

# One

## Matthew 16:21-28

### Introduction

Every three years InterVarsity Christian Fellowship sponsors the Urbana Conference, a gathering that challenges university students to get involved in world evangelization. About 16,000 students from around the world attended the 2009 conference.

- After the main session each evening, students leave the larger conference auditorium to meet in smaller groups for prayer and reflection.

In one of the banquet halls, there was a small group comprised of Chinese students, another group of Taiwanese students, and a third group of students from Hong Kong. Large dividers stood between these three groups.

- These dividing walls were important, because historically these three nations have harbored bitterness and animosity toward one another. The students felt it was best to pray and worship each with their own people.

But one night as the Chinese students were praying, they told their group leader they wanted to invite the students from the other two countries to join them. When the Taiwanese students received the invitation, they prayed and sang for a little while, and then they opened up the wall divider separating the two countries. It wasn't too much longer before the students from Hong Kong pulled back their divider too. Nearly 80 students from three countries now mingled together.

One leader said:

In Christ, we are all one family. Christ breaks down all the boundaries we have erected. In Christ, we have the desire to connect.

But that's not the end of the story. Even more interesting things started to happen. The next night the Taiwanese students asked the students from China and Hong Kong to lead them in worship. The night after that, they invited the Korean and Japanese groups to join them, nations which also had experienced fierce animosity toward one another.

One of the Chinese students remarked:

This kind of thing could not happen without Jesus.

Indeed.

Today we come to the culmination of my summer series on the church that Jesus created, a creation reflected in the verses recorded in the verses immediately preceding today's Gospel text. As you may recall, Jesus had just asked His disciples: "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter had just given the correct answer: "You are the Messiah."

In response, Jesus announced the formation of His church with these words:

On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. (Matthew 16:18)

Notice Jesus does not say:

I will build my churches.

No, it is one church. That's our word for the day:

ONE

Even though my text will unpack the Gospel lesson, I am taking the theme from Romans (the epistle lesson), where the writer encourages us:

So in Christ we, though many, form **one body**, and each member belongs to all the others. (Romans 12:5)

So what is it that makes us ONE? And who are we ONE with?

- Does this only refer to Grace on a day when we combine our two worship services?
- Does it only refer to Lutherans?
- I think most of would quickly say "no."
  - Worshipping together doesn't make us one.
  - Using the same liturgical colors doesn't make us one.

But at the same time, we know that we are not ONE with every Christian and with every denomination. Many of you listening to this sermon know that painfully well.

- As I was finishing this sermon, I read a quote from an United Methodist pastor named Katie Gilbert who told her congregation that the Bible should be read and believed to the same degree that you read Aesop's Fables. They are just stories to teach a moral truth, but they aren't true themselves.
- I am not ONE with her.

So what does make us ONE? What should make us ONE? Well, Jesus addresses that in the Gospel text. Let's see what He says:

## #1: THE CHURCH IS ONE WHEN IT CARES ABOUT WHAT MATTERS TO GOD

Look at verse 23:

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." (Matthew 16:23)

What was Peter's mistake? He was thinking like a human being. He did not have God's mind in the matter.

Jesus had just laid out God's plan. Peter heard it with his own ears. And he objected to it. It wasn't what he thought was the best option.

- By nature we humans like things easy and we like what makes us feel good.
- God's plan is always focused on reaching the unsaved population.

The Church is the Church only when it exists for others... (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

That's why Jesus came to die on a cross. He couldn't simply teach and die of old age. He had to shed His blood for the forgiveness of our sin. That was the plan of God from the very beginning.

Where do we find the mind of God? In the Word of God.

- Until Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit, he had a tendency to argue with what Jesus had to say. Peter had enough faith to confess that Jesus is the Son of God, but he did not have the faith to believe that it was right for Jesus to suffer and die.
- For us we find the mind of God in our Bibles and through our prayers.

The more we each seek the mind of God through the reading of Scripture and through faithful diligent prayer, the more we become ONE.

## #2: THE CHURCH IS ONE WHEN IT PURPOSES A LIFE OF 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. (Matthew 16:24)

There are three parts to this observation:

### 1. We deny ourselves.

See it in the text:

*"Whoever wants to be my disciple must **deny themselves** ... (Matthew 16:24)*

Peter encouraged Christ to **spare** himself. Jesus told Peter – and everyone who wants to be one of His disciples – to **deny** himself.

The whole life of Jesus was about denying self. You might remember that beautiful passage of Scripture in Philippians 2 that describes Jesus like this:

*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in*

*appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8)*

I always thought that my cousin Jodi was the closest thing to a saint when we were growing up, because one year during the season of Lent, when I and the rest of my cousins were attempting to deny ourselves vegetables, Jodi gave up chocolate. Instant halo time! Right?

Jesus is talking about more than that, more than a seven-week avoidance of something to which you will eagerly return. He is talking about an attitude of the heart that says:

In all things and at all times, my will and my desire come behind what God wants.

One of the great commentators in the history of the church writes this:

Self-denial is a hard lesson, but it is the fundamental law of admission into Christ's school, and the first and great lesson to be learned in this school... It is both the *strait* gate, and the *narrow* way. It is necessary in order for us to learn all the other good lessons that are taught there.

## **2. We take up our cross**

Let's return to verse 24 to see the next part of the job description:

*"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and **take up their cross** ... (Matthew 16:24)*

A lot of people think this imagery of taking up the cross has to do with suffering and persecution. And it does, in a roundabout way. But more than anything, the cross is about identity. About who you are.

Whether you mean it or not, when you carry a cross the people around you are going to associate you with Jesus. The cross is and always will be the identifying symbol of the church and the people of the church.

Sometimes that identity will lead into places:

- Where you face suffering. That's very true. We used to associate with missionaries in foreign lands. There are many parts of our world where Christians are in great jeopardy. And there are many parts of our country where our faith is under great attack. That's the negative part.
- Where you find fellowship with other members of the Body of Christ. That's the positive part. It is the cross that draws us here. It is the cross that brings us into fellowship with other Christians in our community.

The challenge for every follower of Jesus is to gladly be identified by it, and not embarrassed by it.

In a couple of chapters Peter is going to face that challenge. This man who boldly made the rock-like profession will soon be questioned by a little servant girl. "Aren't you a follower of Jesus?" she will ask. The Rock will put down his cross quickly because that identification is troublesome for him. "I've never met him," will be Peter's response.

When you put down your cross, you cease to be ONE with the church.

### **3. We follow Jesus**

We return to verse 24 one last time:

*"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and **follow me**. (Matthew 16:24)*

Following Jesus simply means this. We go where He goes.

Author Austin Mansfield describes it like this:

When I was being taught how to clear a minefield our instructor told us to step precisely in the footprint left by the person in front of us. The concept was simple: since the person in front of us stepped on a spot that didn't set off a landmine, the only spot guaranteed to be safe was the ground under that footprint. Stepping anywhere else meant risking death

The person at the front of the patrol is called the "point man." His job is to make sure he clears any mines or booby traps before moving forward. Everyone else's job is to walk where he walks and step where he steps.

When we say "I am following Jesus" it means you are letting Jesus be the point man in your lives. You are trying to match your steps to His footprints.

If you match your footprints to those of Jesus and I do the same, we will be ONE.

### **APPLICATION**

Let me close this sermon and this series with these words by former pastor Bill Hybels:

Church is what you do. Church is who you are. Church is the human outworking of the person of Jesus Christ. Let's not go to Church, let's be the Church.

Nothing on earth has greater potential to change lives and carry out His kingdom work in your community, than your local church. There's nothing like the local church when it's working right. Its beauty is indescribable. Its power is breathtaking. Its potential is unlimited. No other organization on earth is like the church. Nothing even comes close.

The local church is the hope of the world.

That's us. We are the church. We are ONE in Christ Jesus. To Him alone be the glory.

Amen.