

Luke 9:18-24

Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "The Christ of God." Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.

I've been thinking a lot about parenting lately. I think I've been doing that partly because I'm so new at it, partly because it was just Father's Day, and partly just because it's important. I've been thinking especially about my role in allowing or not allowing pain into Elliana's life and how often I should even be thinking about or striving for her happiness. Happiness is a big deal to all human beings. I mean come on. Who doesn't want to be happy? But it's especially important to us Americans. It is evidently so important to us that we say a couple of things in our constitution about it. #1 We think it's worth pursuing. We don't necessarily know how to find it, but we do think it's worth pursuing. #2 The pursuit of happiness is so important to the quality of American life that, for us, it ranks right up there with life and liberty.

Now, please understand that I'm not here to evaluate our constitution. That's politics. I'm simply here to point out that the pursuit of happiness is a high cultural ideal for us so much so that we've enshrined it in our nation's founding document and that fact powerfully impacts the way we think about our lives. And, like I said, I've been thinking about how that ideal relates to parenting quite a bit lately. I can tell you this much. God has some powerful statements about that very thing. They're ones that Luke captures for us.

How powerfully does God stick to his thoughts about the pursuit of happiness? You tell me. In a biblical scene that gets airtime in both Matthew and Mark, Jesus essentially said, "Peter, you're a devil." I can only imagine how jarring that must have been to Peter. Here's a guy whose face was just beaming with pride and his ego was just bursting with confidence because he had just aced Jesus' pop quiz. "Who do you guys say I am?" "The Christ of God!" Peter says. But boy did it go downhill quickly from there. It's painful to watch. Jesus tells his guys, "I have to suffer much, be killed, and raised to life." So Peter - beaming with pride and ego overflowing with confidence - takes Jesus aside, "Uh, Lord? You're not getting it. That's definitely not the pursuit of happiness. Suffering can't happen. Ever." And that's when Jesus let him have it. I mean it. He let him have it! This wasn't your

uncle teasing you good naturedly with a jab like, “oh you, little devil, you must give your mother such a hard time.” This was Jesus giving Peter a steely, “get outta my face with your lies and behind me so I don’t have to look at you” kind of comment. Like I said, it must have been pretty jarring for Peter to hear Jesus say to him, “Get behind me, Satan.”

The question is why. Why does Jesus take a verbal two by four to Peter? Was he *that* cranky? No, he was that serious about truth so he clarified, “Peter, here’s the real issue. You’re not thinking God’s thoughts on suffering. You’re thinking man’s.” That was the crux of the matter. Frankly, that still *is* the crux of the matter. Luke makes that super clear. You know what’s interesting about how Luke sets up this section? He reports that Jesus commanded that this whole idea that Jesus is the Christ “doesn’t go anywhere right now.” Why? Because that wasn’t the big teaching point for everyone to learn that day. The big teaching point for this day - again, Luke points this out by reporting, **“Then he said to them all. (v. 23)”** - was about thinking God’s thoughts on suffering.

Why is that such a big teaching point for Jesus? Well because of a sad reality illustrated in this comment from an article entitled *3 Secrets to a Happy Kid*. The article says, “The fundamental point of human existence has more to do with experiencing happiness than success. Of course, when your kid is older, you’ll want to make sure she’s getting the best education possible, but for now, opt for fun activities and toys over ‘brain-boosting’ ones. And if you’re in the market for daycare or you’re ready to check out preschools, consider ones that emphasize social skills and play over drilling the ABC’s.” Did you hear what the article said? It said, “The fundamental point of human existence has to do with experiencing happiness.” Do you understand what that article is suggesting to us? It’s saying “We’re here – our reason for existence – is to make ourselves happy.” Do you understand that for what it is? That’s not just a life philosophy. That’s a religion. That’s a god. It’s setting up the self as the reason for existence and happiness as the Bible for meaning. It is the perfect idolatry of self. Again, do you understand that for what it is? That is an absolute rejection of God as the one for whom we actually exist and in whom we are to find our meaning. Do you see that? Hopefully, it’s obvious. You know what the trouble is? We’re hardwired for that. It’s how we were born.

That explains why this had to be such a big teaching point for Jesus. It’s why he talked about it with them, “all,” saying, **“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.” (v. 23-24)** Now there’s a lot in these verses to talk about. We can’t cover everything. We can’t even cover most of it. For today, we’re going to focus on what Jesus is saying when he tells us, “Take up your cross.” Do you understand how stunning that was for the original hearers? You won’t be able to plumb the depths of what Jesus is saying here unless you hear it like the original hearers heard it. A cross was a barbaric, brutal, instrument of capital punishment that criminals carried to their

location of execution. The whole idea was that as people watched a criminal parade through the city carrying his own cross that people would say, "I'm so not going to do whatever that guy did." That's how ancient people viewed a cross. It wasn't beautiful like the one behind me. It wasn't yet a statement of faith or something pretty that you put on a necklace. It was a brutal, violent, ultimate instrument of public torture. Hear Jesus' words, "Take up your cross," that way. If you've got a little shiver going down your spine right now, then maybe you're beginning to get the gravity and the weight of what Jesus is saying here.

Before we go any farther, let's be clear about crosses. Crosses aren't bad. Yes, they involve pain. Yes, they involve suffering. Yes, they even involve death, but that doesn't make them bad. Let me remind you of something. One saved you - the one Jesus carried and the one Jesus died on. Yes, it's true that we're hardwired to please ourselves and pursue happiness at all costs, but Jesus' cross canceled that debt in its entirety. It's gone now. Completely wiped out and gone. So, no, crosses aren't bad. They're the ultimate good. That's true of Jesus' cross and it's also true of yours.

So the question becomes for us today, "If I'm going to take up a cross today, tell me where and what it is so I can pick mine up." That's a toughie. Your cross or crosses (sometimes they come in multiples) come at different times, for different lengths of times, and in different sizes. The really cool thing about crosses is that God always tailor makes them for you. And sometimes only you know you're carrying one. You can identify your cross(es) by asking yourself this question: what is it that causes me to suffer? It can be denying sin, staying in a difficult marriage, getting a weird look for your faith, or even a health issue. What's yours?

I'll share with you one of my recent ones. My daughter had to have corrective surgery that required some reconstruction and multiple incisions earlier this month. Some of you parents have had experiences like this so you know what I'm talking about when I tell you that a person can feel the weight of the cross when their child has to endure significant surgery. I'll spare you the details, but I will tell you that when they let us see her in the recovery room and she saw us again for the first time she let out this moan that sounded like she was crying out to us from the Abyss. I will never forget how that moment felt. I will tell you that it was pretty tough to see God's merciful hand in that, but I did. It was also pretty hard to see how Elliana's recovery was a blessing to my family. We lost a lot of sleep and Elliana early on could barely stop crying. But I believe that that cross was one tailor made for Elliana, Melanie, and me. I have crosses that are uniquely mine. You have crosses that are uniquely yours.

Want to know why? Your cross has a specific goal. It keeps you from losing faith in Jesus' cross. That is what crosses are good for. Or think of it like this. God gives you crosses because he loves you too much not too. See, here's where the whole parenting idea I've been harping on comes in. You're God's child. Do you understand what that means? That means God will parent you. And that means he will do whatever it takes to keep you as his child and at the same time improve you

as his child. Please understand that when God sends suffering into your life he's not being a sadist. He's being your Father. He is uniquely grasping - even as strong human fathers do - that it is of utmost important to keep children on the right path and improve their character as they walk it. In fact, to a loving, strong father momentary discomfort or pain for their child is always a worthwhile tradeoff for getting a stronger, better child on the flipside. And so God will arrange or allow suffering in your life to keep you following Jesus and bring about a better you. It's called parenting.

I know this from personal experience. On the morning of Elliana's surgery, I set aside some time to just be with God. I wanted to be strong for my family so I read my Scripture for the day and then I prayed. I prayed like I've rarely prayed before. If I'm honest, I teared up little too. I thought a lot about crosses - Jesus' cross, the one that has showed me beyond a shadow of a doubt that God loves my family and me. And I thought about the cross that God was laying on my family later in the day. If you're wondering in the end what impact this cross had on my spiritual life let me share with you the prayer I wrote in my devotional journal the morning of the surgery (I had no clue at the time I'd be writing this sermon.): Lord Jesus, today you will visit my house with the grace of pain and confusion. And so today I will rejoice that in the cross I find you not only working despite suffering, but especially through suffering. Walk with your princess Elliana. Do as you have promised and make this good for her. Amen.

God will lay crosses on you. You may have a pregnancy where you lose a baby; find out that you don't have enough saved for retirement; have a heart devastating break-up with your boyfriend; get denied by the college you wanted to get into; lose your job; or get tempted by something deep and powerful. I don't know what crosses you have or what crosses you will have. Here's what I do know: A cross is not God abandoning you! A cross *is* God loving you! In fact, he wouldn't be a very good Father if he didn't send them. Crosses drive you endlessly back to Jesus' cross where you see that you are saved and they grow you in a new, better, more powerful, more confident, more loving you for God. That's what we want. After all, life's not about the pursuit of happiness. Happiness may come by God's merciful hand, then again it may not. Happiness is just a byproduct of living life for God. Something worth thanking God for when it comes to us, but not worth chasing. Life's primarily about knowing Christ's cross and taking up the ones he lovingly puts in our path. Amen.