

No One Like Jesus: Losing The Battle, Winning The War

By Jason Huff

November 6, 2016

Psalm 20; Philippians 3:7-14; Matthew 16:21-28

Our final Scripture reading today is Matthew 16:21-28. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. “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, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.” Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.””

Anyone who thinks they’ve never seen a miracle wasn’t watching game 7 of the World Series this week. Right? But if you tuned in game 7, you learned about the pitching staff on both teams. With a 3-1 lead in the series, the Indians could hold back their best pitchers. They didn’t have to win games 5 and 6. As it turns out, it was a bad bet. But in the long season of baseball, you take strategic losses. You can’t win all 162 games you play – it’s impossible. Before the World Series, Cleveland was 94 and 67. The Cubs did even better – 103 and 58. But both teams lost over a full third of their games! Sometimes, losing is a part of winning.

That’s what deal with today in Matthew 16 when we first learn of Jesus’ impending death and resurrection. Jesus has to die in order to complete His mission on earth, and He warns His followers that His path will be our path too. The words he tells the apostles ring through the centuries, speaking to us and to every one of His followers throughout the generations.

The disciples now know that Jesus is the promised Messiah, and Jesus begins preparing them for the hard stuff. He is going to suffer at the hands of the people that should have been first to welcome Him. He will be killed. And harder to believe than anything else, the Father will raise Him back to life. Imagine hearing this for the first time. This must have been agony for the disciples. Here they thought Jesus was going to bring the Kingdom of Heaven to earth, that they would all rule alongside Him, and now He’s talking about having to go suffer and die!

But Jesus isn’t messing around. The word “must” here is powerful. We hear it as “I must go to church” or “I must do my homework” or “I must clean up my house.” A “should happen” thing. That’s not what Jesus says. Jesus is saying, “This ***has*** to happen” in black and underline and italics. It’s that strong. Jesus must go through all these things because this is the only path to salvation for His people. Anything less is not enough. Anything less would not redeem us from our sins and cover God’s wrath in our place. He must lose His life to win the war on sin.

But Peter is indignant, and he does something incredibly bold for his day – the student rebukes the teacher. This was rare in any circles. But Peter is so incensed at what Jesus says that he denies it will ever happen the way Jesus says. Ironically, in the Greek, Peter uses three negatives; he denies Jesus' death three times – saying in a super literal sense, “Far be it from you, Lord; never, not ever will this happen!” It echoes Peter's eventual denial of Jesus three times.

But Jesus' words back are intense. “Get behind me, Satan!” Jesus has just given Simon the name Peter, the name “rock.” Peter is a rock all right – a stumbling block! His words are not from God but from his own sinful way of thinking. This is the same kind of thing that Satan tried to pull in the desert with Jesus. Each temptation Jesus faced in the wilderness was the lure of the easy path, the lure of some other way but the humiliation, suffering, and death of the cross.

After the temptation in the desert, Scripture says that Satan left Jesus to look for an opportune time to tempt Him again. And this was another chance, a moment Satan found an opening through Peter to raise the question of whether Jesus had to go through with it. Do you really have to die, Jesus? Say it isn't so. Dying will make some people believe you were crazy. Others will call your followers crazy for believing you came back to life. Why don't you skip all that and just show your power and glory to everyone so they come flocking to you? But the answer is this: there is no other way to deal with human sin except the way planned from eternity by God. If God is just, then sin must be punished, and the punishment either falls on us or the One who willingly takes it on Himself for us.

That leads to our first key theme today: *the nice, safe, and convenient path is not the path of God.* Jesus warns us earlier in Matthew 7:13 that the road to destruction is wide and easy; the road into the Kingdom is narrow and tough. It's often unpleasant. Yet it is the only way. There is no shortcut to spiritual growth, no hidden key to unlock a great relationship with God without putting in the time every day. The only way to follow Jesus is along the long, hard road of the cross. We'll talk about that more in a minute.

But before we are too hard on Peter, let's be fair: we want things to be safe and easy and comfortable. Even when things are shocking, we don't want them to be too shocking. The news tells us just enough to scare us, enough to make sure we tune in, but not enough to make us turn off the TV – because who would watch the commercials that pay for it all?

And Peter losing his best friend, His Lord? This sent chills down his spine! No wonder he denied it! This last week in popular culture, the show *The Walking Dead* made waves because the season premiere killed off two main characters. People are super upset! Ratings went down over 25% between the 1st and 2nd episodes. People have quit watching, and a major reason why is because they like these characters and hate to see them die. And these are not real people! It's just a story! And we react by never watching again. Imagine Peter's horror at Jesus' real death!

Of course Peter's upset. And yet, his solution is to deny what must happen. To tempt Jesus into taking an easier route, or even threatening to not let Jesus take the route He's described. The disciples are clear they are willing to take up arms to protect Jesus, but they don't understand that Jesus has to die in order for God's plans to be completed. The easy path is rebellion and violence. The hard path is the cross.

We live in an easy time. We as a culture do not have in mind the things of God. And sadly, often times, neither does the church. We mourn that our nation's laws don't reflect the morality of Christianity, yet people in the church break the commands of Jesus on a regular basis because it's easy. Believers ignore God's commands about so many things because the culture doesn't care if we are sexually active outside of marriage or cheat a little on our taxes or indulge in our favorite sin, whatever it is.

We as the church have taken on the world's pragmatism – we do what seems best in our own eyes as long as it seems to work. We'll downplay Jesus in our services if more people will come. We overlook sin because we might lose a few members who put money in the basket, and who's going to pay for everything? I don't want to rant here, but our culture has taken the path of least resistance, and Christians are following right down the same path. We have swallowed whole the lie of our culture that what feels good must be right and must be celebrated.

We must not choose a path and ask that God will bless it. We must choose paths that God will bless and walk down them. This is hard because sometimes we aren't blinded by what's most convenient. But we are blinded by what's nice. It's not nice for Jesus to have to die, so Peter wants to avoid it. It's not nice to have to wade into the thick of sin and rescue someone from addiction or vice or poverty. It's not nice to have to discipline someone and disciple them.

But what matters is having in mind the things of God. God isn't interested in us having a nice life or a comfortable life. He isn't interested in us having a meaningful life or personal fulfillment in the way that the world thinks of it, where our self-worth and satisfaction comes from our job. God doesn't mind that we like our jobs, but that's not His goal for us. God is interested in having a personal relationship with us, and He is not satisfied with us being satisfied with anything less than all of Him.

When Peter rebukes Jesus, he thinks he is protecting his teacher and friend. What he's really doing is denying God's plan to forgive sinners to whom He has shown grace. We must be careful not to deny the work of God in our lives or in somebody else's life because it's hard or difficult or painful. God will not make your life easy. He will make it good.

And here's the road that God uses to make it good, surprising us with our second point for the day: *denying ourselves for Jesus sake, taking up His sufferings, is the way to our own greatest good and our true selves.* What Jesus says is absolute foolishness to the world, but it is the truth of the Kingdom. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Why would do this? Why would we set aside our lives for the sake of Jesus? If He is not who He says He is, it's ridiculous. But if He is the Son of God, as we believe from Peter's confession, we obey. We set aside our lives for the sake of God's Kingdom because that's what matters. We die to our worldly instincts because God's Kingdom is not of this world. We set aside our hatred, our anger, our lust, our vicious words, because they belong to this world and not the next. We learn compassion and kindness and joy and love because they are of God.

We deny ourselves for God's Kingdom because it's in following Jesus and deserting our old lives that we learn who we really *were* and who we are *becoming*. We learn our deep rooted sinfulness because we see it from a different perspective. When we take up our cross rather than fulfilling our own desires, we start to see how those desires kill our souls. Because we were not made to be self-centered. We were made to be centered on others. We were made to live for relationship with others.

God has always existed as three persons – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are completely one yet three. They have always lived in relationship with one another, being fully who they are yet also utterly tied to one another in perfection. Sin itself is rebellion against God – choosing our sinful self over God and others. Selfishness goes against the nature of God and His inter-relationship. Jesus' command to deny ourselves isn't to hate ourselves; it's to become who we were made to be, people living in harmony with God and one another.

When we start living this way, it is incredibly painful at first, not only because we deny ourselves but because we see our selfishness laid bare. It's no secret to you all that my mom went home this week after living with us for four and a half months recuperating from her broken leg. We've had some friends who've come up to us kind of applauding us, Christian friends, saying something along the lines of, "I could never do something like that."

But what Catha and I learned was not that we have a great reservoir of compassion because we're such good people. We learned what our own selfishness really looks like. In our normal lives, we can deny our selfishness because we're not confronted with it daily. If we don't have to have the latest things, the best car or the latest game or Blu-ray or the newest this or that, if we don't get everything we want, we think we aren't that selfish. We volunteer by our own choice a few hours a month at Military Avenue or someplace else and we figure we've done our part. We haven't hurt anyone, so we assume we've done well by God.

But when you're confronted with caring for the needs of someone else, when your schedule is no longer your own, when you lose most of your privacy and control over your TV, when you can't do what you want to do when you want to do it, suddenly – at least in our case – we realized how much we wanted that control back. We realized how selfish we are with our time. That we – all of us – are not as self-sacrificial and Christ-like as we think we are. That we want heaven but we want earth too. We want to be both self-centered and God-centered. And this is nothing new: Paul wrote about it in Romans 7, how we who are truly Christians are still constantly pulled between the good we want to do in Jesus' name but fail to do and the evil that we now hate but still find ourselves doing.

And yet, through it all, we have seen good coming out of that learning experience. We have seen Christ grow us in subtle ways. We've seen in new ways how we have to rely on God to get us through everything. We don't know the long-term results. But there is never going to be an eternal downside to following God's ways instead of our own.

And what good is it to follow our own ways, anyway? As Jesus says, “What can a man give in exchange for his soul?” What can we earn here, learn here, enjoy here that can possibly make up for an eternity spent in the loving presence of God? Everything here goes away. I had a hard drive die here a couple of weeks ago. I’d had it for a little over two years, and I was barely able to save the data by transferring it to a new drive. A few things on that old drive are probably gone for good. DVDs rot and books burn and after 70, 80, 90 years, these bodies wear out too.

If we have, by the grace of God, grown in the ways of God, those traits will follow with us into eternity. But my bookshelves and DVD cases won’t. My stuff won’t. And if that’s all I’ve got and no Jesus, eternity is going to be an everlastingly long, cold regret outside the presence of God. But as Hebrews 6:9 says, “Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case -- things that accompany salvation.”

Salvation is coming, and it will be glorious for believers. This leads into our last, brief point for today: *God’s good judgment is on the way*. Jesus promises at His return that He will come “in His Father’s glory with His angels, and then He will reward each person according to what he has done.” The word *reward* here in Greek usually means to *repay* or *return*. Ultimately, it’s a promise that God will give us our due, whatever that is.

For those who trust in Jesus, our due for following after Him and giving our lives to His ways is to behold His glory and enjoy Him in His fullness. Jesus promised that some of the disciples would “not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” Next week’s passage is the Transfiguration, where Jesus’ glory is shown to three of the disciples. We’ll talk about that in detail then. But God’s good return happens even now for the faithful. We get greater glimpses of Him as we walk closer to Him.

Jesus’ everlasting promise is that laying down our lives for Him is always going to pay dividends. And friends, it’s true. The kindness you find easier to show, the warmth, the friendship, the love – those are things that are far better than what the world gives. When God remakes us into His image, it starts now, and it is refreshing to be in the presence of people who are being made more and more like Him.

When I was in Indiana over the last few days, I saw a ton of political ads. And if you think we have it bad here, you should see it down there. I didn’t see any products advertised – just attack ads as far as the eye could see. Half the billboards were attack ads! The world resorts to name-calling and half-truths and deceit. But a new Kingdom is coming, one where the ruler is clear, a ruler who is loving and kind and just, a ruler you can always trust, a ruler who is not a Trump or a Clinton, a ruler who sought only one thing during His life on earth, and that was to please His Father in heaven.

Don’t give up your hope. Don’t set your eyes on this world and its luxuries. Don’t take the easy path of sin. Follow the high road, the hard road, the road of the cross. And while it is painful, you will also find the ever-increasing joy of knowing God and His love for you as you take each step along the journey.