

The Gift of Forced Selflessness

Well hey everybody, thanks for listening in. If you have a bible nearby, turn with me to Matthew 16. I pray all of you are hanging in there okay—it's obviously been an absolutely insane month or so, and I know all of us are feeling it on a physical, emotional, and even spiritual level at this point. So wanted to remind you, as always, that we as your pastors are with you, we're praying for you, and we're here for whatever you need.

On a logistical front, many of you probably heard that *last* Sunday, the president extended all the social distancing guidelines through April 30. So that means for the first time in our church's history, and probably *most* churches' history, we will be having an *online-only* Easter service next Sunday. Which, let me just acknowledge up front, is a bummer. I mean we had some fantastic things planned, we were going to baptize like 8 people I think—it was going to be a blast. And we'll still do all that, just not on Easter Sunday. It's a bummer for me, and I know it's a bummer for a lot of you too. Especially on Easter Sunday, you want more than anything to gather as God's people and celebrate the resurrection together. And at least *in person*, we won't be able to do that this year.

But *since it is* Easter, and since we can't be together in person, we're going to switch the format up a little. For one, next week we'll have music and teaching—not just teaching as we've been doing these last few weeks. And second, we'll all aim to watch it online *simultaneously*. Meaning, instead of us posting a video to YouTube like we normally do, to be watched anytime, we'll all aim to tune in at 10:30am on Easter Sunday, and watch it together. It will of course be archived to watch later if you *can't* watch it at 10:30—if you have to work, or whatever. But what will be different is that if you tune in at 10:45, you will miss the first fifteen minutes of it until it's archived later on. So we'll be doing all this via our website and YouTube channel. So if you don't want to miss it, go ahead and set a reminder at 10:25 or whatever to tune in, and you may even want to subscribe to our channel on YouTube. Just go to YouTube and search for "City Church Knoxville."

So I hope you'll make plans to tune in with us, next Sunday, at 10:30am for that. Even though it's certainly not what we had in mind for Easter, it's **obviously now as important as ever that we collectively remember and celebrate the resurrection of Jesus and the hope that that brings us**. So that's exactly what we'll do next week.

Alright. With all that out of the way, let's get into today's teaching. For those of you that have been listening in these past couple weeks, we have been talking about what God

might be up to in the midst of something *like* the Coronavirus. We said in the first week that as earth-shaking and devastating as something like this is, God has the ability throughout history to work for his people's good in the midst of it.

In week 1, we talked about the gift of forced helplessness—the benefits of realizing that we never have been in control of our world, and how that's actually a good thing for us to realize. And then in week 2, we talked about forced *interruption*—how anytime our normal rhythms of life are interrupted (like they are right now), it's an opportunity to take stock and consider if our rhythm of life was actually healthy in the first place.

This week, I want us to talk about the gift of forced *selflessness*: **how God might be working in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak to teach us that life is about more than just ourselves.** So let's work our way through some of this passage in Matthew 16 to that end. Start following along with me in v. 21:

*[21] "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that **he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.**"*

Now first off, what an appropriate passage for us to be reading this Sunday before Easter. Because we read that at this point in the story, Jesus began to be noticeably more focused on his crucifixion, that was just around the corner. If you're new to the story, Jesus' life was a very unique one. It was unique in the way that he in many ways was *born*, to *die*. His birth, life and ministry on earth all propelled him forward to the moment where he would be executed, largely because of the religious leaders of his day. And this death would have all sorts of world-changing implications for his people. And so Matthew 16 tells us that **at this point in his life, Jesus began to think more about that, talk more about it, and specifically talk to his *disciples* more about it.**

But it's in that last part—talking to his *disciples* about it—that he starts to encounter some pushback, specifically from one of his disciples named Peter. Take a look back in v. 22:

*[22] And Peter took him aside and began to **rebuke him—***

Now, just as a general rule of thumb, if you ever find yourself in a situation where you are inclined to rebuke *Jesus*...you did something wrong along the way. But that's what Peter chooses to do here. And if you read through the gospels, this is kind of Peter's thing. He's a very hot-and-cold kind of guy. If you've ever known somebody who has all

sorts of potential, but just can't stop getting in their own way, that's Peter. He at one point in his life walks on water, and then he takes his eyes off of Jesus falls in. He tells Jesus "I will never abandon you!" and then denies that he even knows Jesus three times over the next twenty-four hours. This is just Peter's vibe in a lot of ways. And this passage is no different. Jump back into v. 22 with me:

*[22] And Peter took Jesus ~~him~~ aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall **never** happen to you." [as in, "you being crucified will never happen to you if I have anything to say about it."] [23] But he [Jesus] turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, **Satan!** [Which has to be on the top 10 list of things you don't want Jesus to call you]. You are a **hindrance** to me (Peter). For **you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.**" [Now here's really what I want us to focus in, lean in, let's hear what Jesus is saying here...] [24] Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. [25] For whoever would save **his life** will **lose it**, but whoever **loses his life for my sake** will **find it.**" [26] For **what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?***

Okay. Let's talk about this interaction between Jesus and Peter. Jesus is starting to talk a lot more about the fact that soon, he will be hauled off to be executed by the state. And Peter, one of Jesus' right-hand men, just is not having it. He essentially pulls Jesus aside to have a chat with him about it.

Now, before we go *too* hard on Peter, let's make sure we understand where his pushback is coming from. Peter grew up Jewish. Which means he was familiar with the concept of the "messiah"—this long-awaited, victorious king, who was going to set things right, once and for all, for the nation of Israel. He was going to end the oppression that they suffered from empires like the current Roman empire, and restore Israel to their rightful, exalted place as God's people. So when Jesus (who claims to *be* that messiah) announces to the disciples that he himself is going to be oppressed and executed by this empire, Peter is understandably a bit confused by that. That's not how things were supposed to go down in his mind. Which is why he is so adamant with Jesus about it, saying "Jesus, there's no way I'm going to let this happen to you!"

And in response to that, Jesus calls Peter, *Satan*. Quite the flex. So, in terms of the events of this story *specifically*, Jesus calls Peter that name because Peter is trying to *prevent* Jesus from going to the cross—the very thing Jesus' life has been building up to.

But on a more *conceptual* level, I think it may have something to do with Peter encouraging Jesus to preserve Jesus' own life. To put *himself* before *others*. What Peter wants Jesus to do is place Jesus' *own good* (staying alive), before and above the good of those *around him* (who his death would actually serve to benefit). **What Peter wants Jesus to do, to put it bluntly, is be just a little more selfish.**

One reason I say that is because that has been Satan's strategy from the very beginning of the bible. From the very opening pages of Genesis, God takes the first human beings, and he puts them in a garden to do what? To *serve*. Sure, he does give them things to enjoy—but he commissions them with a *job to do*. To "rule over" all of creation. To work the ground and subdue it. **He puts them on planet earth to *serve*, to benefit the world around them and to make it *thrive*. From the very beginning, we were made to *serve*. We were made to be *selfless*.**

If you know the story, it's actually *Satan* that introduces the idea of selfishness and self-preservation into everything. He shows up on the scene and says "really? God said don't eat from that one tree? Don't you want to know what God is holding you back from? Wouldn't it be good to be *like God*? To know everything like he does? Wouldn't that be fulfilling? You should do what *you* think is best, not what *God* thinks is best." And Satan has been using that strategy ever since. **Most anytime you feel the inclination in your heart to "do what's best for you, not what's best for others," that's an echo from the serpent in the garden.**

And in our passage *today*, Matthew 16, Peter does a version of the same thing to *Jesus*: he tries to encourage Jesus to *preserve* his life instead of giving it up. So Jesus responds by calling him *Satan*. Because apparently, **to put yourself and your own desires over and above everything else in life is, quite literally, *satanic*.**

Now, I'm aware that what I just said puts me on a direct collision course with most everything our society teaches us. We throw phrases around all the time like "do whatever makes *you* happy." "Be *yourself*." "Be *true* to yourself." "Follow your dreams." Even at a very pop level, in what I think is one of the funniest *Parks & Rec* episodes of all time, there is the now-famous Tom Haverford and Donna Meagle iconic line, "treat yo'self." This is the air we *breathe*, right? We are taught—no, *disciplined*—every day, in a dozen different ways, that our self is the only real thing worth living for. That *the best way* to go through life is to live out *our* dreams, to fulfill *our* desires, and to indulge *ourselves*, whatever that takes.

And in a time of *crisis* like the our society is in right *now*, that approach just gets *tweaked* a little. Now, instead of “*be yourself*,” it’s “*protect yourself*.” “*Preserve yourself*.” “*Look out for yourself and nobody else*.” Or, to use Jesus’ words from this passage, “*save your life*.” We’re seeing this right now with all the panic buying. Every website and blog post out there on the Coronavirus would tell you that when it comes to grocery shopping, each of us should continue going to the store around once a week (like we usually do), and buying only the stuff we need for that week, and then going back the next week. If we do that, it says, the supply chains will continue working the way they should, and we’ll all have everything we need. That *will* work.

The *problem* is that the bulk of people don’t trust that. So we have people that go and buy enough toilet paper and handsoap for approximately the next seven years, which means that a lot of *other* people don’t even have what they *need* for *tomorrow*. So let me ask, *why* do people do that? Well one of two reasons—both of them have to do with selfishness. Either: 1) people are only concerned about having what *they* need, and are not at all concerned about what *other people* may need (which is selfishness), or 2) they assume that *everybody else* will panic buy, and so they beat those other people to the punch by panic buying first. **So ironically, because we are fearful of other people’s selfishness, we end up being selfish. Fear feeds on fear, selfishness feeds on selfishness. It’s a self-perpetuating, self-destructive mentality, through and through.** Fear at its core, just serves to further *expose* the selfishness that was *already* in our hearts.

Pause & Reflect

So just like we did some last week, here is where I want us to actually pause and reflect on a question together. Here’s the question: **are there any ways you’ve seen this current crisis we’re in, expose your selfishness?** Where has it brought out the more self-consumed, self-preservation side of you? Maybe you’ve seen it in your *marriage* as you’ve been stuck in close quarters together most of the time. Maybe you’ve seen it come out in impatience towards your kids, or towards your roommates that *act* like kids? Maybe you’ve seen it in your consumption of resources: panic buying, overeating, overdrinking, ordering way too much takeout every night and gorging yourself on it. I’d love for us to just reflect on that question: **are there any ways you’ve seen this current crisis we’re in, expose your selfishness?** Press pause on the teaching and consider that for just a moment before we continue.

Okay. So what we're going to see next in the passage is that the approach *Jesus* offers us is the polar opposite of selfishness. Back in Matthew 16, v. 24, he says this:

*"If anyone would come after me, let him **deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.***

"If anyone wants to *come after me*," Jesus says, "this is what they have to do." In some translations, it actually reads "if anyone wants to be my *disciple*," this is what they must do. In other words, to follow Jesus, we must necessarily be willing to do what he did. Which in this instance was to "deny himself," and "take up his cross." "Deny himself," meaning that **at every point, Jesus put the needs of others above his own immediate good**. Jesus did not make decisions by asking "what would I most enjoy in the moment? What would give *me* the most immediate comfort and satisfaction? How could *I* most directly and effectively 'treat myself'?" Those were not the guiding principles in Jesus' life.

And furthermore, he "took up his cross." Now, in Christendom this has become almost a catchphrase ("taking up your cross"). You've likely heard someone use the expression, "well that's just my cross to bear." Now, sometimes we mean it sarcastically, like "I get to house sit for somebody with a lakehouse this weekend—just my cross to bear." Or we just mean it metaphorically ("this person I have to deal with is a real pain—just my cross to bear.") Pretty much none of us mean it *literally*, in terms of *actually being martyred*. And that's okay—there's room to use the phrase metaphorically.

But you do need to understand, for Jesus and his disciples, *this was not a metaphor*. Jesus was not telling them that they should *metaphorically* "take up their cross." That wouldn't have even made sense to them. To *them* it meant, "if you want to be my disciple, you need to be ready to die for it. Saying yes to following me is saying yes to the very real possibility that you will lose your life as a result." And best we can tell from church history, all twelve of them did precisely that. Every single one of them we think ended up being executed as a direct result of following Jesus.

So I tell you all of that, just to drive home the point that this is a very direct, very literal instruction from Jesus. **If you want to be his disciple, fulfilling your personal dreams and preserving your own life at all costs is no longer the priority for you.** You may have some dreams you want to fulfill, and it doesn't mean you don't value your own life at all—but it does mean those are not the guiding principles in how you make decisions anymore.

Pause & Reflect

So again here, let's consider a reflection question together. This time I want us to ask this: **are there any personal desires or aspirations that God may be asking you to give up?** Whether it relates to the current coronavirus crisis or not, are there desires or aspirations that you have personally, that God might be asking you to give up for him or for the good of those around you? Or at least something he may want you to put on pause? If Jesus can ask his disciples to "pick up their (literal) cross," he can at least ask you and I to give up a dream or an aspiration, right? So let's ask ourselves that question: **are there any personal desires or aspirations that God may be asking you to give up?** Press pause now, and reflect on that question.

Okay. Now Jesus wraps up with this, in v. 25:

*[25] For whoever would save **his life** will **lose it**, but whoever **loses his life for my sake** will **find it.**" [26] For **what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?***

So we've gotta talk for a second here about how these verses specifically might connect to everything going on in our world right now. And I realize how counterintuitive what I'm about to say is to a lot of us, but I need you to hear me out. **If your *only* concern during this time in history is saving your life—keeping yourself healthy, Coronavirus-free—if that is your primary concern, Jesus says you will lose your life.** Not necessarily *literally*, but certainly in other ways that very much matter. If at the end of this crisis, people look back and say "man, those Christians, they sure knew how to isolate! They sure did do a good job washing their hands! They're a healthy bunch, those Jesus-followers!" **If that's the only thing that the watching world can say about us when all of this is over, that will be a massive *failure* and *missed opportunity* for the Church.**

But if instead, people in our world are able to say about followers of Jesus during this time in history, "those Christians cared *persistently* and *ferociously* for those around them in a way that no one else did," that will make Jesus look *glorious*, like he truly is. If the world around us is able to say "say what you want about the Christians—no one took care of the vulnerable during the Coronavirus like they did. No one cared for the elderly like they did. No one took care of the material needs of their neighbors like they did. No one lived as *selflessly* as they did." If the world says *that* about us when all this is said

and done, we might have a *revival* on our hands. We could have a spiritual awakening on our hands.

So Church, hear me on this: *this is our moment*. Not to sit on our hands and post on Instagram about how bored we are. Not to just shelter-in-place and hunker down until this whole thing blows over. But to put Jesus on display to the world around us, whatever it takes and however it looks. And listen, feel *free* to be *smart* about how you do that. I'm not saying you march into a hospital E.R. tomorrow with no mask, no gloves, and go "put me to work! I don't even care if I die!" Like, feel free to be smarter about it than that. Help people from six feet away or further. Wash your hands before and after. Take the recommended precautions and be smart.

But don't let the precautions be a reason you don't love people and live selflessly. You don't have to get anywhere near another person physically to send them money on Venmo or have a check cut to them. You don't have to get anywhere near another person to drop off groceries on their porch. You don't have to get anywhere near another person in your LifeGroup to text them and set up phone calls or Zoom calls to check in with them and see how they're doing. To mow someone's grass. To roll an elderly neighbor's trash can to the curb. There is so much you can do with little to no risk to yourself at all. You guys can probably come up with even better and more creative ideas than I just mentioned on how to help people. So be smart about it, don't be foolish.

But don't let any of this lull you into "self-preservation-only" mode until this thing is over. We've got an unbelievable opportunity to show the world what hope in the resurrected Jesus looks like, let's not ignore that. Let's lean into it with the power of the crucified, resurrected Jesus, and show the world what he is capable of.

Let's pray.