

**The  
Bon Air  
Pulpit**

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February 22, 1998

Scripture Reading: *Matthew 16:24*

Sermon: ***Necessary Decisions for Growing Christians***

Our Scripture reading this morning is from the 16th chapter of the book of Matthew, and when you turn to that chapter you turn to the hinge of the book of Matthew. The purpose of the first part of the book is to tell you who Jesus is. Therein are recorded His teachings, His miracles, and His activities. In chapter 16, He gives to the disciples an examination. He asks them, “Do you know who I am?” You recall that Simon Peter gave the right answer. He said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

When you turn down to verse 21, you will notice that he turns to the second part of the book. The *first* part is *who He is*, the *second* part is *what He has come to do*. Matthew says, “*From that time on Jesus began to explain to His disciples He must go to Jerusalem, suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priest, and teachers of the law, that He must be killed and on the third day He would rise again.*” Now the two must be in that order. *You have to understand who He is before you can understand what He has done.* If you don’t understand He is the Son of God then the cross has absolutely no meaning. Then He said, “*I know that you don’t think these two go together,*” and when you put them in your mind you realize they don’t. If you say that this is Christ the Son of God, then you think the next thing would be “I am going to create a great kingdom and then I am going to do all these great things.” But the next thing is, “I have to die.” In this passage of Scripture He says that we need to believe that by His being willing to give Himself to God and give Himself to others, God is going to fulfill a purpose and a will in this world that we can only faintly imagine. Then He turns to His disciples, and down in verse 24 He says, “*Now let me say to you this. If any man wants to come after me, he must deny himself and pick up his cross and follow me. For whosoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whosoever loses his life for mine will find it. What good is it for a man if he gain the whole world and yet forfeit his soul, or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?*” Then Jesus expresses what I think is one of the greatest moments of faith which He ever put into words. He has just said, “*I am going to die,*” but listen to what He now says, “*For the Son of Man is going to come in His Father’s glory with His angels, then He will reward every person for what he has done. I tell you the truth some of you who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming into His kingdom.*” Jesus said, “*I am the Son of God, I will die on the cross, but out of that death the world is going to be*

*changed.” Now He says, “If you want to understand me, then you need to understand you have to pick up your cross, and I hope you will do it with the faith that I do; that is, as you give yourself to God and to others, God will be able to take your life and use it for God’s glory and the good of others.”*

We want to talk this morning about following Jesus, but *to follow Him means you have to pick up a cross*. One of Jesus most famous stories is called the parable of the good Samaritan. You recall it is the story of a man who was taking a trip from Jerusalem down to Jericho and he was assaulted and robbed. *The first people who came along were the thieves who beat him and took everything that they could.* All of us are aware that we live in a world where people can only think about what they can get from you. They have little regard for you and for your life, but simply think you exist for what they can get out of you. I am aware that all around this community there are people who are going from person to person, almost house to house, asking one question: what can I get from you? It doesn’t make any difference if you are destroyed or if your family ends up separated. What I want to know is how much money I can make out of you. They come in their cars, and they have enough drugs in the back of their cars to take care of all the people that they hook. They simply don’t care about anybody; all they want to know is how they can make more money. There are old people, young people, who are the robbers, thieves, and the barons of hate in our world and in our community; and they are still around us.

*The second people who came along were the religious leaders.* You recall that *they surveyed the situation and then they went on their way.*

The *third person* is the hero of Jesus’s story, an unlikely hero because the Jews and the Samaritans religiously and racially hated each other, and yet he saw a Jew and he didn’t ask what his race was or what kind of religion he had. *He recognized he was a person in hurt and need and he reached out to help him.* You need to understand something of what he did. We are told that in Bible times one of the things robbers would do is leave people who were hurt on the side of the road as decoys. When a person stopped to help, the robbers would attack him, so the good Samaritan was taking a risk. He didn’t know if he was going to be robbed next, but he got off his donkey and gave the wounded person what medicine he could. He put him on his donkey and he walked beside him and stayed up all night and took care of him. When he left the next day, he said to the innkeeper, “Whatever you need, here is money, and I will take care of anything else when I come back.” Someone has said that in this beautiful story there are three philosophies of life. *Number one is what is yours is mine and I will take it.* *Number two* is the religious people. *What is mine is mine and I am going to keep it.* *Number three*, that of the good Samaritan, *is what is mine is yours and I will share it.*

Jesus gave us that story, but you recall that all the way through His teachings and His miracles He taught that we are to live a life in which we are to be interested in others and we are to share our lives with them. It was Jesus who said, *“Let me tell you who is the greatest in the kingdom. The greatest in the kingdom is the one who is the servant of other people.* Jesus actually said, *“Let me give you a preview of the final judgment. The judgment is going to be a question. Did you take care of the needy, did you take care of the people who did not have the basic necessities of life, did you visit those in the hospital, did you take care of those people who were in prison, did you generously care for other individuals?”* You recall that the very symbol of the Christian faith is the cross on which Jesus said: I am going to give my life and I am going to give it for other individuals. People who have followed Jesus have understood that that is the very heart of what it means to be a disciple. Many of you have read or heard sung what is called the *Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi* in which he said, “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me show love; where there is despair, hope; where there is sadness, joy; where there is darkness, light. Oh, Divine Master, grant that we shall not so much seek to be consoled as to console; not so much to be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we receive and it is in pardoning that we are pardoned and it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.” St. Francis understood what Jesus taught us: that life is giving yourself for others and for God. Now if you are ever going to understand Jesus, you are going to have to understand that same spirit in your own life.

We are talking this whole year on how we can grow in our Christian lives, and people often say to me, “What I want to do is get closer to Jesus.” Well, listen to Him. *“If you want to be close to me, you have to follow me. You have to do the things that I did.”* Sometimes the reason we feel like we are not growing in our Christian lives is that we are on a different wave length. He is out here with hands open wide, helping, ministering, serving other individuals; and we are here saying, “Dear God, what can you do to bless me?” We are always interested in us, and Jesus is interested in others. No wonder we don’t understand who He is. Jesus said, *“If you are going to follow me, if you are going to be my disciple, there are two big decisions you have got to make in your life. Decision number one is there is one thing you are going to have to put aside and there is one thing you are going to have to pick up. The first thing you are going to have to put aside is self.”* Now, *self* in our term is *selfishness*. It would be *self-centeredness*. Most of us recognize that quite often we spend our lives simply asking: what is in it for me? What good can I get out of this? How is this going to help what I am trying to do in life? We become self centered, everything has an *I* in it. In everything my interest is always what I can do, what I can get out of it. You can always tell a person whose ego has never been crushed; he is the person who complains when he is not recognized, is bitter when people don’t give him the proper reward, is always seeking revenge because you have stepped in his way. *I* is always there, and his whole life is lived around it.

I am reminded of a little girl who had a tea party: "I invited only three, I, myself and me." Most of us, if you asked about our lives, spend most of ourselves doing just that. What is in it for me, can it exalt myself? I am reminded of a story out of a little town in Kansas called Hiawatha, Kansas. I am told that if you go to the cemetery in that town you will see a strange sight. You will see little monuments everywhere. There was a man who was a farmer in Kansas who was quite poor for a long time and then became quite wealthy. He tried to determine what he would do with his wealth. People would come to him occasionally and say, "There are people here who don't have adequate housing, could you help us?" or "We need a softball field for the boys." Mr. Davis would always say, "This town hasn't done anything for me; I don't care anything about you." What he decided he would do is build a monument to his wife, and I understand it is a beautiful monument. He became so impressed with it that he decided to build a second monument, and then he just kept building monuments all over the cemetery. Finally, when he died, nobody came to his funeral except one man. The one man there seemed to be deeply moved that Mr. Davis was gone. He was the man who made the tombstones. Mr. Davis spent all of his life living for himself, and in his death he left nothing behind except monuments to his own selfishness.

What we need to understand is that until I can deny myself I cannot really make progress in the Christian life, because all of the elements to help me grow are dependent upon my putting myself aside. For example: when I come to worship, worship is getting outside of myself and exalting God. It is in gratitude to Him for all He has done for me. If I come to church and all I think about is myself, then worship becomes what God can do for me. I don't become His servant, He becomes mine. It affects my prayer life. So many times when I don't deny myself, all I talk about is: give me, give me, give me, forgive me, amen. It becomes just something to help me in my selfishness. It affects my giving. You see, by giving I begin to understand that I am outside of myself, and I begin to contribute to Him; but when the offering plate comes by I think there are so many things I have to get for myself, I can't give anything to God. It affects my time. The reason you are here this morning is you believe your presence in God's house is important to help you develop and grow and become the kind of person you want. Suppose you turn over next Sunday morning and say, "You know, Sunday is the only morning I have to sleep. It is the only time I can do my things. It becomes I, I, I. The Bible says that until I can come to the place where I can deal cruelly, forcefully with myself, and I put it aside, I will never grow in my Christian life.

When I moved to North Carolina a few years ago I saw an example of that kind of Christianity that that I have never forgotten. I had not lived in North Carolina long when I met John. John was one of the leaders in the congregation. I learned that he had had every position that the church could offer him, every position the association could offer him, every position the state convention could offer him. He was a humble, kind, dedicated Christian man. I also learned later

that he was very wealthy. One day he and his wife, Katherine, saw us, and he said, "I would like you to come out and eat with us." His was one of the biggest houses and in the city, and when I sat down, I couldn't help but notice that all around us everything was just as it ought to be, fine and lovely. When I got to know John, I learned he was never carried away with what he had. He was always one of the most outgoing, generous men I had ever met. He came to me one day and said, "You know, I am sixty-five; it is time for me to retire. I am going to turn my businesses over to my children." I asked, "What are you going to do, John?" He said "I am depending on you for that. I want to give the rest of my life, as much as I can, to serve God. I want you to help me find things I can do for His glory." A couple of years passed and a man came to see me and said, "Have you heard about John?" I thought he meant John was sick, and I said to him, "Tell me about it." He said that John's children have made some bad business decisions and they had lost everything John had. John came to see me and he said, "I wanted you to know before it gets in the paper. I am going to declare bankruptcy. It is the only way I can save what little else I have." Then in a few months someone came to me and said, "Did you know John was moving?" I said, "John, moving?" I asked where and the person said, "In those apartments over there." I had been in them and I knew they were one- and two-bedroom apartments. I went to see John and I asked, "John, why are you moving." He said "I have spent a lifetime telling people that I am a Christian. I have tried to live for Christ, and I cannot die and owe people money." I said, "John, you didn't have to sell your house." He said, "I know I didn't have to, but I had to." When I went down for Sunday dinner at one of the restaurants, there was Katherine. She served me my meal; she was a waitress. John said to me, "My prayer is that before I die I will pay back every dime that we owe. I will not die and let anybody feel that I had taken advantage of him." After I left, I heard that John had gone to an associational meeting and gone back to that little two-bedroom apartment and died of a heart attack. I cannot forget him. I cannot forget that here was a man who said, "I will not be bitter, I will not complain, I will not say that this isn't fair, I will spend my life trying to help other people." That is more than I can fathom.

But it is more than I can fathom that Jesus said, "*If any man is going to follow me, he is going to have to get rid of himself and stop spending all of his time thinking about what is in it for me.*" Jesus said *you have to put something aside but you have to pick up something.* You have to pick up a cross. Sometime I hear people say, "I have a problem, I have an illness, I guess that is my cross I have to bear." You need to understand that a cross is not something that has come on you involuntarily. *A cross is something that you deliberately pick up.* Jesus picked up a cross and he said that it was by this method He was going to give His life for others. It is almost as though He saw this heavy burden that was beating mankind down and he said, "*I will go and get under it and help to lift it up even if it costs me my life. I will go and give myself for others.*" Now listen to what Jesus said. "*If you are going to follow me you are going to have to have that same attitude of life. You are going to have to go and voluntarily pick up the hurts,*

*sufferings, and sins of others and you are going to have to get under them and you are going to have to spend the energy to try to lift them from other individuals. Only if you are willing to invest yourself in the hurts and needs and sins of others can you ever understand what it means to pick up a cross.*" Our problem is we want the blessings, but not the burdens. We want what God can give to us, and not what we can give to others. Someone said the Christian life is more than taking all that God gives, it is giving all that God requires. What He requires is that I come and give myself to Him. I have already heard some of our members saying that in the year 2000 they are going to Europe, and one of their purposes in going is a little Bavarian village called Oberammergau. You might recall the story that nearly 350 years ago the black plague was going through Europe and many of the villages were literally wiped out. The people of Oberammergau banded together and said, "God, if you will save our little village, then every ten years we will gather together and tell people the story of Jesus." All of these years people have come together from around the world, to this huge arena where the story of Christ is lived. After the Second World War, when people from all over the world started to return to Oberammergau, the man who for thirty years played Jesus Christ, whose last name was Langdon, was performing several times a day. Someone came to Mr. Langdon and said, "I know this is difficult on you, you have to carry a heavy cross all the way out of the woods and through a stage; and you have to hang on this heavy cross. Let's make it easy. Why don't we make a cross out of paper and it will be easier for you to carry." Mr. Langdon replied, "Thank you for your concern, but I cannot act the part if I don't carry the cross." *Now listen to Jesus: you want to be close to me, you want to follow me, then you are going to have to pick up your cross. You are going to have to enter into the same spirit, the same sacrifice, the same giving. You are going to have to understand that life is giving, life is surrender unto others.*

One of the reasons people don't understand our religion is that, unfortunately, we have *uncrucified* lives trying to communicate a crucified Christ. We want to tell people what they can get out of it and not what it costs. No wonder we don't understand Him. You remember the old story about a fire that was destroying Rome. In the story Simon Peter was there and in all the chaos Simon and his friends began to go out of town. As they were trying to get away from the burning city, they looked up and there was Jesus walking towards the burning city. Simon said, "Lord where are you going?" Jesus said, "I am going to Rome." Simon said, "Lord, you can't go there. The city is aflame and the people believe we Christians have done it. People are dying, people are in need, the army is out. *Quo vadis?* In light of this, which way are you going to go?" Jesus said, "I am going to Rome." What I wanted to ask you this morning is that in your life, *quo vadis?* Which way are you going? Are you trying to get away from the hurt of the world, the sins of the world, the people who need you? Are you trying to make life easy instead of trying to understand sacrifice? You don't want to carry anything, you're trying to get rid of things. You want to ask God how to make it easier instead of accepting the burden, you want blessings and never burdens.

Then please understand that you will never understand Him. Because *quo vadis?*, for Him, is to go to Rome.

Some of you are going to leave today with something in your hand . Some of you are going to leave with your ego still in your hand, because all you want is what life can do for you. I want to ask you today if you won't bend over and pick up a cross. Say, "Lord here I am to serve you, here I am to help others, here I am to give myself, here I am regardless of what it costs. Lord, here I am to be a servant of yours." You are going to walk out of here with a cross in your hands.