

Bearing the Cross

Call to Worship: Psalm 99

1st Scripture: Luke 14:25-35

2nd Scripture: Matthew 16:13-28

Introduction

Long before I entered the pastoral ministry, when the Lord saw fit to grant me opportunities to preach, I had come upon this text and it hit me deep in the soul, such that I was compelled to preach from it, wherever I was given the opportunity to preach. To this end, I can say that I have not preached from any other text more than I have preached from this one, and I have probably preached from this text, in this pulpit, at least three or four times. And concerning what the Christian life looks like, and the commitment that it entails, no other text has struck me in the way that this one has. Much of the fire that has been kindled in my soul has been stoked and fanned into flames because of what I believe the Holy Spirit has injected into my soul through this text.

As I have prayerfully wrestled with what to say to you, on this final occasion before leaving, I found myself bouncing around from Scripture to Scripture, attempting to locate the context, within which, God would have me say my last words to you (from this pulpit). I want you to know that I don't consider this a small or insignificant matter. I am a dying man, speaking to a dying people, who I love in truth, and want to see greatly prosper for the glory of God. I believe everything that is written in this Book, and because I believe it all to be true, I cannot be casual about it. It must move me, because I am absolutely certain that all of it is absolutely true. And so, what I say here to you, always matters to me (and most importantly to the Lord, whom we serve), and especially what I say now, as a final exhortation.

All of that said, after praying and moving from text to text, I found myself back here again, embracing the settled conviction that this is where I must conclude my ministry here at Grace Reformed Baptist Church of Long Island.

I. The Context

Our context takes us to a watershed moment in our Lord's ministry. After having spent much time traveling about with His Apostles, preaching the Kingdom of God everywhere they went (authenticating His message and office with signs and wonders), and preparing them to lay the foundation of His church, our Lord is about to head to Jerusalem for the last time, where He knows He will be arrested and mistreated by the religious leaders, and ultimately delivered over to the Roman authorities to be crucified. The end of His earthly ministry has arrived, and He is about to set His face like a flint to head to Jerusalem, to accomplish the main task of His coming, namely, the salvation of His people.

This being the case, our Lord must now prepare His Apostles for that which is soon to happen to Him. For, up to this point, they have no idea that the Savior whom they have so come to love, and who has convinced them to give up all to follow Him, is about to be brutally and shamefully treated, crucified and put to death, ultimately leaving them to continue His work, following His resurrection from the dead. Here, our Lord will reveal the true nature of His identity and calling to them, teaching them that the Christ must first suffer and die, before He should enter into His glory and reign. But, it doesn't end there. He must also teach them about their own calling, which will likewise take them down a path of great suffering before they enter into their glory with Him. Up to this point, their expectations were quite distorted, and they could never have imagined all that would soon take place when they arrived at Jerusalem.

And so, here and now, at Caesarea Philippi, the Lord would begin to prepare them for these sobering, upcoming realities. Pulling them aside then, in Caesarea Philippi, where a lengthy stretch of heathen temples and all manner of man-made idols would have been within view, the Lord begins by asking them a leading, and most essential question, having to do with His own identity. "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?"

II. Peter's Great Confession

After His disciples scroll through the various erroneous responses of the multitudes (John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets), the Lord then brings the arrow directly over to them. "But who do *you* say that I am?" And then, again, with all manner of temples and idols

within view, Peter, under the direct influence of God, profoundly declares, “You are the Christ, the son of the *living* God!” It’s hard to appreciate the glory of this profession, especially in the context, within which, Peter had stated it. Because, in essence, Peter was right there, affirming two essential, identifying characteristics which belonged to this Jesus, the Son of Man. First, He was *the* long-awaited Christ; the Savior of the world, who was sent by God to bring redemption to sinful man. And second, this Jesus was the very, divine, Son of God! And not just any god, like the useless, dumb, dead idols that presently surrounded them at Caesarea Philippi, which was a den for every form of idolatry, but the Son of *the Living* God!

In the context of so much confusion where many who followed Jesus, could not properly identify Him, and where those who didn’t follow Him, identified Him with beelzebub (the ruler of the demons), this profession was a big deal. Indeed, Peter and the Apostles only understood this, because the Father had revealed it to them. Now, before we move on, let me bring forth two critical charges taken from this profession:

1) Brethren, never take your sincere confession of faith in Christ for granted. If you truly believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that He is the Son of the Living God, rejoice and marvel over the fact that God Himself has revealed His Son to you, so that, you would own this profession in truth! To bow before Christ as your Lord; to take Him as your Savior, and to wholly submit yourself to Him is a miracle beyond all miracles! And it is further to be blessed among those who believe and yet don’t see. There are all manner of higher powers, fleshly lusts and worldly influences lined up in front of you, striving to keep you from coming to the truth. And yet, by the grace of our God, you have broken through all of these powerful barriers, and have laid hold of the Christ, whom you cannot see, unto eternal life. That is no small thing, brethren. Rejoice and give thanks to God for His unspeakable grace toward you!

2) If you are outside of Christ, know that there is no more important matter; indeed, a matter that involves your eternal destiny, than to come to realize from the heart that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God! You will stand before God very soon, just beyond the grave, which quickly approaches each and every one of us. And you will give an account for your life. And if your offenses; if your sins against God are not dealt with beforehand, by being united to His Son by faith, then you will be the object of God’s holy wrath forever, because of your sins.

Jesus is your only hope, but you must lay hold of Him now, in the present. He is the Christ; the One who has been anointed by God to fulfill all righteousness on behalf of sinners, and to bear and pay for their sins on the cross. God the Son offered Himself up on behalf of sinners, and only those who truly repent and receive Him by faith, will be saved. Let me ask you today, “Who do you say that Christ is?” Your sincere answer to that question will carry you to either hell or heaven, forever. Make it an absolute priority to ensure that you are safely in Christ, before you die and stand before your holy God.

And so, at this watershed moment, Peter brings forth this great confession. But, moving on then, after the Lord encourages Peter concerning the great confession that God has led him to make, the Lord does something quite strange and shocking. Upon coming to realize that the One who is among you, is indeed the long-awaited Christ, and the very Son of the Living God, what do you think would be the natural thing to do? Would it not be to tell everyone, everywhere? Would it not be to proclaim this truth from the rooftops, far and wide? And yet, what does the Lord say? “Don’t tell anyone!” Notice, in verse 20, we are told, “Then He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ.”

III. The Christ Must Suffer, Die and Be Raised Up the Third Day

Why would Jesus command His disciples not to tell anyone that He was the Christ? There was already so much confusion about who He was, right? And one must embrace Jesus as the Christ, if he/she is ultimately to be saved? Why keep this essential and glorious news on the down low? The answer to this question is given in verse 21, “From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.”

Last Sunday evening, I spoke about the Lord’s dealings with the Samaritan woman (in John 4), and I had mentioned how rare it was for the Lord Himself to come out and directly say that He was the Christ, as He did with the woman. I believe that is for the same reason that He gives His disciples here. The Lord knew very well that the Jews (and even His own close disciples, for that matter) had a distorted (or at best, incomplete) understanding of the role of the Messiah. Everyone knew that the Messiah would reign on the throne of David forever,

conquering all of the enemies of His people. But, very few, if any, really understood that the way to the throne for the Christ, was through the horrifying suffering of the cross. The absolute necessity of the Christ actually offering Himself up, as the sacrificial Lamb of God, so that, mankind's greatest enemy, his sin, could be utterly defeated, was just not grasped by the Jews, even though those aspects of the Messiah's role were also revealed in their Scriptures.

And so, should the Lord allow His disciples to aggressively preach that He was the Christ, the Jews would have sought to make Him their King, bypassing the necessity of the cross. In fact, they actually had already tried to do this, upon witnessing some of His miracles. And so, the Lord here commanded His disciples to tell no one; that is, until He accomplished salvation through His suffering and cross. Notice again, it was at this time that Jesus had begun to teach His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, suffer many things, be killed...etc. Here, as He was preparing to head to Jerusalem for the last time, He began to seek to prepare them for what was about to take place, so that, even though they did not quite grasp the reality yet, after His resurrection, their faith would be strengthened, as they reflected upon the fact that He had told them all that would happen, before it happened.

No, the role of the Messiah was no picnic for the Lord. Yes, He would reign supreme over all things, and rightly so, but if He were to have a blessed citizenship over which to reign, He would need to redeem them first, from their own sins, so that, they could stand justified before their holy God. He would have to be cut off from the world. He would have to bear a cross! Such was the role of the Christ, but this wasn't all that He had to teach His disciples.

IV. All Who Follow Christ Must Bear *Their* Cross as Well

This whole notion of the Christ having to suffer and die, didn't settle too well with Peter. And so, the one who had just made such a great confession about the Christ under the influence of the Holy Spirit, would now seek to contradict the Christ, being influenced by satan. And brethren, for the moment, take note of the fact that even the best of Christians can be influenced by God and by satan within the scope of a few minutes time. Peter begins to rebuke the Lord, saying that He would not undergo such suffering and death. Now, while he meant well, Peter's mind was suddenly not set to spiritual things, but earthly things. He could not grasp the weight

of his contradiction, and what that would mean for the world, if the Christ did not fulfill that which was revealed concerning His suffering and death. And so, the Lord responds to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.” As well meaning as he was, Peter was contradicting, “Thus saith the Lord,” letting his natural emotions hinder him from grasping the fact that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer, before being raised up and entering into His glory.

But, following this, the Lord brings forth an additional sobering message, which carries His disciples (and all who desire to follow Christ) to the place where we might understand that union with Christ; that being a Christian, carries with it a profound responsibility which defines our role for the duration of our time here on this earth. You see, it was not only necessary that the followers of Christ receive, embrace and place their whole confidence in a Savior who must suffer many things, die, and be raised up the third day, but furthermore, they too must be prepared to lay down their own lives, if they desired to follow Him to glory. They must take the same path. Notice verse 24, “Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.” And just in case we might presume that this can’t actually be saying what it seems to be saying, the Lord moves on (in verse 25) to provide additional clarity: “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.”

Now, if you are saying to yourself, “Could the Lord actually be saying that we must be willing to give up this life, if we are to follow Him, and that, we must turn our backs to this world and live this life in preparation for, and in light of the next,” then yes, you are hearing Him correctly. That is precisely what the Lord is saying here. And notice, this is not a message that is directed only to His Apostles. “If *anyone* desires to come after Me, let Him deny himself...” For the remainder of our time, brethren, I want to tease out the implications of verses 24 and 25, which I believe, present one of the clearest general descriptions of the commitment that all who would embrace authentic Christianity, must be willing to make.

V. What Exactly is Entailed by “Bearing a Cross?”

What does it mean to bear a cross, and to lose one’s life for the sake of Christ? Let’s consider the general images depicted here, before opening up the specific charge.

1) Bearing one’s cross entails carrying an instrument that would ultimately be used for one’s own execution. The ideas of suffering, death and sacrifice are clearly meant to come to mind. And in the case of our Lord, that is exactly what happened to Him in the physical sense. And so, in a general sense, at the very least, we are dealing with some form of an intentional, conscious willingness on the part of the Christian, to live a life of self-sacrifice, and dying to self. This is no casual or light matter, to say the least. It is radical. It is drastic. It is thoroughly life changing.

2) Along the same lines, losing one’s life for the sake of Christ, entails giving up all that is defined as “life” by the world, with the intention of investing one’s time, energy, resources; in short everything that one possesses, to serve Christ and bring Him glory. It is to let go of one’s earthly desires; to give up the natural pursuits of the world and all that is deemed important by the world, to invest in the Kingdom of God, by faith. It is to let go of all of this, and to submit everything (even our very lives) unto the service of Christ, who has died for us, so that we would no longer live for ourselves, but for Him who loved us and gave Himself for us. It is to forsake the whole notion of living for the best of both worlds, and rather, to live for Christ. It is to take our members, and all that we have, and to offer them up as a free-will offering to God, in Christ.

These are the general pictures that are being conveyed by our Lord, as He seeks to teach His disciples of the true commitment that is involved in seeking to follow Him. This is authentic Christianity.

What then is the specific charge directed to us then, brethren, as we desire to follow Christ? What is the call to discipleship, for all who have been freely redeemed by the shed blood of Christ? As we look at our own lives, brethren; as we take inventory of our own lives, and view the unfolding of our use of time over the last year, month, week and day, we ought to ask ourselves with Judgment Day honesty, if we see such a Christianity exhibited by us. Do we see a life of cross-bearing? Do we see evidence of one who has truly lost his/her life for the sake of Christ? Do we see an embracing of inconvenience, discomfort and self-sacrifice, with eyes and

heart fixed on Christ? Do we look like those who are not settled in this world; like those who are at a bus stop with bags packed, waiting for the return of our Lord, to take us home? Do we look like those who have been truly born again? Do we look like sojourners or citizens of this world? Where is our treasure? Where is our heart? What is our first love? What drives and compels us to live each day? What are our ideals, dreams and ultimate desires? When we look down, do we see our heels dug into the soil that leads to Golgotha, or are our feet planted firmly in the soil of comfort, ease of life and material fulfillment? Oh brethren, I plead with you once more. Don't settle for an American Christianity. Don't settle for a popular Christianity. But rather pursue and cling to a Biblical Christianity! [Note: Also, evangelism]

Brethren, in closing, let me adjust the lens a little further, giving you a very clear and vivid picture to consider. If we are to lose our lives for the sake of Christ, wouldn't the assumption be that what we now live for, ought to line up with the heart and desire of Christ? In other words, if we are going to lose our lives for the sake of the Gospel and Christ, while that would certainly include a willingness to suffer for His Name, would it not also include investing our lives in doing that which is most precious to Him? To this end, I ask you then, what is more precious to Christ than the building up and edifying of His church? All in all, honestly, if you want a very accurate and honest gauge to measure the sincerity of your Christianity, ask yourself, "In what way am I involved in the local church?" It really is that simple. In what ways are you involved in using your gifts unto the building of this church? Don't hide from this question, brethren. I am not asking you this for my sake or to get you to impress me. This is my last Sunday here. I am asking this for your sake, and because I desire everyone here to be involved in this local work... and yet, I know, that many aren't. And that should not be the case. You may say, "Well, I am so busy with this and with that...etc." Brethren, hear me out. You will always make the time to do the things that matter most to you. If Christ is truly first in your life, you will, you must, make time for His church. That means striving to attend the stated meetings, but it also means having an active role in serving in the body, in very specific ways. Now, Christ ought to be the center of the whole of our lives, and our very worldview ought to be shaped by our relationship to Christ. But, that should also be seen in very tangible ways, in one's service to the church. [Final comments on verses 25-27] AMEN!!! Benediction: Jude 1:24-25