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The Paradox of the Christian Life

Matthew 16:24-28

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As you've probably already heard if you're visiting with us this morning, things don't *always* look like this around here. It typically looks like a zoo, not necessarily a fair. This week, next week and the following week we're going to talk about three gifts that God has given us. They're resources, and God has called us to manage those—or what we would call *steward* those—for His purposes. We're going to talk about *time* today – which is really life. Next week we'll talk about talents, and the following week we'll talk about our treasures. Of course those all interrelate and they'll overlap each week.

It is very important to understand I'm not here today by chance. I'm here today because God made me on purpose for a purpose. The Bible is very clear that God is the Creator, life is a gift from God, and we're not made so we can just kind of figure out our way through life. We're here on purpose for a purpose. It is very important that we understand our time, our talents, our treasures are gifts from God, and God expects us to steward them for His purposes. And yes, one day, we will be held accountable for what we've done with what we've been given.

It was just about three years ago that Jeff announced the vision of this church, seeking to plant a hundred churches in India. We talked about the cost of that being about a hundred dollars a month for several years to plant one church. And like many couples, Patty and I prayed about it and decided we, as a couple, wanted to sponsor one of those churches. So on top of regular giving, missions giving, and then *Purpose* giving, all of us feel the effect of that. It's a sacrifice. It does affect lifestyle, but we do it gladly and we do it joyfully. But there is an assumption in that—that this money that we're giving is going to go to its intended purpose.

You know, the funniest thing, for the last two weeks (you may not know this), Jeff was in India. I called him about halfway through the trip, and he was complaining about how hard it is in India. But, you know, in the background I thought I could hear the music of a party. As a matter of fact, it sounded like Hawaiian music, like he was at a luau. And I thought *that's strange*. And then Jeff comes back and he really has a very nice tan. He seems extremely well rested, and he has all these Hawaiian knickknacks all over his desk.

Now what if Jeff took the money that we sacrificially gave to plant churches in India and used this to have a two-week party in Hawaii? Would you have a problem with that? Now obviously the only thing that's true in all of that is that Jeff was in India the last two weeks. I just saw him. He's back and he looks good and exhausted, so I think we're okay there.

But the reality is we would be greatly offended if Jeff had taken the money and gone to Hawaii. That is not the purpose for which we gave that money; it wasn't so that Jeff could just use it to fulfill his own desires and purpose. Why would we think God would be any less offended when He's given us life, He's given us talents, He's given us treasures in order to accomplish His purpose in the world. It's a problem when we've used what we've been given for our own purposes, for our own desires to do our own thing.

The reason we do that is there is something within us that is afraid that if we give it away we're going to lose it, so we clutch at it. We hold onto it. We want to do it our way. But what if, in the process of trying to save our life, we actually end up losing it? And what if it were possible that, in

an act of losing our lives, we would actually save them? Well, as confusing as that may sound, that is exactly what Jesus said in Matthew 16.

If you have a Bible, I invite you to turn with us to Matthew chapter 16. This is a pivotal point in the ministry of Jesus. He has been ministering to the multitudes, but there is a transition now where He has been clearly identified as the Messiah and will really, for the most part, turn His attention to His disciples and pour His life into them before He goes to the cross. This is the passage where Peter opens up his mouth and out comes the declaration that was given to him by the Spirit of God where he says, "Thou art the Christ (or the Messiah), the son of the Living God." It's a very strong statement that not only was Jesus God, but Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah.

It was very hard for these disciples to come to grips with that, but it isn't hard to understand that. Can you imagine what it would be like to try to process the reality that this person that you've become friends with, this person that you walk down the street with, this person that you eat with is actually God in the flesh? That would take a bit of processing to come to grips with, and that is where they are at this point in the story. We pick it up in Verse 21:

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 be raised up on the third day. Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You." But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." (Matthew 16:21-23, *NASB)

Jesus begins to tell His disciples that, as the Christ, as the Messiah, He must go to Jerusalem. There He will suffer. He will die, be buried, and be raised again on the third day. Well, that isn't what Peter imagined the Messiah would do at all. So Peter intervenes, and I think with the best of intentions. But what Peter imagined was the immediate: That the Messiah would come on the scene, and He would make life more comfortable, more convenient. He would make life better today. And so Peter thought the Messiah should usher in the kingdom and bring deliverance from the tyranny of Rome. And Jesus would sit as King, and it would be everything they wanted to make life better today.

Jesus rebukes him and says, "Peter, you've got your eyes set on man's interests." Man's interest is live for the moment. I want my life fixed today. As a matter of fact, what Peter wanted is exactly what people want from God today. They pursue God because they want God to fix life. "God, make my life more comfortable. Make my life more convenient. I need You to fix things up so that I can go through this life in a more comfortable fashion."

But God's interests aren't always man's interests. Jesus wasn't about the moment. Jesus was about fulfilling the plan of God that has been unfolding down through the generations. Peter couldn't have understood that what Jesus was going to do would affect the salvation of people from the beginning to the end. As a matter of fact, if Jesus would have been about Peter's interests instead of God's interests, we today would have no hope of salvation. Everything hung in the balance.

Sometimes it's hard to understand that God's ways are not our ways—that God is not always fixing the moment. But God has a plan, an eternal plan. And He is executing that plan. And in the end it's God's interests that must take precedence over our interests of fixing things for the moment.

Well, it is out of that discussion then that we pick up our text in verse 24.

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to 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 will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and will then repay every man according to his deeds. Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom." (Matthew 16:24-28)

Jesus is now defining to those who are seeking to follow Him what it actually means to be a Christ follower. What does it mean to follow Jesus? He says, "If anyone wishes to come—the invitation is made to anyone, anyone can come, anyone can follow—but if you are going to follow Me, you first must *deny yourself*."

That's a very interesting phrase. The word "deny" means to not associate with. I have to not associate with myself because I'm trouble. There is a part of me that wants to live for the moment. There's a *big* part of me that wants to live for the moment. I want to experience what the world has to offer. I want my life to be comfortable; I want it to be convenient. I want everything in my life straightened up and fixed. Those are my interests. And there's a big part of me that leans that way.

And what Jesus is saying is, "That guy is trouble – because you can't focus on man's interests if you're going to follow Me. The interests have to be God's interests." It is literally a reorientation in life to realize this is no longer about me. It's not about my comfort. It's not about my convenience. It's not about the moment. It's about God's eternal plan. And it's about a chance to be a part of something that will last forever.

It's a challenge to live that way. We have to deny ourselves. It's very important to process Jesus' words through the words of the first century listeners. We have a very unique and unfortunate opportunity in our country where Christianity is relatively popular to the extent where we can live with one foot in the world and one foot in the kingdom of God and, for the most part, get away with that. Even though it's a very miserable way to live, we can straddle the fence.

Understand most Christians throughout the last two thousand years have not had that choice. To make a decision to follow Christ often meant persecution and sometimes meant death. There wasn't much fence-straddling in the first century. Many of these listeners would ultimately be persecuted. Many of them would eventually die for their faith. And that is exactly what Jesus was saying. There is a cost here. If you want life to become more comfortable, more convenient, all straightened up for the moment, that is not what this is about. Most of those who have become Christians over the last 2000 years, including many in our world today in countries around the world, understand that probably their lives will become less convenient. They will become more persecuted in choosing to follow Jesus. There was a price tag, as there is today.

"He must deny himself, and take up his cross." (Matthew 16:24) Again, you have to process these words through the ears of the first century listener. We hear "the cross" and we think religious symbol. It's something you put on a building. It's something you wear around your neck. It's symbolic of our salvation. They wouldn't have heard that at all. As a matter of fact, they hadn't even seen Jesus go to the cross. They would have only visualized those criminals and outcasts of society whom they had seen walking through the streets of the city en route to a horrible death. It would have been a picture of shame. It would have been a picture of those who don't fit in. It would be months later where these same followers would actually see Jesus take up His cross and

walk through the streets of Jerusalem, bruised and bloodied, headed toward a horrible execution. And in that moment they didn't find themselves jumping into the street and saying, "I want to carry my cross too!" They hid in the shadows and hoped that no one would discover that they too were followers of Jesus because the moment was horrifying.

But as the months would pass (and we pick it up in the book of Acts), they really began to understand what it meant to follow Jesus. And empowered by the Spirit of God, many of these people would take up their cross, follow Jesus, and end up executed because of their faith.

So you have to understand all of this is involved in these statements of denying myself and taking up my cross and following Jesus. It's a willingness to declare I am a follower of Jesus, to stop straddling the fence, stop trying to live in both worlds, and to stand up and say I'm identified with Jesus. It isn't always going to be popular. It isn't always going to be easy. It doesn't make life more convenient, but that's what it takes to be a follower of Jesus. You have to be willing to experience the shame that will come from our culture. Jesus said, "They hated me; they'll hate you. They persecuted Me; they're going to persecute you." And for most Christians over the last 2000 years, that has been very true. Our commitment should be no less, even though we may not experience persecution in our lifetime.

"For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it." (Matthew 16:25)

This is the paradox of the Christian life. Verse 25 is as if Jesus is anticipating our reaction out of verse 24 when He identifies what it actually costs to follow Him. A lot of people consider themselves to be Christians. In our country that's a very high percentage. And what they mean by Christian is they're sympathetic to the Christian faith, and they visit God once a week in church.

But when you start talking about denying myself and taking up my cross and God's interests more than my interests, that's a whole different cost. And many Christians would come out of verse 24 and say, "Hey, wait a minute; that's not what I signed up for! I mean I thought God was gonna kinda fix up my life; I thought God was gonna make things a little more comfortable, a little more convenient. He was going to just make my life better. That's what I signed up for. You know, I didn't sign up for this deny yourself, take up your cross thing."

So in verse 25 there's a sense of what we're saying is, "I'm not sure I want to do that. I feel like I want to save my life. I want to protect it. I want to pull it back. I'm not up for that." And what Jesus is saying (you know, this is the interesting thing), when you seek to save your life, you're going to end up losing it. But when you're willing to lose it for My sake, in some strange way it's there that you're going to find it. It's there that you're going to save it.

The paradox of the Christian life is you have to believe by faith that it's the opposite of what my natural inclinations are. That ultimately to save my life I have to lose it. I have to give it up. And it's there that rather than losing life I actually end up finding it.

Now, as confusing as that may seem, this morning all around you are hundreds of people who know this to be true. Somewhere along the way they've made the decision to be a Christ follower. And they have made it a way of life to deny themselves, to take up their cross and to follow Jesus. And they would tell you it was then that they found life, found a significance, found a meaning, found a purpose, found a joy that they had never known before. And they would never go back.

But you have to believe that by faith. I can't prove that to you. All I can tell you is it looks very different on the other side of that decision. You may be thinking: *I just don't understand that. I don't know what that means.* You have to believe it by faith. Jesus promises when you lose your life, you find it. And if you're going to try and save your life, you're ultimately going to lose it. You have to make a decision: Does Jesus tell the truth, or does He not?

“For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul.”

(Matthew 16:26a)

That word “soul” is the same word translated “life” in verse 25. I think that word fits better there. So it says, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his *life*?” In other words, wastes his life. Or, “What will a man give in exchange for his life?”

Jesus is not talking about salvation here; He’s talking about discipleship. He’s talking about a way of life. He is talking about total commitment. And what He is saying here is, “What does the world possibly have to offer you? What profit is there in gaining the world if it is temporal, if it doesn’t really satisfy, and in the end you have nothing? You’ve wasted your life. What is the profit in that? What could a person possibly gain in this world that would be worth wasting your life for?”

We’ve talked about it many times over the last couple of years. I can't imagine anything more horrible than to one day stand before God and to recognize that I totally wasted my life. I can’t imagine being in my old age and looking back and knowing that I had wasted it. And you don’t get a chance to live it twice. You don’t get a chance to do it over. I had one shot and I blew it. That would be a horrifying moment.

That is exactly what Jesus is saying. What if you were the most successful person that ever lived and you gained the whole world, but at the end of the day it’s worthless? The moment you stand before God, the stuff of the world is gone, and what do you have left? What was the profit in gaining that which is temporal and forfeiting that which lasts forever?

There is this amazing truth that is hard to process. And that is on the timeline of eternity, my life is one little slash—30 years, 50 years, 70 years—it’s just a little slash. But in that slash I’m given the opportunity to be part of something that will matter forever. That’s a remarkable concept. To choose rather to go for the temporal insignificant things of this world is a disastrous choice. Jesus says, “Why would you do that? What would somebody possibly trade that this world has to offer for that which is eternal?”

Now the only way this makes any sense is to believe by faith that there really are those things which last forever, that there really is such a thing as an eternal perspective. Because the challenge is this: The reason there’s a part of me that leans toward the things of this world that I can't associate with that guy is because the world is clear, the world is concrete. I understand how the game is played. I understand what it means to “go for it”. I understand what it means to be successful. And that part is pretty clear, and it’s very tempting.

The things of eternity are much more abstract. You just have to believe in them by faith. I can’t prove that to you. I can’t prove to you that at the end of your life, all that will matter are the things that last forever. You just have to decide whether Jesus tells the truth or whether He doesn’t. But that’s the challenge in it. I have to see it with eyes of faith and believe that’s really true and exactly what Jesus says.

“For the Son of Man [which is a title for Jesus; He is talking about Himself] is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and will then repay every man according to his deeds.” (Matthew 16:27)

He’s talking about the fact that if you choose to follow Jesus and deny yourself, take up your cross, follow Me, you will live for the things that last forever. And you’ll believe that by faith. But there will come a day when that faith will give way to sight, and Jesus will return in all of His Glory. And in that moment you will know that you made the right decision. The things of this world will no longer have value, and the things of eternity will remain. And Jesus will reward those who have lived for the things that matter.

There is a lot of discussion and debate these days about the topic of rewards—about what are rewards and how long do they last and who gets them. And to be completely honest with you, I don’t think anybody’s got it figured out. What I have read of the positions seems like they’re all kind of squeezing the Scriptures around to fit their viewpoint. I think we’re all confused and I haven’t read anyone who has it figured out.

But maybe that is, to some degree, what God intended. He didn’t want us to fixate on that and miss the point. And the point is that it very much matters how you live out your Christian life. And there is coming a day where God will reward that; that you believe by faith that ultimately what matters are the things of eternity. I can’t see that. I can’t touch it. I can’t prove that. I just have to believe that, and live my life as a follower of Jesus through these eyes of faith.

One of the things you have to understand is your salvation was not just a ticket to heaven. And I’m not just biding my time, waiting for death so I can go to heaven. If all it was about is salvation, going to heaven, God would just take me home as soon as I trust Jesus as Savior.

The problem is not that heaven is so over-crowded that we’re left in this waiting room until there is more vacancy. I am still here on this earth because I have a job to do. I have a mission. I have an assignment. That’s why I’m still here. And I believe that by faith. If I’m busy about that, I know that one day when Jesus returns, He will reward me for my faithfulness as a follower of Himself. And we believe that by faith.

Verse 28 I think is referring to the Transfiguration—the moment that is described in Matthew 17 where some of these disciples got a chance to catch just a glimpse of Jesus in His glory to let them know this is true, and this is going to happen, and here is a glimpse of it so you know it’s coming.

Ultimately, Jesus is defining, “This is what it means to follow Me.” This is the paradox of the Christian faith. There is a part of you that leans towards the things of this world, that wants to invest your time, your talent, your treasure in the things of this world and to live with that—because it’s concrete, it’s immediate. And the world makes promises it can’t fulfill, yet they’re very tempting.

I can’t associate with that person anymore. I can’t spend time with that person. He’s trouble! I’ve got to die to that person because he’s got his eyes set on man’s interests. And I have to reorient myself to God’s interests. I have to deny myself. I have to take up my cross. I have to identify myself with what it means to be a follower of Jesus. I have to willingly choose to lose my life, believing by faith, that it is then that I’ll find it. And I will then experience the meaning and purpose and significance and joy that I’ve looked for my whole life. And I will believe that one day Jesus will return, and in that moment I will know I’ve lived for that which matters rather than wasting my life away on the things of this world.

It is very important to understand on this Ministry Fair weekend that what we are asking, what Jesus is asking, is not for an hour once a week to teach Sunday School. What He is asking for is everything. He's asking you to give it up, to lose your life, to let it go because it always ends that you will ultimately find it.

What does that mean in practical terms? I believe every single person that has trusted Jesus as Savior has a *general* call and a *specific* call. The general call is about understanding that God has given you life; He has made you on purpose for a purpose, and every day is about that. Your call to be...in the medical world...in the educational world...in the business world...your call to be a student or a homemaker...God has called you with your gifts, talents, abilities; and I believe that your calling is every bit as high and holy as mine.

The New Testament clearly teaches there is not a two-tiered system where the priest-class is up here and the lower class down here. That is just not right. Your calling is as high and holy as my calling. If God has called you to do construction, if God has called you to do whatever, the question you have to ask yourself is, "How might God use my unique calling—my personality, my giftedness—to make a difference in those things which last forever? How can I use what God has called me to in order to influence other people to know Jesus as Savior?"

It involves what we do in the marketplace. It involves what we do in our recreation. It involves what we do in our neighborhood. Every moment, every day is ultimately about God and His purpose and how He might use this to make a difference in peoples' lives forever.

That is the *general* call that we are all called to. But the Bible is also very clear that there is a *specific* call. That there is a local church, and that you are a member of the body, which means you have a role in that local church.

That is more what the ministry fair is about: hundreds of different ways that God can use you with your unique giftedness, your unique personality, your unique maturity level as a Christian to fulfill a purpose for Him.

As I look around this auditorium, there are many who understand this. This is how you live your lives. Somewhere along the way you made a decision to be about God's interests—not your own. You deny yourself. You take up your cross. You follow Jesus. You've been willing to lose your life. And in doing that, you've found it.

Over the twenty-some years that I've been a pastor, I've never known anyone that understands it any more clearly than Rick. Rick is a construction worker, and he is very good at what he does. But Rick has an uncanny sense of his calling. He understands that the construction world is a mission field. And God has uniquely called him and gifted him to make a difference in people's lives for eternity.

Over the years many, many have come to faith in Christ through Rick's presence in the construction field. But Rick also understands that there's a *specific* calling in his life. As a matter of fact I think when God called him it kind of surprised him as to what it was. But now these 17 years that Rick has been involved in children's ministry, Rick has touched the lives of literally hundreds of children who will grow up and they will touch the lives of hundreds of more people. It would be safe to say the rippling effect of that specific ministry would be that it would touch the lives of hundreds of thousands of people over the generations. That's a fairly significant investment of your time.

Let's listen to Rick's story:

I came to know Christ, or made a decision for Christ, through a Bible study that I did. I was building an addition for a couple here in town in Lincoln – Rick and Coleen Duvall. And Rick and I began talking and he asked me about doing a Bible study. And I said, “Sure, I’ve always wanted to know what was in the Bible.” And we started that at lunch time.

I’d always claimed that I was a Christian and thought that I was a Christian. But my life wasn’t measuring up and I began to see that through this Bible study. I saw that I needed Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior.

Probably the verse that did it for me was Revelation 3:15-16 “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot...so because you are lukewarm...I will spit you out of My mouth.” And I knew that I was trying to play both sides of the fence. And God was forcing me to make a decision. I just said, “Lord, I’ve screwed up the first 30 years of my life. If You’ll forgive me and take me, I’ll live the rest for You.” And it was like a thousand pound weight just dropped off my shoulders, and I knew that something had happened inside of me and that I was different.

Well after I came to know the Lord, Rick Duvall had given me a pattern by doing the lunches and he literally led me from darkness into light. And I saw it. So I just had a real burden to share with the people in the construction field. I mean, construction is a wide-open mission field. And so I began to use lunch time as a method.

And one of his lead-in questions was, “If you died tonight would you go to heaven?” And that really had an impact on me, and so I began to use that question. Building a relationship is a lot like building any house or whatever. You have to start with the foundation and work your way up from there.

Initially, I was interested in Children’s Ministry. My kids were 2 and 4 at the time. And so I was taking them and dropping them off. I just always have liked children and kind of wanted to get involved in the 2s and 3s. So I just asked about being a table leader initially. But the more I was involved, the more I just felt God calling me to teach these kids. I just had such a burning desire to do that. And so, I asked if I could do the story a couple of times. And that’s how it really started.

And I’ve got to tell you—I was so scared those first few times teaching those kids. But by the grace of God, the words came out. And I was able to make it through the lesson, and that gave me confidence to continue to teach. I’ve been teaching in Children’s Ministry now for 17 years, going on 18. God’s really used that to touch the hearts of kids.

Over the years I’ve had the opportunity to lead several men to Christ and disciple them. And God put it on my heart to bring these men in and have them share their testimonies with the 1st graders. And so one by one, they came and they shared and to a ‘T’, they wept in front of these kids. And just shared how important Christ was in their lives.

It was a very powerful time, and obviously I was sitting in the corner a mess, crying, because of watching what God had done over the years. It’s grace; I don’t deserve it. And yet God in His grace has used me in ways that I could never have imagined. All it took was just a simple prayer to say, “Lord, I give up. Use me any way You can.” And it just amazes me to this day that God would take something like this and use it for His glory. That is God at work and that’s grace 101.

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