

# The Cross and The Crown.

Matthew 16:21-28. Mark 8:31-38.

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## INTRODUCTION

After reading the whole passage, for today's sermon, the three most important questions you need to answer are these:

- Is Jesus' invitation to bear the cross optional or mandatory?
- Does the disciple voluntarily take up his cross, or is the cross thrown onto the disciple?
- Who is on the throne—Jesus or the ego?

The answers are, respectively: (I) it's mandatory; (II) the disciple voluntarily takes up his cross; (III) Jesus.

Back home in Brazil, we sarcastically use the expression "I need to take up my cross" when we are talking about our mother-in-law. Sometimes we may refer to it in a more serious way to talk about a circumstantial issue, such as a disease or a family problem. These are clearly misinterpretations of this passage. The cross is not circumstantial nor someone else.

It's important to clarify that from the beginning, because we have seen many people misunderstanding such passages in Christianity today. The Prosperity Gospel, the nominal Christian, the CEO Christian (CEO = Christmas & Easter Only) are all examples of such misunderstandings. At the heart of these "*cheap*" Christianity, there is a heart where Jesus is not the King—Jesus has become only a servant to their selfish ego.

With that in mind, let's analyze the text.

## BODY 1.

(Vv. 21–22) From that time, Jesus openly began predicting his death and resurrection. It is important to notice that he adds the word *suffering* into the equation—he was not talking about a natural death; he was talking about his execution on the cross.

The two key points in this verse are “from that time” and “openly.” You can tell there is a reason why that information was kept quiet in the past. Jesus had implied his sacrificial death before:

- (John 2:19) “destroy this temple and I will rebuild it again;”
- (John 3:14) “as Moses lifted up the serpent, so must the Son of Man be lifted up;”
- (John 6:51) “I am the bread of life, and I will give my life for the sake of the world;”
- (Matt. 9:15) “there will be a time when the groom will be taken away from the disciples;”
- (Matt. 12:40–41) the sign of Jonah.

All of these are statements that implied his death. From the beginning, Jesus knew the purpose of his incarnation.

Now, however, he speaks plainly about the matter, and he does so for two reasons: (I) the time was approaching; (II) the disciples had finally recognized that he was the Christ. Thus, now he can speak plainly about his mission to the disciples. It takes time and credibility! In relationships, it is very important that credibility is earned and rapport is built before you disclose personal information.

Now it was the right time for Jesus to have such a conversation with his disciples. And Peter did not take the news well—he pulled Jesus aside and *rebuked* him.

**(What!? Are we reading that right?!)** The disciple playing the master and rebuking the Master? What is going on here?

## BODY 2.

(V. 23) Jesus then reorganizes the whole team by putting Peter back in his place. This verse has two important things you should note:

(I) “Get behind me, Satan” - You may remember Jesus’ temptation in the desert when the Devil offered him a kingdom without a cross. He is doing that once again, now through Peter’s mouth.

(II) “stumbling block” – Back in those days, the roads were not made of asphalt like today, but of rocks. When a single rock wasn’t level, that rock was called a “stumbling block” because it could cause chariots or people to stumble.

You may remember last sermon when we asked the question, “Who is the rock of the Church?” The answer: Jesus is the rock, not Peter. Now Matthew intentionally contrasts Peter and Jesus—Jesus is the rock; Peter is a stumbling block.

Lastly, Jesus says clearly that there are only two ways of doing life: according to man’s plan or according to God’s plan. Here is the heart of today’s passage, and it echoes the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve chose their own ways instead of God’s ways.

C. S. Lewis put it this way: *“There are only two kinds of people on the Judgment Day: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, ‘Let your will be done.’”*

## BODY 3.

Jesus takes that incident and expands the teaching:

(V. 24) He uses the illustration of the cross.

(V. 25) He affirms the paradox of the cross.

(V. 26) He asks two rhetorical questions that put the finger right where it hurts more.

Let us break these down:

1. **The illustration of the cross.** As you answered correctly in the introduction, this is not optional, and it is a voluntary action the disciple must take. Jesus is inviting the disciple to crucify their own ego. “If Jesus is not the first, he won’t be the second.” On the throne of the human heart there is room for only one—either Jesus or the self. True disciples of Jesus have decided to crucify their own ego in order to let Jesus rule their lives.
2. **The paradox of the cross.** He who loses wins; and he who wins loses. The paradox of cause and effect is this: mere religious people use God (cause) to get the things they want (effect). True disciples of Christ use things (cause) for the expansion of the Kingdom of Heaven (effect). For the former, their god is their stomach; for the latter, their God is Christ.

Illustration: in simple terms, those who devote their lives to the world will get the world—but they had to sacrifice God in the process.

3. **The two rhetorical questions.** It is worth noting that Jesus uses money as his figure of speech: (I) the first question depicts the worst deal ever—the individual gains the world yet forfeits his soul. (II) The second depicts the priceless value of the human soul. You may agree with our PM Mark Carney, who once said to Trump in the Oval Office, “Canada is not for sale.” In the same way, the human soul is priceless; no one can pay their way into Heaven. Salvation is by grace, and only Jesus can save us.

Jesus concludes his teaching with the promise of his second coming. He clearly distinguishes between the saved and the unsaved, between self-centered people and true disciples. He concludes the theme of the paradox of free salvation with the high cost of discipleship, using “money” once again to explain the matter: There will be rewards given to his disciples on the Last Day; the word *reward* is used on purpose by him, because it precisely establishes the twofold aspect of this teaching: Salvation can’t be earned—it is a gift; and yet, the cost of discipleship is high – but it will be rewarded at the end.

## CONCLUSION

We conclude this sermon not with a practical takeaway. Rather, I would like to bring forward some statements from different believers throughout history, which show us the real “cost” of true discipleship.

- *“When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)
- *“A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing.”* (Martin Luther)
- *“We are not our own: therefore, let us not make it our end to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh... We are God’s: let us therefore live for him and die for him.”* (John Calvin)
- *“When obedience to God contradicts what I think will give me pleasure, let me ask myself if I love Him.”* (Elisabeth Elliot)
- *“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”* (Jim Elliot)