“Follow me” series

Week 2: Deny yourself

November 8, 2026

Matthew 16:21 From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. 22 Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” 23 Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” 24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. 26 What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

Introduction

- There are statements we call “proverbs.” They contain truth within them. You can say the statement and everyone knows what it means. But for most statements, the context matters.
- Let me give you some examples (and stick with me, this is going somewhere)
- “Christians, he who gave His life for you, today demands yours in return” (Saint Bernard) in urging men to go on the second crusade where thousands of soldiers dies without achieving anything.
- “We will fight on the beaches . . . we will fight in the streets.” (Winston Churchill) against the imminent attacks of Nazi Germany inspiring their people to never give up.
- “I have a dream.” (Martin Luther King Jr.) on the mall in Washington, DC to speak out against racial injustice.
- How many times have you heard a celebrity or athlete get criticized and when you read more, you realize their words were taken out of one context to sometimes mean the exact opposite thing of what they were actually saying.
- It can cause misunderstandings in households. “I didn’t do anything . . . about fixing the dishwasher, but I got the laundry done, and dinner is on the stove.”
- Why do I bring this up? We started a new series last week that we are calling “Follow me.”
- It is based on an invitation given by Jesus to those following him while on earth but is also an invitation to anyone who wants to have forgiveness and a relationship with God.

Matthew 16:24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

- This is Jesus’ invitation to us. Last week we examined this more deeply, to see that Jesus’ call to us is to “follow me” and how this is intimately tied up in being his disciple. We saw that everyone of us responds daily to this invitation.
- Today we begin to pull this invitation apart a bit and look at the core of it. Honestly, today is kind of like part 1 of 2 in looking at the core of this invitation.
- If we want to be a disciple of Jesus, then we deny ourselves and pick up our cross to follow him.
- Jesus did not just say this statement all by itself. He wasn’t espousing a proverb. The statement came in response to a series of events that bring understanding and context to what he meant to those he was speaking with and to us today.

Main Sermon Text

- What triggered this statement, this invitation, from Jesus? The disciples had been with Jesus for several years. They had seen him do amazing things. They had heard his teaching, experienced his love, watched him tangle with the religious leaders.
- They had experienced much of this themselves when Jesus sent them off two by two to teach and heal.
- With all this, they still did not really understand Jesus. They now saw him as more than a rabbi. They thought that perhaps Jesus was the Messiah, the one who was to deliver Israel. But their picture of a Messiah was someone who would rise to power and bring Israel into political dominance and freedom. So Jesus asked them a question.

Matthew 16:13 When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" 14 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

- Peter makes a declaration that was absolutely correct but one that he also did not fully understand.

16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

- This is a watershed moment in Jesus' relationship with the disciples.

17 Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven."

- You are finally starting to get this. Who I am.
- Peter was probably feeling pretty good about himself. He "nailed it!"
- The others probably thought they could have said the same thing.
- Jesus was the Messiah. Deliverance was coming. He was going to be king and they were going to ride his coattails to power. That's what makes what happens next so important.

21 From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

- It was not until his closest disciples had declared that they believed that Jesus was the Messiah that he began to explain what would happen.
- And it came as a total shock to his disciples.
- I am going to suffer. Those in power will take advantage of me. Not only will I not rise to power and take over, I am going to suffer and die.
- This was unthinkable. Messiahs don't die. They conquer. They don't suffer. They make others suffer. It didn't fit their ideas, and so Peter, who "nailed it" the first time, pipes up again.

22 Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

- He called Jesus out. He told him he was wrong. This was not the plan and besides, the disciples would never let something like this happen to Jesus. Perhaps he thought Jesus was going to again praise him for his steadfast support. Instead, he is on the receiving end of the harshest rebuke Jesus ever made to his disciples.

23 Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

- Ouch.
- But this statement is huge because it sets up what comes next and what is the focus for us in this series. Jesus wants all his disciples to understand so he addresses this to them all.

24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but

whoever loses their life for me will find it. 26 What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"

- Jesus wants to correct in the strongest possible terms their definition of what it means to follow him, of what it means to be a disciple, what it means to be a Christian. They thought following Jesus was something to be used to their own advantage, when what Jesus was about to model, was the exact opposite.
- If you want to be my follower, to be in my kingdom, to be my disciple, you must do two things. Deny yourself. Pick up your cross.
- I want to examine the first today and the second next week.
- **To follow Jesus is to deny yourself**
- When I say "deny myself" most of you have a picture that jumps to mind on what this looks like.
- I am going to deny myself the ice cream I really want.
- I am going to stop from spending on that item that is calling out to me.
- I might deny myself pursuing that relationship.
- Perhaps I am not going to roll over and hit the snooze button but deny myself the sleep and get to the gym.
- Or perhaps it is denying myself by not engaging in a sinful or damaging behavior.
- Is that what Jesus meant when he said to deny ourselves? To stop sinning? To give up good things for him?
- Because Jesus said that if we do not deny ourselves, we CANNOT be his disciple. It is not about just having a better life or experience Jesus fully. Jesus said that if we don't live like this, we CANNOT be his disciple, his follower.
- That means if we choose to not do this, we are not really following Jesus.
- Let's go back to the context. Right before Jesus said this, he rebuked Peter. And it was for a very specific reason.

23 Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

- The reason that Jesus was so strong in his words is because of Peter's motivation and what he was advocating Jesus' motivation to be.
- Peter was putting what he wanted and what HE thought God should do in the place of highest importance.

I. To deny yourself is to live with God's priorities in first place.

- The problem wasn't that Peter did not love Jesus; the problem was that Peter wanted to love Jesus without the suffering, the rejection and the cross.
- And in that moment, Peter had stopped following and was now trying to lead.
- Consider, when we deny ourselves a piece of cake what are doing? We are putting our health or having a lower weight as higher importance than the immediate pleasure of the cake.
- When we give up spending money in the moment it is because we are trying to save for something else, or get out of debt, or have made something else more important.
- When we choose not to engage in a certain relationship it is because there is either someone or something that has a higher priority above that.
- When Jesus invites us to follow him and deny ourselves, he is saying that to follow him is to put his priorities above my own.
- Peer assumed that he knew what God really wanted to do, but Jesus told him it was motivated purely out of self-centered desires.
- It's not that what I want doesn't matter, or isn't valid, or that I should ignore them.

- But it DOES mean that how I think, what I do, and how I live, does not flow first and foremost from what I want but what he wants. How does that play out in our lives?
- It is simply answering the question, what goes on top?

A. Let God shape what I think instead of culture.

- What does Scripture say about God? About me? How do I see government? Culture? Even if I have strong opinions, what does God say. This is why Scripture is so, so important.
- When you want to run yourself down, to think of yourself as nothing, we need to know that God tells us in Scripture that we are created by God. In his image. As his masterpieces. That he has work for us to do. That we have value. That we are not stupid or useless.
- When it feels like God is not treating us like we want, we remember that he loves us. That he died for us. That he has proven himself trustworthy.
- We deny our thoughts and subordinate them to God's. And if they differ, we live like God's words are the truth. Whose thoughts go on top? Mine or God's?

B. Let God shape how I treat others.

- How do I deal with people who drain me? Where do I put my time with others? Where should I get involved in serving others. When Jesus tells us to love others, to serve others, to put their interests before our own, he is showing us how to treat others.
- We have our own preferences and desires. But we choose to treat others as Jesus would treat them even when our desire is the opposite.
- Do I treat others my way (on top) or God's way (on top).

C. Let God shape how I use my resources.

- To deny myself is to let God decide how I use my time. Whether it is family, work, or simply wanting to stay home because I deserve it, it is asking the Holy Spirit what he should have me do. When you decide what to do and where to go and how to spend your time, are your priorities on top, or God's.
- To deny myself is to let live as though all my resources, my money, are God's and I will do with them what he leads me to do. I want to spend it on this or that. I deserve this. Is that in line with what God is leading? It's why Jesus said you cannot serve both God and money.

- There was a reason this was a stumbling block for Jesus. It was a real temptation – to not follow the way of his heavenly Father but just do what Peter said.
- He had the position and the power to make it happen. It would have simply been a word.
- But for Jesus himself, he put God's priorities on top. God's desires, not his own.
- To deny self is to align with God's kingdom values.
- Jesus was not asking his disciples (and us) if they merely believe that He is the Messiah – He is asking them to surrender to Him as LORD.
- Believing he is God but putting my priorities ahead of him is incongruent.
- But there is something that goes hand-in-hand with this. Consider what Jesus said right after.

25 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.
26 What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

II. To deny yourself is to receive God's plans.

- Denying myself is not simply an issue of "I can't" or "God won't let me" and denying myself what I want. It is realizing that as a follower of Jesus I can't live as I did before. I am a new person.
- This totally misses the point.
- There IS a call to deny ourselves. To let God decide where my money goes, and when to give it away. To let God manage my calendar such that I serve others even when I am tired and don't want to. To speak out and risk rejection when all I want to do is be safe.
- There is a promise here. If you are willing to follow Jesus and deny yourself, you will find what you most deeply crave, but, and Jesus is really clear here, if you live with your priorities on top, you lose.
- You see, to deny yourself and follow Jesus is to live by kingdom principles, and these tend to be upside down or opposite of everything we are told in our world.
- We are told to get what we want, but the kingdom says we get by giving away.
- We are told to live our life to the fullest but the kingdom says we live by dying.
- We are told to get ahead, to hold to our rights, but the kingdom says we rise by surrendering.
- The world ways watch out for yourself first, but the kingdom says we make a difference by putting others first.
- When we adopt kingdom priorities, then peace, direction, spiritual transformation, differences in our families, in our jobs, follow.
- The sobering part of Jesus' statement is the implication that it is possible to waste your life. I wonder how often we consider that we can live a life where we are successful in our jobs, that our kids are happy, that we enjoy the benefits of western affluence, and our life could be a total waste.
- All because we put our priorities on the top.

Conclusion

- When I deny myself, it is the daily choice to put God's priorities, the priorities of the kingdom, ahead of my own. In what I think, how I treat others and how I use my resources.
- As I do this, I begin to receive all that God has for me. Life eternal and life today.
- As we said last week, the choice is yours.
- There are two questions you much answer.
- The first is the same question Jesus asked his disciples.
- "Who do you say I am?"
- Who is Jesus to you? A good teacher – you like what he says . . . most of the time?
- Your Savior – the one who died for you and offers forgiveness since he can keep you out of hell?
- Or is he your king? The one who owns everything and is over everything, including you.
- How you answer this question matters. Because if he is your king, your Lord, then this changes everything.
- It then leads to a daily question. Will I put my king's priorities above my own and live according to his wishes or will I live in rebellion towards him?
- The invitation to deny ourselves and follow Jesus is not one to be taken lightly. But to do this is worth it.
- When you deny yourself for a year and now you feel better, clothes you hadn't worn in a decade fit, and you have energy, you realize it was worth it.

- When you don’t spend on little things, and don’t go out for dinner twice a week, and sacrifice but a year later you are enjoying a vacation in that special place or you got to help someone in a way that changed their life, you realize it is worth it.
- When you put God’s priorities above your own, and think and act accordingly, what you will find is that life is different. It is so much better than what you would have had otherwise and you will realize that it is worth it.
- For the next couple of weeks, as you wake up each day, simply ask what today would look like if you put God’s priorities first. Then do it.