

Takeaway Lesson - 8/30/26

Matthew 16:21-28 — Take Up Your Cross: The Cost of Following Jesus

Scripture Focus

Immediately after Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus begins explaining what kind of Messiah He has come to be: one who will suffer, die, and rise again. Peter rejects this idea, but Jesus makes clear that the cross is not an interruption of God's plan—it is central to it. Jesus then turns to all His disciples and teaches that following Him means denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and trusting that true life is found not in preserving ourselves but in belonging to Christ.

Read the verse(s) aloud

Memorable quotes/notes:

Historical / Linguistic Context

- Verse 21 marks an important turning point in Matthew's Gospel: **"From that time Jesus began to show His disciples..."** Having revealed His identity as the Messiah, Jesus now begins preparing them for His journey toward Jerusalem, suffering, death, and resurrection.
- Peter has correctly identified Jesus as the Messiah, but he does not yet understand what that means. Like many in his time, Peter likely expected a victorious Messiah who would triumph over Israel's enemies. A suffering and executed Messiah seemed completely incompatible with that expectation.
- Peter actually **rebukes Jesus**, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to You." Only moments after being praised for his confession of faith, Peter attempts to tell Jesus how the Messiah's mission should unfold.
- Jesus' response—**"Get behind Me, Satan!"**—is unusually strong. Peter is not literally Satan, but his suggestion echoes the temptation Jesus faced in the wilderness: achieve glory without suffering and the cross. Jesus recognizes that anything attempting to separate Him from His saving mission opposes God's will.
- Jesus tells His followers to **"deny themselves and take up their cross."** To Jesus' original audience, a cross was not a general symbol for inconvenience or hardship. Crucifixion was a brutal Roman method of execution. A condemned person could be forced to carry the crossbeam publicly toward the place of execution. Jesus' words therefore describe a radical surrender of one's claim to control one's own life.
- "Taking up your cross" does not mean that every difficulty we experience is automatically a cross from God. Christian cross-bearing specifically involves the sacrifices, struggles, or suffering that come from faithfully following Christ and loving our neighbors.
- Jesus asks, **"For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?"** The Greek word *psychē* can mean both "life" and "soul." Jesus challenges the human instinct to measure life by what we can acquire, preserve, accomplish, or control.
- Jesus does not speak only about suffering. He repeatedly points toward **resurrection and victory**. In verse 21, He says He will "be raised on the third day," and the passage ends with the promise of the Son of Man coming in glory. The Christian cross is always understood in light of the resurrection.

Discussion Questions

1. Peter accepts Jesus as the Messiah but struggles to accept a Messiah who must suffer. Are there parts of Jesus' teaching that we find easier to accept than others? Why are we sometimes tempted to want Jesus on our own terms?
2. Jesus says, "If any want to become My followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me." What is the difference between Christian self-denial and simply making life unnecessarily difficult for ourselves?
3. What might "taking up your cross" look like in ordinary Christian life today—in our families, workplaces, communities, or congregation?
4. Read Philippians 2:5-11. How does Jesus' own journey from humility and suffering to exaltation help us understand what He asks of His followers?
5. Jesus asks, "What will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?" What does our culture encourage us to "gain," and how can pursuing those things sometimes distract us from what has eternal value?

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, You willingly traveled the road to Jerusalem and endured the cross for our salvation. Forgive us when, like Peter, we want to follow You only when Your ways match our expectations. Turn our minds from merely human things toward the things of God. Give us faith to deny ourselves, courage to take up our crosses, and strength to follow wherever You lead. Keep us from measuring our lives by what we gain, accomplish, or possess, and remind us that true life is found in You. When following You is difficult, fix our eyes upon the cross and the empty tomb, trusting that suffering and death never have the final word. Amen.