

**Matthew 16:21-26 + The Christian Lives Beneath the Cross + Series: What Does This Mean?
Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 19th Sunday after Pentecost + 15 October 2017**

What was Peter thinking? One moment Peter boldly confesses his faith and Jesus commends Peter. The next moment Peter rebukes Jesus for going to the cross and Jesus tells him, **“Get behind me, Satan!”** One moment he’s the rock of the disciples, the next he’s the stumbling block of Satan. How could Peter fall so quickly? What was he thinking?

To really understand how Peter got to that point, you need to go back earlier in the day. Jesus had taken some time away from the crowds and from the opposition of his enemies to teach his disciples. He asked them, **“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”** Popular opinion was mixed. Maybe he was John the Baptizer or an Old Testament prophet like Elijah or Jeremiah, but then Jesus asked his disciples, **“Who do you say that I am?”** (Matthew 16:13,17)

The disciples had seen that Jesus wasn’t just another prophet. He wasn’t even John the Baptizer—the one God sent to prepare the way for the Savior. No, Jesus was much more than that! He was God himself! So on behalf of the other disciples, Peter responded, **“You are the Christ, the son of the living God.”** (Matthew 16:16) What beauty in the clarity of that confession of faith! Peter’s confession showed their rock-solid trust in Jesus as their Savior.

Jesus commended Peter with glowing terms stating that his confession of faith would become the bedrock foundation of the Christian church and good news that would rescue souls from eternal death in hell. Clearly Peter and the disciples knew who Jesus was. He was God’s Anointed, the long-promised Messiah come to save his people, but dreams of glory and power started dancing in the disciples’ heads. “Will the Christ finally throw off Roman oppression and usher in an eternal world empire?” Some even started to wonder what their roles would be when Jesus took over.

...But Jesus began to speak of things they did not want to hear. Matthew recalls how **“Jesus began to point out to his disciples that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and be raised the third day.”** “Go to Jerusalem, Lord? That’s where your enemies are and there are rumors they want you dead. Suffer at the hands of your enemies and be killed like you’re just another criminal? That’s not what the Messiah is supposed to do! There’s no glory in suffering or in dying like some sacrificial lamb!” In the past, Jesus had not spoken so clearly of these things, so his candid words were shocking. They didn’t want to hear what Jesus was telling them.

So what was Peter thinking during all of this? Would he boldly display his faith by pulling out his Old Testament to remind them that suffering, death, and resurrection were the way that God had planned out our salvation through Jesus? Unfortunately, no. That’s not how Peter reacted. Peter the bedrock became Peter the stumbling block.

After Jesus had publicly commended him for his bold confession of faith, Satan started pumping up Peter’s pride. Dreams of glory running through his head matched those of the other disciples. Peter was just as shocked as the other disciples. “Surely the Master doesn’t need to endure all that! Not if I have to say anything about it!” Peter felt he had to set Jesus straight, so he again took it upon himself to act on behalf of the disciples. **“Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him, ‘Oh no, Lord! This will never happen to you!’”** Satan used Peter’s selfish sinful nature to take hold of his pride. Peter honestly did not want Jesus to face suffering or the cross or death, but he did want glory and power. Satan manipulated his good intentions making him a potential roadblock to the saving work of Jesus.

Of course, Jesus knew what Peter was thinking and who was manipulating. Jesus’ rebuke was sharp and instant. **“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me because you’re not thinking about God’s concerns but human concerns.”** Jesus had to stop Satan in his tracks if he was going to save Peter and all of humanity. There was no other way.

...But how could Peter put himself in such a compromised position? How could he fall so far so fast? How could he think such things? Didn’t he know better? Do we always know better? Wouldn’t you or I do the same thing? Don’t we often seek glory or success or power or victory for ourselves, for the church, even for Christ because we think that’s what’s better? “If only I made more money...” “If only I or my kids were involved in a few more activities...” “If only I were a better Christian...” “If only we were bigger...” “If only people just gave more...” “If only we could show people that we’re relevant and not so strict...” “Then we would have success as individuals,

as a family, as a church! Then we would have real glory and nothing could stop us! Then the world would listen to us! Then we could do so much more!” Or so we think.

Such good intentions. Such wonderful hopes and dreams, but whose dreams are they? Are these the concerns of God or human concerns? On occasion, our God does bless us with success at home, at work, at school, and even in the church. Yet do we sometimes find ourselves like Peter—seeking glory and success for all the wrong reasons, for reasons that are not so selfless? Do you ever find your sinful nature in the driver’s seat seeking what you want?

Jesus’ words are repulsive when he tells his disciples and us, **“If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”** Who wants to carry a cross? It’s heavy. It hurts. It cuts. It crushes. Who of us wants to see our Savior suffer? Who of us wants to suffer for being faithful to Jesus at the hands of others or our own sinful natures? Who of us wants to struggle or endure hardship because we follow Jesus? Rather than gladly bear that cross as Christ’s followers, we reject the cross. We try to throw it off. With the best of intentions, we seek success and glory for Christ, but in reality we seek glory for ourselves. We want to feel better about ourselves. We want to make life easier for ourselves. Like Peter, we deserve the same rebuke. **“Get behind me, Satan! ...You’re not thinking about God’s concerns but human concerns.”**

In the end, you get so caught up in it all that you’re willing to give up everything for what passes away. In reality, though, you endanger your soul. Jesus explains, **“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me will find it. For what will it benefit someone if he gains the whole world yet loses his life? Or what will anyone give in exchange for his life?”** Are the temporary glory, success, and ease of this life really worth eternal death and separation from God’s love in hell?

So why does Jesus want you to deny your self and take up your cross? Remember what Jesus told his disciples before Peter took it upon himself to speak. **“Jesus began to point out to his disciples that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and be raised the third day.”** In spite of our selfish glory-seeking, Jesus does the most unselfish thing anyone has ever done. He submits to the holy will of his heavenly Father. He goes to Jerusalem to face his enemies because it is necessary. He suffers many things and is killed because it is necessary. He is even raised from the dead on the third day because it is necessary. Jesus takes up his cross because it is necessary to save you and me from Satan and our sinful selves.

That changes everything. Not only was it necessary for Jesus to suffer many things, die on a cross, and rise again three days later in order to save you, but also to enable you to bear up under the cross. When it comes to the things you endure for Christ’s sake, he is there beneath the cross helping you bear them with his grace. Beneath hardship for his sake, Jesus comforts you. Beneath need, which causes your sinful nature to howl, Jesus gives you everything. Beneath ridicule for his sake, Jesus gives you security. Beneath the turbulence of your life, Jesus gives you peace. Beneath pressure from the world around you or your sinful nature within you, Jesus gives you relief. Beneath the guilt of your sin, Jesus forgives you so you can daily reject your sinful self, take up your cross again, and follow him.

We live beneath the cross because Jesus bore the cross for us first, but he didn’t stay dead. That’s one detail that all the disciples seemed to miss...and one we often miss. They were so focused on their selfish loss of glory or on their well-intentioned concern for their Teacher, that they completely missed the glory he did promise. Yes, there would be suffering and plenty of it. Yes, there would be humiliating death. Yes, there would be a cold tomb with his dead corpse inside. All those things would happen, but on the third day, Jesus had to rise from the dead. He had to live again so we would live forever.

There’s no way you or I can follow Jesus beneath the cross if he had not risen from the dead himself. We would be utterly crushed. We would be dead in our sins, but our merciful God did not want that to happen. No, he raised Jesus from the dead to give us the eternal victory he won over death. He raised Jesus so one day he could personally remove the cross from your shoulders and give you eternal rest in the glories of heaven.

Eventually Peter got it. In his later years, he rejoiced that he had the privilege to follow Jesus beneath the cross because by grace he would receive the crown of eternal life. When the burden of the cross that you bear grows heavy, when you wonder if you can even take one more step, consider Peter’s words to believers like you beneath the cross. **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you... You rejoice in this, even though now for a short time, if necessary, you suffer grief in various trials so that the proven**

character of your faith—more valuable than gold...may result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 1:3,4,6,7) Glory awaits those who faithfully bear the cross and follow Jesus to the end. With Christ’s gracious help beneath the cross, we travel on. Amen.