

“LOSERS WIN”
MATTHEW 16:24-26

I'm not sure there is a country in the world that places as high a value on *personal* independence and *individual* rights and freedoms as does the United States of America. Ask the average U.S. citizen what it means to be an American and I'd guess most would talk about our personal autonomy.

We insist on making up our own minds and being our *own* bosses and doing things when and where and how we want to do them. Conversely, we have an aversion to authority. We don't like anyone telling us what to do. We resent those who make demands or impose restrictions. We get downright testy when we perceive that our personal space is being intruded upon or our rights and freedoms are being violated.

For example, the hottest topic of conversation in our nation in the last six months has been face coverings, and whether or not someone has the right to make us wear them. Or take the issue of gun rights. Whenever Congress even *considers* legislation that might impose restrictions on gun ownership, there is always a boom in gun sales.

In one of his hit songs Billy Joel spoke for a lot of Americans when he proclaimed, “I don't care what you say anymore, this is *MY* life!” In other words, “Don't tell me what to do or how to live! *I'm* in charge of my life! I'll do what I want, and I'll do it *my* way!”

Which poses a major challenge for Americans who seriously consider Jesus' call to be one of his disciples. Because, frankly, Jesus' call to discipleship is decidedly un-American. He demands that we *surrender* our individual rights and freedoms. He requires that we *give up* our personal autonomy and *forfeit* our independence. And it is not optional; it is not negotiable. We *cannot* be a follower of Jesus and be the boss of our own life. We either give up control and get Jesus, or we do not give it up and get nothing.

Consider what Jesus says in **Matthew 16:24-26**. 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?”*

Jesus is describing what is required to be His follower or His disciple. And, notice, He is not just making a reference to His twelve disciples, but to anyone who would come after Him. In Mark's version of this account we are told that Jesus had summoned a crowd before saying these words. In other words, He was making a *universal* statement about discipleship that applies to all people in all cultures, including Americans.

So, what is required to be a follower of Jesus? Let's look at each phrase carefully. First, Jesus says ***“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”***

Jesus identifies two requirements in this verse. First, one must deny himself. What does that mean? It's important to know that denying oneself is not the same as *self-denial* in the way we typically use the term. It does not mean merely to curb one's appetites or to give up something for a period of time, like people often do during Lent. There is nothing wrong with self-denial. It *might* be a good, noble, profitable thing to do, but *denying oneself* is a far more profound, decisive, and consequential matter.

When used with the reflexive pronoun as it is here in verse 24, to deny oneself means “to forget oneself, lose sight of oneself and one's interests” (Wuest). The tense of the verb (ingressive aorist) speaks of entering into a new state or condition. So, Jesus is describing a

way of life, a permanent practice or state of being. One Bible scholar wrote, "It is a decisive saying 'No' to oneself, one's hopes, ambitions, plans, dreams, likes and dislikes, and nearest and dearest for the sake of Christ" (F.F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, 152).

Of course, this runs contrary to our natural inclinations. We do not *naturally* deny ourselves; we naturally assert ourselves. We insist on doing our own thing, going our own way, and controlling our own destiny. But that attitude is a barrier to following Jesus. It actually prevents us from being a follower of Jesus.

Jesus says that one of the essential demands of discipleship is to lay down our lives, to give up control of our lives. Actually, that is putting it mildly. Look at **verse 24**. "*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*"

Those who heard Jesus use this metaphor would have immediately pictured a condemned criminal being led through the streets on foot, carrying the crossbeam of his cross, and forced to walk past jeering crowds on the way to his execution. A cross was a symbol of death, and those who heard these words would have immediately understood Jesus to mean that death is an essential part of discipleship. Jesus is saying that discipleship is a death sentence.

What does that mean? The death Jesus is talking about is the *death of self-will and self-interest*. It means putting to death personal autonomy and independence. It means, in the words of Paul, that we have been crucified with Christ and we no longer live but Christ lives in us. The life we now live we live by faith in Jesus who loves us and gave Himself for us (Gal. 2:20). It means that we are not our own, we have been bought with a price, the precious blood of Christ (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

It means that Jesus is our Lord and Master, that He is in charge of our lives, that we obey His commands, follow His lead, and march to the beat of His drum. In short, it means that our lives are not about us and what we can make of ourselves and do for ourselves; they are about Jesus—what He makes of our lives and what *He* does through our lives.

That is essentially what Jesus says in the next few verses. Look, first, at **verse 25**. "*For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.*"

Jesus had just finished telling 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.*" This was new and unsettling information to the disciples because their concept of Messiah at this point did not include suffering or death. Only later would they discover that death is what Jesus' life was all about.

But immediately Jesus jumps from talking about His own impending death, to talking about the vital and necessary role death has in the lives of His followers. But, here, He is speaking metaphorically. Jesus is challenging us to consider that how we invest our lives in this world is going to matter for all eternity, and He wants us to understand the nature of profit and loss from an eternal perspective.

The person who spends his time in this world living for himself, satisfying his own desires, pursuing his own ambitions, protecting his own interests, and promoting his own welfare, is ultimately wasting his life and will eventually lose everything. He may have *had* everything in this world, but on the Day of Judgment, when the value of his life and his efforts and his accomplishments are all added up, they will amount to a big fat zero. There will be nothing to show for it, except eternal regret.

On the other hand, the one who loses his life in this world for Jesus' sake; the one who surrenders everything to Him—who lives for Him and pursues His interests and His will and His glory—that man will *save* his life. He may have *had* nothing in this world—no status, no

wealth, no recognition. But on the Day of Judgment, when the value of his life and his efforts and his deeds are all added up, they will amount to a *huge* reward. He will have far more than he could ever dream of having, and he will get to enjoy it in Jesus' presence for all eternity!

Please, hear what Jesus is saying: Living for yourself gets you nothing in the end; living for Jesus gets you everything! And so, the call to lose everything for Christ in this world is actually a call to gain everything through Christ for eternity.

Jesus essentially restates this principle in **verse 26**. *For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?*

Jesus is asking a rhetorical question, a question with an obvious answer. Of course, the answer is "nothing". It *does not* profit a man anything if he gains the whole world and yet forfeits his soul. And what Jesus means by "gaining the whole world" is achieving spectacular success through one's own efforts and doing it for one's own gain and glory.

When I was young, I wanted to be a professional baseball player. In retrospect, the reason I wanted to do that is because I could not imagine a more thrilling, glamorous, and exciting profession. I loved the way I felt after hitting a home run, or after making a fabulous play in the field, or after winning an important ballgame. I loved the applause I received when I played well. I was addicted to adrenaline and accolades. Essentially, baseball was an activity that massaged my ego, made me feel good, and fulfilled my quest for personal glory.

Let's just say that I *had* pursued baseball as a profession. Let's just say that I became a perennial all-star, a hall-of-famer, a legend.

What Jesus is saying in verse 26 is "So what?"

In the movie, *The Natural*, when superstar baseball player Roy Hobbs was asked why he played the game, he said, "When I walk down the street I want people to point at me and say, 'There goes Roy Hobbs, the best there ever was'".

Jesus says, "So what! So what if you were the best baseball player that ever was? What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" And then He asks another rhetorical question in **verse 26**: *"Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?"* And, again, the answer is "nothing."

Jesus is making a reference here to the Day of Judgment, the Day when each of us stands before God to give an account of our life lived on this earth. And He is saying that a person who has spent his life for himself rather than for Jesus will forfeit his soul and will not be able to buy it back. The total value of his life will add up to nothing, so there will be nothing to give in exchange for his soul, no matter how much status or wealth or fame or favor he had while living on this earth.

Michael Jordan is not going to get a break on the Day of Judgment because he was the best basketball player who ever lived. He cannot exchange his basketball skills or his MVP awards or NBA championships for his soul, because on the Day of Judgment those things will prove to be worthless. If he does not have Jesus, he will forfeit his soul and get nothing and be nothing for all eternity.

Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson's were some of the world's greatest entertainers while they lived. But their charisma and talents and fame are not going to help them on the Day of Judgment. If they do not have Jesus, they will forfeit their souls and get nothing and be nothing for all eternity.

Steve Jobs and Bill Gates' technological genius and the way it has changed the world is not going to be of any advantage to them on the Day of Judgment. If they do not have Jesus, they'll forfeit their souls and get nothing and be nothing for all eternity.

Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking's intellectual abilities will not contribute anything to their souls' redemption on the Day of Judgment. If they do not have Jesus, they will forfeit their souls and get nothing and be nothing for all eternity.

Jeff Bezos' wealth is not going to help him one bit on the Day of Judgment. If he does not have Jesus, he will forfeit his soul and get nothing and be nothing for all eternity.

Do you see what Jesus is saying in verse 26? Life is *not* about what we can make of ourselves in this world. It is not how happy we can be, or how accomplished we are, or how many friends we've made, or how much knowledge we've acquired, or how many charitable deeds we've done, or how much wealth we've accumulated.

It is about Jesus and His kingdom and His glory. It's about believing in Him and surrendering to Him and walking with *Him* and living for *Him* and serving *Him*. When we die, we take out of this world exactly what we brought into it—nothing! So even if we gain the whole world—even if we are the richest or most powerful or most famous or most accomplished person on earth, if we do not have Jesus we forfeit our souls, and we will be impoverished for all eternity, consigned to a place of unending suffering and torment.

Jesus is challenging us to think beyond this life to the next life. And the way we prepare for the next life is by surrendering our lives to Jesus *NOW* so that *He* can invest our lives in things that are eternal.

In 1904 William Borden, heir to the Borden family fortune, graduated from a Chicago high school. For his graduation present, his parents gave the sixteen-year-old a trip around the world. As he traveled through Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, he felt a growing burden for the world's hurting people. Finally, Bill Borden wrote home that he wanted to be a missionary.

One friend expressed disbelief that Bill was “throwing himself away as a missionary.”

In response, Borden wrote two words in the back of his Bible: “No reserves.”

Even though young Borden was wealthy, he arrived on the campus of Yale University in 1905 trying to look like just one more freshman. Very quickly, however, Borden's classmates noticed something unusual about him and it was not that he had lots of money. One of them wrote: “He came to college far ahead, spiritually, of any of us. He had already given his heart in full surrender to Christ and had really done it. We who were his classmates learned to lean on him and find in him a strength that was solid as a rock, just because of this settled purpose and consecration.”

During his college years, Bill Borden made an entry in his personal journal that defined what his classmates were seeing in him. That entry said simply: “Say ‘no’ to self and ‘yes’ to Jesus every time.”

While at Yale, Borden was deeply concerned by what he saw as the end result of an empty, humanistic philosophy: moral weakness and sin-ruined lives. So, during his first semester at Yale, Borden started something that would transform campus life. One of his friends described how it began: “It was well on in the first term when Bill and I began to pray together in the morning before breakfast. We had been meeting only a short time when a third student joined us and soon after a fourth. The time was spent in prayer after a brief reading of Scripture. Bill's handling of Scripture was helpful... He would read to us from the Bible, show us something that God had promised and then proceed to claim the promise with assurance.”

Borden's small morning prayer group gave birth to a movement that soon spread across the campus. By the end of his first year, 150 freshmen were meeting weekly for Bible study and prayer. By the time Bill Borden was a senior, one thousand of Yale's 1,300

students were meeting in such groups.

Borden's outreach ministry, however, was not confined to the Yale campus. He cared about widows and orphans and the disabled. He rescued drunks from the streets of New Haven. To try to rehabilitate them, he founded the Yale Hope Mission. At night, Bill would often be found in the lower parts of the city on the street or in a restaurant where he had taken a poor, hungry soul, seeking to lead them to Christ.

Borden's missionary call narrowed to the Muslim Kansu people in China. Once he fixed his eyes on that goal, he never wavered. He also challenged his classmates to consider missionary service.

Although he was a millionaire, Borden seemed to “realize always that he must be about his Father's business, and not wasting time in the pursuit of amusement.” Although he refused to join a fraternity, “he did more with his classmates in his senior year than ever before.” He presided over the huge student missionary conference held at Yale and served as president of the honor society Phi Beta Kappa.

Upon graduation from Yale, Borden turned down some high-paying job offers. In his Bible, he wrote two more words: “No retreats.”

William Borden went on to do graduate work at Princeton Seminary in New Jersey. When he finished his studies at Princeton, he sailed for China. Because he was hoping to work with Muslims, he stopped first in Egypt to study Arabic. While there, he contracted spinal meningitis. Within a month, 25-year-old William Borden was dead.

When the news of William Whiting Borden's death reached the U.S., the story was carried by nearly every American newspaper. His biographer, Mary Taylor, wrote, “A wave of sorrow went round the world...Borden not only gave (away) his wealth, but himself, in a way so joyous and natural that it (seemed) a privilege rather than a sacrifice.”

Was Borden's untimely death a waste? Not from God's perspective. Prior to his death, Borden had written two more words in his Bible. Underneath the words “No reserves” and “No retreats,” he had written: “No regrets.”

This loss of a rich young ruler who had given up all for Christ galvanized many Christians into action. Mrs. Taylor's biography of him inspired a multitude of recruits for mission service. Even his wealth effectively advanced his purposes after he was gone, for in his will he left his fortune to the cause of Christ.

Jesus said, *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?*

Living for yourself gets you nothing in the end; living for Jesus gets you everything! And so, the call to lose everything for Christ in this world is actually a call to gain everything through Christ for eternity.

I cannot...I dare not, close this message without asking, are *you* a disciple of Jesus? I'm not asking if you merely know that He died on a cross for your sins and that He rose from the dead. I'm not asking if you've invited Him to come into your heart. I'm asking if you have accepted His call to be His follower on this earth. That call requires that you deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Him. That is not a suggestion. It is not an option. It is a demand.

I mentioned at the beginning that this passage poses a challenge for Americans who seriously consider Jesus' call to be one of His disciples. Because personal autonomy and independence are part of our DNA. But Jesus demands that we *surrender* our individual rights and freedoms. He requires that we *put to death* our personal autonomy and *forfeit* our independence. For we *cannot* be a follower of Jesus and be the boss of our own life. We

either give up control and get Jesus, or we do not give it up and get nothing.

LOSERS WIN!
MATTHEW 16:24-26

Main Idea: The call to lose everything for Christ in this world is actually a call to gain everything through Christ for eternity.

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Taking up one's cross

Profit and Loss (25-26)

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Living for Christ gets you everything (25b)

Restated: The sum of worldly gain is a total loss (26)

The world's assets (26a)

A bankrupt soul (26b)

Eternity cannot be bought (26c)

Application