

# Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



**Matthew 16:24-26** *Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. <sup>26</sup> For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?"*

Interesting times we live in, aren't they? Just yesterday, we entered into the year 2022. There's a lot of uncertainty as we head into this new year. I saw a joke online the other day that said it's exciting to start the year 2022 until you realize it sounds just like 2020, too. Too as in T-O-O. As in, we're going to have to do this all over again. 2020, 2021, 2022—the numbers keep changing, but it honestly sort of feels like we've been living in the same year for a while now. And so, entering this new year leaves many people wondering what type of catastrophes and uncertainties we'll be facing, and that type of thought process can leave many people terrified. Perhaps you find yourself in that camp of being worried about the near future and all that it will bring.

But there is one way we can overcome all our uncertainties about the future, and that is by following Christ into the new year. In our text for today, Jesus tells us just what's involved in following Him. He doesn't whitewash that picture, either. He tells us what we stand to lose as His disciples, as well as what we stand to gain. This morning, we'll be considering the theme:

## **Following Christ Into the New Year**

- I. It won't be easy.
- II. But it will be worth it!

Now, we all know the life of a Christian is not easy. But there are many people who scoff at that notion, or who belittle persecution felt among Christians, saying it's all just victim mentality, and that Christians are the real persecutors. Well, if you ask me, anyone who says a Christian's life is easy has got the wrong definition of the word "Christian." A Christian is a disciple of Jesus, someone who walks in His footsteps. And if you know anything about Bible history, you know that Jesus' path through life was not a very pleasant one. We can hear Jesus' thoughts on the matter in our text: ***"Then Jesus told His disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me."***

Jesus never leads you through places He Himself didn't go. So, if Jesus tells you that your life will be one of self-denial, you can be sure that He experienced more self-denial than you ever will! And our text for today is a good example of that.

Jesus had just warned His disciples that His upcoming trip to Jerusalem would be His last; He explained to them how He would have to suffer at the hands of the Jews and finally die on the cross. Simon Peter was shocked! He said, ***"Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you."*** (Matthew 16:22) At this point, Jesus *could* have agreed with Peter. He could have taken the easy way out—turned right around and stayed far away from Jerusalem. Instead, He turned on Peter and said,

***“Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”*** (Matthew 16:23) Then Jesus spoke the words of our text, reminding His disciples that not only would the Master inevitably suffer at the hands of the world, but so, too, would each of His followers, including them.

So yes, **Following Christ into the New Year won't be easy.** Being a disciple of Jesus *always* involves self-denial. Unfortunately, that's a concept that almost nobody in our contemporary society understands anymore. We live in a “Me Generation.” People today are used to getting what they want when they want it, indulging themselves in every pleasure, gratifying their every desire. People today are used to denying themselves absolutely nothing. The world is unashamed to take as their motto, “If it feels good, do it!” And if it's bad now in 2022, you know it's only going to get worse in the years to come. That's why it's especially jarring for Americans in this day and age to hear Jesus' difficult call to discipleship: ***“Therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.”*** (Luke 14:33)

What does Jesus mean by that? He means that following Him isn't just a matter of fixing up one's old life. You can't just quit a few bad habits, get your name on a church membership roster, tack on a few good deeds and think that now you're really following Christ! No, when the Holy Spirit works faith in a person's heart, the old life is left behind. A new life is begun. You see, it's the difference between *two completely opposite lives!*

For most people in the world, Christ has no part in their lives. For 'part-time Christians' (and there are a lot of those) Christ is just one small segment of their lives. They go to church on Sunday, but it's just one of the many clubs and groups they find themselves in, fitting neatly into a little bucket of time just like any other organization they're in. But for real disciples, Christ is the *very center* of their lives, and everything else in their lives emanates from Him.

And that's not an easy life! Scripture reminds us that ***“We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.”*** (Acts 14:22) Jesus tells us beforehand that there will be crosses to bear—certain things that we suffer *for the specific reason that we are Christians.* Just a few years ago, our sister congregation in Eau Claire, WI, bore a cross of hatred in their community for their stand against homosexuality. A young woman had been excommunicated for unrepentantly continuing in a lesbian relationship after many efforts of the church to warn her against her sin. That reached Facebook, and soon death threats and bomb threats were being called in at the church. The congregation testified that being *for* the gospel of salvation in Christ alone also means being *against* every form of sin and idolatry. And it wasn't easy.

Like a lot of other things in our lives, following Christ in matters such as this will be a difficult cross to bear—it will often make us hated and misunderstood by the people around us. But God tells us not to be discouraged. In fact, if we suffer for the Gospel's sake, we should rejoice! After all, Peter says, ***“But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.”*** (1 Peter 4:15-16) So, as we prepare to follow our Savior into the new year, we know that it won't be easy. But we also know that **it will be worth it!**

Each year shortly after the new year, I like to seek out some of the so-called prophecies given in the vision-casting mega churches around our country regarding the upcoming year. I don't tune in because I want to find out what to expect in the new year, but just because I like to hear what today's false prophets are using to lead people astray. It helps to know what type of notions you're combating against. In reality, it's usually pretty much the same fluff. There's always lots of guarantees about no plagues coming near your dwelling, a year of prosperity, peace, an outpouring of blessings, and so on. It's all focused on a better life in the here and now.

Sadly, I've never once encountered a new year prophecy that mentioned anything about Jesus and His salvation. All they can talk about is the alleviation of world suffering, lifting the low-end social classes to a higher standard of living, the fight for civil rights. All lofty ideals, but really, they are not the main mission or focus for what Christians on earth are to accomplish. We're supposed to save souls, and that should ever be our goal! I always wish I were sitting in one of those audiences so that I could ask the preacher what Jesus asks in our text: ***"For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?"***

Think about that question—it's a good one. Is there *anything* in this world that's worth risking our souls for? No! Of course not! If we're ever tempted monetarily to compromise our stand on the Gospel, this thought draws us back: we know that we can *never* go wrong if we're walking in Jesus' footsteps. Following Christ into the new year will inevitably lead to self-denial, cross-bearing, and difficult sacrifices—*but it's well worth it!*

We had the reminder in last week's sermon of Jesus' visit to the home of His good friends, Mary and Martha. Think about that scene again: Mary sat at Jesus' feet, listening to His Word, while her sister Martha worked alone in the kitchen, preparing the meal. When Martha came over to complain about Mary's slothfulness, Jesus said, ***"Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."*** (Luke 10:41-42) Despite all the activity in our modern lives, we Christians know that when all is said and done, there's really only one thing that is needful. That's listening to the Word of our Lord Jesus and finding our hope and life in Him!

You know, in the investment world, the rule is: the riskier the investment, the higher the possible profit. If you want the guaranteed safety of savings bonds or certificates of deposit, you're simply not going to make a whole lot of profit on your investment. Very safe investments are not very profitable, while the investments that can be very profitable are also very risky.

But dear friends in Christ, the exact opposite is true of the Christian life! In fact, there's no way you can fail to reap huge profits from following Christ! When you're here in church to listen to the preaching of the Gospel; when you hold family devotions in your home; when you find a quiet fifteen minutes or half-hour to read the Bible to yourself—then you know for certain that you're not wasting time. The time you spend is well worth it! When you do that, Jesus says, you're laying up treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where no thief can break in and steal.

When you invest your life's resources—your time, your talents, your money—in Christ, you shall not lose, but rather *only* gain. When you make difficult personal sacrifices for the sake of your faith, you

will not lose, but rather *gain*! Look at Jesus' original twelve disciples; they gave up everything to follow their Master. But Jesus told them in no uncertain terms that this kind of investment always pays off: ***“Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.”*** (Luke 18:29-30)

But paradoxically, following Christ is also the *safest* kind of investment there is because it promises guaranteed returns. Forgiveness of sins and eternal life is guaranteed to you through the blood of Jesus Christ. Through faith, His perfect life becomes *your* perfect life; His righteousness becomes *your* righteousness. His innocent suffering and death *is* the ransom price that has covered all your sin. Your Savior Jesus gives you His absolute guarantee that heavenly bliss is waiting for you on the other side of eternity. What is the whole world compared to that?

The great Christian author C.S. Lewis once said that when he was young, he always thought of heaven and eternity as a dream world, far removed from the realities of day-to-day living. As he grew older though, and his faith grew deeper, he finally came to realize that heaven isn't the dream world at all. No, *this world*—the one we're living in right now—is the dream world! For a few short years we hustle about on this earth, and then our life is gone, passing by like a breath of wind. The *true* reality lies in eternity—that eternity to which every human being is headed.

Just because the majority of the world is striving to ignore that reality doesn't mean we have to. Let's live every day with a view to eternity! There's an old proverb that reminds us: *“Only one life, it will soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last!”* So let's follow our Savior boldly in this new year. Two things we know going in: it won't be easy, but it will be worth it! Amen.

***“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*** (Philippians 4:7) Amen.