



1616 W. Mequon Road, Mequon WI 53092  
(262)241-3121 [www.stjohnsmequon.org](http://www.stjohnsmequon.org)  
Email: [office@stjohnsmequon.org](mailto:office@stjohnsmequon.org)  
**Pastor James Tiefel**  
**(262) 853-9723 (cell#)**  
Email: [pastortiefel@gmail.com](mailto:pastortiefel@gmail.com)

---

## The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 3, 2023

### **The Church Is Militant: First the Cross and then the Crown**

The athlete cringes at practice but loves the trophy after the game. The musician finds rehearsing tedious but loves the applause after a performance. Christians often fall into the same pattern: we love the crown but flee the cross that precedes it. The Christian Church, the family of believers, does not exist in a relaxed society. We deal with roadblocks and setbacks as Satan works to slow or stop the spread of the gospel. As Jesus was determined to carry his cross to gain our crown, he encourages his followers to do the same.

#### **Sermon**

**Matthew 16:21-26**

**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, the chief priests and the 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 concerns of God, but merely human concerns." Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"**

What's added to your life as a Christian that you otherwise wouldn't have?

Ask a Christian child what is added to their life as a Christian, and they're inevitably going to say something like, "*We get to go to heaven!*" You know what they're probably not going to say? "*An instrument of torture on my back!*" Not many adult Christians are probably going to say that either—and yet isn't that *exactly* what Jesus tells us today? V. 24: "**Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.**" It's in our human nature to revile the cross and seek only the crown of heaven, but Jesus teaches us today that for him and for us, going God's way means death must come before life. First,

#### **It's the cross; *then* the comfort of the crown.**

Our text starts by saying, "<sup>21</sup>**From that time on.**" Which begs the question: What time? Well, it's referring to the text we just had last week when Peter rightly declared that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ. And now from that point on, because there's a lot of differing ideas out there about what the Messiah was supposed to look like, Jesus starts clarifying what that means: that he must go to Jerusalem to 1. Suffer many things, 2. Be killed, 3. And be raised up on the third day. In other words, he'd be exactly whom Isaiah said he'd be—the suffering servant kind of Messiah—The kind of Messiah that must endure the path of the cross before the crown.

But apparently, that is not what Peter had in mind when he used the term, "Messiah," so he took Jesus aside to correct his thinking: "No no, no, Jesus, let me fix that. Your path as the Messiah shouldn't look like *this*, actually it ought to look like *this*. What you're saying—all this suffering—that shall *never* happen to you!" Peter had *just*

been faithful rock, and now he was a stumbling rock, “**not having in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.**”

So, Jesus calls it as it is. He says, “**Get behind me, Satan!** You’re speaking lies from the devil. No, as the Christ, Peter, you will be walking the path of the cross as my disciple, one who follows me on this path, there’s not just a cross for me, there’s a cross for you, too. Now deny yourself and that fleshly mindset of yours, pick up that cross of self-sacrifice and come along.”

So, what’s it look like to be a Christian? Is it always comfy, full of rainbows and butterflies? Or does it look like carrying a cross? Do you have Peter’s view, or Christ’s view? Is it first the comfort, then the crown; or first the cross then the crown?

Ya know, the Peter way is the American way—to seize pleasure and avoid pain at all costs. We love our comfort as Americans. We know nothing of the concept of denying ourselves. For many of us, denying ourselves means nothing more than giving up chocolate a few days a year for Lent. That’s my cross to bear!?! Pretty pathetic. Imagine saying that to some of our brothers and sisters in Pakistan or China who risk their lives to follow Jesus. We need to explore today what this means for us, but as a church is set on fire, and a father is pulled away from his wife and kids to be imprisoned, they know what this journey looks like. “Oh, but bad things have happened to me”—that’s not the same thing as a cross.

What we need to do is define what a cross is. You’ve probably heard people say, “Well, that’s just your cross to bear.” But in many situations—no it’s not. That’s because general suffering is not the same as a cross. Many of us think that just because bad things have happened to us, we’ve picked up our crosses; but bad things happen to everyone! So, if that’s the case, we’ve got a whole lot of unbelievers walking around carrying crosses as well. But it’s impossible for unbelievers to carry crosses because crosses are specifically the sufferings we endure because of our connection to Christ. So, for example:

So, it’s not a cross that you had an argument with someone; it’s the cross you bear because of your connection to Christ, it’s a cross to repent of what you contributed to the situation, and then embrace your calling along the path of Christ as someone who self-sacrifices their own needs to serve others. It’s not the general struggle of managing your money, it’s the cross because of your connection to Christ, to do the uncomfortable thing with the stuff that the world would say “That’s mine.” We instead say, “Actually, that’s my neighbor’s who is in need as much as it is mine.”

Our flesh reviles crosses because crosses are painful to flesh—they rip and tear flesh open. They’re the opposite of comfort—they’re *uncomfortable* so by nature we want nothing to do with them. And that’s exactly why Peter said what he said. He didn’t want himself or his master to endure the cross. So, we’re kind of pointing fingers at Peter this morning; but you know, I think we’re actually even worse! At least Peter didn’t want his master to endure pain. We’re so selfish that we actually want the cross, but we want to strictly keep it over there on Jesus’ back where it kills him and benefits me, but don’t dare let it come anywhere near my own back where it might *inconvenience* me in any way! No, we want the best of both worlds—living a life of comfort on our own terms now AND getting a golden ticket to “the good place” then. And that’s not how it works. That way of thinking is a Satanic stumbling block and doesn’t have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.

So, would some personal introspection reveal that your suffering and struggles are generally of the same sort as any old unbeliever’s? Is there anything uniquely Christian about your earthly struggle? Do you find yourself choosing comfort over crosses? Looking at our selfish ways leaves us utterly crushed under the weight of our crosses. Feeling unlovable. Unsaveable.

Peter felt that way, too, I’m sure. I’m sure after such an interaction where Peter was literally called Satan by his Savior, Peter was utterly crushed. And then on the very night of Jesus’ arrest when he chose his own comfort

over the cross again—denying, not himself, but his Lord—when he met eyes with that very same Lord, he couldn't help running away in tears feeling utterly crushed. Feeling unlovable. Unsavable.

And yet, you know where Jesus was in that very moment? Carrying his cross resolutely to the hill of our salvation, bearing the weight of the world's sin—Peter's, yours, and mine—the *world's* sin on a cross that he knew would lead to his own death. He trudged resolutely bearing the cross because he did not have merely human concerns on his mind, but the concerns of God—the concerns of God to justify sinners as righteous.

If your salvation relied on how well you can get up on your own cross day after day to the fullest, most-perfect extent, you would not be worthy of him. But on his cross of salvation, Christ has made you worthy! When we chose comfort over crosses, Jesus chose the cross to bring us a far deeper comfort. We fail to practice self-denial and carry our crosses to bring blessing into others' lives like we ought to, so he denied himself and went somewhere none of us could go, carrying the cross of salvation that would bring the ultimate blessing of forgiveness of sins to the world. We put our trust in a Savior who when we failed and said, "Sorry God, but I'm not drinking this cup today. Today, *my will be done.*" Our Savior said, "not my will, but *yours be done.*" And he did all this, not to make you feel guilty about some sort of disparity between you and him, but he does it so completely out of his incredible love and grace.

Jesus did exactly the work he said he would do as the suffering servant Messiah: 1. Suffer, 2. Be killed, 3. THEN be raised to life. Cross and death were necessary stops on the path to the crown of life. Jesus went ahead of us on the path to the cross with the empty grave in mind, so that when the Father looks back and sees us behind Jesus by faith, our failures are covered by the blood he shed on the cross, allowing him to smile and say, "Well done, good and faithful servants." And these bones that were once utterly crushed, feeling unlovable, unsavable—these bones rejoice.

Jesus walked the cross-laden path with the empty grave in mind, and we also walk our cross-laden paths with the empty grave in mind, doing what's totally foreign to our flesh—sacrificing our own comfort knowing we are already heirs of an eternity of heavenly comfort. When you're walking in the very same footprints that Jesus left behind, it gives you the comfort and assurance that, "Yes, I *am* in Christ." The visible path I walk is evidence of the invisible identity I have in Christ. So, how can we live according to that truth? I don't want this all to simply be a conceptual idea in your minds—I want to give you tangible ways to practice self-denial. Here's a simple place to start:

1. The smallest beginning place to intentionally practice self-denial is by: **LISTENING!** Humans are so selfish that almost no one can do this simple thing that ought to be a default characteristic in self-denying Christians. In conversation, suspend your own needs and dedicate your attention to the person in front of you. As James says, "**Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.**"
2. Denying your ability to live as **comfortably** as you otherwise could. Perhaps choosing to live below your means that your sacrifice might bless another.
3. To deny serving myself in my **marriage**... seeking to answer not, "How can I squeeze blessing out of this person?" but, "How can I bring blessing into this person's life?"
4. We love our **rights** in the US, and love demanding that we make full use of those rights, but the Christian sometimes let's go of their rights in favor of making other people's problems our problems—standing up for those who cannot speak for themselves and seeking justice for the oppressed.

Generally, a good rule of thumb is that if it feels like a little part of you is dying—you're on the right path. Crosses are going to involve sacrifice for you and blessing for others. But as we walk this path, seeking to stay in Christ's footprints, we remember that we always keep the empty grave in view while bearing our crosses, so that when we fall, we know that Christ is there to catch us, carry us in our time of need, and lead us by His Spirit with renewed strength that rejoices in yet another reminder of his relentless mercy and grace.

Following Christ means the addition of a cross, but like Paul said in the Second Reading, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us..." So until then, we patiently bear the cross as we wait to wear the crown that is ours in Christ. AMEN.