

Jesus' Unexpected Road to Happiness
(Matthew 16:21-17:8)

Do you believe that you can look at a child and accurately predict the adult they will become? In the 1960s, a Stanford professor named Walter Mischel tested hundreds of children between the ages of 4 and 5 and discovered what is now believed to be one of the most important abilities for success in health, work, and life. Each child sat at a table with a marshmallow on it. The researcher told the child that he was going to leave the room and that if when he returned, the child had not eaten the marshmallow he would get a second marshmallow; but if the child decided to eat his marshmallow now, there would be no more marshmallows that day. The deal was one marshmallow now or two later. The child was left alone with his marshmallow for 15 minutes and of course all this was filmed. Some kids ate their marshmallow before the researcher even left the room. Others wiggled and bounced and scooted in their chairs as they tried to restrain themselves, but they eventually gave in. A few children managed to wait the entire time. The results of the Marshmallow Experiment were published in 1972 but the really interesting part of the study didn't appear until many years later. The researchers conducted follow up studies and discovered that the few children who were able to wait for the second marshmallow had higher SAT scores, lower levels of substance abuse and obesity, better responses to stress and better social skills than their one marshmallow comrades. The ability to delay gratification turned out to be critical for success in life. If you wait until you finish your homework to watch television, you get better grades. If you don't skip a workout, you get fit faster. If you restrain your temper, people like being around you more. Success in every area of life is the result of choosing the pain of discipline over the ease of doing what we feel like doing at the moment; of choosing our long term happiness over short term gratification; and of choosing what is right instead of what is easy. Jesus faced these same decisions and as the perfect Man and our Champion and Savior, made all the choices we fail to make in order to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Delayed gratification was the road Jesus traveled His entire life and this morning as we look at Matthew 16:21-17:8 I want to look at how that road is the unexpected road to happiness. We'll look at Jesus' road, His followers' road and finally the proof that this is the only road to happiness. Let's begin with ...

(Jesus' Road to Happiness)

"From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day." (Matt. 16:21) Last week Jeff explained how Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah in the verses right before vs. 21 begins a new chapter in Jesus' relationship with the disciples. Now that they know who He is, He reveals His real mission in coming to earth; not to reign but to suffer and die for our sins and then be raised; which absolutely shocked His disciples. They thought that when the Messiah came He would immediately begin His reign over Israel and make everything that was wrong with the world right. I don't think the disciples really understood Jesus' true mission until after He rose from the dead, even though from this point on Jesus constantly reminds them of His approaching death and resurrection. The word that impressed me in vs. 21 is the word "must." Jesus says He *must* go to Jerusalem, suffer

many things, be killed and be raised. All that Jesus suffered was necessary for our good and for His good. Jesus' road to glory had to go through the shame of the cross. Jesus' road to eternal joy had to go through the sorrow of rejection and hatred. Jesus' road to success had to go through the apparent failure of His offer of salvation to Israel. Jesus had to refuse what He wanted now in order to get what He wanted later; which is why His road was so counter-intuitive and unexpected; and why His disciples had such a difficult time accepting that road – which becomes evident in His following conversation with Peter. *"Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid {it,} Lord! This shall never happen to You." But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's."* (Matt. 16:22-23) Do you ever correct Jesus? Do you ever tell Him, "If that's Your plan, You really got it wrong this time."? We all do. Any time we worry or get scared or get angry when things don't go the way we think they should and instead of trusting Christ, we fight with Him, we do exactly what Peter did. God's path for Jesus is so different from anything Peter expects that Peter feels compelled to correct Jesus. Jesus' response is immediate and strong. "Get behind me, Satan, for you are not setting your mind on God's interests but man's." Jesus recognizes Peter's concern for Him as one more temptation by Satan to avoid the cross, coming this time in the disguise of a close friend's concern. Back in vs. 17, Jesus said the reason Peter is able to recognize Jesus as the Messiah is because Peter has been listening to God. But now Jesus tells Peter that he's been listening to the devil because he is not concerned about God's interests in saving all of humanity from sin and death through the death and resurrection of His Son; Peter is concerned about his own ambitions to see Jesus immediately reigning as king over Israel with him as a member of Jesus' cabinet. By the way, Jesus' rebuke gives us a clue for knowing whether we're listening to God or we're listening to the devil. It is all a matter of whose interests we are seeking, our interests or God's interests. Peter's thinking about Israel's interests and probably his own place in the coming kingdom which is why the rejection and execution of the Messiah seems unacceptable to him. But as Jesus makes clear in the following verses, seeking God's interests is always in our own best interests; which brings us to the unexpected road to happiness for those who follow Jesus.

Jesus' Follower's Road to Happiness

"Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it." (Matt. 16:24-25) Where is Jesus going? He's on His way to the cross. So where are those who follow Jesus going? They are also on the road to the cross. *"If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself,"* which just means saying NO to yourself; saying NO to what I want now, to what I think I need now, to the way I think things should be now in order to follow Jesus now. Jesus is going somewhere they don't want to go; to rejection, arrest, torture, and death. Where Jesus is going goes against their natural desires for self-preservation and the pursuit of happiness. Jesus is not traveling the road to happiness most people travel. His road is counter-intuitive. That's why Jesus says, "Men, now that you know where I'm going, you need to understand that to keep following Me, you'll have to do what I have to do; say no to your all your natural desires and instincts. And this is the test of whether you are following Me or simply using me to get what you want." Self-denial is the ultimate test of discipleship because self-denial shows whether Jesus is the Lord of my life or I am. Self-denial is saying NO to anything I want that gets in the way of following Christ; just like you must before you can accomplish anything significant - whether it's in athletics or music or art or writing or business or parenting - you have to learn how to say NO to yourself. You can pretty much divide people into two groups; one marshmallow people and two marshmallow people; people who can say no to self and people who cannot; people who live for today and people who live for the future; feelers and doers. Feelers run their day by how they feel. Doers do what needs to be done to reach their goal. Feelers do what they feel like doing now and so they start more things than they finish. They make more commitments than they keep. They ask questions like, "Do I feel like making that phone call now?" "Do I feel like writing that thank you note?" "Do I feel like praying and reading my Bible?" "Do I feel like attending that meeting I said I'd attend?" Doers, on the other hand, know in advance how they will be spending their day because they make those decisions in advance. They decide what they want to achieve and then do what needs to be done to achieve it. They have learned to say NO to their immediate feelings, to immediate gratification and to anything else that would distract them from their purpose. A feeler is almost always comfortable but is seldom satisfied. A doer experiences many satisfactions throughout the day, even though some of them are preceded by discomfort. And what Jesus is saying is this: if you want to be My disciple, you will have to learn to be a doer rather than a feeler; you'll need to deny yourself now in order to receive later.

And there's also this part about taking up your cross. This is the first time in Matthew that Jesus mentions the cross, and He's not talking about His cross but His disciples' cross. These men were familiar with the sight of condemned criminals, carrying a cross to their own execution. A man with a cross had no future plans. His life no longer belonged to him. And Jesus says, "If you want to be My disciple, you have to become like that man. Your life is no longer your own. You have no future plans except My plan for your life." The disciples knew that the cross was the most shameful kind of death, reserved only for the worst criminals. The cross was designed to humiliate. The condemned hung naked - sometimes for days at a public crossroads, slowly dying while people mocked him. The cross was the symbol of society's rejection and disdain for the crucified. And Jesus says, "If you're going to follow Me, you'll have to embrace that shame and rejection for My sake each day. And the cross is voluntary. Jesus chose to lay down His life for us; no one took it from Him. The cross is something we choose - out of obedience to Christ - to take up daily. Sometimes we think our cross is anything bad that happens - getting sick, or losing our job, or the neighbor who plays loud music late at night - that's just my cross to bear, I guess. But Jesus says the cross is something we choose to take up; suffering you choose in order to be obedient to Christ. It might be choosing to have that difficult but necessary conversation or to stand up for what is right even or keeping your mouth shut and not returning evil for evil, or going to the hospital in the middle of the night to be there for someone. Taking up your cross daily is choosing to bear whatever suffering is necessary to be obedient to the will of God - just like Jesus did.

What would denying yourself and taking up your cross mean to Jesus' disciples? They lived in a culture ruled by family, religion and possessions. Your chief obligations were to your parents, to the temple and synagogue and to gaining enough possessions to be comfortable and honored in the culture. For the first Christians however, following Jesus usually meant being ostracized by their family, rejected by their community and impoverished because of that rejection. To follow Jesus, they sacrificed the things their culture believed were essential for happiness because following Jesus was more important to them than anything else. What does self-denial and taking up our cross mean for us? Probably a lot more than we realize; we live in the most individualistic culture in history. Most people in Western culture now believe our highest duty is to ourselves. We're the hero of our story and we view life through the lens our own dreams, ambitions and goals. Our happiness trumps the needs of the group, whether family, church, company or society. I have to be me and do what's right for me. So, in an individualistic culture, freedom to be and do what I want to do without any interference from family, church or state is the highest value and the rights of the individual trump the rights of the larger community. So who competes with Jesus to be Lord of my life? Me and my individualism even shapes the way I see Jesus. I'm used to being the highest authority in my life and so I see Jesus as my servant and helper rather than as my master; and as the source of what I want rather than as a person to know and to follow - which is the very opposite of biblical discipleship. In fact, individualism leads inevitably to seeing all people and things strictly in utilitarian ways of how they help me to get what I need. Individualism makes us consumers. As long as this relationship or this group is working for me, I will stay with it; but once it becomes inconvenient or stops giving me what I want, I'm gone; which is why an individualistic society inevitably becomes increasingly isolated and disconnected and why we drift away from people we were once close to. It used to be convenient to spend time with them because of similar interests or schedule or age of our kids; but once it's no longer convenient, we move on, because our interests are no longer served by those relationships. And should a relationship become strained or painful or too much work, we move on rather than working out our differences because my immediate comfort is more important than preserving the friendship. So what does following Jesus' road to happiness mean for us today? It means that when Jesus and I disagree, Jesus wins. The test of whether I'm really a disciple of Jesus or just a cultural Christian is when do I say no to what I want in order to give Jesus what He wants? When does following Jesus actually inconvenience me or make me uncomfortable? If I can't answer those questions, I'm probably not following Jesus. David said, "I will not offer to God that which costs me nothing." If following Jesus doesn't cost me something because I don't have to deny myself or take up my cross, I'm not following Jesus.

What you need to deny yourself to follow Jesus may be different from what I need to deny myself but to get us started thinking about whether Jesus or you is the functional Lord of your life, here are three areas individualism most commonly impacts Christians following Jesus in America. Church attendance: in America, church attendance has been on the decline for years, even in growing churches. People attend church less often today than in the

past, and you know why; churches no longer have a monopoly on Sunday morning. Youth sports, family events, chores, even work all compete for our time on Sundays. We are so busy during the week that Sunday is often the only opportunity to get time with the family or catch up on sleep or get the things done we can't get done during the rest of the week. Attending church isn't nearly as convenient as it used to be and there has been a steady decline in attendance over the past decade in all denominations. Yet the Scriptures still say, "Do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together as is the habit of some, but encourage one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near." (Hebrews 10:25). In an individualistic culture, church attendance becomes one practical test of who is Lord of my time; me or Jesus. The issue isn't what do I get out of attending or whether it's convenient to attend or what else I have to do – the issue is, where does Jesus want me to be on Sundays? Based upon the Bible, I believe He wants us to be together, worshiping God, hearing His voice in His word and encouraging each other's faith as Christ's disciples have been doing for thousands of years. Today church attendance demonstrates who is really Lord of my life because regular attendance is costly. There may be family gatherings you'll be late for or miss entirely. There may be games your kids will miss. When Jeff played soccer, our team competed occasionally in weekend tournaments; but even though Jeff was a starter and I was a coach, we made it clear to the team, we'll be there for the games on Saturday but we can't make it on Sunday. We need to be at church. Watching a sermon on the web is not the same as physically joining with Christ's body to worship Him together and regular church attendance on Sundays and of your community group is one way we deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus. So is my daily devotional time. Do I sleep in or do I get up earlier to spend regular time in prayer and the study of the Scriptures to meet with Jesus and grow in my knowledge of Him? This is another area where individualism has affected American Christians. A recent survey found that only 26% of Americans read the Bible four or more times per week; and that Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons are more consistent in reading the Bible than Evangelical Christians. Yet Jesus said, "He who continues in My word is truly My disciple and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." If I'm not meeting daily with Christ in His word and prayer, I am not on the same road He's on. Ditto with sharing my faith and being generous and doing good to my neighbor. If I'm too busy to love my neighbor as myself or too intimidated to talk to my neighbor about my faith I'm not following Jesus. And that's true for all of Jesus' commands. Following Jesus always requires us to deny ourselves and to take up our cross daily which is why Jesus said, "He who loves Me keeps My commandments." We grow as Christians the same way we become Christians; repentance and faith, by realizing we've been on the wrong road, trusting Jesus to forgive us and to lead us in a new direction. And we'll always be repenting of something as long as we're in these bodies. So ask yourself, where do I need to repent of doing my own will rather than following Jesus and how will I trust Jesus to change me? Where do I need to say no to myself in order to say yes to Jesus?

Back to Matthew 16; Jesus says, "Here's the road I walk and the road you'll walk if you follow Me," which sounds like Jesus is trying to talk us out of becoming His followers. "Come follow Me - and suffer rejection, embarrassment, shame, and death" – except Jesus doesn't stop there. He goes on to show His disciples why this road is the true road to happiness and why it is to our great benefit to deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and to follow Him. *"For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and WILL THEN REPAY EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS."* (Matt. 16:25-27) Why does Jesus say that he who saves his life will lose it and he who loses his life for Christ's sake will find it? This life is not all there is. There is a final at the end of this life when the second marshmallows are distributed. Living for myself in this world at best will result in the temporary gain of temporary things but also results in the loss of my eternal soul. The road that Jesus walks is the ultimate in delayed gratification. Jesus says that He will return in the glory of His Father with His angels and will then recompense every person according to his deeds. The time is coming when every sin will be punished, every wrong will be righted and every scale will be balanced. Justice and fairness in this world won't happen until Christ returns but it will certainly happen and those who live for themselves in the present age will reap eternal misery. The time to follow Jesus is now while we can – even though it means self-denial and a cross to bear. We're in the same position as Noah found himself. God warned Noah about the flood 100 years before it happened and Noah had a choice. He could believe God and prepare, and be out of step with everyone else in his culture or he could ignore God. Noah believed God and it changed his life. Everyone else was living for today. Noah was preparing for the flood. Everyone else was satisfying their immediate desires; Noah was building an ark. We're in the same

position. Jesus has warned us about what is to come; about what lasts and what doesn't, about what satisfies and what doesn't. I can live for temporal pleasure and comfort and what I think will make me happy, or I can follow Jesus, looking forward to the time when I stand before Him and hear, "Good job My faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master."

Jesus emphasizes the eternal benefits of following Him and choosing the road He took but every disciple knows there are tremendous benefits now as well. Ever since Adam and Eve believed they could do a better job of running their life than their Creator could, we have been our own greatest fan and our own worst enemy. By focusing on ourselves and on our plan for our life, we destroy ourselves because we were created for God and not for ourselves and we cannot find true happiness by living for ourselves. That's why Jesus says you only find your life by losing it for His sake. You only find personal fulfillment when you stop looking for it. You only find your true self by denying yourself. You can only win by losing. The happiest people in the world are not the people who get everything they want, or the people who have the financial means to satisfy every whim and desire; or most comfortable people. The happiest people in the world are those who serve something greater than themselves. The road of self-denial is designed to free us from our slavery to ourselves and find our joy in God as He created us to find it. That is why as unlikely as it seems, self-denial is the true road to happiness.

The Proof of that Jesus' Road to Happiness is the Only Road

We're a lot like those 4 and 5 year olds in the Marshmallow experiment. Do I believe that there will be another marshmallow if I wait or will I grab what I can now? To encourage His disciples to join Him on the road of self-denial and cross-bearing, Jesus gives them proof that this is the only road which will get them where they want to go just as it will get Jesus where He wants to go. *"Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."* Six days later Jesus **took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and *led them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light."* (Matt. 16:28-17:2) Jesus gives three of His disciples a preview of the glory He will have after He suffers and dies and rises again and then returns to earth to establish His kingdom in the glory of His Father – a preview of what they have to look forward to if they follow Him. He takes Peter, James and John up on a mountain and for a moment, pulls back the veil of His humanity to reveal the glory of God and who He will be when He returns. *"And behold, Moses and Elijah – the two prophets who saw God's glory on Mt. Sinai - appeared to them, talking with Him."* Peter said to Jesus, *"Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah."* While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, *"This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!"* When the disciples heard {this,} they fell face down to the ground and were terrified. And Jesus came to {them} and touched them and said, *"Get up, and do not be afraid."* And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus Himself alone." (Matt. 17:3-8) There's so much here. I identify with Peter and all the great ideas I have to help God out which God doesn't think are that great. "I don't need your suggestions, Peter. I just need you to listen to Jesus." Jesus' superiority over Moses representing the Law and Elijah representing the Prophets because Jesus is the full revelation of God and the hero of the entire Bible. But the main thing I want you to see is that as Peter, James and John face a life time of self-denial and cross-bearing, Jesus gives them (and us) a vision of what comes at the end of the road to sustain their faith - and faith is what matters here. We aren't Christians because we deny ourselves; we deny ourselves because we're Christians; because we trust that Jesus loves us and that following Him regardless of the cost is always in our best interests. How do I know that by losing my life, I'll find it? That's what happened to Jesus. Jesus denies Himself to live the life we failed to live so that His perfect record of righteousness may be credited to all those who put their faith in Him as a gift. He dies the death we deserved to die on the cross that we should have died on, paying the penalty for our sins so that God can pardon us once and for all. And He rises from the dead as proof that God accepts His death in our behalf and so that He lives forever to come into the life of everyone who invites Him and trusts Him to save them. The Bible says that if I truly believe all that, then I will deny myself and take up my cross daily and follow Jesus because following Jesus is the only true road to happiness and to life.

