

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

January 8, 2017

**“Peter, You’re the Devil!”**

*“Jesus Said That?!” part 1*

Matthew 16:13-28

Happy New Year!

Before we dig into God’s Word this morning, I want to remind you of a fundamental truth: you are not alone. Some of you are thinking, “Well, that’s kind of obvious, Pastor.” But indulge me for a moment. Look around you. Notice those people around you. Why do we gather in this place? To do what we cannot do by ourselves. We worship God. We encourage each other. Together, we are the church, the bride of Christ. There is no such thing as an orphan Christian. Everything we do in this place at this time is meant to equip us for ministry in the world on the other six days of the week. That is why we are here, and that is why we need each other. So don’t just notice the people who are here: notice the ones who aren’t here, and tell them the same thing I told you. We need each other.

Would you please join me in prayer? Holy God, thank you for your salvation through your Son, Jesus Christ. Thank you for rescuing us from the darkness of our own sin and bringing us into the light of eternal life. Teach us, every moment of every day, to listen to your Holy Spirit and to follow your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Take these precious moments now and use them as you will. May our words and our meditations please you, O God, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

I recently read a blog called “50 reasons to be ashamed of Jesus.” It was written by an ex-Christian who had examined the saying of Jesus and determined

that no one in their right mind should follow a man who said such hard and difficult things as the Bible records him saying. While I disagreed with the author's conclusion, he did make a point: the Bible credits Jesus with some very difficult, challenging, and even awkward sayings. So I have decided to preach a series to examine some of them.

Many of these sayings are problematic if you take them literally. Therefore there is something I want to make clear: I do not interpret the Bible literally. It is much more serious to me than that. When I read a passage, I want to know as much as I can about the context in which it was written, what we think the original words meant, as well as what the application is in our modern society. I do not have all the answers, and there will be some that disagree with my interpretation. That's fine. But I won't resort to intellectual anarchy or laziness by assuming there is only one way to understand the words of Christ.

The first difficult saying of Jesus I chose might be familiar to you. It's found in Matthew 16:23, when Jesus says to his disciple Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" I am hoping that you do NOT normally call your best friend "the devil." So our task today is to examine this passage and find out what this meant to the disciples and what it means to us.

Context is crucial to understanding a passage, and this section in Matthew 16 is no different. The author tells us that Jesus and his disciples were traveling through Caesarea Philippi. Why? This city was built by Prince Philip, the son of King Herod, who named it after Tiberius Caesar and himself (according to the NIV Study Bible). It's a city of strategic political importance.

In this place, Jesus asked, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" Jesus used a classic rhetorical device. When you want to know what people really think

of you, ask them what “other people” are saying. They will give you their own opinion anyway!

Jesus’ question had huge political implications. It would be like strolling through the streets of Washington D.C. and asking, “Who do you think was the greatest American leader?” When Jesus asked about the Son of Man, he wasn’t referring to any ordinary person. “Son of Man” was a term used by the prophet Daniel to indicate a heavenly figure with power, glory, and authority in the end times. This was the title Jesus prominently used to describe himself in the gospels.

The disciples responded like enthusiastic students taking a multiple choice exam. They gave all the answers they could think of, hoping for partial credit. “John the Baptist! No, wait, Elijah. No, Jeremiah. A prophet. ‘E’ – none of the above?”

After Jesus had them warmed up, he asked them the real question. “Who do you say that I am?” See the transition here? Jesus made it personal. He wasn’t asking anything abstract. He wanted to know directly what the disciples thought.

This is the question we all have to answer for ourselves. Who is Jesus? Is he just a legend? A myth? A historical person of reasonable importance? A relic of the past? Or is he someone far, far greater?

It’s here that the conversation takes a serious turn. Peter, our hero, the brash disciple, blurts out: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Ding-ding-ding. Correct answer!

Jesus goes on to commend Peter. He calls him “petros” in Greek, which we translate as Peter, but its true meaning is “little rock.” It’s a play on words. Jesus

says he will build his church on “the rock”, or “petra” in Greek. A boulder. Bedrock. Peter’s confession is the rock – that Jesus is the Son of the Living God. When each of us makes this confession, we build up the kingdom of God. We build up the church. This is pretty amazing. Jesus says not even the gates of Hell – literally, death – can overcome the church. That’s powerful.

Jesus also says whatever Peter binds up or loosens on earth will be bound up or loosened in heaven. I believe that Jesus is saying that our actions have eternal consequences. Whenever we confess and help others know Jesus as Savior, they are brought into heaven with us. Yet when we withhold that witness from others, they are bound to the captivity of death and hell. Our words and our actions have huge consequences to ourselves and others.

Now, up to this point, it would appear that the conversation is going well. Peter and the disciples “get it.” The lesson has been learned. Jesus is the Messiah. Awesome. And then we reach that little phrase, “From this time on.” (Matt 16:21) It’s a turning point, not only in our passage, but in the entire gospel of Matthew. Jesus explains exactly what the Messiah has to do. Suffer at the hands of the Jewish leaders. Die. And be raised to life on the third day.

Ever had that moment when the teacher said, “Pay attention: These are the three questions that will appear on your final exam.” This is that moment for the disciples. They hear the first part – Jesus will suffer and die – and they tune out to the rest. It’s like the teacher’s voice in Peanuts. “Mah mah mah, mah mah mah mah. And that’s what will be on the test.” Peter stops listening to Jesus. Instead, in the most ironic of actions, Peter pulls Jesus aside to reprimand him. “What are you talking about, Jesus? No way will this ever happen to you!”

I've never told a teacher to their face, "You don't know what you're talking about. Let me teach you." What is Jesus supposed to say? "Oh my gosh, Peter, thank goodness I have you! What was I thinking? Of course, this whole plan is so silly! You're right. I won't die like God planned." No! Jesus sticks to his plan and tells Peter, "Get behind me, Satan." Sounds insulting, doesn't it? To quote an old movie, "Them's fightin' words."

*(Movie clip from Hook: Insults at dinner.)*

But this quote is not meant to insult Peter. Jesus and Peter don't get into a shouting match. What Jesus is really trying to do is to shock Peter awake with a hyperbole. The term "Satan", besides meaning the devil, means "accuser" or "adversary" (NIV Study Bible). Jesus is not really calling his friend the literal devil. He is making a point that all of us need to hear, and hear it well.

Look at the rest of verse 23. "You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." (Matt 16:23, NIV) Peter has just received authority, and what does he do with it? He tries to undo the whole premise of the kingdom of heaven, that is, Jesus' Messiahship. Jesus' death and resurrection are the foundation of the church, the foundation of the kingdom. Peter is trying to tear all that down.

My own translation of the rest of the passage is this: "Peter, don't be the devil. Don't trip me up. Get your mind off of human things. Look instead what God is doing. Do you really want to follow me? Then throw everything else away that you thought mattered. Forget yourself, be ready to die. If you try to grab all you can in this life, you'll waste it, but if you sacrifice your whole life for me, you will find real, eternal life. The world's riches are no exchange for your soul. Can you buy eternal life with money? No way! Look, I will return in full power and

glory with the very angels in heaven, and each person will receive what they have earned. This is the truth. You will see it for yourselves with your own eyes.”

(Matt. 16:23-28, my paraphrase)

Peter can't imagine someone he loves and respects so much going through something painful. Peter can't see that the God's plan for forgiveness, for salvation, involves suffering and death. He can't wrap his mind around something so terrible turning into something so good.

Is Peter really any different from us? Aren't there times when we think, "This is too inconvenient. This can't be God's will." We end up selling the grace of Christ as a cheap trinket, something that's really cute and good story, but it doesn't make a difference in the long term.

It pains me to admit this, but the church in North America is struggling to realize the full gospel. Jesus could very well say to each of us, "Get behind me, Satan. You're thinking of selfish, worldly things, instead of God's plans." Why do we give so little of our time, energy, and resources to God? Because we are trying to build up little kingdoms of our own.

"Get behind me, Satan."

You can't follow Jesus while walking in front of him. You cannot be both lord of your own life and follow Christ. You have to fully submit to him. Then the rest of your life will fall into order.

When we join the United Methodist Church as full members, each of us makes a promise to faithfully participate in the ministries of the church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness. (UMC Hymnal, page 38.) Why? Because our church is part of the kingdom of heaven that Jesus has

built with his own flesh and blood. It requires our full effort. When we fail to live up to that promise, we become a stumbling block, for ourselves and for others.

“Get behind me, Satan.”

Jesus is asking, “Are you all in? Are you willing to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me?” None of us should be surprised that he asks us this. Self-sacrifice is the standard expectation of every coach in every sport, every CEO in every business and non-profit, every leader in every organization in the world. Will you sacrifice your own selfish interests for the benefit of the whole? Why would Jesus ask for anything less than our very lives, when he gave up his own life to redeem us? We should be jumping, shouting, waving our hands, saying, “Yes, of course, Jesus, I will give up everything to follow you! I love you.”

“Who do you say that I am?”

No one can answer that question for you. It’s your choice. But if you say, as Peter did, “Jesus, you are the Son of the Living God,” then live like you mean it. Be willing to accept temporary inconvenience and suffering for the hope of eternal life. Be willing to deny yourself so that others can see the glory of God. Be willing to risk. Don’t be a stumbling block. Don’t be a Satan.

We know Peter learned his lesson, and the church flourished. And Peter gave us a final promise that I want to read to you in closing.

*1 Peter 2:4-12 (NIV)*

“As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says:

“See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone,  
and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

“The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,”  
and,

“A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”

May God give us all grace and courage to be building blocks, and not stumbling blocks, of the kingdom of heaven. Amen.

### Memory verse

Matthew 16:24 – “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Reflection questions

1. Think of the most insulting thing a friend ever called you. Why did they say it? How did you resolve the situation?
2. What is the most you have ever sacrificed for someone or something else? Time? Money? Did you achieve your goal?
3. Who do you say Jesus is? How does that affect your life?
4. What is something that has become a stumbling block in your relationship with Jesus? How can you work with him to remove it?
5. How can you live up to your promise to support the work of the kingdom at BCUMC with your prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness?