

## Chapter 67: The Cross and the Kingdom

*Matthew 16:24–28*

In the previous section, Jesus had insisted upon the necessity of his own sufferings. While this bitter message immediately met with opposition among Jesus' disciples, Jesus now has an even more painful message. Not only will Jesus suffer, but his disciples must suffer as well. In fact, there is no alternative path or opportunity to find a clever escape from the suffering that they must face, because Jesus insists that his disciples must suffer with him if they would desire any share in his kingdom. Here, Jesus offers the foolish message on which the whole gospel message hinges: *we enter Jesus' kingdom through Jesus' cross.*

### **Taking Up Our Cross (Matt. 16:24–25)**

While Matthew uses the transitional word “then” for various indefinite periods of intervening time, the word “then” in v. 24a appears directly tied to the previous section, where Jesus began to show his disciples all that he must suffer in Jerusalem (Matt. 16:21–23).<sup>1</sup> In the previous section, Peter had spoken for all the disciples when he insisted that Jesus must not suffer and die. After rebuking Peter individually, it seems that Jesus must confront this mistaken idea in all of his disciples.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, though, Jesus does not simply reiterate his teaching about how *he* would suffer, but he broadens the application of this principle to insist that his *disciples* also must suffer with him.

Thus, Jesus begins with a stark criteria for his would-be followers: “If anyone would come after me...” (v. 24b). As Calvin notes, this makes imitation of Christ a necessary component of following Christ: “none can be reckoned to be the disciples of Christ unless they are true imitators of him, and are willing to pursue the same course.”<sup>3</sup> After this criteria, he offers three third-person imperatives in a forceful construction that is difficult to capture in English. While we have second-person imperatives (“Do this!”), we must resort to something like “let him...” for third-person imperatives. The strength of this construction, however, is much more like “he must...,” adding to the starkness and necessity of Jesus' demands. While the grammar of this phrase is different from what Matthew wrote in the previous section, that Jesus “*must* go to Jerusalem and suffer many things,” the idea of necessity appears in both contexts.

First, Jesus says that any would-be disciple must “deny himself.” As many commentators observe, we have tamed this powerful idea by imagining that Jesus is suggesting something like staying on a dieting regimen (“I must deny myself the unhealthy foods I want in order to become a healthier person”). Jesus, however, is talking about a radical rejection of “the old self, the self as it is apart from regenerating grace....[Such a disciple] no longer seeks to promote his own predominantly selfish interests but has become wrapped up in the cause of promoting the glory of God in his own and in

---

<sup>1</sup> Morris suggests a meaning of “next in sequence.” (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 431.)

every life, and also in every sphere of endeavor.”<sup>4</sup> Calvin notes that this must include a denial of the ways that we naturally think as well as a denial of the affections for the world and the flesh that we naturally feel, “and thus give our consent to be reduced to nothing, provided that God lives and reigns in us.”<sup>5</sup>

Second, Jesus says that any would-be disciple must “take up his cross.” Importantly, Jesus had said something very similar to this and v. 25 back in Matthew 10:38–39. The major difference here, then, is that Jesus has just announced in clear terms that he himself must suffer many things and be killed in Jerusalem. As Hagner observes, if Jesus must suffer in this way, then in comparison to his previous comments Jesus’ words about taking up one’s cross now become less “theoretical” and more “ominous.”<sup>6</sup> Morris notes also how uncomfortably personal this idea has become: “We should not miss the force of *his cross*: there is a cross for every servant of God.”<sup>7</sup>

Third, Jesus says that any would-be disciple must “follow me.” This adds the overarching explanation for the kind of suffering into which Jesus calls his disciples. It is neither meaningless suffering, nor some kind of self-destructive, masochistic despair, not some extreme version of stoicism that relishes the personal strength that grows from enduring hardship. The purpose for this suffering is wrapped up in Jesus himself: in his own example, on the trail that he himself will blaze, and toward the final destination that he has chosen for his people. Every disciple must individually suffer, however no disciple of Christ will suffer alone. Rather, we are crucified *with* Christ (Gal. 2:20).

At this point, Jesus gives three further explanations to shed light on this central criterion of discipleship. Each explanation is marked by the word “for,” which is nicely captured in the ESV translation of this passage. In the first explanation, Jesus says, “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (v. 25). In this (which, again, follows Matt. 10:39 nearly verbatim), Jesus gives both a warning and a promise, both of which turn on the disciple’s relationship to Jesus. If someone, in an attempt to preserve his own life, refuses to follow Jesus through self-denial and cross bearing, then that person will lose the very life that he attempts to preserve. On the other hand, if a disciple willingly forfeits his own life for Jesus’ sake, that disciple will paradoxically find the life that he has relinquished.

We should first observe that this kind of categorical distinction between those destined to eternal life and those destined to eternal condemnation is only possible if Jesus is truly the Christ, the Son of the living God.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Calvin notes the extensive application of this principle by showing how this warning and promise confronts three groups: those who seek for glory in death (e.g., on the battlefield), those who despise life and wish to escape it (e.g., the depressed and suicidal), and those who are unwillingly to follow Jesus into death because of how tightly they cling to worldly and fleshly desires.<sup>9</sup>

## Treasuring Our Lives (Matt. 16:26)

In the second reason, Jesus sets the promise and warning in a sharper contrast: “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” (v. 26a). Here, Jesus moves beyond an abstract promise of saving one’s life vs. losing one’s life. In this reason, Jesus makes the trade-off

---

<sup>4</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 656.

explicit. While a man may indeed gain the world, what profit will that be he forfeits his soul in the exchange? Then, to make the foolishness of such an exchange even more apparent, Jesus asks, “Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?” (v. 26b). That is, what could anyone possible value above his own soul?<sup>10</sup>

We should pause for a moment to consider the surprising implication of what Jesus is saying here. In v. 24, Jesus was telling his disciples that they needed to take up their cross—that is, to prepare to die. Now, Jesus is asking them about whether they want to keep their lives (i.e., their souls). We see here that Jesus is not contrasting life and death in simple terms. Rather, he is showing that the worldly conception of life is backwards and upside-down. In our natural state, we think that “life” means pursuing all the good things that this world has to offer. Jesus, then, gives us a hypothetical: would you trade your eternal soul for a life filled to the brim with the good that this world offers? By this, Jesus exposes a key basis on which he asks his disciples to “deny themselves” and die (i.e., “take up their cross”). He is not asking them to die to life, but to die to death in order that they might truly live.

Once again, Calvin writes so well about this contrast: “the *soul* of man was not created merely to enjoy the world for a few days, but to obtain at length its immortality in heaven. What carelessness and what brutal stupidity is this, that men are so strongly attached to the world, and so much occupied with its affairs, as not to consider why they were born, and that God gave them an immortal soul, in order that, when the course of the earthly life was finished, they might live eternally in heaven!”<sup>11</sup> Whatever we think we are gaining in the short term becomes pale and empty in light of the inescapable preciousness of our own souls.

## **Tasting the Kingdom (Matt. 16:27–28)**

In the third reason, Jesus foretells the future judgment that he himself will execute on the earth: “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” (v. 27). As elsewhere in the Bible, the coming day of the Lord in judgment is presented as a powerful motivation for ordering our lives rightly today.<sup>12</sup> Here again, Jesus mingles his warning with his promises, where he himself marks the division between the two sides of this statement. For those who persist in their rebellion against him by their violence or their persistent clinging to the things of this world, Jesus warns of the day of their judgment. On that day, the most powerful kings who possess the greatest wealth and the most sophisticated military forces will not be able to stand against the Son of Man coming with his angels in the glory of his Father.

On the other hand, Jesus here offers the most precious promise possible to the humble believer who has possessed nothing in this world to defend himself from the wickedness surrounding him. As Calvin paraphrases, Jesus is here saying, “Place your lives fearlessly...in my hand, and under my protection; for I will at length appear as your avenger, and will fully restore you, though for the time you may seem to have perished.”<sup>13</sup> Those who have forfeited their lives for Jesus will be exalted in the same way that Jesus was exalted: through the resurrection power of God, displayed originally and decisively in Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>10</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 484.

How, though, should we understand the terms of “repayment” here, as to “each person according to what he has done”? From the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus was clear that the true standard of entrance into the kingdom of heaven was a righteousness as high as God himself: “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). According to this standard, then no one would ever stand worthy of the promise on his own righteousness. Nevertheless, Jesus is here outlining an alternative path for guilty sinners to acquire righteousness: through their union with him by faith. We will be saved because Christ was repaid for what we have done, and because the Son of Man will judge us according to what *he* has done for us. Our merit is entirely excluded from this gracious exchange of righteousness for unrighteousness. Nevertheless, Jesus also makes clear that those who are united to him will produce the fruit of faith in good works. We will not be saved *by* the good works that we do, but the salvation we receive will *produce* the fruit of good works according to Christ’s own example.

The final verse in this section is notoriously difficult: “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” (v. 28). Some have taken this as evidence of Jesus’ misunderstanding that his own return would be soon, within the lifetimes of his own disciples.<sup>14</sup> Others have taken this as a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem, “with its definite transfer of the offer of the gospel from the obdurate Jews to the receptive Gentiles.”<sup>15</sup> Still others take this as a reference to Jesus’ resurrection, ascension, and his outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost during his current reign at the right hand of the Father.<sup>16</sup> Although this list is in no way exhaustive, we will offer only one other suggestion, where others point to the transfiguration in the next passage.<sup>17</sup>

For my own part, I find two approaches most satisfying. First, I think that Hendriksen is right when he sees Jesus’ description of “the Son of Man coming his kingdom” as an example of “prophetic foreshortening” that compresses “the entire state of exaltation, from his resurrection to his second coming” into a single “unit.”<sup>18</sup> It is not one simple moment that Jesus has in mind, but the culmination of his exaltation glory, beginning with his resurrection and extending all the way to his return, when he will “repay each person according to what he has done” (v. 27). Second, France insightfully observes that this the next section of the transfiguration contains an unusually precise time connection (“after six days”), and that Mark and Luke also closely tie this promise about “some standing here” with the account of the transfiguration.<sup>19</sup>

Combining these views, I think this suggests that the transfiguration itself functions as something of a *manifested* foreshortening of Jesus’ state of exaltation, previewed before he actually comes into his kingdom. Here, Jesus insists that his disciples must follow him into his sufferings if they would save their souls. Next, Jesus gives “some” of his disciples a glimpse of the glory of the salvation that all those who lose their life for Christ’s sake will find in his consummated kingdom.

## Discussion Questions

1. How is this section connected with the previous section in Matthew 16:21–23 (“then”; v. 24)? How does Jesus connect the necessity of his own suffering (Matt. 16:21) with the necessity of his disciples’ suffering (v. 24)? What does it mean for someone to “deny himself”? To “take up his cross”?

---

<sup>14</sup> e.g., Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 485.

To “follow” Jesus? What is the first explanation as to why our suffering is necessary as disciples of Jesus (“for”; v. 25)?

2. What will it profit you if you were to gain the whole world but forfeit your soul (v. 26)? If this is true, why are the alluring desires of this world so compelling to our hearts? Where do you struggle to believe that you will profit something from this world at the expense of your everlasting soul? How does Jesus’ second reason for taking up our cross to follow him cut away at the seeming attractiveness of that desire?

3. Why do you think that Jesus uses such elevated language to describe his future judgment (v. 27)? How does this underscore the seriousness and severity of that judgment? How much has that judgment weighed on your mind and heart this week? If that judgment weighed heavily, why? Is there something from which you need to repent? If this judgment did not weigh heavily, why? Have you been careless toward the coming of Christ’s kingdom?

4. What do you think that Jesus meant about “the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” in v. 28? How might that coming of Christ’s kingdom include the resurrection, ascension, outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, session (i.e., sitting enthroned) at the right hand of his Father, and Second Coming? How might all of that be connected to Christ’s transfiguration in the next section (Matt. 17:1–13)?