**SERMON SERIES:**

**LIVING A VICTORIOUS CHRISTIAN LIFE**

**“The Victory Of Suffering”**

*Matthew 16:21-26*

We’re nearing the conclusion of our summer sermon series “Living A Victorious Christian Life.” I hope this series has helped you see things in new ways and I pray you’re responding to what the Holy Spirit desires to do in you as a result.

So far we have seen how the Scriptures teach us we *can* find daily victory and joy by living in Christ and under grace—rather than living in our old selves in Adam, under the requirements of the law. We’ve also received the righteousness of Jesus Christ. We’re clothed in his good, pure and holy nature. True victory also comes as we allow the Holy Spirit to fill us. Last Sunday we talked about having a seeker’s heart—to be people who seek after God in worship, prayer and in Scripture.

***You were issued a challenge last week: if you attend Sunday school you were challenged to set aside three minutes at the beginning or end of your class for prayer, focused on the Scripture verses of your lesson for that day. For those who don’t attend Sunday school, you were challenged to spend three minutes in prayer for our worship service before leaving your car. I applaud those who’ve committed to these challenges, and I truly believe God will draw even closer to those of you who’re seeking him in this way.***

Let’s find our Scripture reading, Matthew 16:21-26. This morning I want to turn our attention to another aspect of how we can live victoriously, and it’s something that makes us quite uncomfortable. And it’s not easy. We can experience victory through suffering. Yes, I said suffering. But how in the world does suffering lead to victory?

Before we go further, let me explain the kind of suffering I’m talking about. This will not be about the suffering we experience as a result of *life*: pain, sickness, grief, depression, loneliness, age, brokenness. None of us can escape suffering that comes from the circumstances and situations of life.

Now there *can* be victory through those kinds of suffering. ***Many of you can probably tell of how God has brought good things out of a time of suffering you endured.*** But what we want to consider this morning is *voluntary suffering*, or suffering through sacrifice so that God’s will can be done.

Our example of this is Jesus himself. While in the region of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples the question *“Who do people say that I am?”* (Mark 8:27). He then followed it up by asking *“But who do you say that I am?”* Peter, speaking for the group, declared that Jesus was the Son of the living God. Jesus commended Peter and went on to tell the disciples how he would build his church so surely and supremely that even Hell itself couldn’t stand against it.

His next comments, however, caught the disciples off guard. Look at our Scripture reading: *21From then on Jesus began to tell his disciples plainly that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, and that he would suffer many terrible things at the hands of the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but on the third day he would be raised from the dead.* Jesus said that he would have to undergo suffering in order to accomplish God’s will.

This is *intentional* suffering. It’s not because of the events or situations of life. Jesus wasn’t going to Jerusalem to suffer because of old age, disease, chronic pain, or mental illness. He purposefully and intentionally submitted himself to suffer for the salvation of the world. This was his great struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane. ***“If there’s any other way…but not my will—my desire, my agenda—but yours, God.”*** Walking in Christian victory calls us to the same kind of selfless surrender. We’re asked to lay aside what we want in order that God’s plans can be fulfilled through us.

But look what happened next: *22But Peter took him aside and began to reprimand him for saying such things. “Heaven forbid, Lord,” he said. “This will never happen to you!” 23Jesus turned to Peter and said, “Get away from me, Satan! You are a dangerous trap to me. You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God’s.”* Peter couldn’t get a grip on the fact that the whole Messiah-thing was going to involve suffering! That wasn’t what he thought being part of this new kingdom would entail.

***It’s like the little boy on his first day of first grade. Accustomed to going home at noon in kindergarten, the little boy was getting his things together when he was actually supposed to be heading to lunch with his class. The teacher asked what he was doing. “I'm going home,” he replied. The teacher explained that in the first grade he had a longer school day. “You'll go eat lunch now,” she said, “and then you'll come back to the room and do some more work before you go home.” The little boy looked at her in disbelief, hoping she was kidding. Convinced of her seriousness, he put his hands on his hips and demanded, “Who on earth signed me up for this program?”***

Peter was unwilling for Jesus to suffer―not only because it didn’t fit into his understanding of what the Messiah was supposed to do―but also because if Jesus suffered then his followers would likely also suffer. Peter wasn’t sure he liked that part! Yet every follower of Jesus is called to willingly give up our self-reliance, to lay down the agendas we’ve set for ourselves. Peter wasn’t willing to consider that God’s plan involved suffering, leading Jesus to reprimand the fisherman with the name “Satan,” which means “adversary.” Jesus understood that Peter was looking at things from a human, selfish point of view. Peter had become a stumbling block to the ordeal Jesus was about to undergo.

In a sense, Peter’s refusal to allow Jesus to suffer—or to experience suffering himself―was not unlike the temptations Satan presented to Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-17): to take the easy way out, to cut corners, to exchange a painful and difficult path for one that was comfortable and didn’t demand so much.

But Jesus’s reply put voluntary suffering center-stage: *24Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me.  25If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it.  26And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?”*

Our fallen human nature urges us to look out for ourselves and to grab all we can get. We’re taught through media and advertising to accumulate more, more, more. The concept of doing without in order to provide for others is foreign to us. This is one reason why being a follower of Jesus is so difficult in our culture. The expectation for a true disciple of Jesus is that we’ll suffer the loss of what we want in order to bless or benefit someone else.

Christianity is about sacrifice and surrender, not comfort or getting what I want. It requires that we do without, go without, be without, just as Jesus did. Even his own life wasn’t too great a thing to surrender for God’s will to be accomplished. Are the things we’re asked to set aside more valuable than that? Does God call us to something Jesus himself didn’t or wouldn’t do? Of course not!

The apostle Paul, writing in Philippians 1:29 said, *For you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him.* We cannot claim to be followers of Jesus if we’re unwilling to suffer for him as well. The deepest desire of the human soul is to please God―but the deepest desire of our broken human nature is to please ourselves. But with the power of the Holy Spirit working in us, we can overcome our selfishness and surrender ourselves for the things which please God.

***This is something that a great many older, established churches struggle with. One thing pastors often hear is “We want more children and youth.” Or “We want more young families in our church.” District superintendents will tell you they hear “We want a young pastor with a family to help attract young people to our church” a lot.***

***Unfortunately, having more children or youth or young families doesn’t happen without significant change within the church. Budgets must be re-evaluated and re-prioritized. Space must be allocated. Worship becomes different. That’s why a lot of larger churches have multiple worship services. One is likely conservative and traditional, like ours; others are likely more contemporary.***

***But I’ve found that in older established congregations, comments such as “We want more children and youth” actually means “We want more children and youth* but we don’t want to change anything.” *Or “We want more young families in our church” actually means “We want more young families in our church* as long as they fit in with what we’re already doing.” *In other words, we want them so long as we aren’t inconvenienced.***

***Before coming here I led two churches in turnaround efforts. One worked, the other didn’t. In both appointments I heard these well-intentioned comments about children, youth and young families. The question I would put back was this: “What are you personally willing to give up in order to have more children, youth or young families?”***

***I told the churches repeatedly that they couldn’t turn around without change. And unfortunately those who were the oldest would be asked to surrender the most. They’d have the most to lose in order to reach out, change and grow. It’s not an easy thing to ask; it’s not an easy thing to hear, much less do. But as disciples of Jesus Christ, we’re called to intentional suffering. We’re to set aside our comforts and plans in order to help others enter the kingdom. In order to have more children, more youth, more young families, means that people will have to let go of their personal preferences.***

Now please don’t think that I’m getting ready to make a bunch of changes! I’m not, I’m just using this as an example of voluntary suffering. We give up and let go of, like Jesus did, in order to share the gospel and change lives. As we seek to live a victorious Christian life we’ll encounter moments when we’re called on to suffer by releasing what we want for what God has in mind. We let go of what we can see and hold for something we can’t.

***In both of my previous appointments, I was asked “If we make such-and-such a change will that guarantee more attendance, or new members, or what-have-you. No pastor can guarantee that. That’s why voluntary sacrifice is hard. I may be asked to give up my preferred worship style, or Sunday school room, or parking spot, or favorite pew in exchange for something that may never come to pass.***

But while no one can guarantee that a particular change will produce results, I can guarantee that when we’re willing to surrender our preferences God honors that. And what God honors he blesses. Anytime we release what we cling to, God does great and amazing things because of it. So is it easy? Of course not! Does it cause obstacles and trials? You bet! But we can find victory through voluntary suffering.

When faced with intentional suffering, the more we balk―the more we demand things always go “my way”—the more we expect convenience and entitlement to be our right—the less we resemble our Lord and Savior. Are we willing to become those who suffer for Christ’s glory and the growth of his kingdom? I pray we may all be strengthened by the Spirit to show the true victory of suffering.

Let us pray:

*Lord God, from whom all blessings flow, we admit that we don’t suffer well. Not when we’re sick, not when we’re troubled, not when we’re overwhelmed. And not when we’re asked to change for the sake of the kingdom. We know you are always seeking to reach new people, and that you do that through us. Forgive us for any time or season in which we balked at voluntary suffering. Forgive us when we put our own personal preferences above your will.*

*Help us know the victory of suffering for you and your kingdom, for in doing so we humble ourselves before your divine plan and offer ourselves as those who long to see others brought into the family of faith.*

*Thank you for this church, Father. Thank you for its leadership and fellowship, for what it has meant to so many people over so many years. I am grateful for a congregation that doesn’t bicker and fight over your mission, that doesn’t dissolve into cliques in order to see personal preferences maintained. We’re not the flashiest, God. We’re not the coolest or largest. But we have a depth of love and warmth that many other churches cannot claim. We have peace, grace, compassion and generosity*―*again, things other churches may struggle to find or have. May we never take these blessings for granted nor forget the source of them.*

*In the name of Jesus, who willingly embraced suffering for our sake; amen.*