

Finding our true self – Matthew 16:21-28 8th May 2011 at 10am

Introduction

Good morning everyone

Well, we've reached chapter 16 verses 21 to 28 in our Sunday morning journey through Matthew's Gospel. So, it'd be really helpful if you'd grab a pew Bible and open it on page 984.

This morning we're going to be talking about finding spiritual reality. And we'll do this by focussing on verse 25, the heart of this passage: *For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.*

But before we do that, we need to first have a quick look at the little Greek word: *psyche*.

Psyche appears in verses 25 and 26, whenever the word 'life' and the word 'soul' are used. Each of them translates this same Greek word: *psyche*. Now whenever you see this switching between English words it's a clue that it's a very rich word – a word that doesn't have an exact parallel in English.

Now most of the usual translations use the words 'life' and 'soul' exactly like our pew Bibles, but *the Message* translation helpfully suggests another word to use: true self.

And that's good because it helps us to see that Jesus is saying something really important here. He's telling us how we can find our true self:
How we can find the real you; the real me; who we really are

And it seems that this is something that's really important in our society at present:

I don't know if you watched Professor Brian Cox's recent TV series on the Wonders of the Universe? He started each episode with these words:
"Why are we here? Where do we come from? These are the most enduring of questions. And it's an essential part of human nature to want to find the answers."

Great ambition! And I thought it was an excellent series which I really enjoyed, but Brian Cox, a humanist physicist, didn't come even close to answering his own questions.

However Jesus says in our passage, I do have the answer to your questions. I can show you how you can find your truest identity.

But his answer in verse 25 could not be more counter-intuitive. More provocative even

This is what Jesus says:

He says that if you want to find spiritual reality

He says if you want to find your truest identity, your true self

Then you have to die

Let's try to grasp the force of what Jesus is saying here:

He's saying that if you want to find the spiritual you, your true self..... you have to climb the steps to the gallows

If you want to find yourself..... walk out in front of the firing squad

If you want to find yourself..... become a dead man walking

That's how you do it

When Jesus calls us to him, he's asking us to come and die

That's the astonishing message of these verses

To help us get to grips with this, I'm going to split our passage into two parts

Firstly we'll look at the context of Jesus' comments: at what had happened just before he makes this extraordinary statement; at what we might call Peter's mistake, in verses 21-23
Then we'll look at the teaching that follows this from verse 24 onwards

Got that? Peter's mistake – then Jesus' astonishing teaching

Peter's mistake (vv21-23)

Okay let's look first at Peter's mistake

In verses 21 to 23, immediately after Peter has just acknowledged Jesus as the Son of God, Jesus starts teaching his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die before being raised back to life. And when Peter disputes this, Jesus rebukes him strongly in return.

Why did Jesus do this?

Why did Jesus say what he did to Peter?

Well there are three remarkable things about Jesus' rebuke:

Firstly, notice it really is a very forceful rebuke! It's in complete contrast to Jesus' normal way of dealing with people.

Jesus is normally very gentle in his interactions

But this is even harsher than his rebukes to the Pharisees! "*Get behind me, Satan!*" he says to Peter "*You are a stumbling-block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.*" (verse 23)

He's calling Peter, Satan! It's an incredibly strong rebuke

Secondly, notice the timing of it. It comes immediately after he's just praised Peter for his answer to the most important question in the world – who is Jesus? Talk about going from the heights to the depths, in a few short minutes!

And thirdly, notice this rebuke is done in public.

Look you know how this sort of thing should work. If an employee gets something wrong at work, any good manager will take them quietly aside to a private place and tell them what they've done wrong.

But Jesus doesn't do that to Peter here. No! He very publicly and deliberately confronts Peter in front of the other disciples

Imagine what it would be like, if, just as I was speaking now, Steve was to stand up and criticise my sermon right here, right now. (No need to do that by the way, Steve!)

That's what Jesus did to Peter

Why? Why did he do this?

Well, there's only one possible reason

The only possible conclusion is that Peter's error was so serious that Jesus had to correct it immediately and publicly.

So what was this serious error? What was Peter's mistake?

Let's look at the context again

As I said, immediately after Jesus accepts Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, Jesus starts talking about the need for him to suffer.

He's saying here's how I'm going to save everyone; here's how I'm going to do it

I'm going to be weak

I'm going to be humbled

I'm going to be tortured

I'm going to be killed

I'm going to be completely defeated

That's how I'm going to triumph

You see Jesus saw something that no one else had ever seen. He saw that the glorious longed-for Messiah was not only a kingly figure and a prophetic figure – but he was also the suffering servant that Isaiah describes (in chapter 53 and elsewhere)

No one else had seen the possibility that the Son of God, the Saviour, the Christ, the Messiah – could also be a figure of weakness; a figure without beauty; a figure of abuse and suffering

Jesus is saying that this is how God's kingdom will come in him and through him. It'll come through weakness and through suffering and through difficulty and through death

And now we can understand the seriousness of Peter's mistake:

Jesus is saying that Peter is thinking just like Satan; just like fallen humanity

Just like everyone, in fact, who admires power but not weakness

Who admires strength but not humility

Who admires status but not servant-hood

Jesus is giving an example of the counter-cultural message of Christianity:

That the way up is down

That the way to triumph is through defeat
That the way to power is through sacrifice and emptying

And Jesus says, if you want to follow me, then you'll have to do the same

Finding our true self (v24-26a)

So, we've seen the context. We've seen Peter's mistake
Now let's look at the teaching that follows it.

In verse 24, Jesus says this: *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."*

In a major contrast to Peter's words, Jesus starts to explain what it really means to be a disciple of his.

You see, as one commentator has said: Peter had been giving the essence of Christian immaturity in his criticism of Jesus' plans

What's the essence of Christian immaturity? It's this:
Jesus Christ suffered so that I don't have to *[repeat]*
Jesus went to the cross so that I'll never have to go there

The essence of Christian immaturity is to say that Jesus died for me so that not only will I not have to suffer bad things, but that I won't ever do bad things.

And Jesus says that's not true. It's absolutely not true

Verse 24, shows that far from Jesus dying so that we won't have to experience really bad things in our lives, or do really bad things – far from that – Jesus words in verse 24 shows that if we want to follow him whole-heartedly, then we will suffer for it.

Jesus says you need to understand this. That's why I was so hard on Peter.
This is vital; it's foundational; it's crucial.

[Pause] Do you understand this?

Do you understand that the way to find your true self, is not through the things that the world values?

Look again at verse 25: *"For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."*

Jesus says that the way to maturity, the way to a really strong identity is by denying yourself, taking up your cross, and following him.

And that the way this works, he says, is that you have to lose yourself..... for me

Notice that Jesus isn't just saying lose yourself by doing your duty..... perhaps by helping people

He isn't saying lose yourself in some good cause..... perhaps by taking part in some social justice project

He isn't saying lose yourself in your family

Even though all of these things are good in themselves

No! Jesus doesn't just say lose yourself..... he says lose yourself.... for me

And what that means, he says, is you need to look at my cross and let that shape everything else.

The truth is that it's only when we understand that Jesus with his cross has overcome the really big issues of sin and separation from God;

That he's dealt with the real things: the real guilt, the real condemnation....

It's only then, that we can begin to deal with our own little crosses

If you try to lose yourself for any other reason than for Jesus, you'll simply lose yourself!

But if you lose yourself for him, then you will find yourself. That's what verse 25 is saying

Let me show you how this happens in practice. Let me go through three ways in which we get a strong identity by following Jesus:

Firstly, we only get a strong identity when we know we belong to Jesus

Just as our earthly families help give us some identity and strength, so the knowledge that we're part of Jesus' spiritual family gives us ultimate identity and strength

When we're confident of what we are in Jesus, then we'll have a strong identity that can stand up to all the knocks and shocks of life

In fact it's only when we truly grasp the implications of Jesus' free gift of grace through the cross – that he died for us, that he loves us, that we're accepted in him

It's only when we've truly grasped this, that we gain the strength to cope with our own brokenness, to accept our messed up lives

It's only when we realise that the fact that we're unable to save ourselves doesn't matter, because Jesus can and has saved us – it's only then that we can begin to look at ourselves openly and honestly

When we have the confidence of knowing that we are his, we can accept our flaws. We can live with the criticism of others without curling up in a little ball. We can handle the knowledge of our imperfections

And we can do this because of our confidence in the most important relationship that we'll ever have – our relationship with God through his Son Jesus

Okay, so firstly, we get a strong identity when we know we are Jesus'

Secondly, we get a strong identity when we are free from outside influences

The way that most of us try to gain an identity separate from Jesus, is by gaining the world.

We look at how the world values us, our careers, our status. We consider what the world thinks of us:

“This person loves me. That person looks up to me. This person thinks I’m cool. That person said some good things about me.”

But Jesus says in verse 26: *What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?*

Jesus is warning that even if we were to be successful at gaining the world, the price of trying to get an identity this way is fraught with danger.

Because we could lose our soul. We could lose our true self

The problem is that we become trapped by what society thinks of us

And if we’re controlled by what other people think of us then we won’t have a strong identity and we won’t be free

For example if you’re someone who’s controlled by what the opposite sex thinks of you, then you’ll spend time thinking how to impress them; you’ll spend money buying clothes that’ll make you look good in their eyes; you’ll lose sleep at night worrying about your next meeting with them – and how the last one went

Now none of this is necessarily wrong in itself. But is it freedom? Who’s really defining the person you are?

Wouldn’t it be great to be so strong, that you could look at other people, look at your peers, and say:

“You know what, you may be a good thing, you are in fact a good thing, but you’re not my life, you’re not my identity, you’re not my soul”

Wouldn’t that be great?

But the only way we can do this – the only way we can have this freedom, this strength from our identity – is when what Jesus thinks of us, is more important to us than our status in society, our relationship with others, what other people think of us

And the only way that will happen is when we realise that the self that would be preserved by gaining the world, is not worth preserving anyway because our identity, our true self, would be lost

Okay, so firstly, we have a strong identity when we know we are Jesus’

Secondly, we have a strong identity when we are free from outside influences

Thirdly, we have a strong identity when we have Godly purpose in our lives

When we have Godly purpose in our lives we have the strength to take decisions that may, and probably will, lead to weakness and suffering

Let me give you three quick examples:

Firstly, if you decide that for Jesus' sake you're going to get involved with helping needy people; people who are then going to impose on you and ask you to do things that you don't want to do – then that's going to lead to your suffering

Or if you deliberately take a job that doesn't pay as much as another, but makes you more valuable to the people around you, perhaps because it gives you more time to make a difference to their lives – that'll lead to your suffering

Or if you start to give your money away in radical ways; in ways that impact your standard of living – that'll lead to your suffering

But it'll also lead to strength, just as surely as Jesus setting his face to go to Jerusalem, led via suffering and death, to the strength of his resurrection and to the completion of his work here on earth.

Conclusion

In the end it all comes down to this: when Jesus asks in verse 26, what would you give in exchange for your soul? What could you do?

Think of the value of the soul

Think of the value of the self

What could you give in exchange for your soul?

Of course if Jesus turned to his father and asked him what he would pay for our souls, you know what his father would say, don't you. He'd say this: "I'd give anything. I'd give my own Son."

We started by hearing Jesus' astonishing words that the way for a disciple of Christ to find their truest identity is for them to be willing to start on a death march.

Discipleship is on God's terms, not ours; just as coming to him is on his terms, not ours.

Let's be clear. Jesus is saying that we have to lose the world to gain our soul. To find our true self.

But as the martyred missionary Jim Elliot once said (and I know that you've heard this before but it's too good not to finish with!). This is what he said: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose!" (Jim Elliot 1927-56 – a missionary to Ecuador)

Prayer