

Sunday, June 26, 2016

Luke 9:18-24

¹⁸ Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, “Who do the crowds say I am?”

¹⁹ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life.”

²⁰ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”
Peter answered, “God’s Messiah.”

²¹ Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. ²² And he said, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”

²³ Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.

We all do some following in our lives. Some may follow less than others, but the fact remains that following someone or something is necessary for a good life. You need to follow directions to get from point A to point B successfully. You need to follow instructions in order to set up the new playground set or basketball hoop. The difference between using a screwdriver instead of an Allen wrench can make all the difference between frustration and satisfaction for completion. If you go hiking, you might need to follow a trail guide to prevent any injury or disaster. If you’re caravanning with friends on a long road trip, you should probably follow the lead car or you’ll get lost. It’s easy to see with these scenarios that even leaders need to follow at times. Certainly, we all need to be followers when it comes to our spiritual lives. Whether you’re new to the faith or a seasoned pastor, God calls you to follow his Messiah. Following God’s Messiah means to trust in his true mission and to deny yourself.

I

At the time of this story, Jesus had been doing his public ministry for over a year. He was no longer a secret to the people, no longer just a carpenter’s son from Nazareth. He was the man who healed the sick, made the lame walk, raised the dead, and fed over 5,000 people with hardly enough food for even a couple people. The people even took notice of his power and authority when he taught and preached. Jesus was someone new and fresh, and the people began to follow to see what he would do and say next. This much the people knew: this man named Jesus was someone great.

Jesus knew who people thought he was, but he still asked the disciples, **“Who do the crowds say I am?”** The disciples were qualified to answer this question. They had already been sent out by Jesus to preach about the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. They listened to who the people said Jesus was, and this is where they got their answer from. The disciples’ work and the

people's reactions reached the ears of King Herod. Earlier in Luke 9 we read, **“Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was going on. And he was perplexed, because some were saying that John had been raised from the dead, others that Elijah had appeared, and still others that one of the prophets of long ago had come back to life.”** (Luke 9:7-8) You can imagine Herod's surprise. All these people were dead. He himself had John the Baptist beheaded. Yet, to the people, Jesus being one of these resurrected people only added to his lure. They were uneducated about who Jesus truly was and why he was on the earth. They wanted Jesus to save them from the Romans. Because of their wishes, that's who they made Jesus out to be in their minds.

Jesus also knew the disciples' thoughts about him. Yet, he still questioned them because he wanted them to confess their faith. **“But what about you, he asked. Who do you say I am?”** There was no need for all the disciples to answer. They all thought the same thing, and they trusted Peter as their spokesman. So, Peter confessed, **“God's Messiah.”** The disciples knew Jesus wasn't just any great man. They knew Jesus was *the* Messiah of God. Jesus was the Christ. Jesus was the one sent to save them from their sins. Yet, they still needed more education as well. They didn't quite understand how Jesus would accomplish salvation for mankind.

So, Jesus gave his disciples the blueprint for how he would win salvation. **“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”** This was the mission of the true Messiah of God. This is what the people should have believed Jesus to be and what he was to do. After all, this was all spoken about in the Old Testament. Jesus would suffer. Much of Isaiah 53 speaks about this but listen to verse 4. **“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.”** Jesus would be rejected. Psalm 118:22 says, **“The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.”** Jesus would be killed as Psalm 22:1 tells us, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** These words were spoken by Jesus as he died on the cross. Finally, Jesus would rise from the dead. Job confessed this truth thousands of years before it happened. **“I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.”** (Job 19:25) This is the true mission of God's Messiah. Those who believe he came to complete this mission are true followers of God's Messiah.

Who do the crowds say Jesus is today? Plenty of false religions claim Jesus was just a great man, a great prophet. He is the example of how we need to live to get to heaven. He helps us out in that way. This is a different type of great prophet than what the Jews were hoping for, but the same failed trust in the true mission of God's Messiah. Plenty of people still deny Jesus was even ever on this earth. It's simply a great fairy tale or a myth to make sure kids behave better since Jesus is watching. Also, there are opinions out there that say religion is only around for structure and something to do to stay busy and have a purpose on earth. That's not following God's Messiah.

Jesus asks you, “But you, who do you say I am?” At times, you and I don’t confess “God’s Messiah!” in the true sense of Christ’s title. We can be tempted to make him out to be primarily a miracle worker for our earthly life. The temptation to blow a lot of money is all around you here in Vegas. “If I lose some money, Jesus will get it back for me because I’m a follower of his.” Jesus has blessed us with medicine to heal diseases. Maybe you’ve ever thought, “Why would I use medicine? If Jesus wants me to live he’ll miraculously heal me, and if he wants to take my life, he will.” Maybe Jesus wants you to live through the power of medicine. Certainly, Christ can miraculously do wonderful things for you here, but don’t blindly trust in how and when you want God’s Messiah to work a miracle.

Rather, follow God’s Messiah and see what he came to earth to truly accomplish each and every time for you. Who does your faith say that Jesus is? Your faith will always respond with “God’s Messiah,” the one who came to suffer, be rejected, be killed, and be raised to life. Your faith knows what’s most important in your life. Your faith knows that no matter what earthly trouble or ongoing stress is happening, God’s Messiah has taken care of your most dire need. Faith knows God’s Messiah has taken care of all of your sins and therefore God’s Messiah has given you heaven. Jesus tells you, **“Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”** (Matthew 11:28) Your faith continues to thank God even when your earthly requests aren’t answered with a “yes.” Your faith does this because it trusts in the Messiah’s true mission as Scripture portrays it.

That’s why worship and various opportunities for Bible study are offered in churches. The weekly opportunities aren’t there to guilt trip you into thinking you have to go to be a good Christian. They are there to give your soul comfort in what God’s Messiah has done for you. Read some tougher, theological books to challenge your spiritual thoughts to see the mission of God’s Messiah in newer ways. Challenge yourself with more thorough personal devotions. Dig even deeper into God’s Word to see how God’s Messiah fulfills every last detail spoken about him. As you follow him through these means, you will be blessed because you will follow his true mission more closely. You will also see how else you can follow him.

II

The disciples may have been confused as Jesus described what would come of his life not long down the road. But after the confusion must have come approval. Maybe you can see them nodding their heads in approval as Jesus said, **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”** They had already agreed to this by leaving their jobs behind to follow Jesus closely as his chosen 12 followers. They knew from experience that to follow Jesus meant they had to deny themselves. Jesus had taught them to put their selfish desires behind God’s demands. They knew that denying themselves meant to carry their crosses daily no matter what. They knew that following God’s Messiah in this way meant no days off. Denying themselves was a daily fight between the sinful nature and the new man.

But what about Jesus' next statement? Were they so sure what he meant? **“For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.”** Logically, that doesn't make sense. It certainly doesn't make sense when thinking about an earthly life. Yet, with a little education, it makes perfect sense in light of God's Word as you follow God's Messiah. These two phrases go hand in hand. Losing your life means to make your spiritual life more important than anything earthly. It's the same thing as denying yourself.

Think about sacrificing a little to gain much. A little extra work at your job or home means sacrificing a little fun now, but it means gaining a lot of fun in a vacation later. Helping around the house instead of watching your favorite show or playing your favorite video game means sacrificing a hobby, but it makes for a happier wife or mother. Likewise, denying your earthly comfort by following God's Messiah pays off with eternity in heaven because that's an expression of saving faith.

As followers of God's Messiah, believers carry specific crosses that unbelievers don't. These are crosses of sacrifice and persecution for being a follower of God's Messiah. How do you respond when these crosses present themselves? An extreme scenario seems more and more likely in today's age. School shootings have presented Christians with a cross. I often wonder how I would respond with a gun pointed to my face and someone asked me, “Are you a Christian? If so, I'll shoot.” How about more common crosses? Maybe you've chosen to attend a party where you know sin is the common theme, but you didn't want to be made fun of for not going. Work presents its own crosses for believers. The temptation is there to keep silent about your faith to keep relations good or to keep a promotion in the works. Like the disciples, it's easy to say we'll deny ourselves in the moment, but to act upon that desire is difficult because of the sinful nature. The disciples fled from Jesus on Maundy Thursday. We can flee God's Messiah as we follow our own desires instead of denying ourselves.

Following God's Messiah does mean a denial of yourself and of certain pleasures. However, as you deny yourself, you don't have to carry your crosses alone. God doesn't leave you high and dry to see how you'll fare without him. He is happy to help! He gives you his Word to remember how you can daily drown your sinful nature. He's given us Baptism to do exactly that! Christ's selfless life serves as an example of how we can be selfless of our own wants to follow God's will instead. When we follow our own wants, we definitely harm our souls and may even harm our own bodies. When we follow God's Messiah by denying ourselves, we can never harm ourselves spiritually.

He tells us that carrying these crosses is a privilege. It's a sign of faith in God's Messiah which ultimately results in heaven. It is not the action of carrying your cross which gets you to heaven, but the faith which urges you to carry. As you carry your crosses of sacrifice and dealing with persecution, you express to others what truly matters in your life: eternity in heaven. As we carry our crosses, we echo the Apostle Paul's words, **“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”**

There's no need to prove your faith to God by going out of your way to find a cross to carry. You don't have to go looking for trouble at work by shouting what you believe. Yet, when the opportunity presents itself, follow God's Messiah by confessing your faith even if it means you'll lose some earthly respect or a job opportunity. To the earthly mind, this is dumb. To the Christian faith, this is a proud moment of following God's Messiah. Prayerfully, you'll never be in the position of having a gun pointed at your head, but if you do, have the confidence of heaven in mind. How is denying yourself possible even in front of close friends? This attitude comes from the faith inside you. It doesn't care what others will think of you, but it considers God's will for you. If you know blatant sin will be at a party, confess your will to follow God's Messiah by denying your earthly self and don't go. You will grow closer with God, and that relationship is what truly matters. You might just help someone else deny their own self as well.

Sacrifice in this way may not seem fun to the human mind, but it is a joyful service for a Christian attitude. Being a follower of God's Messiah is the trip of a lifetime. It's free of charge and the experiences will never end. We never have to doubt what we'll get as followers of God's Messiah. We know who our guide is. We know what he has done and will continue to do for us. We know that if we remain behind him, we don't have to worry about anything else. Follow God's Messiah and see what's waiting for you at the end of the journey. Amen.