

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Fifteenth Sunday After Trinity, September 8, 2024

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 421,366:1, 430:1-5, 417:1-5, 422:1.

Lessons: Isaiah 41:10-14, Hebrews 11:32-40, Mark 8:31-38.

Sermon Text: Matthew 16:21–27

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

There are many things that are important to us. We should often ask ourselves what, or maybe who, is most important in our lives. In our text today Jesus gives an answer to what should be the most important thing each day: *“whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”* Please listen carefully, as Jesus tells us

IF ANYONE WOULD FOLLOW CHRIST, HE MUST DENY HIMSELF

1. **We are reminded of Jesus’ calling and mission.**
2. **Because Peter doesn’t want Jesus to do that, Jesus must sternly rebuke Peter.**
3. **What it means to follow Jesus.**

Our text begins with Jesus telling his disciples again about his mission on earth. This isn’t the first time he has done this. He makes this point very clear: *“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.”*

Jesus had to explain this to his followers repeatedly. The words they heard from him were all they had – they did not have the complete written Scriptures we have today. Of course, they had heard the Old Testament Scriptures, but they did not have them all printed as we have today. They had to rely on their memories of what he said. We, of course, have the entire written Word of God, both Old Testament and New Testament, and the ability to search the scriptures quickly and easily.

Jesus makes it very clear that he will give up his life, and we know why: to pay the price for our sins. Jesus had to suffer many things – especially from the religious leaders of his day, men who should have known the Holy Scriptures.

But we see one of Jesus’ disciples objecting to his mission. This is the same man who had most strongly said *“Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* (Matthew 16:16, KJV)

Immediately Jesus turned to Peter and publicly rebuked him in front of the other disciples. *“Out of my sight, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”*

In terribly strong language Jesus spoke to Peter, calling him Satan. Jesus recognized in Peter’s words the voice of Satan. At the beginning of Jesus’ ministry Satan had tempted Jesus to give up his work of redemption and bow down to him. Now, Satan through Peter was again tempting Jesus not to go through with his terrible suffering and death. But if Jesus yielded to this temptation, man’s salvation could not be accomplished. So Jesus told Peter that his objection to Jesus’ suffering and death was a *“stumbling block”*, an offense, to him. What Peter was saying to Jesus is that he should not suffer and die, that he should not carry out his work of redemption. Peter was thinking as a sinful man thinks, but not as God thinks. Peter had human ideas contrary to God’s plans. Peter intended to show his love for Jesus in telling him that he should not suffer and die, but he was wrong and needed to be rebuked.

“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?’”

Jesus speaks of denying oneself and taking up a cross and following him. Now we certainly don’t necessarily have to be nailed to a cross and follow Jesus that way. But such a thing shouldn’t be unexpected if it does occur. Persecution can occur in many ways.

You heard in our Epistle lesson about believers – even in the Old Testament – who ***“were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.”*** (Hebrews 11:35–38, NIV84)

So what does Jesus really mean when he speaks about taking up one’s cross? This was long before Jesus suffered and died on the cross for the sins of the whole world, and especially for us, for which we daily rejoice. So the picture may not have made much sense to Jesus’ followers on this day. But we can see exactly what Jesus meant.

Sometimes people speak of “a cross” as any difficulty or pain they must endure.

But as Jesus used the word here, a cross is whatever Christians endure because they are Christians. Much later in his life, Peter wrote in his first letter: ***“So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.”*** (1 Peter 4:19, NIV84)

A cross is whatever Christians suffer because they follow the Savior and in word and deed confess his name before men. We quote from Peter’s first letter again: ***“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.”*** (1 Peter 4:12–16, NIV84)

Jesus himself said: ***“All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.”*** (Matthew 10:22, NIV84)

The cross includes self-denial. We must forsake and give up everything that might prevent us from following Jesus, whether it be things such as honor among men, or earthly possessions, or friends and relatives, or even our own life. Jesus’ words in Luke are plain: ***“any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.”*** (Luke 14:33, NIV84) We must not become so attached to any of these things of the world that they interfere with our relationship to Christ.

The Apostle Paul, who suffered much and many times for the truth of the Gospel wrote to the Philippian Christians: ***“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.”*** (Philippians 3:7–8, NIV84)

This is not an easy matter for our flesh, yet loyalty to Christ demands that, if need be, we forsake all that we have.

We have a daily struggle against sin in our own bodies. Paul wrote in Romans: ***“I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.”*** (Romans 7:18–20, NIV84)

Paul also wrote to the Colossians: ***“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.”*** (Colossians 3:5, NIV84) He also wrote to the Galatians: ***“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.”*** (Galatians 5:24, NIV84)

Each Christian has his or her own crosses to bear. We may rest assured that our Father in heaven will never place a heavier burden upon us than we are able to bear. ***“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”*** (1 Corinthians 10:13, NIV84)

Isaiah assures us that God will stand with us: ***“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”*** (Isaiah 41:10, NIV84)

We quote Peter again, much later in his life: ***“If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.”*** (1 Peter 4:14, NIV84)

Paul had this to say about believers, children of God: ***“Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”*** (Romans 8:17, NIV84)

We must never think of such a cross as a mark or token of God’s anger against us, but of his love. The purpose of any cross is that it tests and tries our faith. It leads us to seek help from God in prayer, and turns our attention from things temporal and earthly to things spiritual and eternal.

We hope and trust in God for guidance, protection and help in the affairs of our earthly lives. We don’t worry about the future, because we know what our heavenly Father will provide for us eternally. We especially have hope in the eternal life purchased for us by Jesus himself suffering the most horrible literal cross for us!

Humanly speaking, we want an easy life. But Jesus did not seek or have an easy life. ***“He humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!”*** (Philippians 2:8, NIV84)

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:16–18, NIV84)

Jesus suffered, but he rose again. We too, shall rise again: believers to eternal life, unbelievers to eternal damnation. With the hymn-writer we ask:

“Why should cross and trial grieve me?

Christ is near With His cheer;

Never will He leave me.

Who can rob me of the heaven

That God’s Son For my own

To my faith hath given?” (The Lutheran Hymnal, 523:1)

All the crosses that we bear point us and lead us to hope, and so we rejoice with an older and chastened Peter in his first letter: ***“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”*** (1 Peter 1:3–9, NIV84)

We pray: Lord, let me deny myself and serve you every day! Amen.