

The Cost of the Kingdom

Matthew 16 It is not enough to confess that Jesus is Messiah (16:16) if we do not understand that his messiahship involves suffering and death (vv. 21-23). And if Jesus' mission involves the cross, those who would follow him must embrace the same price (vv. 24-27).

The Cross Is Central to Jesus' Mission (16:21)

The gospel message is incomplete without the cross. Recognizing Jesus as the Messiah was a good first step (vv. 13-20), but not very helpful when the disciples' concept of Jesus' messiahship differed so greatly from his own. Jesus' messiahship meant that he would suffer and die (v. 21); those who wish to follow him must be ready to pay the same price (v. 24). The cross was the most scandalous form of criminal execution in Jesus' day (see Hengel 1977:8-9). Even the term sounded terrible to ancient readers (Hengel 1977:10), and we may not blame the disciples if they hoped he was speaking metaphorically.

The Devil Offers the Kingdom Without the Cross (16:22-23)

If verses 18-19 grant Peter special authority, this passage qualifies it: his authority functions only when he speaks from God, not when he speaks human or demonic wisdom (compare Meier 1979:118). When Peter rebukes Jesus, he oversteps his appropriate bounds as a disciple. Correcting a teacher was rare (*ARN* 1A), and some sages believed teaching the law even in the presence of one's teacher merited death from God (as in *Sipra Shem. Mek. deMil.* 99.5.6). Disciples "followed" their teachers (Mt 8:22; 9:9-10; 10:38; 19:21), literally remaining behind them out of respect when they walked. Thus though Jesus *turned* to confront Peter literally behind him, he now ordered him to *get behind* him figuratively (16:23), returning to a position of discipleship.

But Peter was not only out of order; he was the devil's agent. At the wilderness temptation Satan offered Jesus the kingdom without the cross (4:8-9); Peter now offers the same temptation and encounters the same title (Cullmann 1956b:27). The devil has influenced this world so deeply that the world's values are quite often the devil's values (Jas 3:15; 4:7); by valuing the things human beings value (like lack of suffering), Peter shows himself in league with the devil. The religious leaders later echoed Satan's temptation as well (Mt 27:42-43). That Peter is a *stumbling block* (16:23; not in Mk) again plays on his name: *rock* (see comment on 16:18) could have negative as well as positive functions (Meier 1979:117 and 1980:185).

That some of Jesus' religious contemporaries were Satan's mouthpieces need not surprise us: think how many of us prefer comfortable beliefs to the cross today. (We can wear crosses as jewelry mainly because the Christian symbol has lost much of its original significance; as some preachers point out, few of us would enjoy sporting a miniature electric chair or gallows around our neck.) Some Western Christians expect unlimited prosperity or teach that Christians will escape all tribulation, while many of our brothers and sisters elsewhere (such as in Iran or the Sudan) die for their faith. Is it not possible that some Christians today still speak for the devil?

Jesus Expects Disciples to Follow Him to Death (16:24)

Summoning others to his revolutionary cause, Garibaldi cried, "He that loves Italy, let him follow me! I promise him hardship . . . suffering . . . death. But he that loves Italy, let him follow me!" (Strong 1907:766). Only a cause worth dying for is truly worth living for, and a generation of Western youth, deprived of causes worth their lives and of elders personally committed enough to point the way, have become restless and disillusioned.

"Taking up one's cross" in antiquity hardly meant simply putting up with an annoying roommate or having to live with ingrown toenails. It meant marching on the way to one's execution, shamefully carrying the heavy horizontal beam (the *patibulum*) of one's own death-instrument through a jeering mob (Jeremias 1972:218-19 and 1971:242). Jesus anticipated literal martyrdom for himself and many of his followers by the Romans' standard means of executing lower-class criminals and slaves; his kingdom was ultimately incompatible with Rome's claims (Manson 1979:131; F. Bruce 1972a:19). If disciples "come after" and imitate their teachers, Christians' lives are forfeit from the moment they begin following Christ; to *come after* Jesus, Peter himself had to return to walking behind him (v. 23).

Although genuine Christians may fall short on their commitment at times (26:69-75), those who wish to follow Christ should understand from the start that they are surrendering their lives to Christ. Those who do not acknowledge Jesus as Lord-as having the right to demand of them anything, including their lives-have yet to be truly converted. Today Christians continue to debate the character of the gospel: to be saved, does one need to accept Christ as Lord or only as Savior? Throughout the New Testament, however, the question is more or less a moot one. Jesus came to save us from our sin, and accepting him must include recognizing his right to rule our lives. This does not imply that Christians are perfect; it does indicate that they recognize who their Lord is.

Jesus Is Worth Any Price We Must Pay to Follow Him (16:25-27)

Losing one's life in this age would be a small price to preserve it in the eternal age to come (compare 2 *Baruch* 51:15-16; *m. 'Abot* 4:17). We must decide whether we "want" to come after Jesus (Mt 16:24; NIV *would*) or "want" (the same Greek term; NIV *wants*) to save our lives (v. 25); we cannot have it both ways. The cross means death, and nothing less (10:38-39; Jn 12:25).

Yet the only way to ultimately preserve one's life is to relinquish it in faith that the Son of Man will someday come with his angels to execute judgment (Mt 16:27; compare 25:31; 2 Thess 1:7-8; Dan 7:9-14) according to each person's works (for example, Ps 62:12; Prov 24:12; Rom 2:6; 2 Cor 11:15; Rev 22:12). Those who expected a period of great suffering before the time of the kingdom, as most Jewish people did, would hear in such words a radical call to perseverance (Mt 24:9-13).

In the end God will reward us for what we have done, and eternal life matters more than our temporary lives in this age. I once shared Christ with an associate who cared deeply about his friends, prompting him to consider that eternal life is a gift of far greater significance than any other he could offer them, but he could not give what he did not have himself. God's Spirit prompted him to forsake status and worldly plans, and he became a committed Christian who has touched countless lives since that day. John dared to believe that God's eternal riches outweigh any cost in the present, so he became a true disciple of Jesus Christ. Yet how few disciples we have; except for going to church and paying tithes, many Christians today do with their time and money much the same as what morally upright non-Christians do.

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