

Life's Two Options: Scandal or Loser

14th Sun. after Pent. – 09/03/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Matthew 16:21-28 Pastor Keith Besel

Two verses translated literally from the Greek,

v. 23 [Jesus says to Peter,] **“Go away, behind Me Satan. You are a scandal; a trap for Me, because you are not thinking of the things of God, but of the things of mankind.”**

v. 25, [Jesus says,] **“For whoever is desiring to save his life, will lose (or destroy) it. But whoever loses (or destroys) his life on account of Me will find it.”**

Introduction

⌘ What a contrast we see in Peter from last week's Gospel Reading to the one before us today. Last week, Peter made a bold and clear declaration that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16:16). And now, a short time later we see him “rebuking” that same Son of God because He is showing and teaching His disciples the details of what it means to be the one whom God had anointed to carry out His salvation plan for the entire human race.

→ Jesus though, will have none of Peter's attempts to hijack and take charge of His mission and purpose. And so His response to Peter lays out the fact that there really are only two options in this life. Either you live as a “scandal” or as a “loser”; that is one who loses control of his/her entire life.

→ That doesn't really sound like either one is a good option on the surface, does it? But I'm confident that a deeper dive into the text of Holy Scripture here today will clear things up.

I. What leads to the confrontation?

⌘ First let's understand what brought Peter to the point of his confrontation with Jesus. After Jesus told Peter and the other disciples that His true identity as the promised Messiah and Son of God would actually serve as “the rock”; as the foundation for the Christian Church, we are then told in verse 21 that Jesus “began to show His disciples that He must” do four things: First, “He must go to Jerusalem” which was the center or seat of power for God's Church at that time. You see, the leading Jews – the Elders, the Chief Priests, the Scribes – they had all become addicted to power so that they actually led the people away from God's truth into a corrupt, manmade religion; what is labeled today as the Jewish faith. Second, Jesus said that He “must...suffer many things from the elders and chief priest and scribes” to the point that, third, He “must...be killed”, and number four, “on the third day be raised” (v.21).

→ This was Jesus' mission; His reason for coming to earth. But Peter is not on board with God's salvation plan. His understanding of the Messiah's kind of saving was that He would come and physically take charge of things; that He would forcibly remove those who were corrupt and establish a new order in God's Church. To think of God's anointed Savior as the victim of suffering and death – well to Peter that smacked of kowtowing to the enemy. And Peter would have none of it! So Peter says, “This shall never happen to You” (v.22).

→ Just think of what those words really mean. Peter is telling God – the almighty Creator of the world, that He doesn't know what He's doing; that His plan for saving souls from hell is invalid; that it just won't work!

⌘ Now, it's easy for you and me to sit here 2000 years later, point our accusatory fingers at Peter and think, “How can you be so clueless Peter?” But you know, we ourselves and so many others all around us have been doing the same thing in a thousand different ways for thousands of years.

→ Aren't we telling God that His ways are all wrong, when we trust in scientists who were nowhere near existing at the beginning the universe, to concoct an ever-changing theory that this complex universe just came together by chance with a "big bang" and a series of species evolving from one kind to another, even though the evidence of any of those changes is nonexistent? Or what about our society thumbing our noses at God's creation of two distinct genders, male and female, both created in His image, each with different gifts and roles as the foundation of marriage and the family and all of society? Think of all of the different manmade beliefs and religious systems that we humans have arrogantly created which are directly against the truths God has recorded in Scripture to keep us from doing that very thing.

→ Look, there's no way we can list all of our own Peter-like rebellious actions against God and His Son's saving plan for our eternal life, but everyone us would do well to spend some serious time reflecting on our own priorities and passions and desires in contrast to the ways that God has called us to live and believe in His Word.

II. Life as a Scandal

✘ Doing so, will properly prepare us then to hear Jesus' response to Peter as an expression of His response to our own sinful thoughts, words and deeds. Jesus said to Peter in verse 23, "Go away, behind Me Satan. You are a scandal; a trap for Me, because you are not thinking of the things of God, but of the things of mankind."

→ The Greek word that is often translated as "hindrance" or "stumbling block" is "skandalon" (σκάνδαλον) and it's where we get our English word "scandal". Literally it means a "trap" or "snare". It was originally the piece of wood that kept a trap open for animals. When the piece of wood was removed, the trap snapped shut. And when it's used in the New Testament it describes a public offense or a shameful person.

→ When we couple this word with Jesus calling Peter "Satan", we understand that Jesus is telling Peter – and all of us here today – that any thought or belief or action that is not in line with God's Word and plan for mankind is truly Satanic in nature, because it serves the devil's shameful agenda of undermining or undoing or completely trying to destroy God's plan and desire to save all souls from spending eternity in the torments of hell.

✘ Jesus boils it down at the end of verse 23 when He says, "because you are not thinking of the things of God, but of the things of mankind." Why is it so easy for us to be "scandalous" in our day to day lives even now today? Because we human beings struggle to think beyond the here and now; about tomorrow let alone about eternity, and so we want the things that make us feel good, or powerful or important or god-like right now today, whether it fits with God and His plan or not; we just want it!

→ Jesus even used this same Greek term on the night of His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane in Matthew 26:31 when He said to Peter and the other disciples, "You will all fall away (or be scandalized) because of Me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'"

III. Life as a "Loser"

✘ But even as His disciples left Jesus in the Garden that night, Jesus didn't leave His disciples in our text, or you and me alone in our scandalous life of sin and rebellion, did He? He sure could have done it. He had every reason to leave Peter in the clutches of Satan. Because of his and our sin, none of us in fact deserves to be a part of God's salvation plan, since we have worked so hard at brushing it aside and ignoring our Lord's attempts to embrace us in His loving ways.

- In fact God's plan for Jesus seems like utter foolishness to our human reason, doesn't it? I mean think about it. The very idea that one, and only one, human being of earthly flesh and blood could be beaten and tortured and horrendously nailed to a wooden cross outside of Jerusalem in the year 30 AD, and that His death would somehow pay the penalty for the guilt of all human beings who have ever lived and ever will live so that as Romans 10:11 says, "Everyone who believes in Him will not be put to shame" – that whole plan of "the Cross" – if we're honest – is foolishness to the ways of mankind.
- ✘ Paul even admits the same in 1 Corinthians 1:18 & 23 when he says, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing", in other words those who are "thinking of the things of man" rather than "the things of God" (v.23), "but to us who are being saved", Paul continues, "[the word of the cross] is the power of God." Which is why Paul says, "...we preach Christ crucified, a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."
 - ✘ So what does all of this have to do with the second option for life that Jesus put before us in our Gospel Reading today – life as a "loser"? Well, in verse 25 Jesus lays it out before us. He says, "For whoever is desiring to save his life, will lose (or destroy) it. But whoever loses (or destroys) his life on account of Me will find it." What this is, is Jesus' way of describing, in more detail, the difference between you and me being focused upon the "things of man" or being focused upon the "things of God".
 - He uses a real life example in verse 26 by going to the extreme. "What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" Our human nature and our worldly culture both say that "if you were to actually become the richest person in the entire world, then 'you would have it all'", right? But Jesus says, a life with that kind of goal; one that is focused on accumulating earthly stuff, including worldly influence, popularity, pleasure, a great body, the highest level of academic degrees – basically all of the things that this world says is the opposite of being a "loser" – Jesus says this is the person who, because of his/her misguided thinking will "forfeit" or "lose" his life for all eternity.
 - Why? Because he thought that he could do the impossible, and that is "save his own life". You see, this is the key to Christ's amazing love in this conversation for Peter; for the rest of His disciples, and for you and me right now today.
 - ✘ The truly foolish way of life is for any of us, who are sinners to the core from birth, to think that we could ever do enough, or gain enough, or be smart enough on our own to have a better plan than God! Likewise, as soon as we might think that we can achieve forgiveness and salvation by any little bit of self-worth apart from Jesus and His suffering and death on the cross, and His resurrection in victory over death – that too is utter foolishness, no matter what the world wants us to think.
 - Instead, Jesus says the only way to receive eternal life is to be a humble and willing "loser"; that is a person who "loses his life for My sake", says Jesus. The idea here is one of putting aside all of the things that our world and our sinful nature want us to try and gain for our own pleasure and glory and instead, as Jesus said earlier in Matthew 6:33, "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness...", in other words, "the things of God", which much of the time would make this world label us "a loser".
 - But you tell me, would you rather be labeled as "a winner" here on earth but end up in hell or be labeled as "a loser" here on earth and live in heavenly Paradise with the one true God forever?
 - ✘ Enduring the hardship, the persecution, and the earthly shame of this "loser" status because you are not ashamed of Jesus as your Savior – this is what Jesus is talking about when He says in

verse 24, “If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me”; and in verse 25, “whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.”

→ This taking up of the cross and following Jesus – let’s be clear, it is not our own doing, but it is the work of the Holy Spirit once He has come to live within our hearts through faith; granting us the new life as a disciple of Jesus so that we are then able to give up trying to save ourselves or impress the world – yes we lose that old life, to now embrace God’s plan and mission; to truly love His Son Jesus as our only Savior, and to relish the life as a “loser”; as a “fool” for Christ. To Him be the glory for His amazing grace! Amen.