

Get Behind Me

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Text: Matt 16:21-28

As I am weighing these verses in my mind, I am recalling several other verses that may have some bearing. The exhortation of Philippians 4 to meditate on things noble and lovely, to fill our minds with the things of God, comes first in line. Then the declaration of control in 2 Corinthians 10 - *We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ* (2 Cor 10:5). And I think of the Proverbs admonition to guard the heart. And I grew up hearing the misquote, *For as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he* (Prov. 23:7 KJV). We have talked about it from time to time, that we must control our thoughts, at least partly by what we choose for entertainment and education. The input determines the output. What we think about and what we fill our minds with affects the whole of our lives and our behavior. So, our thought life is important, and this will come to bear a bit later on as we examine the text.

I have told you, also, that the largest portions of the gospels are narratives of the last week of Jesus' earthly life, beginning with the Triumphal Entry, continuing through the passion, the cross, and the resurrection. John's account of these events begins in chapter 13, so 9 chapters out of 21 narrate these events. Six of Mark's sixteen chapters and five-and-a-half of Luke's 24 chapters are concerned with these events. Matthew begins in chapter 21, so the last one-quarter of Matthew's gospel is consumed with that period. But Matthew also narrates earlier sayings and events that point to that last week.

Three times, Matthew tells us, Jesus predicted to the disciples that he was going to die. We'll deal with them in turn, but the first such prediction comes in our text this morning. *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, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day raised to life.*

There's a ton to unpack here, but two or three things stand out. One is the use of the word *must*. He *must* go and suffer. He *must* be killed. Why must he? Are there not options? Jesus knew the Scriptures, and just a few weeks ago, on Easter Sunday, I recounted for you the earliest creed of the church, which Paul learned shortly after his conversion. 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 - *that Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures ... According to the Scriptures.* And I recounted for you then, the prophecies that pointed to these events, including Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. The Messiah was to be the Lamb of God, the perfect sacrifice for sin. The writer to the Hebrews spends a lot of time explaining what that meant. But one thing it meant was that Jesus must suffer and must die. And we should understand perfectly why that didn't make sense to his disciples.

Part of the reason it didn't make sense was what tradition had done to their expectations. They were looking for a conqueror to expel the Romans and set the people free. They were looking for a king to restore and reunite the Davidic kingdom. They were looking for a mighty man of war to lead an invincible army to wrest control of an earthly kingdom and set up Israel's golden age. And they had Scriptural reasons for their hopes. So, in their minds, the Messiah wouldn't be from Nazareth, would be from a royal lineage, and couldn't die, least of all a criminal's death at the hands of the enemy.

Then, too, that bit about being raised to life again. If the Messiah wasn't supposed to die, that didn't make sense from the start. And even if Jesus were to die, which they didn't believe for a moment, this resurrection business was completely irrational. And it appears that it didn't even register in their minds. They fixated on the suffering and death.

And so, Peter ...

I love Peter. He's so sure of himself, and at the same time so full of himself. And he demonstrates for us all the complexity of human nature. He's open to instruction and inspiration, as we learned last time. At the same time, he's closed to anything uncomfortable. He wants change, but he doesn't really like change – like almost every church board and congregation I've ever known. We need to change and grow, I've been told. But when we start making changes, they resist - "That's not what we meant!" And when we start to grow, as one dear lady said to me, "I don't feel like I know anyone anymore. There are too many new people."

I say that because, while Peter is perfectly happy for Jesus to be the Messiah, he doesn't really want Jesus to do the real work of the Messiah. Remember, inspired by the Holy Spirit, Peter declared Jesus to be *the Christ, the Son of the Living God*. But now, when Jesus tells him what the Messiah must do, what "Lamb of God" really means, Peter just can't take it. He takes Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. *Rebuke* is an interesting word. The Greek word means "to reprove, censure, or scold." A second meaning is "punish." It's what you do to a disruptive child, or to someone you know is wrong. It can also mean "put to silence." You tell them to stop, to be quiet, or scold them for telling lies or using bad language. In this context, I think "scold" is the best word. Peter began to scold Jesus for saying such things. The Messiah can't die. If you are the Messiah, such things as suffering and death can't happen to you. Stop talking like that. Seems kind of strange, doesn't it? Peter going from affirming the Messiah to scolding the Messiah. Yes, you are the Messiah; just don't go doing any of those Messiah things.

And Jesus turns on Peter. Again, this seems so strange to me. From a blessing a moment ago: "Bless are you Simon, son of Jonah," to a curse: "Get behind me, Satan!" And here, again, we need definition. The word and name "Satan" is from a Greek word meaning adversary or enemy. Satan, personified, is the enemy of God and of God's people. Satan stands against God's plan. Satan seeks to thwart and disrupt your relationship with God and God's work in your life. Satan is your enemy because he is God's enemy. Satan opposes the work of salvation. And a satanic spirit is anything that stands between you and Christ. Things that may be good in and of themselves may become satanic when they keep you from prayer, from the Scriptures, or from worship. Little League, for example, is a good thing that teaches children sportsmanship. But if Little League causes you to take your children out of church, it is satanic. It is the enemy of your child's soul. I

enjoy John Grisham thrillers. He's a good writer. But if I'd rather read a John Grisham novel than the Bible, that is satanic simply because it stands between me and God's word.

But the reason, here, that Jesus calls Peter *Satan*, is that Peter is now opposing the work of the Messiah. He's standing in the way of God's plan. Peter has now become an adversary or enemy of what Jesus intends to do. And why? Because he does "*not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.*" You want what you want. You want what is comfortable, and what fits your concept of the Messiah. You want an easy faith, a comfortable faith. You want a God who will cater to your needs, a God of prosperity and good health. You want a God who will make you happy. These are human concerns: safety, security, happiness, health, comfort, prosperity. And, in Peter's case, the human concern was for a Messiah who would come in glory, at the head of a mighty army to drive out the Romans, unite the nation under a Davidic king, and usher in a golden age of peace and prosperity. That's what they expected the Messiah to do.

But God is less concerned about your happiness and your health than he is about your holiness. The writer to the Hebrews declared, *Jesus suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood* (Heb 13:12). Jesus didn't come to make you happy; he came to reconcile you to God, to cleanse you of sin ... By the way, he came to cleanse you of sin, not just forgive you of it. He came to transform you, adopt you, make you a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. He did not come to prosper you but to purify you. He did not come to make you healthy but to make you holy. The concerns of God would lead Jesus to stand before Pilate, to suffer horribly, to die on a cross, and then (don't ever forget this), to rise victorious over sin, death, and hell. *That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared ...* Jesus did not come merely to die; he came to defeat death for us, to proclaim freedom to the captive.

Then Jesus explains kingdom priorities to the disciples. He points them to the concerns of God. Essentially, if we want to follow this Messiah, we must become like the Messiah. I've explained to you before the way disciples of a rabbi learned from their rabbi. They lived with him, ate at his table, slept in his house. If the rabbi had a limp, the disciple imitate the limp. If the rabbi had a lisp, the disciple lisped. The disciple dressed like his rabbi, ate the same food. The disciple become a copy of his rabbi, so much so that when we talk about the book of Isaiah being written by two different people, the distinction is so fine that we don't question the authority of the second half. Deutero-Isaiah is a disciple of Isaiah, writing at a different time but with the same heart and virtually the same vocabulary.

That means that if Jesus bears a cross, so must we. If Jesus endures torment, so must we. If Jesus is persecuted and maligned, we must be willing to accept persecution and insult in his name. "*Whoever wants to be my disciple, he says, must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*" The servant is not greater than his master, and if we are disciples of Jesus we cannot expect to be exempt from the treatment he received. But it's a trade-off: Jesus or the world.

That's the trade-off Jesus accused Peter of making – think the way God thinks, or think the way man thinks. Think as a kingdom citizen or think as a citizen of this world. Follow Christ or follow the world. Again, no one can serve two masters. We can't have divided loyalty, because at

some point we will be forced to choose one side against the other. Do you want eternal life in Christ, or do you settle for the temporal life of earth? *“For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.”*

I was commenting earlier about happiness and prosperity, the things we seek in this life. And the prosperity preachers would have you believe that earthly prosperity and kingdom citizenship are not only compatible but somehow the will of God. Nowhere in the Bible do I find that the will of God is your prosperity. Nowhere in the Bible do I find that the will of God is your happiness. I do find that the will of God for you is that you be holy (1 Thes 4:3). Will you exchange God's kingdom for prosperity and comfort on earth? What kind of trade-off is that?

It's like the experiment with a small child, where the adult places on a table in front of the child the choice of \$10,000 cash or a small package of candy. Which will the child choose? The candy every time, even though the money is of far greater value in the long run. The candy is temporary pleasure. The money is an investment. But when it comes to the world or the kingdom, we are often like the child, and choose the temporary pleasure of the world. We forfeit the kingdom for temporary happiness. *“What good will it do for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”* It's a child's choice.

But it really is our eternal destiny that is at stake, *“for the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory and with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.”* We make that far too broad, in my opinion. We lump all of our choices and all of the actions of a lifetime under this very small umbrella. The judgment will be based on this one choice: do you choose the candy or the cash? Do you choose happiness, or holiness? Do you choose the world, or do you choose Jesus and the kingdom of heaven? Like a highway junction, this choice determines the rest of the journey. Gain the world, or gain the kingdom.

One final note on verse 28 - *“Some of you will not taste death until ...”* The Gospels follow this statement with the Transfiguration, to which only Peter, James, and John were witnesses. They saw Christ in his glory. But it also points ahead to the resurrection, when they would see Jesus alive, and to his ascension, when they would see him rise to heaven. It is not a prediction that they would not die before the Second Coming, but only that they would see Jesus glorified.

Let me close with this: Jesus here offers Peter - and us - a choice, a fork in the road, so to speak. Do we concern ourselves with the heart of God, or with the things of man? Do we set our priorities to the kingdom of heaven or to the politics of earth? Do we follow Jesus, or do we seek our own way? Prosperity? Or, purity? Happiness? Or, holiness? The world? Or, the kingdom?

Let's make the right choice.