

All of us have experienced turning points in our lives. Turning points come in different shapes and sizes, but we usually know when we're in one.

It's Memorial Day weekend, so I think of my dad, who enlisted in the army at age 18 and fought on the front lines in WW II. That was a turning point in his life. It was painful—he saw things and did things, which haunted him the rest of his life. But it was also life-giving. He went to war with no direction in his life, but he came home, got married and a few years later graduated from Dental School. The war was a turning point for him. One thing is for sure; turning points can be painful; however, they're also necessary and even good.

We're about halfway through Matthew's biography of Jesus. And this is a story with a clear turning point in chapter 16. The first half of this story took place mainly in Galilee; the second half focuses on the road to Jerusalem and his final week there. The first half of Matthew's Gospel is fast-paced—almost three years are covered in just sixteen chapters. But in the second half, the narrative slows down. Eight of the last twelve chapters deal with that one last week in the life of our Lord.

To understand this Gospel we have to take a closer look at this turning point in Jesus' story. We'll see it wasn't just a turning point for him but also for his disciples; one that required a shift in their thinking about what it meant to follow Jesus. It was a painful turning point, but necessary and life-giving.

As 21st century Christians, we too must come to this turning point of what it means to follow Jesus. It's a painful but necessary reality for all of us. The disciples turning point is described in 16:13–28.

### **Peter's Great Confession**

Let's start by reading verses 13–16.

**When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"**

**They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."**

**"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"**

**Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:13–16)**

Jesus and his disciples travel 25 miles north from Galilee to Caesarea Philippi, at the foot of Mt. Hermon. In Jesus' day, this city was a bastion of Roman politics and power. It was as pagan a place as could be. One of the sources of the Jordan River flowed out of a cave near this city, and there was an ancient shrine in this cave to a god named "Pan."

It's in this idolatrous setting Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of man is?" The disciples were quick to answer. Like good PR men, they had heard the buzz of the crowd. Public opinion was good lately: "Some say John the Baptist." There was a side to Jesus that was

every bit as hardcore as John was. "Others say Elijah." It was hard to deny the similarities between these two wonder workers. "And still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Jeremiah was known as the weeping prophet—somehow that seemed to fit Jesus.

I think the disciples enjoyed this. They liked to sit around and banter about the latest fads in religion. But Jesus has had enough armchair theology, and so he asked a more pointed and personal question: "But what about you. Who do you say I am?" In the Greek text the word "you" starts the sentence. He said, "**You**, who do **You** say that I am?" What if Jesus asked you the same question, "**You**, who do you say that I am?" It's not enough to parrot what others are saying; we have to make up our own mind. It's not enough to enjoy armchair discussions with fellow learners; we must enter into our own dialogue with him.

I can imagine the disciples began to squirm. It was time for them to say what **they** thought. Peter (who else), speaking for the Twelve, answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." He didn't say, "**He** is the Christ." Rather, "**You** are the Christ." It's direct address. This is always the first step in the journey of discipleship. Some of you still haven't made that discovery. You've been sitting in church for weeks, maybe months, but you're still not there. At some point, each of us must declare where we stand, and what he wants is for you to come to the place where you address him, "**You** are the Christ!"

### **On This Rock**

But that's not all—look what Jesus says in response to Peter.

**Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. (verses 17–20)**

One thing is clear—Peter got it right! "Blessed are you, Peter." Having said that, the words, which follow are some of the most debated in all of Scripture. I could spend hours trying to explain how they've been interpreted. But I'm going to keep it simple. These verses answer three questions.

- First, how does one arrive at this discovery about Jesus? Jesus clearly says it's the work of God. Peter doesn't come up with the right answer because he's so smart, godly, open-minded, or well taught by his parents. He comes to it because God revealed it to him. We all have a propensity to take credit where credit is due, but sometimes we take credit where it isn't due. Jesus is clear the only credit for this discovery goes to his Father in heaven. If you

believe this truth today, give thanks to Him who opened your eyes to see it.

- The second question is more complicated: what does Jesus mean by “on this rock I will build my church?” Peter’s name means “rock,” but when Jesus said, “on **this rock** I will build my church,” he was referring not just to Peter but to Peter’s confession about Jesus. He didn’t say, “on **you** I will build my church” but rather “on **this rock**,”—the rock of his confession about Jesus, that he’s the Christ. In a way, the true “rock” is Jesus himself, and it’s on that rock Jesus will build a new community called The Church that nothing, not even death can overcome.
- Third question: why does this matter? It matters because this defines our mission as his gathered people. That’s what the “keys” are all about. Jesus said, “I’ll give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” Who gets the keys of this kingdom Jesus came to establish? Not just Peter but all who come after him who proclaim this truth about Jesus as Messiah and Lord. Keys imply authority. The religious leaders had keys but they used them to lock the door and keep people out. These keys don’t just shut the door but they also open the door to the kingdom of God. We proclaim the gospel, and when a person believes, the keys open wide the gates to eternal life, but when a person rejects the gospel, the door remains shut. The keys that close and open, lock and unlock, are held by followers of Jesus making entrance to God’s kingdom available to people through our witness. That is our mission as his new community.

It’s amazing they all didn’t start cracking up. This had to sound preposterous. They were just a tiny band of ordinary people, the target of mounting opposition by the people who really mattered. But Jesus said, “To **you** I’m giving the keys!” This is like handing a six-year-old the keys to a brand new Mercedes and telling him, “Take it for a spin on the freeway, son; you’re in charge.”

But before Peter and the others were ready to take on this challenge, they had more to learn about this Messiah. The real turning point was still yet to come. That’s why Jesus muzzled them in verse 20. The answer was right, but their definition of what it meant to be Messiah was wrong. In verses 21–28 Jesus began to redefine Messiah.

### **The Christ Must Suffer**

Look at what he said.

**From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.**

**Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”**

**Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” (verses 21–23)**

Jesus made a shocking prediction—he’ll suffer, be rejected by Jewish leaders, and be killed. As almost an afterthought he adds after three days

he’ll be raised. This is the first of three predictions Jesus made about his death and resurrection. The cross didn’t take him by surprise. He wasn’t the helpless victim of cruel men. He was fulfilling what he knew to be his chosen destiny. This is why Jesus said he **“must”** suffer. Don’t miss that. The Son of Man **must** go to Jerusalem and suffer because the Father planned it, Scripture foretold it, and the world needed it.

But Peter couldn’t handle those words. Peter performed an “intervention” on Jesus. He pulled Jesus aside and rebuked him: “Never, Lord! This can’t happen to you.” Peter had no category for the Messiah suffering. The Messiah he’d heard about was a powerful figure who would trample Israel’s enemies. Up until now, everything was going according to plan, but there was no time for a detour like this, so Peter rebuked him. It’s like he said, “Get it together and act like a real Messiah!”

Then, Jesus, consumed with God’s “must,” turns around and rebuked Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You’re a stumbling block to me...” Peter the rock had now become Peter, the chump! He was the mouthpiece of the enemy, repeating the temptation Jesus resisted in the wilderness to grab the crown without the cross, to become Savior before becoming Servant. Jesus said no to him again: the Son of Man **must** suffer.

Patrick Morely in his book, *The Seasons of a Man’s Life*, wrote, “The turning point in our lives is when we stop seeking the God we want and start seeking the God who is.” What kind of Jesus do you want? Do you want a Jesus who answers every prayer just the way you think he should? Do you want a Jesus who takes away all your problems? Do you want a Jesus who’s more Savior than Servant? Sooner or later, we must stop seeking the Jesus we want and start seeking the Jesus who is.

Think about it this way. If Jesus were a professional athlete, what kind of competitor would you want him to be? If Jesus were an executive, how would you expect him to run his company? If Jesus were an actor, what kind of roles would you cast him in? In American culture, we look for heroes. We look for LeBron James, Bill Gates, or Denzel Washington. Why wouldn’t we want a Messiah like that as well? A Messiah who wins and not loses, who succeeds rather than fails.

But there was something more going on in Peter’s heart. Peter resisted what Jesus was saying because he implicitly knew if Jesus **must** suffer, that would have implications for his own life. Perhaps it was dawning on him the path Jesus took might determine his own path. Peter’s real turning point came in what Jesus said next.

### **Following Jesus in Costly Discipleship**

Look at verse 24.

**Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. (verse 24)**

The real turning point in Peter’s life and our lives is when we recognize and accept being associated with Jesus means following him on the costly road of discipleship. This isn’t an unnecessary detour in the life of faith. This is **The Way**. This is the normal Christian life. This is God’s “must,” not only for Jesus, and Peter, but for us. But what does this call mean?

Jesus says it means to “deny yourself.” Don’t misunderstand this. Denying yourself doesn’t mean denying yourself of things. I remember as a kid denying myself bubble gum at Lent and feeling very spiritual about it. But you can deny yourself things and still be totally self-consumed.

Denying yourself may result in denying yourself of things, but that's not the point.

Nor does it mean denying your self-worth. He's not calling us to devalue ourselves. As we'll see in a moment, he assumes we **do** value ourselves.

And he doesn't mean deny your feelings. Jesus isn't a stern football coach yelling at his team, "I don't care how you feel. Suck it up and run another lap."

Denying yourself doesn't mean you deny yourself happiness. In some circles, godliness is measured by how miserable you feel, but that's not denying yourself.

Denying yourself doesn't mean denying your basic human needs like your need for rest or food. We know that because Jesus took time for both rest and food.

So what **does** it mean? To deny yourself means to deny your own right to be master of yourself. It's to say, "no" to your self-lordship; to the god who is me. You see the one thing we value and protect is our right to run our lives. But Jesus calls us to give up that right. This will look different for each of us.

- For the ambitious, it'll mean renouncing a life geared towards attaining success as the world defines it.
- For the greedy, it means refusing to live for things.
- For the angry, it'll mean giving up your desire to get even.
- For the insecure, it'll mean giving up your obsession with human approval
- For the adventurous, it'll mean giving up your freedom to pick up and go whenever you please.
- For the witty, it'll mean refusing to use your wit to tear others down.
- For the brilliant, it'll mean humbling yourself and learning from those with half the brainpower as you.

To live this way we'll have to swim upstream in a culture obsessed with self. A culture, which encourages us to claim our rights, pamper ourselves, and get what we want, will have to be resisted.

But there's something else here. Jesus also said discipleship means "taking up your cross." Again, this is misunderstood. We struggle with some illness, a difficult marriage, or an irritating roommate, and we say, "This is the cross I have to bear." But that's not what Jesus meant. To take up one's cross evoked images of a criminal forced to carry a crossbeam on which he'd soon be executed. If you saw a man carrying a crossbeam, you knew he was as good as dead.

How do we live this way? Certainly, Jesus calls us to be willing to die for him, and many have, but there's more. Could it be discipleship means abandoning our right to control our future; to fulfill our own earthly ambitions; to be dead to this world; to bury our own agenda and allow him to replace it with his own?

That's so foreign to how I live. I still get my feelings hurt if I don't get the recognition I deserve. Someone condemned to die could care less. I still want to plan my future. God loves me, and I have a wonderful plan for my life! I've got a church to build. I've got grandkids to visit. I've got the best years of my life ahead of me: retirement, travel, long mornings reading the paper and drinking good coffee. Jesus says, "From now on,

you're taking a walk. On your back is the cross on which you'll die. You must live with that mindset. You must live with reckless abandon for me. Make my Kingdom and **me** your foremost concern in all you do. Stand the good news I came to give and for me. I want your life to be defined not by your success by your service to me."

Some of you may say, "Well, that's fine for pastors and missionaries, but that's not how the average Christian lives." Jesus doesn't give us that option. This is for all of us. This isn't just for hero disciples. Notice the word "**Whoever.**" Jesus said, "**Whoever wants to be my disciple...**" Jesus invites each of us to choose this costly path. Later, Jesus will tell a wealthy young man he must sell his possessions. The young man walked away sad. Jesus felt love for this man, but he didn't run after him. He didn't head him off at the pass and lower the requirements: "Oh please be my disciple; it's not that hard." He gave him, and he gives us, the dangerous freedom to chose to head down this path or not.

### **Thru Death Comes Life**

But there **is** good news in this—really good news. Jesus offered a motive for living like this.

**For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.**

**"Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." (verses 25–28)**

Do you know why we should live this way? It's a well-kept secret—those who lose, really win. Those who die, really live. Those who give up, get so much more. Jesus promises you won't be sorry for making this decision. You may give up the world, but you'll gain your soul. And what's more valuable than your soul? You may be rejected by men, but you'll be rewarded by the Son of Man when he returns in glory with all his angels.

Jesus assumes we value our own soul. That's why he tells us how to save them. He even says our soul is more valuable than the whole world. He borrows language from the marketplace: "What would you sell your soul for?" Jesus wants to save our lives to find true life, but the mystery is we can't find it by holding on to it. We have to let it go. We have to surrender to him to find freedom. And the disciples will see a great example of that when Jesus is raised from the dead. That's what Jesus meant when he said, "**some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.**" He was not talking about his Second Coming, but his resurrection where he was vindicated after suffering on the cross.

There's a profound mystery in this. It's like the mirror image world Lewis Carroll created in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. It was an inside-out world. To get somewhere in that world, you can't walk towards it, or you'll end up further away. Instead, you must go in the opposite direction. It takes a lot of effort to imagine all the ordinary affairs of life working as in a mirror. If you've ever tried to cut your own hair while looking in a mirror, you know how hard it is.

Jesus is asking us to learn to think and live in an inside-out way. We can't find life by grasping it for ourselves. The tighter we hold on to our life the more it slips through our hands. This is why most people today are so unhappy. They're clinging to their own lives and coming up empty.

Have you seen the *Seinfeld* episode where George Costanza—who's probably the most selfish, self-centered, unhappy, neurotic character ever created on TV—comes into the coffee shop and tells Jerry that life's just not working? His entire life turned out to be the opposite of what he wanted. Jerry told him to choose the opposite of everything he feels, and to everyone's surprise, George did so. He started to tell the truth instead of lying all the time. He started to treat women with respect instead of selfishly. He started to love his parents instead of dicing them. He started to show self-control instead of going into a rage every time he was behind the wheel. As a result, he got a new job, a new girlfriend, a better relationship with his family, and some self-respect. George lost his old life, but in the process, he found a new one that was much better.

Now that's just a silly TV show, but Jesus does promise us that if we live in that inside-out way, for his sake, we'll find true life in this world and the one to come.

This was a great discovery for the disciples—the turning point. And this will be the turning point in each one of our lives: when we come to that discovery that not only is he the Christ, and the Christ **must** die, but we **must** die with him. Only through dying do we find true life. That's what it means to be a follower of Jesus, a disciple.

Our mission as a church is to make and mature more followers/disciples of Christ. What we've learned today is what it looks like to be a follower of his, what true discipleship looks like. Three things I'll leave with you.

- First, true discipleship means you confess him as the Messiah, the Son of God, who suffered, died, and rose again. When you make

that confession of faith, your discipleship journey begins. Answer the question, "Who do **you** say that I am?"

- Second, true discipleship means becoming part of this new community called "the church." Jesus said, "On this rock I will build my church, my community." And it's far from a perfect community, as Peter has shown us. In this community you'll find both exalted spiritual wisdom and degraded self-interest. You'll find saintly sinners and sinning saints. But it's still his church, his community. There are many people here in the Bay Area who say they are "spiritual but not religious" and usually that means they're spiritual but don't want to have anything to do with the church. But Jesus doesn't give us that option. He calls us to be part of an imperfect community with the keys in our hand and with a mission on our mind.
- Third, true discipleship means dying to myself and being completely sold out for Jesus and his Kingdom. John Calvin once said, "the sum of the Christian life" is self-denial for the sake of Christ. What do you think about that? So let me ask you, how is the self-denial going? Are you saying no to sin? Are you saying yes to his call to serve him? There are no half measures on this journey. It's like learning to swim: if you keep your feet on the bottom of the pool you'll never learn how to do it. And when you get into the deep end it's no use keeping your feet on the bottom. Your only choice is to swim or drown. Would you consider leaving your feet off the bottom and venturing out into the deep end of discipleship? If you will, you'll find a glorious new freedom; Jesus calls it life, abundant life.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*