

## ***“The Road Ahead”***

*Isaiah 53:3-11 • Matthew 16:21-28*

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Have you ever tried to explain something to someone else and they just don't seem to get it? Maybe they weren't really paying attention. Or maybe, you think, they aren't the brightest bulb in the lamp. Or perhaps worse, YOU are the one who doesn't seem to get it. Your mind wanders off while someone is talking. You forget things easily. People who study human communication say you have to tell an intelligent person something seven times before he knows and remembers it. And if you're like me in statistics class, it's way more than seven times. That's why you see or hear the same advertisements over and over again. Repetition is the key to people remembering your message. Part of the problem may be that we are overloaded with information and highly distracted so that we don't pay close attention. But human nature plays a big part in this. We are creatures of habit and it takes repetition to create a habit.

If it makes you feel better, Jesus had the same problem with his disciples. In the next few weeks leading up to Easter we are going to travel with Jesus on the road to the cross. Here in Matthew 16, we come to the first place in Matthew's gospel that Jesus foretells his crucifixion, death, and resurrection. But it's not the last time he has to say it. Verse 21 begins, "From that time 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." In other words, from this point on Jesus was telling his disciples what was going to happen. He told them repeatedly and they still didn't understand. Even though he had told them ahead of time, the crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection took the disciples by surprise.

On this occasion, Jesus told the disciples that he would be killed by the religious leaders as part of God's eternal plan. But Peter, always the first to put his foot in his mouth, pulled Jesus aside and said, "No way. We're not letting this happen to you!" Just a few verses before Jesus had asked

the disciples who other people said he was. They said that some people thought he was John the Baptist, some Elijah or another prophet. Then Jesus asks them, "who do YOU say that I am?" Peter said that he believed Jesus was the "Messiah, the son of the living God." Then almost immediately he dares to rebuke God? Our English translations don't really convey the emphasis that's in the original Greek. Peter says something more like, "God Forbid! This will never happen to you!"

Peter and the other disciples still thought like most Jews of the time that the Messiah would be a political king, much like king David, who would throw the Romans out and set up his own earthly kingdom. They couldn't even comprehend the idea that the Messiah would suffer and die. They were still looking at things from a human perspective, not from God's perspective and Jesus quickly points that out to Peter. He says, "you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

So now it's Jesus' turn to rebuke Peter. Almost immediately after Jesus had praised Peter for his confession and called him the rock on which Jesus would build his church, he calls Peter Satan and tells him to get away from him. He says, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me." The word translated as "hindrance" is also sometimes translated as "stumbling block" or "offence." It's the Greek word *skandalon*, which is where we get the English word *scandal*. Originally it referred to the part of a trap where the bait is placed but it came to refer to anything that is a temptation.

The reason Jesus calls Peter Satan is because he is tempting Jesus with the same thing Satan did in the wilderness, which is earthly glory without suffering on the cross. But without the cross there is no salvation. Sadly, people today are tempted to follow a form of Christianity that does away with the cross, does away with the saving death of Jesus. They argue instead that Jesus merely came to show us a better way to live.

But a Christianity without the cross is worthless. It's hollow. James Boice points out that "Christ's example helps no one, both because we cannot follow it and also because it's not an example we need but a Savior." And that salvation comes through Jesus' perfect sacrifice on the cross and the empty tomb.

Jesus tells Peter that he's not setting his mind on the things of God. He then proceeds to tell the disciples what those "things of God" are. He says, "If anyone would come after me," that is, if anyone wants to be Jesus' disciple, "let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Not only will Jesus suffer many things, but now he tells his disciples that they must be willing to do the same. And you and I must be willing to do it as well.

There are three parts to Jesus' statement. First, he says a disciple must "deny himself." This is not particularly popular these days. Our culture today is almost entirely focused on satisfying ourselves. In many cities, Amazon can deliver packages to you in a matter of hours so you don't have to suffer through waiting until the next morning to get what you want. There are products and services to cater to your every desire. We have become completely focused on ourselves. It's me, me, me! Social media reinforces this by encouraging others to be focused on me, too. That was pretty much the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They chose to satisfy themselves rather than deny themselves.

That attitude sometimes carries over into churches in one of two ways. On one hand, people now shop for a church the way they shop for blue jeans or a restaurant. They go from one to another looking for the church that meets their personal desires. If they feel like one church isn't meeting their felt needs, they move on to another one. Sometimes they'll say something like, "I'm not being fed at that church." The other way satisfying self affects churches and Christians is participation and commitment.

Many people only attend worship or Bible study if there's nothing better going on. They don't have time to worship and grow and connect and serve, but they have time to golf or fish or sleep in or shop online.

But God has a different standard. Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, the exact opposite of satisfying our personal desires. He is clear that being a Christian means giving up some of those personal pleasures. It means making a commitment, even if it means making a sacrifice. Denying self means dying to self. But to truly die to self we have to replace our own selfish desires with something else.

That brings us to the second part of Jesus' statement in verse 24. He tells us to take up our cross. Often times we think of our cross to bear as something we're forced to do. But I think what Jesus really means is for us to sacrifice in order to serve others. Taking up our cross means doing those things Jesus commands us to do: feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and lonely, bringing good news to the poor. It also means a willingness to suffer for the sake of Christ. The result of a life of sacrifice for Christ is found in verse 25: "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." The rewards for sacrificing for Christ in this life are eternal, but there are rewards now, too. People who regularly serve others are usually more grateful for the blessings they have received, and as an article I read last week said, people who are grateful have lower levels of anxiety and are healthier physically.

Then third, Jesus calls us to follow him. This is a recurring theme in Matthew and it's the key to discipleship. We are to follow Jesus where he goes and we are to do what he does. The place we learn to follow Jesus is in gathering with other Christians to worship God, to study our Bibles, to pray, and to serve people. Those are what the Reformers called the "ordinary means of grace." Those are the ways God is present with us. This is why we have the Church.

Jesus is clear that if we call ourselves Christians, we are not merely spectators. We are

not simply to watch Jesus and his church. You and I must get into the game. That means giving up some of your time, your money, and your comfort in exchange for serving others and following Christ. One commentator put it this way: "faith means obedience, and obedience is the grave of the will." The Apostle Paul reminds us, "you are not your own, you were bought with a price." When you are willing to deny yourself,

take up your cross, and follow Christ, you will begin to understand what it means to be the Church. And I think that's what Jesus may have meant when he said that some people would see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. When we commit ourselves completely to Christ's kingdom, we begin to see his kingdom at work around us. And what a great vision to see! He just might have to remind us sometimes.

*Amen.*