

Sermon Draft

Text: Matthew 16:21–28

Sermon: “By Faith, Not By Works”

Embedded in each of the readings for this Sunday is the matter of persecution by enemies, followed by a call for believers to live well. Yet the only reason a believer can live well is because he was first cared for by God. Living well includes doing so in order that two things can happen. First is that God is honored and second is that others come to know of God and all he has done in restoring mankind. Therefore, Lord, ***“grant us courage to take up our cross daily.”*** (Collect)

Jesus is in the midst of teaching about the destructive effect of the Pharisees and beginning to tell, with some detail, about his death and resurrection. Just prior to our text, we read of Peter’s famous confession that Jesus is the Christ promised of old, a most significant confession of faith, one that applies for all time.

By the working of the Holy Spirit, we grasp this paradox of salvation: losing our life, we, no, Christ saves it. ***“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it”*** (v 25).

Christianity is a religion of paradoxes. So much is set forth in Scripture that seems contradictory, even opposite, of what one would normally conclude, especially by human reasoning. It's exceedingly important for every believer to tell himself, and tell himself emphatically, that what Scripture says is true, is true in spite of what reason might tell him instead.

Martin Luther was rather pointed in impugning reason as a manner of setting forth Christian doctrine. Human reason is, well, human, and with humanity all being so flawed by sin, it simply cannot come to proper godly, biblical conclusions.

Now, that doesn't mean believers don't use their minds. God indeed gave man his mind to be used and used intensely and extensively. But the way reason is detrimental, as Luther indicated, is when reason is elevated to be more authoritative than Scripture. The temptation is great. Passages like our text that seem hard to understand seem just to beg for a reasoned explanation.

But more often than not, such reasoning leads to false theology. There's hardly anything worse. For false theology always threatens loss of faith. We can most certainly agree that to be lost for eternity is the very worst thing that can happen to a person.

So, when in our text this morning we hear the interesting and not easily explained paradox of saving the soul to lose it and losing the soul to save it, we then are tempted to explain it away somehow. Problem is, the explanation likely brings forward false doctrine.

Let's look at this critical teaching of Jesus by pitting one side of the paradox against the other and bringing in a most important phrase of this text: "for my sake," that is, for Jesus' sake.

So, what does it mean to "save one's life," or "to save one's soul," as some translations say? Very simply, it would mean that the person decides he or she has to do something, whatever it might be, to work hard enough, do the right things so that he or she will end up in heaven. We usually call this self-righteousness. The emphasis is on the word *self*. It means that, by some sort of criteria, one has to do or perform or complete some actions by which God will accept that person into the glories of heaven when this life is over.

We, as Lutherans, hit this false, unbiblical teaching hard. When we then hear the phrase "self-righteousness," we know immediately that it's wrong for one to attempt.

We do rather well at showing how many denominations are way off in this regard.

Often, it comes in what's commonly referred to as "decision theology," where, for the person to be considered saved, he has to have made the decision to "ask Jesus into his heart," as the phrasing often goes. To state it another way, one has to make the conscious decision to pray and invite Christ in so that one is accepted by God and has life forever.

The responsibility, therefore, is on the individual. When confronted, that person might not agree that he's denying the work of the Holy Spirit and denying one's total depravity (that he has no ability to move toward God, much less become holy enough for God), but that indeed is what this theology means.

So, the problem here, then, is with all those other denominations out there that have bad theology, right? Wrong! You see, every one of us has the exact same inclinations, temptations, to try to save ourselves. Indeed, without specific intervention by God the Spirit, we'd be just like not only the faulty doctrines of the many denominations within Christianity but also like all other religions in the world. All religions have the same basic tenet of salvation, that of doing something to save oneself.

It's just the way every human being by nature is hardwired to think. Our basic sinful nature knows only one way of salvation, and that is to do whatever it takes to save self. It's in our DNA, as we might say, to be self-savers. We just can't help it.

The way it normally shows itself, even in us who know better, is that we set up some sort of arbitrary criteria by which one looks just a little better than others.

And once we do that, we conclude, though wrongfully, that if we can be better than that other person, even just a little bit better, then God will accept us. It's messed up thinking, but that's the way we think, according to our sinful nature.

This, which is ever so painfully true of all of us, is what it means, in Jesus' words in our text, to desire to save one's life, or soul. We can't, just can't, save ourselves. Being blind, dead, and enemies of God, as the Scriptures so clearly tell us, we can do nothing whatsoever to save ourselves. The clear result is that one is then lost, lost for all eternity. That is the sad, sad outcome of "saving one's life," as our passage puts it.

So, let's look at the other paradoxical statement, that of losing one's life so that it can be saved. The specific wording is, **"whoever loses his life for my sake will find it"** (v 25b). What does it mean **"to lose his life"**?

In the context of this passage, it would mean that there would be not only no attempt to try to do something, anything, to save oneself, but, even more, it would be an abandonment of believing in one's own capabilities to save oneself. It would mean acknowledging one's absolute inability even to contribute toward one's salvation. Indeed, it can be said that until this happens, one's own ego, one's own self-aggrandizement, will always keep one in the lost category.

But we must be very clear here. To abandon one's own capabilities is an impossible task. Without outside intervention, without the Holy Spirit doing his specific work, we cannot deny ourselves. Thankfully, God does not, will not, leave us to our own devices.

He brings his Word to us in the Sacraments, in the liturgy, in the Absolution, in the sermon, in our parents' instruction, all so that our cold, hard, dead hearts can be and are changed, changed from dead rocks to living building stones of the Church.

It is truly a most wonderful gift that the Spirit comes to us, revealing to us our sinful nature so that we can come to realize that the solution is already there and that, by the faith given us, we know and believe that it is true for us, each of us.

We do need to note, though, that just abandoning oneself and denying one's own capabilities for salvation is not enough. It must be for a most specific cause and reason. That reason is Christ.

"Whoever loses his life for my sake," Jesus says, "will find it."

Of course, people take up after all kinds of causes, some of which put them in serious danger. But for salvation, it can only be for the sake of Christ.

This is so because it is only Christ who lived the perfect life and died the sinless death. It is only Christ who stood in our place as the worst of sinners, even though he was holy. It is only Christ who made the complete and full payment for all our sins when he died on the cross so that all sin is removed.

It is only Christ who sent the Spirit to create faith in all this in our hearts—faith that what Christ did for us is real and brings eternal blessing. Yes, Jesus did all that. Yes, Jesus died and rose and gave you eternal life, just as the Spirit has brought you to believe.

Yes, it all hinges on Christ. By the working of the Holy Spirit, we grasp this paradox of salvation: losing our life, we, no, Christ saves it. Having come to know all this by faith, we rejoice and rejoice greatly that salvation is indeed for the sake of Christ.

Since we are incapable of doing anything for ourselves, this is an out-of-this-world gifting. It is a gifting that will last forever. The gift of faith in Christ is indeed an eternal gift. All thanks and praise be to God!

Amen