

Matthew 16:24-28

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[0 : 00] Taking it to another level can be an exciting or a scary experience.

I imagine a few coaches, managers of teams heading to South Africa for the World Cup are challenging their players to take it to another level.

They've qualified, they've had a measure of success, but now it's a different ballgame. The standard required is higher. They have to take it to another level if they want to progress.

Perhaps more immediately, for some of us, perhaps even here this morning, in a relationship there can be the decision, hopefully shared, to take it to another level.

And that can be quite scary to speak in those terms, or perhaps more importantly to actually seek to do just that. Last week we considered the call of the first disciples to follow Jesus.

[1 : 13] And while that decision was, and we noticed this in a measure, an informed decision, it is still true that the disciples would have had little notion of what following Jesus would involve.

And today we will consider another occasion in Matthew's Gospel where the challenge to follow Jesus is laid before the disciples. And on this occasion, there is greater light shed on what that would actually involve.

In Matthew chapter 16 and verse 24, Then Jesus said to His disciples, If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.

Following Jesus is taken to a whole new level. Now, in order to better understand and to do some justice to what Jesus is saying on this occasion, we need to briefly identify the context, the occasion, when this challenge is laid before the disciples.

Peter has been granted by God the Father a spectacular insight into the identity of Jesus. We've read in verse 16, In answer to the question, Who do you say I am?

[2 : 47] Simon Peter answered, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. And we have reason to reasonably believe that though Simon Peter was the one who was granted this insight and who voiced this conviction, this understanding of who Jesus is, is now shared by the other disciples.

And so there is, we might say, a step jump in the understanding of the disciples as to who Jesus is. And given that greater and fuller understanding as to the identity of Jesus, so the stage is set for Jesus to reveal to the disciples, in a deeper and in a fuller way what the mission of the Christ, the Messiah, is.

And so in verse 21, Matthew begins what follows in the following way. From that time on, Jesus began to explain to His disciples.

From that time on, there is a significance even in the language that Matthew uses. He's saying something new is beginning. There is a new stage that is being entered into, in the mission of Jesus, but perhaps more particularly, in His revealing to His disciples what His mission is.

From that time on, they have now a greater, fuller understanding as to who He is. And so it would be hoped would be better placed to listen to and to understand what His mission is.

[4 : 37] From that time on, Jesus began to explain. Though even in the words there, there's a recognition that it's going to be difficult for them to fully understand, for we read, from that time on, Jesus began to explain.

You see, what needed to be explained was of such moment, was of such importance, was very difficult for them.

But He began to explain that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things and be killed and be raised to life as we have presented to us there in verse 21.

The mission of the Christ, whom Peter had so accurately identified, the mission of the Christ was to suffer, to be rejected, to be brutally and mercilessly killed, and to be raised again.

The very same Peter, who has just enjoyed the commendation of Jesus, Blessed are you, Peter. Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah.

[5 : 51] For this was not revealed to you by man, but my Father in heaven. This same Peter, who has been commended, is now the one who protests at this teaching that Jesus brings concerning His mission, the mission of Messiah.

And we know the passage well. Never, Lord, He said, this shall never happen to you. This protest of Peter is born of not being able or not being willing, or perhaps a combination of both things, not being able or willing to understand what Jesus is saying.

This explanation that Jesus begins to give to the disciples. His vision, Peter's vision, of Messiahship is of honor and glory, of power and fame.

Not the Via Dolorosa, but the red carpet leading to a golden throne. That is his conception of who Messiah is.

And so, he utters these two words that we have read. Two words that ought never to cross the lips of a follower. Never, Lord. Even in these two words, there's a, you might even call it an obscene juxtaposition.

[7 : 16] Never, Lord. If He's Lord, you can't say never. If He is truly Lord, then never simply ought not to be in the vocabulary of a follower. But these are the words.

Never, Lord. Two words that are a contradiction in terms and highlight the urgent need for a clear presentation by Jesus of what His mission is.

Of why it is He must suffer these things. And in turn, a clear presentation of what the mission of His followers must be, of those who would follow Him.

Instruction is required that will displace human wisdom. The things of men that Jesus refers to there in verse 23 when He rebukes Peter.

The things of men, human wisdom, must be displaced with or by divine wisdom. The things of God, as Jesus calls them there in verse 23.

[8 : 21] You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men. And so, teaching instruction is required to correct that situation. Human priorities must be replaced with divine priorities.

A human conception of what following might involve must be replaced with the perspective of Jesus Himself, the one to be followed. Having, I hope, in some measure, introduced the call itself, the invitation, the demand that we want to consider in verse 24.

We can now proceed to do that. And what I want to do is consider what we have from verse 24 and following, the content of what Jesus says in the following way.

First of all, to notice that we have in these words of Jesus a directed invitation. You'll notice that very briefly. We have also a repulsive invitation and we'll have to dwell a little more on that.

And then thirdly, we have a reasoned invitation and we will be concerning ourselves really with verses 24 to verse 27.

[9 : 40] First of all, then, a directed invitation. Directed to whom? To whom is Jesus addressing this invitation or this demand or this instruction?

To whom? Well, it would seem that it is very simple to answer that question. In verse 24, we are told very clearly, very explicitly, then Jesus said to His disciples, if anyone would come after Me.

And so, you might say we don't need to dwell any longer on this matter. It is so straightforward. To whom is the invitation directed? To whom is the challenge directed?

Well, to His disciples. However, we do need to pause for a moment because if we proceed to see what Jesus says, we will discover that it is directed beyond His disciples.

We read there in verse 24 in the actual words of Jesus, if anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself. And I draw your attention to this very important word, if anyone would come after Me.

[10 : 54] If anyone would come after Me. Jesus doesn't say to the gathered disciples, if you would come after Me, you must deny yourself, you must take up your cross.

That is not the manner in which Jesus expresses Himself. He says, if anyone would come after Me. So, what is the implication of this form of words that Jesus uses?

Well, the implication is clear that Jesus does not only have the disciples in mind. The audience that Jesus has in mind is not restricted to those men who are surrounding Him and listening Him on this particular occasion.

Well, who else does Jesus have in mind? you. He has you in mind. If anyone would come after Me, if anyone and nobody in the succeeding centuries and millennia is excluded as being part of this audience, of being part of those to whom Jesus is directing these words, if anyone would come after Me.

And you this morning are included. This invitation is directed to you. This challenge is directed to you.

[12 : 19] You are covered under this umbrella of anyone. It is a directed invitation, so mark that well as we continue to consider the content of the invitation, the content of the challenge that is laid before you.

So, a directed invitation, but secondly, a repulsive invitation. Now, I appreciate that the word repulsive is itself a repulsive word, but I use it advisedly.

The word means that which repulses, that which puts off. And the invitation of Jesus to follow Him, as explained by Jesus on this occasion, will indeed have this effect on men and women.

It has and will continue to put people off following Jesus. Why so? Well, consider what Jesus says concerning what is involved in following Him.

It's not a walk in the park. What is involved in following Jesus? Well, we can say three things. Decision, denial, and death. Decision, denial, and death.

[13 : 45] First of all, decision. We've touched on that perhaps in the passing just a moment ago. If anyone would come after me. Jesus is not presuming that all will follow.

He's not taking it as a given that all will say, well, yes, Jesus, we want to follow you. What else could we do? You are the Messiah. Of course we're going to follow you. No, Jesus knows full well that before anybody follows Him, they must make a decision.

And He is very conscious that some will choose not to follow. If anyone would come after me, if that is what you decide, then be clear about what it involves.

Some will choose to follow, some will choose not to follow. There is a decision that must be taken, a decision that must be made. And Jesus recognizes that even in the manner in which He addresses us.

And Jesus is at pains to ensure that those who will take that decision are aware of what their decision involves and what the implications of the decision are, that they are fully aware of what following Jesus involves.

[15 : 05] So there is a decision. You have to decide. Have you decided? decided. Will you decide? Well, I would certainly urge you to listen carefully to what is involved in following, if you are indeed, as you must, take a decision.

So there is decision, but there is also denial. If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself. He must deny himself.

What does that mean? To deny self is to abandon a way of thinking and a way of living where you are number one.

It is to reject the selfishness that makes one's own personal happiness the ultimate goal. It is to no longer ask, what do I want to do?

And replace that question with another. What would Jesus have me do? And this is wholly contrary to the natural inclination of fallen human nature.

[16 : 16] It runs counter to the wisdom of this world. It is to dethrone the God of personal autonomy as the ultimate volume.

The rallying cry of our generation, it's my life, it's my future, it's my room, it's my decision.

And Jesus comes and says, if you're going to follow me, you can no longer think in those terms. If you're going to follow me, then you have to recognize that you no longer are able to cry and to live in that way.

It's my life, Jesus says, not anymore, if you would follow me. Others would assure us, you've got to look after number one.

And Jesus comes and says, oh no you don't. If you're going to follow me, that can no longer be your concern. You are to deny self.

[17 : 18] If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself. You are to let go of the steering wheel of your life and hand it over to Jesus Christ.

And he will decide where you will go and how you will get there. And it is likely to be a bumpy and a painful ride. To follow Jesus requires that you deny self.

In this repulsive invitation, there is decision, there is denial, and there is death. If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross.

This is a grossly repulsive demand that Jesus makes. The language is not only severe, we can reasonably describe it as vulgar.

It is vulgar language. You must take up your cross. Crucifixion was the most shameful form of execution. It was an accursed thing to die on a cross.

[18 : 27] And yet this is what anyone who would follow Jesus must do. He must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

But what does it mean? The language is dramatic, it's repulsive, but what does it mean? And some might quickly respond, and rightly so, well, but this isn't literal, we're not to literally take up our cross, that is true.

But the fact that it's not literal doesn't make it any less demanding. There is this notion that when you recognize that this isn't a literal demand, that somehow it's less demanding.

Not so. It remains very severely demanding. To carry a cross is to be on the pathway to death.

To carry a cross is to begin dying. If in Jerusalem you saw a man carrying a cross, you knew that he was heading to death. In many ways you could say that he had begun dying.

[19 : 30] The process of dying had begun. The only place you carried a cross to was to the place of execution. And yet this is what anyone who would follow Jesus must do.

Take up his cross. Dying. This is the key idea of this picture that Jesus makes. To take up your cross.

To follow Jesus is to die to self. Really what Jesus is doing is developing what he has already said concerning denying self and taking it to its fullest expression.

To die to self is to take self denial to its ultimate. expression. To die to self. To crucify self. This is the invitation that Jesus is making.

If we are to follow Jesus we must be like Jesus. And the cross was for Jesus the ultimate expression of his obedience to the will of his father.

[20 : 46] father. We know that this was his great concern throughout his life to do the will of his father. And the ultimate expression of his submission to the father's will is the cross.

And so for us to take up the cross as we are required to do if we would be followers of Jesus is to live in absolute obedience and submission to God irrespective of what the consequences may be.

For some of the disciples who were gathered listening to these words those consequences would include violent death. They may not include violent death for us though we live in changing times.

And who's to say what a generation will bring even in our own land. But whatever the consequences may be this demand to take up your cross is a demand that says whatever the consequences I'm willing and I will face them as I follow Jesus.

If anyone would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Only then are we able only then are we equipped only then we might say are we invited to follow him in a meaningful way.

[22 : 11] I wonder is it if only in a small measure clear now what I mean by taking it to a new level. Following Jesus taken to a new level.

Not enough for the disciples to leave their nets. That was a big ask. They must also deny self and take up their cross. So we have many ways what we can I think legitimately describe as a repulsive invitation.

But thirdly we have a reasoned invitation. In verses 25 to 27 it's not surprising that Jesus gives reasons for doing what at face value appears utter lunacy.

You say what fool would do this? What fool would take on board this demand? What fool would deny self and take up his cross? You'd have to be a fool to do such a thing.

And so Jesus gives reasons why it is not foolish to do what he is asking of you to do. He gives reasons why you ought to deny self and take up your cross and follow him.

[23 : 28] And there are I think essentially two reasons. One that relates to the here and now to the present and another that points forward to a future event. First of all the reason that relates to the here and now to the present.

In verse 25, for whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. It's somewhat cryptic, the words that Jesus uses.

What Jesus is saying is if in the present you refuse to deny self and take up your cross and follow Jesus, if in the here and now you decide to cling on to your life and your essentially self-centered way of thinking and living, which is what is meant by save your life, if you would save your life, whoever wants to save his life, anyone who wants to cling on to his life, who wants to cling on to the steering wheel of his life.

It's interesting that in parallel passages this expression save your life is rendered differently or different words are used it speaks of, Jesus speaks of keeping your life or loving your life or saving your life.

The idea is that you cling on to your control of your life. And what does Jesus say? He says if you do that, you will actually lose your life.

[24 : 54] How so? Well you will fail to ever discover the richness and fullness of life that can only be experienced by following Jesus. You see as long as you cling on to your life and to your way of thinking, you miss out on the opportunity of following Jesus.

You miss out on life in all its fullness. Maybe I could illustrate this with a dog holding on to an old manky bone that has no flavor left.

All the marrow is gone. But you're playing with that dog and he's clinging on to this bone and he won't let go. You know how stubborn a dog can be with a bone? He just won't let go for anything on earth.

He's holding on to that bone. Now just imagine if you say, well I've got another idea. You come from the kitchen with this rich steak, this big piece of steak and you hold this steak up before the dog.

You think, well any dog would just drop the bone and grab the steak. But there are dogs. You maybe know these dogs. Maybe you've got a dog like that. But he struggles to know what to do. You see you're holding on to this bone.

[26 : 01] You're wanting to take this bone from and he's saying, what do I do? I want the steak, but I won't let go of this bone. And so he misses out on the steak because he's holding on to the bone. That, maybe in a very small measure, illustrates what Jesus is saying here.

He's saying, if you cling on to your life that you value so much, your independence, your autonomy, doing your own thing, and you cling on to it, it's so precious to you, well be advised that by clinging on to it, you miss out on the life that Jesus would have you live.

You miss out on fullness of life. So just drop that bone. It's worthless. It no longer has any flavor. I wonder if you've heard folks say, there must be more to life than this.

Maybe you've said it. Maybe you've thought it. Well, there is. That's what Jesus is saying. There is more to life than this. Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but in contrast, whoever loses his life for me will find it.

Whoever is willing to stop stubbornly clinging on to your way of thinking and rather follows Jesus, then such a person will find life.

[27 : 26] will discover life as it's meant to be. This is the argument that Jesus is making and it is a powerful argument. It is the argument so vividly expressed by the missionary Jim Elliot, who died a martyr's death in the jungles of Ecuador.

In response to those who thought that he was a fool to abandon a promising career and prospects in the United States to go to the jungles of Ecuador where he eventually died, he responded, he is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. You're clinging on to that life that you're going to lose anyway. And you're missing out on that which cannot be lost.

Eternal life. Life as Jesus would have you live it. In verse 26, in what follows, we don't really have another argument, but rather we have the same argument reinforced or illustrated.

What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? In actual fact, the word that is used in verse 25 translated life and in verse 26 translated soul is the same word.

[28 : 49] Which is helpful in substantiating what I'm saying that really in verse 26 you have a development of the same basic argument. What Jesus is saying is along these lines.

He's addressing those who are struggling with this and he's saying, listen, imagine that you refuse to follow me. You say, no, it's too big an ask. This denying self is taking up the cross.

It's too much. I'm not prepared to do that. And you decide to carry on your life as you see fit. Seeking satisfaction and happiness in what this world has to offer.

And imagine, Jesus says, imagine you're spectacularly successful. You gain the whole world. Bill Gates, eat your heart out.

He's a pauper next to you. You gain the whole world. You choose not to follow Jesus. That's too much that Jesus is asking. You go your own way and you are spectacularly successful.

[29 : 48] You gain the whole world. Jesus says, ultimately, you're still a loser. Ultimately, you're still a loser. Why? You protest. Because, Jesus says, the life I have for you is much better.

Even in the here and now. And certainly into eternity. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?

Will you listen to the reason Jesus graciously gives you? That you might take up his challenge to deny self and take up your cross.

But there is, finally, a second reason that Jesus gives for denying self, for taking up your cross, for following him. And this second reason relates to a future event.

In verse 27, we read, For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.

[30 : 53] See, in verse 25, we begin with this word, for, the reason being given. And then in verse 27, we have again, for another reason is being given. And as I say, it relates to a future event.

And the future event that Jesus is drawing the attention of the disciples to, and indeed is drawing your attention to, is the sobering reality of an approaching day that will not be postponed and cannot be avoided.

And it is the day of judgment. This is what Jesus refers to. He's saying there is a day coming when I will return to judge the world.

And on that day, you will stand before the judge, Jesus, and he will announce your eternal destiny.

He will reveal your reward. And his judgment will be according to what you have done. Did you live for yourself?

[31 : 59] Or did you live for Jesus? Did you take up your cross? Or did you decide not to do so? Did you follow Jesus? Or did you go your own way?

No doubt, a very respectable way. But your way, not his way. If these questions are posed to you on that day, what answer will you be able to give?

So Jesus, in this second reason that he gives for following him, for denying self, for taking up your cross and following him, in this second reason, Jesus urgently and graciously points the waverers.

to the future judgment. And he does the same today. Today he points you forward that you would consider that day that will not be postponed and cannot be avoided.

There is no record in Matthew's account of any immediate response response by the disciples to the words that Jesus has directed them.

[33 : 19] And I wonder, and I am simply wondering, I wonder if that is significant. If a response was recorded, we might feel, well, the matter is closed.

The challenge was laid before that original audience. That audience responded. End of story. But the story has not ended.

The story has not ended because the challenge still awaits a response. It awaits your response. If anyone would come after me.

You are that. Anyone. What will you do? Let us pray.

Let us pray. Let us pray. We are that.