of the Authorised Version has 'according to his works'. This was a mistake in the ancient text, and we now know that the Greek reads more accurately 'to each according to his deed' (singular). This last word sounds strange, but the word 'deed' in Greek could mean 'something done as a general rule', 'general practice', 'action' or a number of words that indicate general usage. The principle seems to be that God will judge each according to the general nature of what he or she does.

Going Deeper

Is there a structure to this small speech of Jesus?

We often find that scripture presents us with speeches and poems that have a structure, and although we are not familiar with these structure, they help us understand things that may otherwise seem to be a mystery to us; and this is the case here.

This small speech of Jesus has a structure, which is evident from the use of the connecting words used in Greek (the small word 'gar', usually translated 'for') which begin the three middle verses 25,26 and 27. I summarise the speech in this way:

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| V24 | The main theme of Christian discipleship |
| V25 | First development; losing and gaining life |
| V26 | Second development; the supreme value of life |
| V27 | Third development; a warning about the end times |
| V28 | Conclusion with an emphasis on urgency |

We will now go through the different sections of the speech one by one.

Christian discipleship

Verse 24 represents an existing theme of Jesus' teaching about self denial, but is repeated here by Jesus because the disciples had not understood what it meant. For example,

Peter had affirmed the divinity of Jesus and then immediately listened to his own worldly voice. He had heard the teaching about self denial, but did not know how to put it into practice. The beginning of this speech of Jesus is a salutary lesson to all of us who have heard the Gospel preached Sunday by Sunday, but just like Peter, fail to put what we hear into practice.

How do we 'deny ourselves'? We have to do the opposite of our natural desires, which are to live according to 'self interest', and follow someone else, who is Jesus. We are to 'take up our cross' and follow Jesus, who went to Jerusalem to face His enemies, and placed Himself in God's hands. Of course, we are in awe of this great work, and it is unique in what it achieved, but when Jesus said 'take up your Cross ...' He did not mean bearing up under the strain of everyday life. To say this is an insult to our Lord who lost His life bearing the strain of our sin. Surely, this famous phrase is all about the denial of self and a complete and unreserved submission to the service of God. This is the authentic Christian understanding of the passage, and it was a message Jesus was trying to reinforce to the disciples. They had not yet understood how consuming this call would be.

Losing and gaining life

The next verse (16:25) is the famous paradoxical saying that illustrates the point just made; 'For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.' But what does this add to the now clear instruction from our Lord that half hearted discipleship is no discipleship at all?

The 'life' that is spoken of here is not life in a biological or physical sense. It is life in the sense of our distinct, personal, spiritually created identity, or what the Old Testament calls 'soul'. When we 'lose our life for Jesus' sake', to paraphrase the text, we give back to our Creator what He has created, so that He may do with us what He wills. So many people are desperately afraid of this, feeling that they will somehow lose their proper identity. In truth, however, this is the only way we will ever discover our true identity, by being in the hands of the one who gave us our identity in the first place; and with our consent can fulfil this even whilst we live.

The contrary side of this is that by trying to save our lives, we lose them. People persist in believing the biggest lie with which Satan has afflicted humanity; this lie is that we find our fulfilment in and through looking after ourselves and pandering to our own interests. The centuries have shown us that this path is in truth the route to unhappiness and oblivion. Do people think that the real people who were Churchill and Frank Sinatra, for example, who are both known by virtually the whole world, benefit in any way from their continuing worldly celebrity once they have been judged before God's throne? Yet people persist in seeking after personal fame as a measure of satisfaction, personal achievement and immortality; modern secularism has yielded very odd and inhuman behaviour!

The supreme value of life

The speech continues with the same theme (16:26); 'What good is it for a man to gain the whole world but forfeit his own life? Or what will he give in return for his life?' What price do we put on life today? Jesus taught other parables that illustrated the importance of knowing that our lives are given to us by God, and our fulfilment is found in our maker. Luke's famous parable of the rich man makes the point; the rich man stored up everything he had in his barn, and then sat back to enjoy life, unaware that his own life would be required of him by the maker he had ignored in his profiteering (Luke 12:16-21). James picked up the same theme in his letter to half-hearted Christians, linking Jesus' teaching with that of Ecclesiastes 'come, you who say ... let us make money ... you do not even know what tomorrow will bring ... what is your life?' (James 4:13-16).

However, I think it likely that as Jesus was speaking, He was reminded of the time when Satan (who was on His mind since Peter's folly a few verses earlier) had tempted Him to 'gain the whole world' during the wilderness temptations (Matt 4:8,9). Jesus had dealt with this, knowing that He had a special role in establishing the Kingdom of God as Messiah, but He could now perceive that Satan would tempt the disciples, along with all other people, in the same way. Satan appears to offer everything if people will yield to him, and if we follow his leading we may appear to gain 'the whole world', but at what cost? Jesus' words were designed to make people stop and think before yielding all to Satan

A warning out the 'End Times'

Jesus proceeded to bring in to the open the ultimate consequences of what He had been saying. The end would arrive with the coming of the Messiah with angels, and with the Father in Glory (Matt 24:30; 25:31; Romans 6:4; 2 Thess 1:7; Zech 14:5); and when this happened, judgement of all things would take place (Rom 2:6; 2 Cor 11:15; 2 Tim 4:14; Rev 2:23; 18:6; Psalm 61:13 etc). Jesus talked about this as something just about to happen, as He always did. The proximity of judgement has always been a spur to decision making! Yet the implication here is that not only will the return of the Son of Man bring judgement, but those who have followed the way of the Cross will be vindicated.

The famous words 'He will repay each according to what he has done' may well be an appropriate comment about judgement in general, for we do believe that God will indeed sort out 'right from wrong' and right behaviour from wrong behaviour (25:31-46). However, in this setting, and as the notes about the text indicate (above), 'what he has done' is the grammatical singular, and speaks about either a habit or type of behaviour, or one single action. In the context of this speech here, it is perfectly correct to say of this passage that the Father will repay each according to whether he or she has 'done' the one thing God requires of them; to 'take up the Cross' and follow Jesus as a disciples! We can find information about what God will do when He judges the world throughout Scripture. The Old Testament prophets are full of it, and there is plenty in Revelation as well. It is just possible that here, Jesus was meaning that the Father will judge according to whether people have truly followed Jesus in the path of discipleship.

Verse 27 of itself does not contain any sense of 'when' all this might take place; consistent with Jesus' teaching about the 'End Times' that neither He nor the angels know when all this will take place, 'only the Father' (Matt 24:36). What has confused many people is the next verse (16:28), which appears to give us a hint, indicating that some of those who hear Jesus will still be alive when the 'Son of Man comes in His Kingdom'.

The coming of the Kingdom

But all is not what it seems. If you have followed the pattern of the speech, the last verse does not begin in the same way as the previous three, or follow on from verse 27. It begins with an emphatic colloquialism of Jesus 'Amen, I tell you'. This is not an addendum to the talk of the end times in verse 27, it is the conclusion of the speech. If we take our eyes off of our interest in the date of the second coming, and whether anyone listening to Jesus might be alive for it, then we find that verse 28 has a quite different meaning.

It goes back to the very message about discipleship that is the heart of Jesus' speech. Jesus called those with him to 'take up their cross' and follow him. If they did that, then they would follow Him to a time when Jesus would be crucified and would rise again, then go to the Father and send His Holy Spirit on His people the Church. This is how He would establish His Kingdom on earth; this would be the 'Son of Man coming in His Kingdom' (16:28) to inaugurate God's harvest time, a harvest time in which we still live today.