

It's a Matter of Perspective 2020
Matthew 16:20-26 1 Corinthians 1:18-30

Matthew 16:20-26 (New Revised Standard Version)

Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

1 Corinthians 1:18-30 (New Revised Standard Version)

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

One-time Tony Campolo took some youth on a mission trip to Haiti.

Seeing firsthand such extreme poverty and human suffering especially as they saw what a significant difference **they could make** toward improving other people's lives.

One of the young men that went on the mission trip spent most of his time helping out at a rural clinic, and then talked to the group about sensing God's call.

Charlie explained, "I'm coming back.

I'm going to medical school, get my degree, and come back as a doctor to help others **for Jesus**.

Several years later, Campolo ran into Charlie again in NYC.

To his credit, Charlie had gone to medical school, worked hard, gotten his degree, and he became a doctor.

But Charlie was using his medical degree to do cosmetic surgery,
not the useful kind such as helping burn victims,
or people disfigured in a car wreck or accident,
rather his medical practice catered to human vanity,
applying his skill to tweak the appearance of rich people.

Campolo was shocked and disappointed, and Tony reminded him,
“Charlie, you had a dream. God gave you a calling,
but you settled for less, you sold out ...
you sold out your dream for a Porsche and a Jacuzzi.
You gave up something very special **of God**,
for mere trinkets and babbles of this world.”

Charlie had chosen to follow the values & perspective of this world,
which meant sacrificing his true purpose, life-meaning and call.

The disciples, including Peter, had witnessed and watched when Jesus
fed huge crowds, walked on water and healed the sick and lame.
They were on their way to Jerusalem and the momentum was with them.

At Caesarea-Philippi, Jesus asks who they thought he was,
and in a moment of inspiration Peter got the question right, vs. 16
Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

After complimenting Peter for listening to God’s revelation,
Jesus explained what being the Messiah really meant, vs. 22
From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo
great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be
raised.

In response to all that talk about suffering and death,
Peter insists, no way, that can’t possibly be God’s plan, vs. 23
“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get
behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on
human things.”

The problem wasn’t that Peter didn’t understand what Jesus said,
it was that it didn’t fit his idea of what the Messiah should do...
... Peter presumes to have a better plan than God’s will.

Jesus recognizes in Peter’s words
the same temptation that Satan had used in the wilderness,
trying to dissuade him from obeying God’s purpose, **to sell out**,
and responded as he had back then, Get behind me, Satan!

It was not that Peter had suddenly become evil and demonic,

but just as Satan had tempted Jesus in the wilderness
to abandon God's will, saving purpose and plan,
so now Peter was opposing the will and purpose of God.

Peter was like a football player who catches an interception,
"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God"
but then runs the wrong way toward the opponent's end-zone,
and is unintentionally helping the other team score.

Then in contrast to Peter trying to dissuade and instruct Jesus,
the Lord describes faithful Christian discipleship, vs. 24-26

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

I've always read that **as a challenge and call for deeper commitment,**
more effort and trying harder to please and serve the Lord
through more vigorous and faithful Christian achievement...
... which had led to even more frustration, more guilt and regret,
since even on my best day, **I still fall far short of that text.**

But recently I've noticed something else about that passage.

Consider how Jesus described the problem to Peter, vs. 23,
you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.

It's not you've got to try harder, but rather it's **shift your focus.**
Reset your perspective to the divine, toward what God is doing,
and join-in with God's work-project, God's purpose and agenda.

That's a critical change in perspective that truly matters.

It's about drawing close, cooperating with God's grace, and letting
the Holy Spirit guide us to refocus on the works and will **of God.**

For centuries the Jews had been waiting for the promised Messiah,
who they expected would perform miraculous signs and wonders
as a powerful, conquering hero who would restore the nation...

... and Jesus crucified did not look much like that miraculous sign.

They were sure that they already knew what a Messiah should look like,
and no way did Jesus or the cross come close to that definition...

...after all, what kind of Messiah would go out & get himself crucified?

It was in sharp contrast to that **perspective of their expectations**

that Paul writes in Corinthians about **a theology of the cross**

as a symbol of death that became a symbol of life and hope, vs. 18

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is **the power of God**.

Paul is describing Christianity as a paradox of the unexpected,

our God willing to die a humiliating and agonizing death on a cross,

for broken, unworthy and undeserving sinners and failures.

Consider the life and ministry, the mission and teaching of Jesus,

who went out of his way to seek the lost and outcasts,

breaking with tradition to welcome & eat with sinners.

Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God where nobodies are somebodies,

where the one who is great, is the one who serves other people,

that to be first, then you must be last and least,

and to save your life, means willing to lose your life...

... **the very opposite of this world's sense of power and influence,**

where we are **far more fascinated** by impressive winners,

by the successful and influential, the rich and victorious,

then by humble servants obedient and faithful to God.

Consider the contrast, as Paul explains,

the apparent foolishness and scandal of Jesus dying on the cross,

compared to what is admired and pursued in this world. vs. 22-25

For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach **Christ crucified**, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, **Christ the power of God** and the wisdom of God.

Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men,

and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Hear Paul's message to those proud Christians of Corinth, vs. 27~29

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ... so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

Now that does not mean that our faithfulness and obedience,

or that our best efforts to serve well don't really matter,

but that God had already made the first move toward us

even while we were yet lost, hopeless & unworthy in sin.

Paul's theology of the cross is God's grace, healing, change & hope,

that God has chosen and continues to choose to love each one of us-

- not for who we are, or what we've accomplished or what we can offer,

but entirely & relentlessly - it's all about God's grace and love.

We are called to Jesus Christ and we are blessed solely because even before we existed, God chose to love and bless us. vs. 30

But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption.

That is the essence of the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, which has the power to change, to heal and save human lives,

regardless of our struggles or our situation in life...

... meaning that even in the darkest & most exhausting places in life,

by grace there is enough strength and hope to see us through.

In contrast to the perceived values and ways of this world,

the message of the cross is the Good News about God's grace,

that Jesus reaches down to bless, redeem and save us,

long before we have made any moves toward the Lord,

accomplishing what we cannot possibly do on our own-

--- and that is the message of the cross that saves and changes lives,

and when we do hear that message and respond to it,

it has the power to heal, bless and change everything ...

--- for as we live into that faith-relationship through grace,

we begin to see the world, ourselves, our lives and goals

through **a new perspective of God's mercy and blessings,**

of allowing room for the Holy Spirit to transform us

toward the meaningful life for which we're created.

... which is to embrace the truth: God is good & his promises are sure,
and that the God who loves you and is up to something good for you.

It's all grace, as God opens our eyes to see a new perspective,

or as Paul wrote, 2 Cor. 5:7, for we walk by faith, not by sight.

Grace is about resetting our minds, lived-values and perspective

beyond our circumstances, immediate concerns, and human things,

by learning to perceive and notice divine things,

God's gracious presence and power are happening all around us,

as we wait upon the Lord and allow space for healing and blessing,

by looking for where God is present and already busy at work,

which Jesus explains as us doing these three things:

As Jesus instructed: deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me

Here the Greek language is quite specific and particular,

the verb tense indicates a continuous and on-going action.

1st Keep on denying yourself -

That is learning to say: "Not my will, but THY will be done."

It is to focus and trust in God, rather than ourselves.

It's learning to see with gratitude and an awareness of God,

and saying: **Lord, you take charge, enter and rule throughout.**

2nd Keep on taking up your cross

It's our particular cross, as intended by the Lord,

not some other more desirable cross of our own choosing.

It's also the one that leads toward a closer walk with God,

and it's our doorway to spiritual growth and discipleship.

3rd Keep on following me

It means to follow Jesus, which is to turn from **our point of view**

and to take up **God's point of view** & purpose, making it our own.

That is the great Christian paradox,

that to try and secure our lives on our own terms

is ultimately to lose our lives,

while to lose our lives in faith and service of Jesus

is ultimately for God's grace to save our lives.

It really comes down to what do I truly trust and actually believe?

Am I certain and am I entirely confident

that God is good, all-powerful, capable and working a plan,

and that in the end, **God will surely accomplish it?**

When I am at my most faithful and **spiritually-attuned best,**

in any situation and regardless of whatever is going on,

these are **perspective-questions** that I need to ask:

Where am I perceiving God in this, and what might God be up to in this?

How can this serve to fulfill the will and purpose of God?

What could God be intending to show me through all of this?

What does it mean to respond as God intends and desires for us

by loving our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength?

What does it mean for God's grace to flavor my life, my words, my deeds and attitude?,

and based on the way I am living today and right now,

is it more reflective of this world's ways and values,

or the message of the cross, of God's grace & power?

Today, in the abundance of God's Spirit, healing purpose and mercy,

may the Lord accomplish something incredible in each one of us

that is amazing and wonderful, disturbing and life-changing!

For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?