

"This is My Son ... Listen to Him!"

Matthew 16:21-17:27

Key Verse: 17:5

"While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!'"

Matthew's gospel can be divided into two parts, with the dividing line being Peter's confession, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Peter truly understood who Jesus was, and he was the first person in history to make this confession of faith. "Knowing who Jesus is" is very important. It is the foundation of a real relationship with Jesus, and it leads us to eternal life (Jn 17:3). However, confessing faith in Jesus is just a beginning. We should further learn what kind of Messiah Jesus is, and what he requires of his followers. In this respect, we are beginning an advanced study.

In today's key verse God speaks directly to Jesus' disciples, telling them that Jesus is his beloved Son, and to listen to him. Why did God intervene in this way? It is because the disciples were not listening to Jesus. They had their own idea about who Jesus was and what he should do. They wanted to hear only what they liked to hear. We can understand them. When we hear comforting words like, "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age," we like them and cling to them. But when we hear challenging words, such as, "deny yourself and take up your cross," we cringe and want to avoid them. But in learning Jesus, we cannot pick and choose what we like. We must listen to what Jesus tells us, whether we like it or not. Then we can find great treasure. Good medicine is sometimes bitter. Healing may come through pain. So let's listen to the words of God for the sake of our spiritual health, whether we like them or not.

I. The cost of discipleship (16:21-28)

First, Jesus predicts his death and resurrection (21-23). Look at 16:21. "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." Jesus uses the word "must" in reference to going to Jerusalem and to being killed. It was because this was God's will which Jesus must obey absolutely. Jerusalem was the center of social and religious life in Israel. The temple was located there. It was the place where all Jews had to come three times a year for important feasts. During the Passover in Jerusalem, Jesus would become the Paschal Lamb. Jesus had to go to Jerusalem in order to be crucified, and to be raised to life. Then repentance and forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem (Lk 24:47). His disciples would be his witnesses, beginning from Jerusalem (Ac 1:8). The early church was born of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem at Pentecost. Jerusalem was most important in God's world salvation plan. However, it was full of enemies who resisted God's will. To obey God's will Jesus had to turn the enemy stronghold into the starting place of a new history. We each face a "Jerusalem." We must not avoid it, but must confront it, in order to fulfill God's purpose.

"Must" also referred to Jesus' suffering and death. Worldly kings rule with military power. Jesus would not rule in this way. Rather, Jesus, even though he is the King of kings, would humble himself and suffer and die on a cross, paying the price of our sins, in order to set us free. In this way Jesus became the king who serves and saves in obedience to God's will.

Jesus revealed these things for the first time to his disciples based on their confession that he was the Messiah. How did Peter respond? Look at verse 22. "Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!'" Peter thought the stress of leadership had taken its toll on Jesus, and that due to the persecution of religious leaders Jesus was discouraged and had become negative. So he wanted to cheer Jesus up and help him restore a positive attitude. He had his own idea about what Jesus should do. His concept of the Messiah

was a glorious ruler, not a suffering servant. His response is very natural. The problem is that Peter did not know the will of God. We have a tendency to think about our own situation, or our own generation in very narrow terms. At present, many people are thinking only about the economic problems in the United States, and not at all about the sanctity of life or moral well-being, or the needs of other countries. People are willing to ignore the increasing influence of Islam, because it does not seem to affect their economic situation. We have become self-centered and narrow-minded. God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts and God's ways are higher than our ways (Isa 55:8-9). God, in his great wisdom, wanted to solve the fundamental and universal problem of all people--that is sin and death. That is why Jesus had to suffer, die and rise again.

Humanly speaking, Peter's words were reasonable, understandable, and seemed to offer comfort to Jesus. However, his reasonable ideas made Jesus vulnerable to the devil's temptation not to take the cross, but to go an easier way. So Jesus turned and said, "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." Jesus indicates that Satan was working behind Peter. Although human concerns seem to be reasonable and good, when they oppose God's will they are evil. They make people stumble instead of obeying God. In following Jesus, we cannot rely on our reason. We need a spiritual principle that gives discernment. Jesus teaches this in the next part.

Second, the way of discipleship (24-28). Look at verse 24. "Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'" Just as Jesus used the word "must" in regards to his own obedience to God's will, so he also used the word "must" in regards to his disciples' attitude toward him. Just as Jesus denied his own desire in order to carry out God's salvation work, so his disciples must deny their own desires. Just as Jesus took up his cross, so his disciples must take up their own cross. Of course, our cross is different than Jesus' cross. We cannot die for the sins of the world, or even for our own sins. Our cross is the cross of bearing pains and difficulties to serve God practically, such as teaching the Bible, raising Jesus' disciples, and caring for the needy. Our cross can also be suffering through such things as sickness or family problems that refine our character in Christ. Compared to Jesus' cross, our cross is small. But to us, it seems very big. It seems too hard for us to carry. In America, the philosophy of self-indulgence and the freedom to do as one pleases are dominant. To deny oneself and take up one's cross sounds like a foreign language. Many say, "What are you talking about? That is a UBF motto." But this is Jesus' motto. Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be my disciple... must...." There is no exception. Still, Jesus' way of discipleship seems to be too hard to follow. Our lives are already very demanding and hectic. In addition, we have to deny ourselves and take up our cross? Why do we have to do this, not just one time, but on a daily basis throughout our lifetime? Well, if we don't deny ourselves and take up our crosses, we will be slaves of our sinful desires. We will never do anything life-giving or truly meaningful. We will not bear good fruit. Our lives will be miserable. Denying ourselves and taking up our crosses seems to be burdensome. But if we really do so from our hearts, we will enjoy true freedom, bear good fruit and live a meaningful life. One person thought that self-denial and cross bearing was too restrictive and burdensome. So he gave up. For a while he seemed to be free. He did not have to write Bible testimonies or attend meetings. He did whatever he wanted. Later he found that the burden of sin oppressed him. He began to be weary and lonely and thirsty. He also suffered from the torment of evil spirits. Then he realized that taking up the cross was really a blessed life. Life without the cross is misery itself.

In verses 25-26, Jesus tells us why we have to deny ourselves and take up our crosses: "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?" William MacDonald, a famous Plymouth Brethren preacher, told an interesting story. A man named Pat was walking down the street in New York City. He was accosted by a robber who held him at gunpoint and said, "Your money or your life!" Then Pat answered, "Take my life. I need my money for the future." This tells us that some people value money more than life itself. However, even though one obtains wealth, honor, power, and everything else he wants, death will deprive him of all these things. We have just one life. If we had two lives, we could dedicate one to God and one to pursuing worldly glory. However we have just one life. We don't have time to experience every possible alternative and then decide how to invest our lives. We must make a right decision while we are young. If we live for ourselves, we will lose everything. But if we live for Jesus and the gospel, we will gain everything. To live for Jesus or not is not a small matter. It is a matter of eternal life and death. Jesus is worthy of our whole life investment. It is not a losing

business. In verse 27 Jesus said that when he comes in his Father's glory and with his holy angels, he will reward each person according to what they have done. That may seem too long to wait. So Jesus said in verse 28, "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." This reward is not just for the future, but it impacts our present life. When we have hope in our hearts we never taste death, but experience the kingdom of God. The following event will give a glimpse of this.

II. The transfiguration of Jesus (17:1-27)

17:1 begins with the words, "After six days...." We can imagine that the disciples were depressed since they heard about Jesus' suffering and death. Peter must have hung his head and lamented, "Oh! Jesus called me Satan." Jesus felt that they needed some encouragement. So Jesus took with him Peter, James and John and led them up a high mountain by themselves (1b). Why did Jesus take only three of his disciples? It was to raise key members who would serve others as good examples in following Jesus. What happened on the mountain?

Look at verse 2. "There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light." Before climbing the mountain, Jesus appeared gaunt and haggard from serving many kinds of needy people. Jesus and his disciples often skipped meals due to the endless demands of people. Jesus suffered a lot in order to take care of God's flock. Isaiah described him well, saying, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isa 53:2b). But Jesus' original image was not like that. Jesus is the Eternal God, through whom all things were made. Jesus is the Almighty and Glorious God. Jesus is the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who lives in unapproachable light (1 Ti 6:15-16). When he was transfigured, his face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light. This was the image of the Risen Jesus who conquered the power of sin and death. Apostle John met the glorious Risen Jesus while he was exiled on the island of Patmos. He described this Jesus, saying, "The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters....His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance" (Rev 1:14-16). When Jesus was transfigured, Moses and Elijah also appeared and talked with Jesus. Luke 9:31 says, "They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem." Moses represented the Law and Elijah represented the Prophets. Jesus fulfilled the Law and the Prophets through his death and resurrection (Mt 5:17). Jesus, Moses and Elijah had a glorious Bible conference on the Mount of Transfiguration. These two men must have encouraged Jesus greatly, for they also had been suffering servants who obtained eternal glory.

Why did Jesus reveal his glorious image to his disciples at this time? It was to help them accept his teachings. Hearing of Jesus' death on the cross seemed too terrible to them. They did not understand the meaning of it. They had no idea of the glorious resurrection after suffering and death. Jesus planted a glorious hope in their hearts, so they could endure all the hardships and pains of suffering. Like them, we need a glorious hope in our hearts in order to carry the cross. How can we have this? We must go up the mountain with Jesus through prayer. Let's go up the mountain of glory, the mountain of hope, the mountain of victory, so that we find the strength to help us follow Jesus joyfully.

When Peter saw transfigured Jesus talking with great servants of God Moses and Elijah, he fell into a trance. He interrupted the heavenly conversation by blurting out, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters--one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah" (4). In his fantasy he thought, "and one for me!" Mark commented that he did not know what to say, they were so frightened (Mk 9:6). Nevertheless, Peter revealed his desire to enjoy glory on the mountain forever, without going back to the hard reality of the world again. We can understand Peter because we also want to enjoy glory without suffering. We want sweet fruit without breaking a sweat. We want to raise promising disciples of Jesus without bearing their weaknesses. We want to raise outstanding children without sacrifice. God's truth is very clear. No pain, no gain. No sweat, no sweet harvest. No cross, no crown.

While Peter was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (5) Why did God say to them, "Listen to him!" It was

because they had a very serious listening problem. Even though they had healthy ears, they could not hear. It was because their spiritual ears were closed due to the worldly desires in their hearts. They wanted to hear only what they liked to hear. Unless they improved in hearing Jesus' words, they could not be his disciples. Why should we listen to Jesus? God said about him, "This is my Son, whom I love." Jesus is united with God in love. To listen to Jesus is to listen to God. These days, many people listen to other voices, such as celebrities, athletes, politicians, psychiatrists, and so on. Worse than that, many people listen to the devil. They want to minimize the importance of Jesus' voice, as though it is one of many, or even less important than others. Listening has serious consequences. We follow whom we listen to. Other voices lead us to death. But Jesus leads us to life.

Hearing the word of God is a serious matter to mankind. In the Garden of Eden, Adam did not listen to God and lost paradise. However, when Abraham listened to God's word and obeyed it, he was blessed. The blessing was not only for him, but for people of all nations. Jesus is the best example. Though he was the Son of God, Jesus learned obedience from what he suffered, and became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Heb 5:8-9). What is the first thing God wants us to do? It is to listen to him. Deuteronomy 6:4 says, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One." In this verse, the Hebrew word translated "Hear" is "Shema," which means "to hear and obey." Thus, listening is closely related to obedience. The prophets said repeatedly, "Listen to God." When the people listened to God they prospered. When they were unwilling to listen to God, disaster and calamity came upon them. Listening is a matter of the heart. We listen to the one we love. In order to listen to God we must keep our hearts in God. Proverbs 4:23 says, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."

What happened to the disciples? They fell facedown to the ground terrified (6). But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid" (7). When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus (8). As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead" (9). Jesus granted this experience to his disciples to help them believe his words personally. When the disciples heard that Jesus would rise from the dead, a question arose in their hearts. They wondered why the teachers of the law predicted that Elijah would come first. This was a commonly held Jewish belief based on Malachi 4:5 (10). They thought that Elijah would precede the Messiah and restore all things. Then the Messiah would come in glory. Jesus explained that Elijah had already come (11-12). But the Jewish leaders mistreated him because he was not what they expected. In the same way, when the Messiah came, they mistreated him. Then the disciples understood that he was talking about John the Baptist (13).

While Jesus and the three disciples were on the mountain, the other disciples tried to drive out an evil spirit from a boy (14-15). When Jesus came to the crowd, the boy's father pleaded with him to cure his son. Jesus sighed and said, "You unbelieving and perverse generation." The disciples were supposed to be men of faith who could turn the adverse situation into God's victory. But they failed when they did not listen to God in prayer, and instead depended on their own past experience. Jesus rebuked the demon and cured the boy. Then he encouraged them to have faith, saying, "...if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you" (20).

In verses 22-23, Jesus repeated his prediction of his suffering, death and resurrection. This time, the disciples were filled with grief. It means they began to listen to Jesus even though they did not like it. In verses 24-27, we find Jesus helping Peter to do something by faith. When his trust in Jesus was restored, he experienced a miracle.

Jesus is the Son of God. He is worthy to receive honor, glory and praise from all human beings. But he came down to the world and humbled himself to serve us. He bore all our weaknesses and infirmities. Finally he suffered and died on the cross for our sins. Then he was raised from the dead. This was God's way of salvation through the Messiah. In the same way, Jesus wants us to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow him. This is the way of life, glory and victory. Let's listen to Jesus' words.