

NAZARENE BIBLE COLLEGE
CHAPEL SERMON JANUARY 29, 2008
TURNING POINTS

I. TEXT: MATTHEW 16:13-28

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 Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, 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 warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. 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, chief priests and 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 things of God, but the things of men." Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his 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 he has done. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

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II. TURNING POINTS

A. In the Life of Jesus

This passage represents a significant turning point in the life of Jesus. Prior to this event, the emphasis of his ministry was to preach the good news to Jews and demonstrate the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. From this point on, his focus will, instead, be on Jerusalem and the cross. From this point on there is a marked difference in his demeanor, in his message, in his relationship with his disciples. It is obvious that something significant has taken place in his life.

B. In Our Lives

We also face significant turning points. These turning points come in the form of events that represent critical decisions we make in seeking to follow God's will for our lives. Our choices in these times of decision result in a dramatic change in the direction of our lives. Though we may not always be aware of how significant or dramatic these changes in direction will be at the time that we make the decision, after a span of time we can look back and easily track the footprints that have been left upon our lives by them.

I am sure that each one of us here can identify two or three of these turning points in our own lives right now. Already your minds are taking you back through your life. The circumstances are fresh on your mind. You are rehearsing all the critical changes in your life that can be traced back to these few primary decisions. Perhaps the emotions surrounding these events are even now flooding back over you.

C. The Impact of the Turning Points

Why is this? What is it about these turning point experiences that make them so intellectually, emotionally, and even spiritually fresh months, years, even decades after they occur? The answer lies in the fact that in these events we come face-to-face with choices that seem almost impossible to make. Impossible because the choices come with challenges that appear insurmountable. Impossible because the decisions present questions for which we have no answers. Impossible because in each option lies obstacles that cloud our ability to perceive or predict the outcomes of choosing them.

D. The Impact Illustrated in Jesus

In this passage, Jesus both illustrates and acknowledges the seriousness and difficulty of these turning points. No sooner had he announced his decision and his commitment to proceed to Jerusalem and the cross, than his closest associates respond that this represents pure insanity, and they bring all the pressure they can bear on him to choose a different course. This new path Jesus has chosen represents such a drastic departure from the previous direction of his life, that even those who were most committed to him found it totally incomprehensible and unacceptable.

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E. Implications for Our Own Lives

This event in the life of Jesus is meant to illustrate what we can expect when we face these same types of decisions that we must face in following God's will for our lives. Jesus makes this very plain when he lays down the conditions for following him. If we want to walk in the center of God's will for our lives, if we want to stay in step with Jesus, if we want to successfully navigate the turning points in our lives, then it will demand this level of commitment and sacrifice on our part.

We must deny ourselves.

We must take up our crosses.

We must lose our lives to save them.

We must forsake the whole world so that we may save our souls.

F. The Essential Foundation of Turning Point Commitment

What makes such commitment, such faith possible in the turning point moments of our lives? Jesus knew that we would never find the resources for these times within ourselves. That is why he pointed us toward the source in this passage. In the turning point moments of our lives, when we must make a conscious choice to accept and obey God's will whatever we must deny, whatever cross it means we bear, whatever we must count as loss, or whatever of this world we must forsake, our ability to make and stay with the right choice will depend the unshakable conviction that Jesus "is the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

G. Personal Testimony

If you are a member of my Sunday School class, you will recognize this passage. We studied it the Sunday after Dr. Stelting called me into his office to ask me to become the director of the Advantage program. On that Sunday, I was teaching this lesson to the members of my class, while all the time God was using it to instruct me.

I have shared with some of you, that the decision Marcia and I had to make in relation to the Advantage program is without a doubt the most difficult career decision we have ever made. When Dr. Stelting presented this possibility to me, my first response to him was that my passion is still Christian education. This is where my heart and my joy is. I have invested five years in remaking NBC's Christian education program from the ground up. I believe we are just now beginning to see returns on the investment we are making. God has still been expanding my vision of what he wants this program to be and what he wants to achieve through this program in his church. I told Dr. Stelting that I could not imagine God asking me to turn my back on all this work that is still unfinished. I have preached in every class I have taught that Christian education is essential to every ministry and even to the very existence of the church. I feared and believed that accepting this new position would communicate to my students that this was all a meaningless platitude or lie.

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Over the entire next week, and Marcia and I prayed and fasted about this decision, I could not escape these thoughts, and on the morning that I was to give my answer to Dr. Stelting, I awoke at 4:00 in the morning at peace that I could say no to the job offer. However, in the few hours between that time and when I met with Dr. Stelting, God began to challenge me that he was not taking me away from my joy and passion. He was not dashing the desires and visions he had awakened in my heart. Instead, he was opening a new avenue through which that passion could be expressed and those visions could be fulfilled.

Did this make the decision any easier to accept? Did this make it any easier to release the ministry I loved so much? Not really. Did God reveal is some miraculous means everything that this decision means for Marcia and me in the future? Can I predict with perfect clarity all the changes that it will bring to our lives? Not in the least. Did God lay out some grand step-by-step plan for how he will fulfill the desires of my heart through this new position? Not at all. After two weeks in my new job, has God released me from all my lingering doubts and apprehensions about my decision? Not in the least!

So how can I move forward in this drastic turning point of my life with confidence and peace? I can because in the midst of it all I have no doubt about this one truth. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. He died for me so that through his resurrection God's best could be fulfilled in my life. He loves me, and because I have committed my way unto him, he delights to give me the desires of my heart. Most importantly, because I have sought his wisdom and not my own, he has promised to never leave or forsake me.

H. Personal Response

Each of you has a made similar turning point decision in your life. That is why you are here at NBC. Just like Marcia and I, you had to make that decision without being able to predict all of the consequences of it for your future. These consequences have unfolded over time as you progressed down the path of your choice. Over the weeks you have become more and more aware of the ways in which you must deny yourself. Months after making the decision, you have been called on to shoulder the crosses of your choice. Having now traveled many miles down this new path for your life, you have become painfully aware of what you have chosen to count as lost. Having put more distance between you and this turning point of your life, you are beginning to weigh in the balance all that is in the world that you have been called to forsake.

With the weight of all these consequences resting upon your shoulders, it becomes tempting to second guess your choice, to doubt your decision. You begin to fear the unknown consequences yet to be faced. You begin to remember longingly pathways left behind.

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Jesus understood these fears and temptations. It is apparent from his anguished prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane that he experienced them himself. He knew that in these moments you have but one hope to keep you on the path, and this hope is that he is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. On this one unshakable foundation lays your confidence that one step in the foot prints of Jesus, whatever the cost, is better than years lived in ease separated from his presence and walking away from his will for you.

I. Invitation

If you find yourself in the midst of a great turning point of life, questioning decisions made in your past, stumbling under the weight of consequences of choices made, Jesus extends a hand to you tonight and beckons, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30 NIV)

As Chaplain Lyke leads us in this last song, will you accept his invitation?