

Surrender: The Path of True Discipleship

Matthew 16:21–28

This may surprise you, but when I was a kid, my brother and I were bitter rivals. We fought over silly things, and often the battles ended with me on the ground and my brother kneeling on my chest, commanding me to surrender. Perhaps you can relate to similar struggles in your own childhood. Fortunately, our relationship is no longer characterized by such antics.

The title of my message today is “Surrender: The Path of True Discipleship.” The story of me and my brother, though silly, points to a reality that Jesus wants to convey in Matthew 16. That reality is surrender. As we dive into this text, I want to begin with a simple definition that will guide us as we seek to understand what Jesus is saying:

Surrender: *The deliberate, ongoing renunciation of self-rule — denying one’s own will, taking up the cross of Christ as a daily act of death to self, and following Christ as Lord — trusting that losing one’s life for His sake is the only way to actually find it.*

Setting the Scene

Throughout the book of Matthew, Jesus has been preaching the good news of the kingdom of God. In His sermon, He has laid out the characteristics of a kingdom follower and helped us understand the transformed nature of such a follower:

- Being a follower of Jesus means I recognize the blessing that comes from my brokenness — I am poor in spirit. I have nothing to offer God; He has given me everything in Christ.
- Being a follower of Jesus means I mourn over that brokenness, and it leads me to repentance — I recognize I am on the wrong path, I get off at the nearest exit, and I choose to follow Christ until I reach my destination: the path of blessing and spiritual comfort.
- Being a follower of Jesus means I have nothing in myself to lord over another. I display meekness in how I interact with others — power under

control — recognizing I have nothing to boast about except Christ and what He has accomplished in my life.

- Being a follower of Jesus means my appetites are different. I love what God loves, and I hate what He hates.
- Being a follower of Jesus means my mindset is driven by kindness. Because I have been given everything through Christ, I have much to give others by way of the grace and mercy shown to me.
- Being a follower of Jesus means I desire to bring others into the same peace that now dominates my soul.
- This transformed life will bring hardship. In fact, hardship is a mark of the follower of Jesus.

This kingdom life is not the kind of life you'd expect of royalty. It flows from the inside out — character over good deeds — and it is upside down: the last will be first, and the first will be last.

This concept was difficult for the people of Jesus' day to understand. It was contrary to their mindset. The Pharisees and religious rulers saw their religion as a status symbol, and they used that status to lord over those they felt were beneath them. This was not the way of the kingdom. This was not the life Jesus desired for them, and if they wanted to follow Him, they would need to learn to surrender to the will and way of their King. This is where we find ourselves in Matthew 16, as Matthew's account reveals the heart of those who heard Jesus' message.

The Pharisees, feeling the assault of Jesus' message on the foundation of everything they held to, asked Him to show them a sign from heaven. Why would they do this?

- The message of surrender was offensive to them as it would force them to acknowledge that they were wrong — that there was a truth outside themselves to which they, too, were subject. That was a hard thing to accept.
- The message of surrender would cost them the chokehold they had on the people. They were using religion to control others, failing to see that God had given them truth for the purpose of leading people to Himself.

In truth, we are not so different from the Pharisees. Growing up in a Christian home, I found myself wearing truth as a badge, often using it as a blunt tool to

bludgeon those I felt weren't living up to the standard. I failed to understand that God's purpose in giving me the truth was not to hand me a platform to judge others, but to show me how to rescue those who are lost — to point them to the answer for their struggles. For eighteen years, my life was defined more by externals than by an inward reality — a heart transformed by the truth of the gospel. Like the Pharisees, I failed to surrender.

The Warning and the Confession

As Jesus speaks to His disciples in Matthew 16:6, He warns them of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees — an interesting expression. Leaven is yeast; a little bit works through the entire dough. The pride and arrogance of these religious elites would infect their whole heart in a way that would destroy any chance of their following Jesus. If the people did not fully embrace the truth that they were broken and desperate apart from God, they would find their entire soul infected with a pride that would keep them from Him. In demanding a sign, the Pharisees were declaring resistance to Jesus' will and way. He was calling out their heart, warning that their pride would keep them from God — a condition His disciples needed to be aware of.

As Jesus continues the conversation, with the warning about the Pharisees and Sadducees still ringing in their ears, He asks them in verses 14–15, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter's answer is clear and decisive: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” At those words, Jesus blesses Peter and acknowledges the Father's work in revealing this truth to His beloved servant. Peter didn't demand a sign — he simply received the truth.

As we near our text for this morning, Jesus continues the discussion with Peter and the other disciples. In verse 21, He shows them the path of surrender to which He is about to call each of them, and His words are harsh and difficult to accept. Let's read them together.

Matthew 16:21–23 — 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. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance

to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

As Jesus reveals the Father's plan, Peter struggles to accept it. What Peter fails to understand is that the path of true discipleship demands surrender. If Jesus was to be faithful to all the Father had entrusted to Him, He had to yield to the Father's will — and in doing so, He set an example for us. This is foundational to following Christ: we cannot follow Him while clinging to anything other than His will and way for our lives. As Jesus laid out this path in Matthew 5–7, He wanted His disciples to understand that following it demanded surrender.

Peter's Struggle — and Ours

Peter's objection is quickly rebuked: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” How could Peter's mindset be so contrary to the ways of God? It seems he was fighting for Jesus' life and rejecting the shame Jesus was willing to endure. Wasn't that a good thing?

- Peter had set up in his mind a vision of the kingdom of God and what it would look like. He was fighting for this vision of the kingdom and struggling to accept the one that Jesus came to bring.
- Peter wanted Jesus to step into his broken world and fix it. The thought of Jesus' death felt like failure.
- Peter wasn't willing to let go of the vision he so hopelessly clung to.
- His refusal to release his grip on his own kingdom meant he wasn't ready to embrace the kingdom Jesus was offering.
- Peter was not ready to walk the path of surrender, and Jesus called him out for it.

Fortunately for Peter, the Father still had a plan for his life. Scripture tells us that Peter would go on to be a pillar in the church; his leadership would be foundational to the growth of Jesus' bride... the church. But before Peter could embrace the future that God had for him, he needed to accept his own need for surrender. Perhaps that is where you are living today.

- You struggle to let go of what you think the kingdom of God needs to look like in your life... in your marriage, in your family, in your work.

- You struggle to release your expectations of what you want Jesus to do in the midst of your brokenness. Perhaps you foolishly desire God to make much of you. You see the gospel as a path to prosperity.
- You struggle to embrace the path of surrender because you fear that letting go of control will lead to your demise. This was my struggle.
- You struggle to trust the will and way of a sovereign God, who is capable of orchestrating the events of your life for His glory and your greatest good.

My brothers and sisters, hear the words of Christ — this line of thinking is an offense to the gospel. It is an obstacle and a barrier to true saving faith. Just as Jesus called out Peter, He is calling out us today. Recognize that your thinking is keeping you from the very God who desires to give you rest.

The Call to Surrender — Matthew 16:24–28

This brings us to our main text, where Jesus tells His disciples what the path of surrender truly looks like. Let's read it together.

Matthew 16:24–28 — Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, 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. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? 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. 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."

There is a lot happening in this text, and for the sake of time we'll focus on Jesus' call to surrender in verses 24–26. As He responds to everything unfolding in this chapter, He lays out what it looks like to be a true disciple of Jesus and a citizen of His kingdom.

1. Being a disciple of Jesus means denying yourself (v. 24)

What does He mean? The path of true discipleship is not about our will, our wishes, our way. If we want to follow Jesus, we must set aside what we think we want in order to pursue the will of the One who has called us to Himself.

I grew up in a Christian home — parents who loved me, a church family who genuinely cared for my soul. And yet, as I thought about being a follower of Jesus, it was more about what I wanted out of my faith than about a work God desired to do in me. I did a lot of good things before I truly knew Jesus, but for the wrong reasons. I prayed the salvation prayer at five because I didn't want to go to hell. I got baptized at eleven because I didn't want to be the kid in my youth group who hadn't done what everyone else had done. I kept serving in my church because I loved the praise that came with it — I loved receiving the accolades.

When I turned eighteen and stood on the edge of graduation, I still felt emptiness and distance from God. The truth is, I had never denied myself in coming to Him. My pursuit of Him was still, in the end, a pursuit of me — what I could get out of my faith, how it could improve my life.

- Denying myself meant recognizing that there was a “King” whom I was serving — me! And I was not worthy of this worship. My actions were an offense to the God who made me. Denying myself meant recognizing that I was not the king of my own life.
- Denying myself meant recognizing that my chief aim was not to please myself, but to please the God who saved me.
- Denying myself meant serving others not for the praise of man, but for the purpose of pointing them to the God who loved them and desired to rescue them.

When I gave my heart to Jesus and surrendered to His will, everything changed — though the battle for ongoing surrender continued. I lived in a Romans 7 reality. I now had an awareness of my own selfishness, as the ugliness of the flesh kept rearing its head, in my life and in my marriage. I wrestled with loving my wife in hope of receiving something in return, and when I didn't receive it the way I wanted, I spiraled in my flesh. As I grew in my walk with Jesus, I began to learn what denying myself truly meant:

- Denying myself meant loving God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength — He became my chief pursuit.
- Denying myself meant loving my wife as Jesus loved the church and gave Himself up for her.

- Denying myself meant seeking others' good even when it isn't reciprocated in the way that I desire.
- Denying myself meant seeing my acts of service as worship to the God who rescued me — not a means to an end, but an expression of a heart fully surrendered to Him.

Some of you are still wrestling with this reality.

- Perhaps you're struggling in your marriage, thinking, "If my spouse would only... then I could be truly happy." Hear the words of Christ today: if you want to follow Jesus in your marriage, you must deny yourself. Love your spouse. Serve your spouse. Point your spouse to Jesus for no other reason than to honor God.
- Perhaps you're struggling in your parenting, thinking, "If my kids would only... then my home would be..." God's call to you is simple: show them Jesus. Love His truth. Trust that the Spirit of God will use the Word of God to move the heart of the child of God. Deny yourself of what you want so you can embrace what God has for you in your particular situation.

There's so much more we could say here, but Jesus doesn't stop with denial of self.

2. Being a disciple of Jesus means taking up your cross (v. 24)

This would have been a difficult line for the disciples to swallow. Take up my cross? You mean I must be willing to die? That is exactly what Jesus is saying.

The path of true discipleship means letting go of everything I hold most dear. For the disciples, that meant being willing to die — and more than that, living with a mindset of continual, perpetual sacrifice (Rom. 12). It meant a singular focus: nothing could be more important than following the will of God. For Jesus, that meant death on the cross — there was no escaping it. For His kingdom to thrive, He had to die. The disciples struggled with that truth, because to follow Him in His kingdom, they too had to be willing to die. This is what Paul is describing in Philippians 3 when he speaks of the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. The mindset Jesus embraced on His way to the cross is the same mindset His followers need as they walk the path of discipleship.

This mindset is deeply countercultural. We run from pain and hardship. For many of us, our entire lives are spent protecting ourselves and securing our comfort.

We avoid conversations that bring us pain. We build our futures around retirement and ease, while Jesus says: risk it all for the sake of His kingdom. We hold back our finances because saying yes to Jesus means saying no to something else we want. Taking up my cross means embracing the gospel as the only way to live — speaking truth in my workplace even if it costs me my job, telling the truth to friends and neighbors even if it jeopardizes a friendship, caring more about the glory of God than about preserving my comfort. This brings us to our third and final point in the text.

3. Being a disciple of Jesus means following Him (v. 24)

What does this look like?

- Look to His life and embrace His values. Be about the most important things: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.
- Live for the truths Jesus died for. Brothers and sisters, love the gospel and never get over it. Talk about it in your homes. Bring it up at work. Share it with your neighbors and friends. Declare it boldly and without apology, recognizing that it is the only truth that can rescue a dying world.
- Establish a culture in your home that points your family to the truth that rescues. Care more about gospel life than about your travel sports schedule. Care more about gospel life than about your favorite tv show. Care more about gospel life than about preserving your comforts.
- Pursue and embrace the truth that transforms. As Deuteronomy 6 states: love the Word, preach and teach the Word, live the Word.

The Weight of the Question

Jesus is clear that the path of true discipleship means letting go of everything we think matters more. He punctuates this in verse 26:

"For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?"

Do you want to live a blessed life? Then pursue the path of the kingdom. Many of us are fighting to gain the world instead:

- We say yes to our kids, hoping to give them what we never had.

- We build our calendars around events and activities that create more busyness and less of this fully surrendered gospel life.
- We watch more, stream more, scroll more — chasing connection and pleasure in this world. We are amusing ourselves to death.
- We post on social media hoping for the approval of others, at the expense of the true, lasting relationships that point people to Jesus.

What is Jesus saying to us in this text? Simply this: the path of true discipleship lies in the face of everything the world calls important. Whoever seeks to gain this life will forfeit his soul. If you want to be a follower of Jesus, hear his words this morning: “deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Him.”

If you want to be a follower of Jesus, you must surrender! **Let us pray.**