

Growing in the discipline of the cross

Mt. 16:13-20, 21-28; Gal. 2:20

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Introduction: How is your ID this morning? Mine is expired, though we're doing our best to get me an appointment. But I may be having an identity crisis before long! So what's your true identity? Does it depend on having an up-to-date ID card? **Did Jesus have this problem?** Being Man and God at the same time must have been a challenge! But if He really is who He claimed to be, then coming to a deep confidence about His identity is the most important thing we can do – the only way to know your own identity!

1) In our Scripture passage for today, when Jesus asked His disciples what people were saying about Him, it wasn't because He was concerned about His "image" or the kind of "press" He was getting. He was actually concerned to help them nail down more clearly His identity and purpose. **"Who Jesus is"** was actually the question all the Gospels sought to answer, but in this particular story, Jesus had come to a crossroads in His ministry: He needed to take His disciples to a deeper level of understanding and commitment. So He asked, **"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"** He was asking them what the *vox populi* was saying and they knew – they were in tune with it (some said John the Baptist, others Elijah, Jeremiah, or another prophet). But then He brought the question home to them personally, and Peter gave the answer that represented the consensus: **"the Anointed One, Son of the living God."** Then Jesus made it clear it's not just a matter of head knowledge, the right "book answer, nor just a matter of right doctrine; it's only by a revelation from God's Spirit: **"Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven"** (Mt. 16:17). **Jesus' identity** – as Son of Man/Son of God, Messiah-Redeemer, Word made flesh, Reconciler, Good Shepherd, Lord, King, Author of faith, life, and salvation – is **too immense** for it to ever be reduced to a learned book answer; the Spirit of God has to open our heart and mind to receive this. The clearer the vision you have of Who He is, the better you'll know who you are, and the greater your strength will be to resist the evil one in your life.

Where does this expression "Son of Man" come from? Its first use in the Hebrew Bible comes from God Himself in Num. 23:19: **"God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind."** Son of man, Hebrew *"ben-adam,"* became a poetic expression used in Hebrew parallelism with man, suggesting "humanity," or mankind and his offspring (Ps. 144:3-4, 80:15-19, 146:3; Isa. 51:12, 56:2; Jer. 49:18, 33// 50:40, 51:43). In **Ezekiel**, the phrase *son of man* is used **94 times** by God to address the prophet, suggesting his weakness, vulnerability, and lowliness. The expression is especially important in **Dan. 7:13-14**, where it occurs in Aramaic, Daniel's court language: *kibar anash* = **"like a son of man"** (in Dan. 8:17, *ben-adam*). It describes a **mysterious figure in Daniel's heavenly vision** who appears before God and is granted divine authority. In the Gospels, the term is used 81 times; it's Jesus preferred expression for self-referral: He's claiming to be *that* God-Man from Daniel's vision on a mission to confront the Beast who deceived Adam and

Eve. Jesus was also tempted to seize power on the Beast's terms as they did. But unlike every human before Him or after Him, Jesus resisted the urge. And **what did Jesus do** in His earthly ministry? He went about banishing the Beast from people's lives; He invited people to repent and believe in the Good News of God's kingdom that was coming on earth through Him and His rule. In Jesus' kingdom, they would learn how to *rule over the Beast* instead of being ruled by it. Jesus would finish establishing this rule ... right there on that cross.

2) So for Jesus' disciples to understand His identity, it had to be linked up in their minds with the cross (Mt. 16:21-28), because that's how Jesus would confront the Beast and overcome it. Scripture uses a lot of metaphors and parables for discipleship, but the cross (Lk. 9:23) is the most radical. Others, like being born again (Jn. 3), taking on His yoke (Mt. 11), being a clay vessel with a treasure inside, or carrying Jesus' death in our body (2 Cor. 4:7-11), being **"baptized into His death"** (Ro. 6:3-4), simply reinforce the same essential message as the cross. So this is what Jesus began to point His disciples to at this moment in His ministry ... and it was quite the shock! The idea that Messiah had to suffer, be rejected, and die was **totally foreign** to everything these disciples had ever been taught about the Anointed One who would come to redeem Israel (it didn't sound like victory, but ultimate defeat!). It was so foreign and Peter rejected this idea so viscerally that he would dare to rebuke Jesus (**"not so!"**) and receive His strongest rebuke in return (**"Get behind me, Satan!"**). Jesus is explaining here that His suffering and death **were essential to His identity** as Messiah.

So the next item on **Jesus' teaching agenda** that day was to clarify what it would mean to follow such a Messiah, because a disciple is not greater than his teacher, nor a servant above his master (Mt. 10:24). If a cross awaited God's Anointed One, a cross awaits all who follow Him. So He starts by saying, **"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself..."** What does that mean, to **deny yourself**? It's the same Greek verb used to describe what Peter did to Jesus the night He was arrested (He denied Jesus, denied knowing Him = disown, renounce). So if I deny *myself*, it's like **I renounce being the reason for my existence**, I disown myself as the center of my life, always in control, my agenda #1 priority: my fulfillment and dreams are not the most important, and therefore can be sacrificed for the good of others or the advancement of Christ's Kingdom. Maybe you say, "I already know this; I'm committed to this; I try not to be egotistical or overly materialistic; I try to serve others." **Do we think we can just reduce our egotism to a minimum** and call ourselves good disciples? Can you just reduce your materialism as much as possible, and that makes you a good Christ-follower? That kind of denying of self is also taught in Buddhism and Hinduism (although with a different twist); the problem of ego, pride, and selfish desire is recognized by many religious systems. So what's **different about Christian self-denial**? In Jesus' invitation, denying yourself is only the prelude; you cannot do it properly without the next step, which is the heart of discipleship ...

Jesus then says, **"take up your cross and follow me."** I've been meditating seriously on this parable for 50 years and have yet to finish understanding or explaining it. But I know it's the key! It holds my heart as the true answer to life's enigma. But you have to stay with it; you can never assume you've got it all figured out. You have to meditate on it, spend time with the Master asking Him to teach you, because this is not just a "condition for discipleship"; this is **God's definitive solution for our sin problem**, for our idolatry, our egotism, and brokenness: this is the only healing and restoration! This is Jesus' "vision of life," meaning the cross represents the true pattern for living – it's **reality therapy**! Everybody's looking for the key to life's puzzle, the answer to the riddle, the right focus ... and Jesus says it's **the cross**.

3) So what is this discipline that Jesus calls us to in **assuming His death as our way of life**? Paul summed it up in Gal. 2:20 (**"crucified with Christ ..."**). What we're trying to tame here is the **wild fury of our idolatrous human nature!** ("You can't mean little old me?") Do you really know your "sin nature"? Jesus says the only remedy for it is the cross – that should wake us up! That's drastic! But truth be told, my fleshly nature is utterly dedicated to my well-being and comfort, my positive image, long-term security and good reputation. So the discipline of the cross is **absolutely necessary** if I'm

going to connect with a deeper reality than my self-preservation and self-aggrandizement. What does it consist of? (Beyond mere Bible-reading, praying and fasting, going to church, serving, tithing, etc. = all good disciplines.) Maybe you think meditating on the crucifixion of Jesus isn't very "pleasant"? It's why the story of the crucifixion is retold four times with great detail (Gospels); repeated a dozen times in Acts; explained, reiterated, and applied in the epistles; even in the OT, the shadow of cross is cast by the sacrificial system (in the law and historical books), in the Psalms and prophets (Isa. and Zech.). God *intended* for us to contemplate the cross over and over! He wants it to format our inner being, because it's where you learn at least three basic lessons (summing up):

- a) **Your true value** and worth, how much God loves you! You don't know how deeply you are treasured till you have stared long and hard into the cross! Getting a truly objective view of ourselves is a huge challenge: we struggle with the right balance between self-confidence and self-deprecation (Rom. 12:3); the goal is authenticity! The process of spiritual self-examination includes hard questions: Am I ok? In a healthy place? Holding grudges, handling conflict? Dealing with others sincerely, with genuine love? Or with indifference, pretense, masks? Don't settle for anything less than real! God didn't create you for inauthenticity!
- b) **What's most important**, what's worth holding onto and what isn't; the cross is the great revealer, because it exposes the temporary stuff of earth and directs our hearts and minds to the substantive values of eternity. Contemporary culture wants to keep us entertained with virtual reality and temporary pleasures that keep us focused on shallow versions of the present. William Blake's adage is painfully true: "we become what we behold!" For the Christian, beholding the cross is the way to break free from the nihilistic shortsightedness of the world we live in: all its delights and pleasures are passing away (1 Jn. 2:17), vanity (Eccles.); yet there's an appetite that runs deeper than physical hunger and thirst, deeper than sexual hunger or any physical stimulus, deeper than the desire for entertainment! It's our hunger for God!
- c) **The nature of spiritual warfare**: Meditating on the cross prepares you for your own cross-bearing! There's suffering somewhere in your future (no need for a crystal ball here!). Meditating on the cross helps you identify the true enemy, overcome spiritual opposition, face trials and suffering, and learn what to do with your old sinful nature (you nail it to the cross, again and again!).

What was it Jesus really accomplished there? And how does it help me face my issues, fulfill my purpose, live life more fully? Take notice of how Jesus confronted and overcame the Beast ... by giving up His life and dying (so contrary to human logic!). He did this instead of betraying His Father or betraying us! When the Judge of the universe was on trial in a human courtroom, He told His judges, "**From this moment on, you will see the Son of Man seated at God's right hand!**" (Lk. 22:69). This was the declaration that helped them reach their verdict of "guilty!" From one perspective, that cross looks like a cruel torture device, but Jesus saw it as His earthly throne where He would face down all the evil powers that had ruled over mankind. There He exposed the subhuman nature of evil by letting it do its worst to Him, even as He forgave us and canceled our debt. He overcame our wicked deed with His divine love. So His *execution* was in fact His *exaltation*, showing how gloriously He was able to conquer all evil powers by refusing to submit to them; even death could not defeat Him! So He now summons a new humanity into existence that can overcome the Beast in the same paradoxical way He did: by dying to self and discovering that Jesus' life and power have become our life and power through faith in His name and through His Holy Spirit. You see, we need an infinite power source to overcome in this life! And strangely, paradoxically, we get that precisely through the cross. Are you taking up yours?