

## **“Giving Up Your Life”**

Dear friends, greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. Today we come to the final week in our “Give It Up” series; a series in which we’ve been looking at some of the things God has called us (in our lives) to either rethink (as his people) or to give up completely.

Our hope and prayer has been (during these weeks) that this series will have served as an encouragement to you (in your faith) as you think about what Jesus was willing to “give up” for you as he went to the cross, as well as a challenge (in your life) as you think about the calling you’ve been given and how in our “giving up” things in our response (to Jesus) that he ends up giving us far more (in return) than we ever let go.

Today we come to the close (of our series), to the final topic in the things we’re called in life to “give up.” And yet, interestingly enough, as is so often the case in the Christian life, as we come to the close, we find ourselves (in reality) faced with what really is (nothing more than) the start.

From Mark, chapter eight, Jesus says, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.”

It’s interesting, as you read through the gospel accounts, those four stories we have (in the Bible) of Jesus’ life, how our Lord never hid his scars to win a disciple. He never watered down the calling to attract a follower. He never changed the message. He never altered the truth. He never did a “bait and switch,” misrepresenting (in the calling) what was inevitably going to happen.

What he said was, “I’m going to the cross,” What he communicated was, “I’m going to suffer and die for the sins of this world.” And then (he said), more than once, “If you want a share in my glory, if you want to have any relationship with me at all, and if you want to be called one of my friends and be recognized as one of my own, then the cross must become for you (as it was for me) the central and controlling principle of your life.”

“Giving Up Your Life.” Losing what you have in order to gain what you might never have. Not long ago, there was a poll taken of just over 5000 churchgoers who were asked to list their preferences for sermon topics. (I might have shared this before.) Not counting the 150 (or so) who voted for not having a sermon at all, the results were revealing.

Now, there were variations on these themes. The wording might have been a bit different, but (generally speaking), the four sermon subjects that (rose to the top) were as follows: #1: “How Can My Religion Help to Eliminate Worry and Tension from My Life?” #2: “How Can My Relationship With God Lead to a Happier Home Life?” #3: “How Can My Sunday Morning Faith Impact My Monday Morning World?” And #4: “How Can My Prayer Life Lead to a More Fulfilling Life?”

Now, without going (too far into it), without question, those are wonderful subjects to pursue, great questions for sermons to ask and to answer. (Don’t get me wrong.) I’ve preached on each of those topics throughout my ministry. There’s nothing wrong with those questions. (They’re good questions.)

What’s revealing (however) about that poll are not the sermon topics being addressed, but the direction of the sermon subjects most desired. (Did you notice that?) Every one of them has a “What can I get out of religion?” direction. Every one of them is asking a “What’s in it for me?” kind of question.

How can my religion eliminate worry? How can I have a happier home life? How can my Monday world become better? How can my life become more fulfilled?

Those are great questions. We need to keep asking them. Having Jesus in your life and (controlling your life) can change your life. Everything about your life can be different, if you let Jesus become the difference.

But don’t be deceived. Don’t turn this (following Jesus) thing into something he never promised. His was never a “Here’s what you can get” approach to the gathering of disciples. His was never a “Here’s what’s in it for you” appeal when he went out looking for someone who would follow. No! What he said was, “I’m going to my death.” What he communicated was, “I’m going to suffer and die.” And what he said (more than once), was “If you want to be one of my followers, then you need to be ready to carry a cross.”

“Giving Up Your Life.” Losing what you have in order to gain what you might never have. It was an all-encompassing challenge for those first followers of Jesus. It’s an all-in approach to life for each of us here today. The truth is you can’t follow Jesus, if you’re not willing to carry a cross. The reality is you can’t claim the name of Christ, if you’re not also ready to claim (for yourself) the path upon which he walked.

I remember reading a story (years ago) about one of the early missionaries to Korea. Back in the late 1800’s (if my memory serves me well), it was one of the mission fields that (at that time) had hardly been scratched. Anyone willing to go to Korea would have to have been willing to face an uncertain future at best.

The story told about the interview process for selecting those early missionaries. Evidently, anyone pursuing a missionary life had to first pass a psychological test. And so, as a result, the story told about a missionary who had already served for seven years, who was applying to go back.

The psychiatrist asked a simple question. He asked, “Do you want to return to Korea?” and the missionary answered, “No.” When asked to explain, the response was simple.

The man said, “No, I don’t want to return to Korea.” He said, “Who in their right mind would choose a primitive Korean life in a bamboo hut over a comfortable American life in a nice home? No,” he said, “I don’t want to return, not at all. But I’m convinced Jesus wants me to, so my only option,” he said, “as a follower of his, is to go.”

Now, that was years ago, and his experience (and calling) are not ours. (Don’t mishear what we’re saying.) The application in your life (and mine) might be completely different than it was in his. (Most likely, it will be.) The Christian life plays out differently for every one of us. What’s not different (for any of us) is the basic calling we’ve been given.

Jesus wasn’t looking for followers desiring a comfortable life. (He was looking for followers desiring to serve.) Jesus wasn’t seeking a group (of believers) willing to meet together on their own terms. What he was doing was (laying out the terms) around which (all believers) would need to learn to meet.

That’s what was happening in that confrontation with Peter. (You remember the story.) We’re not focusing today on that part. But that’s what was going on when Peter rebuked Jesus for his words. (Do you remember what Jesus said to Peter?) He said, “Get behind me, Satan! (He said), “You’re coming from a place (in your calling) that (in your calling) finally has no place.” (And, how come?) Because...you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”

It’s like what Mark Twain said about the Bible? (Maybe you’ve heard this.) He wasn’t a theologian, but do you know what he said? (He said), “Many people are bothered most by the passages in the Bible they don’t understand. Not me,” he said. “For me, the passages that trouble me the most are the ones I do.”

It’s not that Peter didn’t understand what Jesus said. His rebuke came because he did. It’s not that the Church (today) has failed to understand the calling. It’s more that the Church (today), in far too many cases, has been far too often and too easily influenced by the world.

“Giving Up Your Life.” Losing what you have in order to gain what you might never have. Do you know what the greatest ambition in life was for the apostle Paul? He was a talented man. He was as gifted as they come. Do you know what his greatest ambition in life was? (He had many talents.)

Paul was a great preacher. (I would have loved to have heard the apostle Paul preach.) If Paul had been led by the world, if that was his ambition, he would have attracted large crowds through the things (and the way) he preached.

Paul was a great theologian. (Wouldn’t it have been great if Paul could have taught one of our “Middle Hour” classes here at the church?) If the world was his passion, (what he lived for), he would have done everything he could have to build a reputation as one who understood divine truth.

Paul was a great missionary. Imagine what it must have been like to be a member in one of those early churches! (I can only imagine.) It would have been exciting to be a part.

And Paul was a great administrator, a great visionary. If Paul had been controlled by the world, (if that’s what he wanted), he would have been one of the most remembered and modeled-after administrators and visionaries this world has ever known...if that’s what he wanted.

Do you remember what Paul called all of those worldly ambitions? Do you remember what he said about all of those self-serving and centered desires of the world? In our (second lesson today), he called them “rubbish.” He said they were “worth nothing.” He went on to say that his greatest desire in life, his greatest

ambition (for his life) was to “gain Christ...to be found in him...and to share in his sufferings, to become like him in his death...that he might somehow attain to the resurrection of the dead.”

“Giving Up Your Life.” Losing what you have in order to gain what you might never have. It’s meant to be our greatest passion in life, this thing we call the cross. It’s designed to be what we live for in life, the challenge of giving away our lives for the sake of taking hold of his.

Maybe you’ve heard the story about the man who came to his pastor to present him with a large monetary gift? The parishioner showed up in his office one day, sat down and presented him with a gift of \$100,000 for the church. The pastor (when he saw it) was amazed! It had never before happened. He was blown away. He (so much) wanted to keep it. But he didn’t.

What he did was, instead, he looked at the check, thanked the man for his offer, and then gave it back. And (then he said), “Now go and cash it...and cash it for one and five and ten dollar bills.” (Then he said), “Then go out and spend them, use them for God, one and five and ten dollars at a time.” The man responded, “That would take a lifetime!” The pastor said, “That’s the point.”

When Jesus calls us to follow, he calls us to walk the way of the cross. It’s a way of sacrifice. It’s a way of commitment. It’s to become our greatest passion in life. It’s a calling that will take everything we have to give for as long as we’ve been given. And we’re to do it, not to save ourselves, but because we’ve already saved in him. Not to qualify ourselves, but because (in his death and resurrection), all of the qualifications have already been met.

In Paris, there’s a museum built and dedicated to the French sculptor and artist by the name of Auguste Rodin. Best know for his sculpture of “The Thinker,” the museum holding his life-work will long be a tribute to his God-given abilities and gifts.

One of the stories that surrounds his life (in the late eighteen and early nineteen hundreds) is one in which he was traveling along a road and came across a huge carving of the crucifix. When he saw it, he immediately fell in love with it and insisted in having it as his own. And so he did. He purchased this large cross and arranged to have it transported back to his home. As the story goes, unfortunately, when it arrived, it was too big to put inside the house. So what did he do? He knocked down the walls and raised the roof, and rebuilt his home around the cross.

Now, I don’t know if that’s a true story or not. It’s part of the legend; whether it is, doesn’t really matter. What I do know (and what does matter) is that the calling we’ve been given in Jesus is to do the same; to tear down the walls of our lives, to raise the roofs under which we’ve been living, and to reconstruct everything we’re about around the cross.

That’s where the One we follow has called us to live. That’s where the One who has chosen us as his own has gone before. And that’s where the One who gave his life (long ago), on that Friday (we call “Good”), that’s now less than two weeks away, has promised it can be found.

My friends, Jesus never hid his scars to win a disciple. He never watered down the calling in order to attract a new follower. He never changed the message. He never altered the truth. He never did a “bait and switch,” misrepresenting what was inevitably soon to happen. But he did and he does continue to call.

“Giving Up Your Life.” Losing what you have in order to gain what only he can give.

Let’s pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you for the path you walked for us as you went to the cross and for the hope and the promise and the assurance in life that are now ours because of what you have done. We thank you for taking our sin and putting it to death, and for how, in its place, you have now called and chosen us as your own. Lord, help us to let go of the things in this life that have control, and to give complete control of our lives to you. Encourage us in our faith, strengthen us in our calling, and empower and enable us (each day) to live our lives for you, in whose name we pray. Amen.