

*The Things of God, Matt 16:21-28*

Let us pray: Father God, fill us with the life of Christ through your word today. In the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.

Are you a Christian? Or are you simply a churchgoer? When we have been in the life of faith for a long time, it is easy for our walk to become habitual. We need moments when we stand before the word and ask ourselves honest questions. A Christian is someone in whom Christ lives. My deepest hope is that Christ will be clearly revealed through my life. That is the reason we exist in this world as the church.

Last week we reflected on the moment when Jesus went to Caesarea Philippi with his disciples and asked them the essential question, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter responded with the remarkable confession, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16, NRSVA). Only after that confession did Jesus say that he would build his church on that very truth. He also said that the church would receive the keys of the kingdom of heaven, that it would open and close its gates through the gospel, and that the powers of hell would not prevail against it.

Up to this point, the passage sounds very encouraging. It feels like a promise of glory and victory. Yet the next verse says, "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (v. 21).

There is a secret in this teaching about overcoming the powers of hell, but the disciples were not yet able to understand it. Peter had just received great praise for his confession, "You are blessed," and he must have felt encouraged. Yet suddenly Jesus spoke of tremendous suffering. Until this moment, Jesus had not spoken about the cross in a full and direct way. There are truths that cannot be taught to us until our confession of faith is firm.

It is not surprising that the disciples were shocked by Jesus' words. For the Jewish people, the Messiah was ultimately the one who would bring the victory of God, so the idea that the Messiah must be rejected and suffer death was extremely difficult to accept. This was not the future they had imagined for Jesus. They expected him to free Israel from Roman oppression and restore the kingdom of David. His future was their future, because they had staked everything on him, and now that expectation seemed shattered. The future that the Lord unfolds for us can also be quite different from what we imagine.

The disciples could not grasp the idea that someone could die and yet live again. Even when Jesus actually rose from the dead, they struggled to believe at first. So it is likely that only the part about the suffering and death of their teacher seized their hearts and filled their thoughts.

Peter took hold of Jesus and began to rebuke him, which means he spoke sharply to him. "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." This was human zeal. Is it not frightening to think that what we believe is right can actually stand in the way of the Lord's work?

Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Peter was on a kind of roller coaster that day. Moments earlier he had received praise for his confession of faith, yet now he heard Jesus' strongest

rebuke in the history of the church. Jesus could have said what he often said, “You of little faith,” but this matter touched the very core of his identity as the Messiah. The one who had just been called a “rock” was now another kind of stone, a stone of stumbling.

When Jesus said “Satan,” he meant, “In this moment you are speaking the thoughts of Satan.” When we fail to understand the will of God and follow our own emotions and ideas, we can become instruments that the enemy uses. It is very easy for false thoughts from Satan to slip in. If our thoughts are not aligned with the word of God, the loosened gaps allow Satan to come and go. Satan entered into Judas Iscariot (Luke 22:3; John 13:27), and in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, when they lied to the apostles about their offering, their hearts were filled with Satan (Acts 5:3). Their own thoughts and desires welcomed the enemy’s influence.

When Jesus said, “Get behind me,” it seems to mean, “Let go of your mistaken thoughts and return to your proper place as a disciple who follows rather than tries to go ahead of God.”

Jesus rebuked Peter, saying, “You are not thinking of the things of God but of human things.” The concerns of God are that the Messiah must suffer and die before entering glory, so that he may save humanity from sin and death. Human concerns are to seek glory without suffering, to choose the easy path. It is the life in which the self becomes one hundred percent the master, going forward without regard for God.

Jesus then explained what discipleship truly is. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (v. 24). The disciples had witnessed many crucifixions, so they understood deeply what the cross meant. To take up one’s cross meant that the person must die on that cross. The cross is the place where everything is denied. A criminal condemned to die on a cross has no rights. All humanity is bound under sin and death, enslaved as sinners. The old self, shaped by our fallen nature, must die on the cross so that God may recreate us as the new self with a new nature.

When we believe in Jesus, our old self is crucified and we are born anew. Yet because we still live in a body that belongs to the old creation, remnants of the old self remain. Even though the old self has died, it sometimes rises up again. This is why self-denial is not a one-time act but a daily practice of discipleship.

Self-denial begins with acknowledging that we are sinners. We recognize that we cannot save and fundamentally change ourselves. So we surrender the ownership of our lives to the Lord instead of ourselves. Whenever the old self lifts its head, we declare, “No, you are not the master of my life.” To deny oneself is to lay down one’s own zeal, one’s own previous thoughts, as Peter had to do, and to align oneself with the Lord’s thoughts, the will of God. In this sense, taking up one’s cross can be summed up in one word: obedience.

When we remain trapped in our own thoughts, worry, anxiety, and fear inevitably follow. Peter writes in 1 Peter 5:7, “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.” This is the experiential counsel of an apostle who had gone through every kind of hardship and concern. How do we actually cast our anxieties on him? We often pray and hand our bundle of worries over, only to pick it up again. Am I the only one that does this? We must cast them not just once, but continually.

The most basic and powerful way is to pray with the word. When we empty our thoughts and fill ourselves with the word, it pushes out our own thoughts and the thoughts of God begin to fill our hearts and minds. This is why Psalm 1 says that the blessed person delights in the law of the Lord and meditates on it day and night. Speaking the word aloud, proclaiming it before God, becomes a fragrant prayer lifted up to him.

When we cast our worries in this way, the promise of Philippians 4:6–7 is fulfilled. The peace of God guards our hearts and minds. A heart and mind filled with the peace of God lead us to do the work of God.

The Lord also says, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?” (vv. 25–26). To deny oneself and take up one’s cross means offering one’s natural, fleshly life, the old self, the *psyche*, to be crucified with the Lord of the cross. The original meaning of “for my sake” is “through me” or “because of me.” Only through Christ can this self-life, filled with our own thoughts, be dealt with. *Psyche* can also mean “soul,” so when we receive the eternal life of Christ, *zoe*, our soul is saved. The work of gaining a soul that is more precious than the whole world is the very work of God that we, the church, are called to do.

Jesus promises a reward to those who deny themselves. “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (vv. 27–28). God repays self-denial. Those who do not fall into self-righteousness, who do not sink into self-pity, who do not strive to prove themselves, but who simply desire to reveal Christ and obey by taking up their cross, will see the kingship of Jesus even in this world. They will experience the Lord governing and ruling over their lives.

Galatians 2:19-20 says, “... I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” A Christian bears the fruit of Christ’s rule being revealed through self-denial.

When you wanted to sleep in this morning but said, “No, I need to come and worship the Lord,” that was self-denial. When your finances felt tight, yet you gave your tithe and offering because God commanded it, trusting that he would provide, that was self-denial. Children, when your mom baked cookies and you wanted to eat them all yourself, but you remembered Jesus’ teaching to love your neighbor as yourself and shared them with your siblings or friends, that was self-denial.

In life, there are times when things do not go the way we want. How do we deny ourselves and take up our cross in those moments? Even when things do not follow our plans, we lay down our thoughts and choose to praise and thank God. This is sometimes called the “opposite spirit.” It means going against the values of the world. The world says, “Live according to how you feel,” but no, Christians live according to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Friends, lack and insufficiency are some of the most common struggles we face. In those moments we easily fall into complaining or worrying. This is the spirit of scarcity. When we focus on what we do not have, Satan uses that very place to whisper more fear, anxiety, and unbelief into us. At such times we

must engage in spiritual battle with the opposite spirit. We confess and declare the abundance of God with our mouths, offering praise and thanksgiving to him. And we sow. God promises that he “supplies seed to the sower and bread for food” and that he “will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness” (2 Corinthians 9:10). This is why the churches of Macedonia, even in severe affliction and poverty, gathered an offering with joy and sent it to the Jerusalem church during its famine (2 Corinthians 8:1–5).

When someone has been sick for a long time, they can become so accustomed to illness that they stop expecting to be healed. Satan whispers, “You will not get better.” But the will of God is that we be healed and serve his kingdom with strength. Jesus healed every person who came to him. Of course, if the time has come for our mission to be completed and for us to return to the Lord, that is another matter.

About twenty years ago, I began taking medication for high blood pressure. At that time, when I was serving as a chaplain at a university in Korea, a colleague who was a professor in the nursing school said to me, “Hereditary hypertension is something you must never stop treating with medication.” That sentence stayed in my heart for a long time, and I assumed I would have to take blood pressure medicine for the rest of my life. But a few years ago, my wife and I began praying that God would allow me to come off the medication. And I began doing what I could do. About a year and a half ago, I started exercising consistently at the gym, and more recently I felt challenged to begin running. Now I run three or four times a week, about three miles each time. Amazingly, my blood pressure began to improve. Following my doctor’s advice, I measured and recorded my blood pressure faithfully for about two months. After reviewing the record, my doctor recently suggested that we reduce the medication to half for now. He also said that if my blood pressure continues to remain at this level, we can consider stopping the medication altogether. So I am hopeful that, depending on the doctor’s judgment, the day may come soon when I can stop taking blood pressure medicine.

In fact, our family has experienced God’s healing in several illnesses in the past. That is why I try not to speak only according to what I see or what the world says, but to govern my lips with faith. Of course, when and how healing appears is entirely in God’s sovereignty. But I believe I also have a part to play. As Jesus taught, denying oneself and taking up one’s cross to follow the Lord is faithful obedience. For me, praying was an act of faith, and exercising consistently was also obedience in faith. And the outcome is entrusted to the hands of the Lord.

Friends, why does Jesus come with his kingship? He comes to share that kingship with us. We are children of the King, so we too are royalty. The children of a king carry themselves with royal dignity and practice self-control. When we deny ourselves and take up our cross in obedience, he places the crown of the King upon us, reveals the rule of the King through us, and uses us to rescue people from the oppression of Satan. May we practice this royal mindset every day and begin to enjoy his reign from this very moment. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, we thank you for the word of life. Empower us to deny the self that lives only by the natural life, and to live by the abundant life-giving word of Christ that governs our thoughts, our hearts, and our lips each day. In your glorious name. Amen.