Believe: “What Does It Mean to Surrender?”
Matthew 16:24-24

If you remember, several months ago when we began this series called BELIEVE, I spoke to you about a peach tree in my yard. If you recall, I had planted the peach tree back in 2008 when we moved to KC, and initially the peach tree did well and produced abundant peaches. But then, over time, we observed that the tree produced diseased fruit, and then very few peaches at all. Finally, the wind blew the tree over, and we discovered that the tree was diseased…rotten to the core. All that was left to do was to cut the tree up and use it as firewood.

I told you that story as an illustration of our lives as human beings on planet earth. Every human being has been given life that we might bear fruit that brings glory to God and hope to the world. The quality of our fruit will depend upon the health of our tree, right? But we have a problem, don’t we? Every human life hosts the disease of Adam’s sin. Left untreated, no matter how hard we try, we will eventually go the way of my peach tree! What we produce in our lives will actually spread the disease, and in the end, we will become rotten. Jesus once said, “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” I think we all know that He wasn’t giving a lecture on orchard maintenance…He was talking about our lives and the judgment that awaits every human soul. Jesus made it clear: We all need an intervention…we need a Savior.

The hope of the Gospel is this: Jesus came into the world as the Son of God who conquers the power of sin through his sacrificial death on a cross that we deserved, and through Him we might receive forgiveness and eternal life that we could never deserve. We are saved by grace alone! But in addition to the hope of eternal life, this grace of Jesus Christ provides hope for a new and transformed life now. Because of Jesus, the disease within us can be, over time, rooted out and replaced with His power living within us, healing all that was corrupted, which will lead us to bear good fruit that brings glory to God and hope to the world. So how does that process work?

In his book, The Divine Conspiracy, Dr. Dallas Willard writes that there are essentially five stages of the eternal life that we go through as believers that will eventually produce the fruit that Jesus died for us to produce.

1) The first stage is our confidence in and reliance upon Jesus as the One appointed to save us. This is our initial “conversion” from one who is perishing to one who is saved and is being redeemed through the blood of Christ. All who come to this place in their lives can rest with full assurance that they are included in Christ’s family.

2) The second stage is marked by a growing desire to become an apprentice of Jesus, learning to live in and from the Kingdom of God. In other words, we have a growing desire to put His
teachings into practice. This is the beginning of our integration into the eternal life Jesus saved for us to enjoy…it is the beginning of our emancipation.

3) The third stage, following the discovery of the abundant life of following Jesus, naturally leads to obedience. Because we now love Jesus with our whole being (heart, mind, strength, and soul), we love to obey Him, even when we do not fully understand or “like” what that requires. Willard writes, “Love of Jesus sustains us through the course of discipline and training that makes obedience possible. Without that love, we will not stay to learn.”

4) The fourth stage, following a season of discipline and obedience, both leads to and issues from the pervasive inner transformation of the heart and soul. Here is where we begin to see (as will all those around us) the “fruit of the Spirit” that Paul writes about in Galatians: love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, full faith, meekness, and self-control. Willard writes, “These are called the ‘fruit of the spirit’ because they are not direct effects of our efforts but are brought about in us as we admire and emulate Jesus and do whatever is necessary to learn how to obey him.”

5) Finally, the fifth stage is characterized by the power to work the works of the kingdom. Remember, Jesus predicted “Those who rely on me will do the works I do, and even greater ones” (John 14:12). Now…I want you to pay very close attention to what Willard writes about this final stage, “Perhaps we feel baffled and incompetent before this statement. But let us keep in mind that the world we live in desperately needs such works to be done. They would not be just for show or to impress ourselves or others. But, frankly, even a moderate size ‘work’ is more than people’s life could sustain. One good public answer to our prayer might be enough to lock some of us into weeks of spiritual superiority. Great power requires great character if it is to be a blessing and not a curse, and that character is something we only grow toward.”

Did you hear that? Did you hear what needs to happen before we can hope to employ the power of God to do the works of the Kingdom? Our character must grow toward becoming like Jesus. That’s the journey we are on Church…we are on a journey to think like Jesus, to act like Jesus, and to become like Jesus, that we might be filled with His power to accomplish the works of His Kingdom…to be the Light of Christ in a hurting culture. This whole process that I have described is the essence of discipleship, but notice: it is a process. So, as we get ready to jump back into the spiritual practices, take a moment and identify where you are in terms of these five stages of the eternal life. Perhaps you are not yet even at stage 1, because you have not placed your faith in Jesus as your Savior. That’s OK, and I want you to know you are most welcome here this morning. By the way, I think God brought you here this morning because He loves you and He wants you to be His child, a permanent member of His family! Now, I suspect many of us are at stage 1, for although we wouldn’t yet consider ourselves apprentices of Jesus, we know in our hearts that we have sincerely placed our confidence in Jesus as our Savior. Perhaps you are in stage 2, such that you are growing in your affection for Christ and find that you desire to
do what He commanded? I suspect there are many here today in stage 2. Now, I personally know some of you who are very much in stage 3, for you have shared with me a deep commitment to obey Christ, even when it has been quite costly and disruptive to your previous way of living. That is a very important and often difficult place on the journey…but totally worth it, right? Some of you are in stage 4, and you are slowly becoming aware that His character is now more and more your character…what a transformation has taken place in your life! Thanks be to God! And, perhaps a few of us here this morning are now in stage 5, where we are experiencing the power of God working through our lives to do the works of the Kingdom. By the way, those in stage 5 are not as uncommon as you might think…there are more than a few in our congregation by my estimation. However, their humility often makes them quite difficult for the average observer to identify…no doubt that is as it should be.

Now…these stages are no exact science, so I don’t want you to worry too much about them. And whatever stage you identify with, please feel safe and welcome to be where you are. I find these “stages” to be encouraging simply because it validates where we are as part of the journey. They also help us to envision where that journey goes if we continue to walk with Jesus in the days to come…I find that to be motivating!

Now, the catalyst for spiritual growth and health will most certainly come in adopting the practices of Christ. We call such practices “spiritual disciplines.” Again, these practices are not an end unto themselves lest they be used as ‘law;’…and to think of these practices as law would be most unfortunate. Instead, we should see every spiritual discipline as a means of opening our hearts and minds to the fellowship and the lordship of Jesus and the transforming affect of the Holy Spirit. Thus far we have considered the disciplines of worship, prayer, Bible-study, and single-mindedness. This morning we will consider the discipline of total surrender. Due to our limited time, I will briefly discuss this concept of surrender under three subheadings: 1) the call to total surrender; and 2) the practice of total surrender; 3) the freedom of total surrender.

I. The Call to Total Surrender
In the book *Believe* that we are reading together as a congregation, Pastor Randy Frazee writes: A genuine decision to follow and obey God is a decision of total surrender. We leave nothing off the negotiation table. We are “all in” as a reasonable response to God being “all in” for us.

The word “surrender” is not actually a term ever used in the New Testament, but I think it is a meaningful word to describe the “daily dying” that is part of the Christian life and discipline. In other words, as we read in the Ten Commandments, we are to have “no other gods before us.” We are forbidden to make for ourselves something to which we attribute infinite value and worth, such that it would be prioritized over our exclusive allegiance to God. Now that may seem obvious and reasonable, but boy, is that ever hard, right? In Matthew 8, Jesus calls the question of two men who demonstrate a desire to follow Him. In no uncertain terms, Jesus makes “total surrender” a prerequisite to discipleship. But Jesus isn’t calling for the surrender of wooden
idols…the idols he is calling these men to surrender hit a bit closer to home. Here’s what we read beginning with vs. 19: A scribe came up and said to Jesus: “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Another of the disciples said to him, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” And Jesus said to him, “Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead.”

Now, both of these responses by Jesus seem harsh. Jesus informs the scribe that to follow him, he must be willing to surrender his comfort and security. Jesus then informs the second man that to follow him means surrendering even reasonable allegiances like family.

Now…keep in mind, Jesus always loves those who seek to follow Him. He doesn’t say these words with anger or malice…He is simply presenting the cost of discipleship. To be a follower of Jesus means that we surrender everything that we have and every competing allegiance. If our comfort or even our family has higher value than our allegiance to our King, we are under the power of an idol of our own making, and our allegiances are split.

If you remember the story of the rich young ruler found in Mark 10, the young man is eager to know how he can inherit eternal life. Jesus replies, “You know the commandments: Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not defraud. Honor your father and mother.” And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.” And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, ‘You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.’ Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.”

Notice that the demand for total surrender came as an expression of love. Jesus loved the man, and that is EXACTLY why he demanded total surrender. How are we to think of that?

Perhaps Jesus demanded total surrender of his would-be-disciples because He knew what was coming. In Matthew 10 Jesus makes a prediction of what His followers can expect as He sends them out into the world: Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Think about it for a minute. According to a biblical worldview, believers are those who have been “dropped in behind enemy lines” as C.S. Lewis once wrote. There is a spiritual battle for the souls of men, women, and children, and Jesus came to liberate those souls and bring them
home to the Father. His soul-saving mission is to be accomplished through His church, but Jesus makes it clear that this is, indeed, a dangerous mission. There will be resistance. Disciples will be betrayed by their own family members. They will be arrested, imprisoned, and even martyred for their allegiance to Jesus. They will have to endure scorn, persecution, and financial devastation.

So think about it. If we do not surrender our competing allegiances...if we do not lay down even those things we hold most dear in order to serve King Jesus exclusively, those competing allegiances will become the weakness that our Enemy will exploit to lessen our Kingdom influence or even to drive us away from following Jesus at all. Such is why Jesus states later in Matthew 10: A person’s enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

I know those are hard words for us to hear. As good Midwestern Americans, there is no higher value than family for most of us. I know you are offended, and quite frankly, if it came between your allegiance to your family and your allegiance to Jesus, many of us would walk away from Jesus and never look back. But where does that put us in the biblical narrative that we just read? Do you see why Jesus was so direct?

Now...I know there is a ton of tension here, but let me just reflect upon this for a moment given 30 years of pastoral experience. I cannot tell you how often I see people make an idol out of their family members. Parents make idols out of their children. Grandparents make idols out of their grandchildren. Boyfriends make idols out of their girlfriends and the list goes on. Let me simply make an observation: nobody in your family actually wants to be your god! Nobody in your relational world wants to be your Savior, your Validator, your Need Supplier, or your Identity. You may think you are being noble by making your family your number one allegiance, but I can tell you that what you are actually doing is creating dysfunction at a level that will require years of counseling to undo!!!

It goes without saying that your job, your 401K, your love for tennis, your private addictions, and a long list of other competing allegiances all fit in the same category: not one of them ever asked to compete with GOD. But that is what we tend to do: We make a good thing an ultimate thing, and we become a slave to our self-appointed idol that has no power to save us...because that thing that we serve is actually not a god.

Can you see that Jesus demanded that we surrender all competing allegiances and follow HIM because He actually IS GOD, and He is the only one who can set us free from our self-constructed slavery? Did you hear what he said at the end of that passage we just read in Matthew 10? Here’s what He just said, “Whoever finds his life will lose it, whoever loses his life
for my sake will find it.” Let me ask you a question: Have you found your life? I mean...the real life...the abundant life...the life that God created you to live, the life Jesus saved you to enjoy?

Remember the 80’s band, U2, and that famous song, “I still haven’t found what I’m looking for”? That is the lament of every human soul who serves a false god. But here is what Jesus is saying in no uncertain terms: lose it...loose it...let it go, set it down...surrender it all...and you will find what you have been looking for. You will find the life that you have always wanted. It is the life you were created to live. It is a life of risk, faith, and adventure. There will be battles to fight and souls to be rescued and deep, profound friendships along the way. It is a life of power, my power, living in you. But there is only one way into that life...and it is the most counter-intuitive way. You must surrender everything that you have used to prop up your current identity, and you must surrender everything you are...everything you have...every person you love...every title you wear...every competing passion...to Jesus. And that doesn’t just happen once...it’s every day for the rest of your life. This, of course, is the spiritual discipline of surrender...and it is not optional for the Christian. It’s part of the deal.

II. The Practice of Total Surrender

So...how does that work? How do we practice surrender? In his book Celebration of Discipline, Richard Foster suggests that surrender begins with submission in seven key areas.

1) We intentionally submit our bodies, our minds, and our spirits to God. In plain language, that means that we set aside our fallen, default assumption that we should be able to get what we want and do what we want. Thomas a Kempis prayed every morning: “As thou wilt; what thou wilt; when thou wilt.” I wonder how our lives would change if we practiced that prayer every morning and then surrendered our day to the Lord. Let’s say that prayer together: As thou wilt; what thou wilt; when thou wilt.

2) We intentionally submit to God’s Word. Foster writes, “We submit ourselves first to hear the Word, second to receive the Word, and third to obey the Word.” As always, we call upon the Holy Spirit to help us both understand and obey what God has said.

3) We intentionally submit to our family. That’s right...we still love our families more than ever! But we love them through Jesus, and we love them as Jesus loves them. That means we serve each other and place each other’s needs before our own. We intentionally listen, make allowances for each other, share with and bless one another.

4) We intentionally submit to our neighbors. Again, placing our personal agendas and desires aside, we look to serve our neighbors through simple acts of generosity and care. This means offering to watch their kids, share our food, engage in meaningful conversations, mow their grass when they are out of town or laid up with an injury, etc. Surrender gets very practical when we are following Jesus, because these practical behaviors of self-denial and service are the means by which many are won to Christ.
5) We intentionally submit to the believing community. We jump in and help wherever there is a need within the local church. No job should be too small for those who are fully surrendered to Christ, regardless of title or station. We’ll talk more about living in community next week.

6) We submit to the broken and despised. Foster writes, “Our first responsibility is to be among them…we must discover ways to identify genuinely with the downtrodden, the rejected.”

7) We submit to the world. Against Foster writes, “Starving people affect us all. Our act of submission is a determination to live as a responsible member of an increasingly irresponsible world.”

III. The Freedom of Total Surrender

Foster describes the freedom of submission as “the ability to lay down the terrible burden of always needing to get our own way.”

You would not believe the personal and corporate torment that we endure because of this horrible idea that we should be able to get what we want. If ever we were freed of that noxious notion, we might be amazed to discover the joy that awaits us. Think of it: how much anger do we carry because we did not get our way? How often do we revel in self-pity because we did not get our way? How often do we harbor evil thoughts, resentment, and unforgiveness in our hearts because we did not get our way?

We must practice surrender if we are ever to experience freedom from this horrible sense of entitlement. More than that, it is the practice of surrender that will prepare us for those defining moments in our lives…the really big ones that have tremendous consequences.

Consider Jesus as He prayed to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. In his human flesh, Jesus abhorred the cross that awaited him. Like any other man, his built in “self-preservation” gene kicked in and he made his desire clear: “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” Jesus was able to deny himself and go to the cross because He practiced submission to the Father throughout his life, every day, all week long. Jesus practiced self-denial and submission in His relationships with others as well. In Philippians 2 we read that “though being in the very nature God, he did not count equality with God as something to be grasped, but instead made himself nothing, taking on the form of a servant, he became obedient to God…” Jesus always denied himself and served…everybody. He served the poor, the sick, the demon-possessed, the hungry, the children, the women, and he even washed the feet of His own students. Now notice…Jesus didn’t diminish Himself by surrendering His will to God…He didn’t forfeit His identity by serving others. On the contrary, God exalted Jesus and he became the most influential human being who has ever lived. Self denial did not mean self-hatred for Jesus. He was incredibly comfortable in His own skin and He clearly had a charisma that drew thousands to hang on his every word. In other words, surrender was not self-diminishing. Surrender was the path to self-actualization and flourishing.
This is the secret of the Christian life that few understand unless you are actually in the Christian life. True life…the abundant life…the FREEDOM that our hearts yearn for...comes not through getting what we want and doing what we want, but by denying ourselves for the sake of following Jesus. It is the path of self-denial in Jesus’ name that leads to life. It is there that we finally “find our lives”...just as Jesus promised. There is no other way.

Church, like every other discipline, surrender is something that we must train ourselves to do with the help of God’s Holy Spirit. We must begin where we are, and practice every day. I suggest we begin this morning by simply closing with the prayer of Thomas a Kempis: “As thou wilt; what thou wilt; when thou wilt.” Lord, we surrender. Amen.