

# Matthew 10:38-39

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-10/matthew-1038-39/>

*Jesus bids His disciples to take up their cross and follow after Him. He warns them that everyone will lose their soul/life, but only those who lose their soul/life for His sake will find it.*

The parallel gospel accounts of this teaching are found in Matthew 16:24-25, Mark 8:34-35, Luke 9:23-24, Luke 14:27 and John 12:25.

Throughout these instructions Jesus has two main objectives. The first objective was to commission the twelve on a barnstorming tour throughout the towns and villages of Israel proclaiming the Kingdom and calling men to repentance (Matthew 10:7). He gave them directives such as to avoid the Gentiles and the Samaritans (Matthew 10:5) and to not acquire gold (Matthew 10:9). He also told them what they were to bring or not bring with them (Matthew 10:10); how they were to enter and leave a city (Matthew 10:11-14); how to be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves as they encounter the dangers of political courts and synagogues (Matthew 10:16-18). Jesus instructed them to expect persecution (Matthew 10:17, 21-23, 25, 28, 34-36) but that as they face all manner of persecution they are to take comfort and be encouraged because God will empower them (Matthew 10:19-20). Jesus told them that He sees and knows what happens to them (10:26-27, 29-31), and will be faithful to reward their faithfulness to Him (Matthew 10:32).

Jesus's second objective was to prepare the twelve for the mission He had for them after He would leave this earth and ascend into Heaven.

In many respects the next statements Jesus makes are the culmination of both these objectives.

*And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.* This is a continuation of thought from the previous passage which stated that those who love members of their household more than Jesus *are not worthy of Him*. But here Jesus changes the subject from allegiance to and love for others who are dear to us, to love and allegiance to and love for the self (“psuche”).

There is nothing unusual or odd when Jesus bids His disciples *follow after Me*. This would have been an expected invitation and command for a rabbi to give his disciples. Jesus has said similar things to them and other possible disciples earlier (Matthew 4:18; 8:22; 9:9). It is what immediately precedes this command that makes it startling and strange—*he who does not take up his cross*. The *cross* was the Roman's public method of executing criminals. It was physically torturous and socially humiliating. Its victims were often stripped naked, nailed to a “T” or “X” shape of wood, and left to dehydrate and suffocate to death outside city walls or along byways for all to see. The victim would have to carry their own cross to the place of their death. This makes it clear that anyone who seeks true greatness will have to lay aside making a priority of seeking comfort in and from this world, and instead seek obedience to Jesus and His ways.

Jesus bid His disciples to *follow after* Him and die, as He himself would die, by taking up *His cross*. This would likely have shocked or confused the disciples. It is likely they did not understand at this point that Jesus, the Messiah, the King, God's Prophet and Divine Son was telling them that He was going to die via crucifixion. This would have been utterly unthinkable for the disciples. There are numerous passages that make it clear that much of what Jesus did and taught the disciples was lost on them until after He rose from the dead and after they received the Holy Spirit, and were guided into understanding (Mark 9:32; Luke 9:45; Luke 18:34).

That He would ask them to die for Him would not have been stunning. These were deeply committed men who were zealous for the restoration of Israel. Revolution was in their hearts. They were fully aware that such a cause would be deemed rebellious to Rome and very well could lead to their deaths. These were men ready to *lose* their *life* ("pusche") for the kingdom—so long as it fit within their paradigm. Jesus selected them, in part because of this willingness to die for Him, but He was now taking the first step toward changing their paradigm. Their call is not to die for a political revolution, but a spiritual one.

This is the first time Jesus foretells His death to His disciples. And even though Matthew does not describe their immediate response, based on their later actions and statements, they do not seem to comprehend its larger meaning or Jesus's purpose in dying until after His resurrection or the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

If they were to be *worthy of* Him, they would need to *take up* their own cross and be willing to die as Jesus Himself would do *and follow after* Him. This command is echoed throughout scripture. All believers are called to die to self, and live to Christ.

"So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live." (Romans 8:12-13)

"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me." (Galatians 2:20)

Jesus then gives a pair of paradoxical statements.

The first of these parallel remarks is *he who has found his life will lose it*. The word translated as *life* is "psuche." "Psuche" is the inner essence or core identity of who a person is. It is no less than a person's heart with all its loves, desires, and will, plus his mind with its consciousness, and reasoning. To *lose* your "psuche" is to *lose* your very self. Without a "psuche," a person is no longer a person. A "psuche" is not merely the most critical thing about a particular person, it IS that person. When the spirit separates from the body, resulting in death, the "psuche" continues to live.

One of the big questions and quests of life is to find who we are. To discover why we exist and to fulfill this purpose. God fearfully and wonderfully made every "psuche"/*life/soul* for a purpose that He ordained in eternity past (Psalm 139:14-17, Ephesians 2:10). Because of the sin and the

fall, we have been separated from God and are unable to fulfill that purpose in a satisfying way (Genesis 2:17; Gen 3:17-24). Even if we think we have *found* our “psuche” and its purpose apart from God, we are mistaken. Every way we go about trying to find fulfillment, the things of this world can never fully satisfy us (Ecclesiastes 1:14). We can never truly find our *life* apart from God. This is because God created us to be and live in harmony with Him and with others whom He created. All attempts to find or claim our “psuche” separate of God are vanity. The meaning of Jesus’s statement is this: *He who has found his “psuche” (separate from God) will lose it.*

Jesus’s second parallel statement is no less remarkable: *and he who has lost His life (“psuche”) for My sake will find it.* The person *who* forfeits *his* “psuche” and all his earthly ambitions *for the sake* of Jesus and His kingdom *will find his* “psuche” and the satisfying purpose for which he was created. If we renounce our claims for this *life* and seek first Jesus and His Kingdom and righteousness all these things will be added unto us (Matthew 6:33). This is the paradox to self-discovery and fulfillment.

And the key phrase of this paradox is *for My sake*. Everyone will lose *his* “psuche” in one way or another. The questions Jesus puts before His disciples are in which pursuit will it be lost and what will you get in return for losing it? Will you lose your “psuche” with God in pursuit of vain glory and finite commodities of short-lived earthly kingdoms? Or will you abandon and lose the world’s short-sighted ambitions by setting them aside and live your *life for My sake*? What will your soul have to show for itself during your time on this earth? Will it find fulfillment from knowing and walking alongside God by faith despite the trials and rebuke of men? Or will it forget itself and the purpose God created it for in exchange for earthly treasures where moth and rust destroy (Matthew 6:19)?

If we must lose our “psuche,” let us *lose it for Jesus’s sake*, so that we may *find it*, instead of squandering it in this once-in-an-eternity opportunity to know and love God by faith (I Peter 1:6-9).

Jesus shared this paradox often, that we gain our life by losing it (Matthew 16:24-25; Mark 8:34-36; Luke 9:23-24; John 12:25). Christ’s frequent retelling, coupled with the fact that all four gospels record some version of this saying, underscore its importance.

This paradoxical admonition to *find* ourselves (in Christ) by losing ourselves (apart from Christ) echoes the core lesson of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes presents *life* as “hebel,” a Hebrew word that means “vaporous.” Solomon tells us that if we try to figure out the “hebel” of *life* using our own understanding, the result will be madness, folly, and evil. On the other hand, if we admit our limitations, and trust God instead of our own capacities, and follow His commands, then we find peace, happiness, and wisdom. In similar fashion, Jesus tells His followers that if we want to *find* all that this *life* has to offer, we must start by giving up the idea that we can secure that on our own, following our own ways. It is only by following Jesus’s ways with full dedication that we can acquire that for which we most deeply long.

## **Biblical Text**

**And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it.**