

“Deny and Rejoice!” Matthew 16:21-28

“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. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 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? For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

This is such a well-known account in Christian circles. Peter speaks and Jesus rebukes him: “**Get behind me, Satan!**” And we join in a unified choir condemning him: “O Peter, how could you do that! Such a shame, you are not thinking about the things of God!”

Do you know why Peter said it? Because he was just like us. That’s right. I can’t imagine any one of us in Peter’s situation saying anything else. Why would we? Just picture that situation! People of God had been waiting for their promised Saviour.

Jesus seemed to tick all the boxes. Mighty, powerful, caring, no one could touch Him or counter His wisdom, He was getting more and more popular, the old guard of political leaders feared Him and change was in the air. Such a hopeful momentum...

But then Jesus says that He must suffer and be killed. And on the third day be raised again. Forget about that last one! No one could even understand what it meant. You hear only “must suffer and be killed”. What! “**Far be it from you!**”

Would you want someone who is your main hope to suffer and be killed?! Of course, not! Wouldn’t it be lovely if Jesus became a king? A king of kings. A ruler over every ruler. Wouldn’t you want it? Our Guy! Just. Merciful. Caring. He would usher in the golden age for humanity; He would finally defeat all evil and create paradise on earth.

Don’t we desire the same thing? Okay, if not Jesus, then at least some kind of a Christian political leader who would establish justice and order in this messy world. Someone who could fix all our problems. Someone who could be the solution.

How shocked Peter and the others should be, when Jesus rebuked him. How shocked would we be in that situation? We shouldn’t forget about how unusual what Jesus says is, how unexpected and how counterintuitive.

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His words come as an explosion and shatter everything we usually believe to be true. People tend to believe and hope that this world could be fixed, that paradise on earth can be restored, if only we had the right political leader, if only this or that...

What Jesus says is so unpleasant. "No, Guys, listen! This world cannot be fixed. Better education will not fix it. Better laws will not fix it. Better government will not fix it. Better morals will not fix it. Hear this - even I cannot fix it for you!"

"The kingdom you are dreaming about, the life you are hoping for, is impossible in this age. This world will have to be wiped clean and restored again. And human creatures cannot be fixed either. You will have to die and be raised again. But most importantly, first, I must die and be raised again to set things right and give you true hope." What?!

This is such an offensive message. That we and this world are so corrupt by sin, that even if Jesus began to reign in this world, even He could not fix it, even He could not fix us. For the root of our problem is not external, it goes through our very hearts, our very being.

Which means, stop naively fooling yourselves, no one can fix this world! We should care for it, for God's good creation, by all means, we should love and serve our neighbors as much as we can in all our vocations, in family, in Church, in workplace, wherever God has placed us, of course, at the same time being clear that this world is beyond fixing.

We are beyond fixing. Which means our hope should not be focused on this age and our main efforts not on fixing this world but on the new life-giving Gospel. This is where those Christian communities that haven't grasped the deadly seriousness of our sin, get really upset, for they want to fix this world. In this age. By their own efforts.

Jesus announces another solution that corresponds to the magnitude of our problem. He will unite us with Him by means of His Holy Spirit indwelling in us. He will be our head, and we will be His body. Wherever the head goes, the body will follow.

Jesus Christ, our head, has already walked through the gates of death and... He has come out alive on the other side. When we look at Him, we know what to expect. Our old sinful self, our old sinful bodies will have to walk through the gates of death.

And as we do, we will die to our sinful selfishness, to our rebellion, to the twistedness of our hearts and desires, to anger, envy, jealousy, hatred, bitterness, pride, and all the evil potential that is stored so richly in our hearts. We will leave all that at the gates of death.

But, because we are united with Jesus, and because He has promised that nothing, not even death will snatch us out of His Father's hand, we will follow our Risen Lord Jesus, and we will be with Him where He is. That is His solemn promise to you.

That is why Jesus said that He is going to prepare a place for you, New Heavens and New Earth, where you, a new you - the resurrected, holy and glorious you - will dwell and reign with the Risen Jesus forever in eternal joy and blessedness.

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No smaller solution would suffice. Jesus had to die as do we, as does this world. But we already know what is to come. That is our firm hope. God's own solution in Jesus, not our human ideas. And we too need to set our minds on the things of God.

How to do that? **How to set our minds on the things of God?** Jesus gives us His own answer, and again, it is as challenging as it can get. **"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."**

Okay, but **what does that mean to deny myself?** Simply put, this means that you need to replace yourself as the center of the Universe with the Triune God. That instead of everything revolving around you, your ideas, your wants and preferences, everything should revolve around the Triune God and His will and hopes for your life.

How would that look practically? It happens when we recognize and rejoice in the fact that it is our Father in heaven who gives us everything needed for this body and soul, both daily bread and fulfillment of the deep desires of our hearts. When we know this, we don't want to save and store and spend for ourselves only. We keenly look for the ways to support the new life-giving Gospel, with our means, with our time and our talents. Is it us?

It happens when your entire lives, daily lives, wherever you are, are guided by questions like – how can I live to bring glory to Jesus, how can my life point to Jesus, how can I tell others about Jesus, how can I lead others to Jesus? Do we ask them?

It happens when we embrace the Word of God as our highest authority, when we begin to see the true God, the world and ourselves through God's revelation and instructions in the Bible. Not the way we prefer, not the way we like or what helps us to fit in, but the way the Lord Himself shapes our understanding. Is that what we do?

Do we even want to do this? Test yourselves, reflect on this! If you hear from a fellow Christian that God teaches or expects from us something that you don't like or disagree with? How do you feel and react? How do you respond?

If your Pastor teaches or instructs you in God's revealed will showing it from the Scriptures, but it goes against your convictions and preferences, how do you respond? Do you listen to the Word, or do you stick with your guns? It is not easy to change some conviction which we have held for a long time. Are we ready and willing to deny ourselves and instead have a mind of God? Are we?

On a surface level, this may sound like giving up a lot! But no! In fact, it is the very opposite. When with God's help we begin to deny ourselves, our entire lives are transformed. Every area of our lives is renewed and filled with divine joy. How so?

Because now, empowered by God's own Spirit, you strive to bring joy and glory to the One who loves you more than anyone else and who says to you: "I have given my life for you, and now I am giving you all things!"

Brothers and Sisters, deny yourself, place Jesus at the center of your life, and every area of your existence becomes much more beautiful, much more meaningful, much more significant and adventurous. New life with God already here, already now... This much

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about denying ourselves... **But what does it mean to take your cross?** It is very simple. What do you think will happen when you try to embrace the mind of God, when you strive to imitate Jesus? This will happen. You will have internal and external opposition. A fierce opposition. First, internally.

Old Adam in you will fight in anger against putting Jesus in the center of your life. You will struggle to trust and listen to Jesus more than yourself. You will struggle to live for Jesus, not for your own interests. You will struggle to speak Jesus words, not your own ideas. You will struggle to follow His instructions, not your own preferences and desires.

Now, externally. What do you think will happen when you begin to recognize the grand spiritual battle that is being waged for our souls and try to take part in it; when you will recognize that you can't fix people, and will become more concerned about their eternal fate, about their salvation? What will happen when you speak the message that Jesus has entrusted to you, when you tell others about God's will and wisdom for our lives, about our hopeless situation and about God's unfathomable grace and patience?

What will happen when you stop seeing people as your enemies, but as fellow human creatures, captives of sin and devil, beloved by God, who gave His life for them, and start praying for them? When instead of seeking justice or revenge you will strive to bless those who persecute you? Do you think that any of that will be easy? Think again!

That is your cross. And if you want to be Jesus' disciple, take it up!

Now listen to this! How generous our Lord is! He is indeed prodigal in His desire to bless you! He is the One who comes to rescue us from our unfixable situation. He sacrifices all, He sacrifices Himself for you. He is the One who reaches out to us, who searches for us when we are lost. He is the One who breathes a new life into us.

But then, He just can't stop. Listen to this promise! When Jesus returns in His divine glory **"He will repay each person according to what he has done."** This is amazing. It is the Triune God who transforms us, it is Him who enables us to focus on the things of God and to at least somewhat live as Jesus' disciples. And then this!

When you endure any of those challenges, internal and external, when you strive to fear, love and trust your God, to listen to Him, to remain faithful to Him, to resist pleasing people, to resist temptations of our flesh, to live for Jesus even in our small and imperfect ways, to pass on His Good News despite the resistance, - every time when you are in such situation, rejoice and be glad!

For you will be rewarded by the Risen Lord Jesus. What a life we have with this God! He is your loving Father who is always looking for more and more ways to bless you, who Himself enables you to succeed and then rushes to reward you for that.

May He help you to set your minds on the things of God, may He help you to joyfully deny yourselves and to take up your crosses. For they are nothing else than wonderful gifts from our Lord. And remember - your reward is already awaiting you!

Keep denying yourself and keep rejoicing in your crosses! Amen.