

Matthew 16:21-28

When I was a kid I always wondered who Simon was. “Simon says jump on one foot,” the schoolteacher called out, and we all jumped on one foot. “Simon says touch your nose,” and we did that too. As long as we did what this Simon fellow said to do, we were alright. But the second we did something without Simon’s permission, we were done; game over. It wasn’t good enough for the teacher to tell us we could stop jumping; Simon had to say it. I always wondered how Simon got to be the boss.

We may wonder the same thing about God. Every day of our life we hear our conscience whispering: “God says not to do that. God doesn’t want you going there. God wants you to do this, and then do that.” And just like every kid in class would eventually fail to do what Simon says, so you and I every day fail to do what God says. He doesn’t have us jump on one foot or touch our nose. His commands are much more serious. He commands our thoughts, words, and actions. God says to love Him with all our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength. God says to love our neighbor as ourself. This is no game. In our text Jesus points out that failing to do what God says; failing to follow Him will result in losing one’s life, in forfeiting one’s soul.

There was a man like us, a disciple, who did not want God calling the shots. He thought he knew better than Jesus how to run his life, and even how to run Jesus’ life. This man wanted to be Simon. He wanted to be the one who said, “Simon says.” And fittingly enough, this man’s name was Simon...Simon Peter. Jesus, however, called him by a different name. “Get behind Me, Satan!” He told him. It all began when Jesus showed His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die, and rise again. Now Peter had good intentions. “God have mercy on you, Lord. This shall never happen to you!” Simon says enough of this foolish talk! You’re not going to suffer and die. God forbid it!

Peter was not sinning intentionally here. He was intending on keeping Jesus out of harm’s way, and himself too, for that matter. If Jesus was taken by force, what would happen to His followers? Maybe they, too, would suffer and die with Jesus. But whatever good he intended, Peter here was doing exactly what Satan wanted him to do. He was not God’s mouthpiece, but the devil’s. Satan was using him to oppose Jesus; to hinder Him from what He was sent to do.

I think you and I would shudder in horror if we actually realized how often we are just like Peter; how often Satan uses us to oppose God’s will, even when we, like Peter, think our intentions are good. We want the best for ourselves and for our families. We avoid pain and suffering. We follow our dreams and aspirations. We try not to deny ourselves those things that we really want in life. But our way in life may not be the way Jesus would have us go. “If anyone would follow Me,” He says, “let him deny himself and take up his cross.” We need to lose our life, He says, to save it. We must set our mind on the things of God, not on the things of man. Suffering, denying ourself, not grasping the good life, but grasping the things of God--this is what it means to follow Jesus. And like Peter we echo the words: Simon says God forbid it! That is not how I want to live.

Perhaps an analogy here would be helpful. When a young married couple has a child, pretty much everything in their life is turned around. They no longer sleep through the night. Now they suffer many sleepless nights because of their little baby. They no longer spend their money on just what they want. Now they purchase baby food, and clothes, and diapers. They no longer do what they want to do when they want to do it. Evenings out, vacations, even trips to the mall must be structured around their baby. New parents must sacrifice. They often deny themselves. They do a lot of

suffering. Their mind is no longer set just on their own interests; no longer just on the things they want to do.

This is how it is with us who follow Jesus. We are called upon to sacrifice in ways in which non-Christians are not. Our time, our money, our whole life is given in service to our Lord. We may be called upon to suffer as His followers. We may be persecuted for the Faith. We do not live for ourselves as many people of the world do; we live for Christ. And so we deny ourselves those things we may want when they would lead us away from the Lord.

And even though new parents love their baby and cannot imagine life without him or her, they do complain now and then about how tough it is, how difficult, how big a sacrifice on their part. And so do we. I know you love Jesus. That's why you are here. That's why you sing His praises and give your offerings. That's why you strive to follow Him. Yet it is difficult. And oftentimes our sinful flesh takes over. 'Simon says enough of this! I'm tired of always doing what God wants. For once I'd like to do what pleases me!' Just as new parents grow weary of structuring their entire life around their baby, so we grow weary of following Jesus. We value our faith, but we grow weary of having to feed it Sunday after Sunday. We'd like to do what Simon says now and then, not always what God says.

Have the courage, my fellow sinners, to call this what it is...sin. As Jesus says, this is not of God, but of Satan. He hates it that we follow Jesus. He hates it that we worship here together and feed on God's living Word and Sacraments. Oh how we need to encourage each other to turn away from the devil and, as we sang before, taking up our crosses, follow, and keep following, Christ our Lord.

Is it too much for Him to ask, that we follow Him? Friends, then consider this...Jesus with joy took up His cross for you. He bids us to follow Him through grief and sorrow, through pain and suffering, but one place we cannot follow is to Calvary. Our crosses we bear with His help, but His cross we cannot carry. We join Him in His death in our baptism, but on Calvary He died alone.

I was young when my father was diagnosed with cancer. And one Sunday evening in February my mother sat at his bedside in the hospital. For over a year she had cared for him. She was by his side often. She was holding his hand as he lay in his hospital bed, but this time it was different. On that evening he took her hand and he laid it aside. She had faithfully walked with him through it all, but now he must go alone. He removed her hand from his and he turned away, and then in peace he died in Jesus' arms.

My friends, this is what Jesus did for you. At Calvary He let go of your hand so that His hands would be nailed to a cross. At Calvary He entered into hell alone because He was suffering the punishment of your sins. This is why Satan wanted Peter to hinder Jesus, for Jesus would bear the sins of all hanging on His cross. My friends and fellow sinners, Satan failed. Jesus did not do what Simon said. He obeyed His Father's will. He died for you and now you are forgiven. All of your sins, intentional or not, are forgiven. Your weariness in following Jesus is forgiven. Your giving in to the devil is forgiven. Jesus paid for it all at that place where you and I could not follow. But because He did this for you, you now follow Him into the resurrected life.

One day my mother will follow my father, but not just into death; she will follow him into heaven. And this is where Jesus leads you, friend. Whatever suffering you endure now; whatever cross you bear for the sake of Christ; however weary it is to follow your Lord, never give up! Never turn away! It's worth it! He is leading you in the path of eternal life. Amen.

