

"DOUBLE-MINDED OR SINGLE-HEARTED?"

MT 16:21-28

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY
SPIRIT. AMEN.

TEXT: MT 16:21-28

DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST:

WHILE AT MY FIRST CONGREGATION, I HAD THE OPPORTUNITY
TO SERVE AS THE ASSISTANT COACH OF THE DAY SCHOOL'S VARSITY
SOCCER TEAM. I WATCHED THE PLAYERS IN MANY GAMES, YET EVEN
IN THE GAMES THEY WON, MANY MISTAKES WERE MADE AND GOALS
WERE MISSED. GENERALLY THESE GOALS WERE MISSED BECAUSE OF
A LACK OF CONCENTRATION. THE PLAYERS SIMPLY TOOK THEIR
EYES OFF THE BALL.

OF COURSE, IT'S NOT ONLY YOUNG SOCCER PLAYERS WHO MAKE
SUCH MISTAKES. EVEN PROFESSIONAL ATHLETES MAKE MISTAKES AT
TIMES BECAUSE THEY FAIL TO CONCENTRATE. FOR EXAMPLE, IT'S
NOT ALL THAT UNUSUAL TO SEE A HIGHLY PAID WIDE RECEIVER ON
A PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL TEAM DROP A BALL PASSED RIGHT TO
HIM. APPARENTLY HE BEGAN THINKING ABOUT SOMETHING ELSE
BEFORE THE BALL GOT TO HIM—LIKE MAYBE A 250 POUND
LINEBAKER HITTING HIM HARD—AND HE DROPPED THE BALL.

YOU MIGHT SAY THAT'S WHAT PETER DID IN THE GOSPEL TEXT

FOR TODAY—HE DROPPED THE BALL. IN LAST SUNDAY'S GOSPEL READING WE HEARD PETER MAKE THE BOLD CONFESSION THAT JESUS WAS "THE CHRIST, THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD" (16:16). BECAUSE OF HIS TRUE CONFESSION, JESUS GAVE HIM A NEW NAME AND CALLED HIM BLESSED. IN THE GOSPEL READING TODAY, HOWEVER, WE HEAR PETER REBUKE THE LORD AND TRY TO DISSUADE HIM FROM FOLLOWING HIS APPOINTED PATH OF SUFFERING AND DEATH FOR THE SALVATION OF ALL HUMANKIND. WHY WOULD PETER DO THIS?

JESUS IDENTIFIES THE PROBLEM CLEARLY: PETER IS DOUBLE-MINDED. LAST WEEK PETER SPOKE FROM FAITH, BUT TODAY HE SPEAKS FROM UNBELIEF. PETER IS DOUBLE-MINDED—SAINT-AND-SINNER-AT-THE-SAME-TIME—AND JESUS CORRECTS HIM BY POINTING OUT HIS SIN IMMEDIATELY: "YOU DO NOT HAVE IN MIND THE THINGS OF GOD, BUT THE THINGS OF MEN" (V 23).

IN CONTRAST, JESUS WAS SINGLE-HEARTED. HE ALWAYS HAD IN MIND THE THINGS OF GOD. HE KNEW WHAT HE HAD TO DO. HE "MUST GO" TO JERUSALEM IN ORDER TO SUFFER AND DIE FOR THE SINS OF THE WORLD SO THAT ETERNAL LIFE COULD BE OFFERED TO ALL PEOPLE. OUTSIDE THE GATES OF JERUSALEM, JESUS WOULD BE CRUCIFIED, AND HIS FATHER WOULD PLACE UPON HIM THE SINS OF THE WHOLE INHABITED WORLD. IN THAT WAY JESUS WOULD PAY THE PENALTY FOR THE SINS OF ALL PEOPLE IN ORDER TO REDEEM

HUMANKIND AND RECONCILE THE WORLD TO GOD. THAT WAS THE REASON HE LEFT HEAVEN AND CAME TO EARTH—TO SAVE LOST SOULS LIKE YOU AND ME—AND NO ONE AND NO THING WOULD KEEP HIM FROM ACHIEVING THAT GOAL.

JESUS WAS SINGLE-HEARTED, AND ANYONE WHO WANTED TO BE HIS FOLLOWER, THAT IS, HIS DISCIPLE, ALSO HAD TO BE SINGLE HEARTED. THEY WOULD NEED TO LEARN TO BE LIKE HIM AND TO UNDERSTAND THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP. SO JESUS CHALLENGED HIS FOLLOWERS: "IF ANYONE WOULD COME AFTER ME, HE MUST DENY HIMSELF AND TAKE UP HIS CROSS AND FOLLOW ME" (V 24). LET'S LOOK AT EACH OF THESE THREE REQUIREMENTS FOR JESUS' DISCIPLES THAT WE MAY BE SINGLE-HEARTED AND FOLLOW CHRIST TO OUR HEAVENLY GOAL.

THE FIRST REQUIREMENT OF JESUS' DISCIPLES IS TO DENY SELF. THAT MEANS THAT THE DISCIPLE MUST BE WILLING TO GIVE UP HIS OR HER LIFE IN OBEDIENCE TO THE WILL OF THE TRIUNE GOD, AS JESUS DID. NOW, TO GIVE UP ONE'S LIFE IS MORE THAN A DECISION OF THE HUMAN WILL. IT IS AN ACT OF FAITH, A FAITH THAT IS CREATED IN THE HEART BY THE HOLY SPIRIT. "FLESH GIVE BIRTH TO FLESH," JOHN WRITES, "BUT THE SPIRIT GIVES BIRTH TO SPIRIT" (3:6). THE HOLY SPIRIT CREATES FAITH IN THE DISCIPLE THROUGH THE WORD AND WATER OF HOLY BAPTISM (JN 3:5) AND THROUGH THE HEARING OF GOD'S WORD WITH

UNDERSTANDING (ROM 10:17). ONLY THEN DOES THE SPIRIT MOTIVATE PEOPLE TO "COME AFTER" JESUS, TO DENY SELF AND FOLLOW HIM.

YET EVEN WHEN WE WANT TO GIVE OUR LIFE TO JESUS, WE MAY MISDIRECT OUR ZEAL. INSTEAD OF DOING GOD'S WILL, WE MAY CHOOSE TO DO OUR OWN WILL INSTEAD. THAT'S WHAT PETER DID. INFLUENCED BY THE POPULAR CULTURE OF HIS DAY, PETER MAY HAVE THOUGHT OF JESUS AS A MESSIAH COULD GET WHATEVER HE WANTED WITH LITTLE OR NO EFFORT. IN HIS LIMITED UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT IT MEANT THAT JESUS WAS THE MESSIAH OF GOD, HE COULD NOT UNDERSTAND HOW JESUS' SUFFERING AND DEATH FIT INTO THE PICTURE. SO HE TRIED TO STOP IT.

"GET BEHIND ME, SATAN!" JESUS SAID. NOW, "SATAN" MEANS "ADVERSARY." PETER WAS SERVING AS JESUS' ADVERSARY, A HINDRANCE, TO THE FULFILLMENT OF GOD'S WILL DUE TO HIS FAULTY UNDERSTANDING AND MISBELIEF. WITH SIMILAR WORDS, JESUS TOLD SATAN AFTER THE TEMPTATION IN THE WILDERNESS, "AWAY FROM ME, SATAN!" (4:10). WHAT JESUS IS TELLING PETER IS "DON'T TRY TO BE IN FRONT AND LEAD ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WILL, PETER. GET BEHIND ME. BE A FOLLOWER, AND DO GOD'S WILL. SAY 'NO' TO SELF AND 'YES' TO ME." THIS IS A LESSON WE ALL NEED TO LEARN OVER AND OVER AGAIN—TO SAY "NO" TO SELF AND TO LEARN AS GOD'S NEW CREATION IN CHRIST JESUS TO

SAY "YES" TO GOD AND TO DO HIS WILL.

THE SECOND THING JESUS REQUIRES OF HIS DISCIPLES IS THAT HE OR SHE "TAKE UP [HIS OR HER] CROSS." WHAT DOES JESUS MEAN BY "CROSS"? WELL, FOR JESUS IT WAS MORE THAN JUST THE CROSSBEAM HE WAS FORCED TO CARRY OUT OF JERUSALEM TO CALVARY FOR HIS OWN CRUCIFIXION. IT MEANT ALL THE PAIN AND AGONY HE SUFFERED AS THE PENALTY FOR OUR SINS—EVEN SEPARATION FROM GOD, THE TERROR OF HELL ITSELF. THUS, FOR US, THE "CROSS" IS NOT SIMPLY THE ORDINARY TROUBLES WE EXPERIENCE IN LIFE DUE TO HARDSHIPS, SICKNESS, POVERTY, OR OLD AGE. RATHER, THE CROSS IS THE BURDEN WE CARRY AS A RESULT OF FOLLOWING CHRIST. IT IS THE RESENTMENT, THE RIDICULE, THE REJECTION WE RECEIVE WHEN WE CONFESS CHRIST BEFORE AN UNBELIEVING WORLD. ST. LUKE TELLS US THAT WE MUST TAKE UP THIS CROSS "DAILY" (9:23).

WHEN WE TAKE UP OUR CROSSES DAILY AND CARRY THEM PATIENTLY, OUR LIVES BECOME A WITNESS TO JESUS, OUR MASTER. YOU SEE, GOD CALLED THE ISRAELITES, THE JEWS, TO BE A UNIQUE PEOPLE IN THE WORLD. THEIR PAGAN NEIGHBORS, THE GENTILES, WORSHIPED MANY FALSE GODS. THEIR BELIEFS AND BEHAVIORS MADE THEM SPIRITUALLY "UNCLEAN," THAT IS, UNACCEPTABLE TO GOD. IN CONTRAST, THE ISRAELITES BELIEVED IN THE ONE TRUE GOD, THE MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH, WHO HAD

REVEALED HIMSELF THROUGH THE PROPHETS AND IN THE HOLY SCRIPTURES, AND THEY LIVED ACCORDING TO A STRICT CODE OF BEHAVIOR, SUMMARIZED BY THE TEN COMMANDMENTS. THEIR HOLY AND SPIRITUALLY "CLEAN" LIVES SERVED AS A WITNESS TO THE NATIONS SURROUNDING THEM OF THE HOLINESS OF THE TRUE GOD.

A DISCIPLE OF CHRIST LIKEWISE MUST DENY HIM- OR HERSELF, TAKE UP HIS OR HER CROSS, AND THUS BECOME A WITNESS TO OUR GOD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. NEARLY HALF OF AMERICAN ADULTS CLAIM TO BE "BORN AGAIN" CHRISTIANS, BUT THEY FAIL TO HAVE A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON OUR SOCIETY.

ALTHOUGH THERE'S MUCH *TALK* ABOUT RELIGION, PERSONAL MORALITY DOESN'T SEEM TO BE AFFECTED MUCH. TOO MANY CHRISTIANS HAVE BECOME "LIKE" THE WORLD, BECOMING CONFORMED TO THE PATTERN OF THIS WORLD, INSTEAD OF BEING TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWAL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT (ROM 12:2). OUR CALLING AS CHRISTIANS IS TO BE WITNESSES TO THE WORLD ABOUT GOD'S NEW LIFE IN CHRIST, NOT TO LIVE AS THOUGH THE WORLD HAS A BETTER WAY (5:14-16).

THE THIRD REQUIREMENT OF A DISCIPLE OF JESUS CHRIST IS THAT HE OR SHE MUST FOLLOW HIS OR HER MASTER. DID YOU EVER PLAY "FOLLOW THE LEADER" AS A CHILD? DO YOU REMEMBER HOW HARD YOU TRIED TO COPY THE ACTIONS OF THE LEADER EXACTLY? YOU WATCHED CAREFULLY AND TRIED WITH EVERY BIT OF ABILITY

AND STRENGTH YOU HAD TO IMITATE HIM OR HER COMPLETELY. WELL, THAT'S HOW A DISCIPLE OF CHRIST IS SUPPOSED TO FOLLOW HIS OR HER MASTER. HE OR SHE IS TO REGULARLY STUDY JESUS' LIFE IN THE GOSPELS—HIS COMPLETE TRUST IN GOD—AND THE GOOD WORKS HE DID. JESUS SAID TO HIS DISCIPLES, "A NEW COMMANDMENT I GIVE TO YOU: LOVE ONE ANOTHER. AS I HAVE LOVED YOU, SO YOU MUST LOVE ONE ANOTHER" (JN 13:34). HE ADDED THAT WHEN WE LOVE OTHERS THIS WAY—AS HE DID, WITH A SACRIFICIAL LOVE THAT GAVE ITSELF FOR OTHERS—THEN "ALL PEOPLE WILL KNOW THAT YOU ARE MY DISCIPLES" (JN 13:35).

YET THE DISCIPLE OF CHRIST DOES MORE THAN JUST TRY TO FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF THE GOOD LIFE JESUS GAVE. HE OR SHE NOT ONLY WANTS TO BE *LIKE* HIM, BUT ALSO WANTS JESUS TO LIVE IN HIM OR HER. PAUL WRITES: "I HAVE BEEN CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST AND I NO LONGER LIVE, BUT CHRIST LIVES IN ME" (GAL 2:20). THROUGH THE WATERS OF HOLY BAPTISM, OUR OLD SELF HAS BEEN CRUCIFIED AND DIED WITH CHRIST. THROUGH THE DAILY REMEMBRANCE OF OUR BAPTISMAL VOWS, OUR OLD SELF IS DROWNED AND DIES DAILY. WE STILL HAVE OUR SINFUL NATURE, AND BY THE SPIRIT'S POWER, WE MUST CONTINUALLY STRIVE TO SUBDUE IT. LEARNING HOW TO CONTROL AND SUBDUE OUR SINFUL HABITS AND DESIRES IS A PROCESS, BUT GOD PROMISES TO BE WITH US DURING THE PROCESS AND TO HELP US BY HIS SPIRIT, UNTIL AT

LAST CHRIST IS FORMED IN US (GAL 4:19).

DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST, BEING A DISCIPLE OF CHRIST MEANS BEING SINGLE-HEARTED, HAVING CHRIST DWELLING IN OUR HEARTS BY HIS SPIRIT THROUGH FAITH, AND FIGHTING AGAINST THE DOUBLE-MINDEDNESS WHICH IS OURS BY NATURE. BEING A DISCIPLE OF CHRIST MEANS TO DENY SELF, TO TAKE UP THE CROSS GOD HAS APPOINTED FOR EACH OF US DAILY, AND IN THE SPIRIT'S POWER TO FOLLOW OUR LORD AND MASTER UNTIL WE REACH OUR HEAVENLY GOAL. SO THEN, "LET US FIX OUR EYES ON JESUS" (HEB 12:2) AND WALK IN HIS WAY; IN THE NAME OF HIM WHO IS THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE: JESUS CHRIST. AMEN.