

Matthew 16:20-25

Introduction

We have just reached a high point in Matthew's Gospel. "[Jesus] asked His disciples: 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and other Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'" Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'" Jesus is not simply one of the prophets, He is not one among many, He is not a forerunner preparing the way. He is the Christ, the Messiah, the promised son of David and deliverer of God's people. He is the royal "son of the living God" – the one that Israel has been waiting for! In all of His preaching and teaching, Jesus has never once claimed any of these titles for Himself. And yet Peter, having listened to Jesus' preaching and teaching, and having understood the meaning of His miracles, *now for the very first time* confesses Jesus to be *the Messiah*. What a dramatic moment this is! It's full to the brim of significance and meaning!

"And Jesus answered [Peter], 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter (Petros), and on this rock [petra] I will build my church [my "assembly"], and the gates of [death] shall not prevail against it.'" And so now things have built to an even bigger crescendo! What is this "assembly" that the Messiah is going to build? It is the rebuilt and restored Israel promised in the Old Testament. It is the eschatological, end times assembly of the Messiah, the Son of the living God! It is the Church. And so Jesus goes on to say to Peter:

"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." As Peter proclaims the good news about the promised Messiah, he will be exercising the power and authority of the keys. In Peter's mouth, the word of the kingdom will be powerful to *do* and to *accomplish* all that it proclaims – to *open* the doors of the kingdom to those who believe and to *shut* the doors of the kingdom against those who refuse to believe!

This is all so unbelievably big and far-reaching. It's all so very dramatic! So what are we waiting for? Is it finally *time*? We said that the climax of verses 13-19 was setting us up for a major *transition*. Isn't it clear now what this transition will be? It's time for the kingdom to be consummated and fulfilled. It's time for the Messiah to take up His throne on the earth and establish His rule over the nations! It's time for the kingdom to come in all of its power and glory! And if we didn't already know better after two thousand years of history, that's exactly what we'd be thinking. But no sooner has Peter finished confessing Jesus to be the Messiah, and no sooner has Jesus said that He will build His Messianic assembly and grant to Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven, than we read *these* words in verse twenty:

I. Matthew 16:20 – Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

That is, "He strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the *Messiah*." So after all of the drama, this is what we get next! A *strict* order to keep the good news under wraps. But He *is* the Messiah, isn't He? And if He is, shouldn't this good news be proclaimed and shouted from

the mountain tops? What have the disciples arrived at this understanding *for*, if not to pass it on now to others? Can you begin to see what a “let down” this verse appears to be after the drama and the excitement of verses 13-19? *Why*? How are we to make *sense* of this? Verse twenty-one answers this question:

II. Matthew 16:21 – From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

Take a moment to let that register – or an hour, or a year, or a whole *lifetime*. Through sixteen chapters in Matthew Jesus has vaguely hinted at such things, but He has *never* come out and said it, like He says it now. After all of the time that we have been in Matthew... after all of the time that we have spent with Jesus, how do you respond to something like this? Matthew says that Jesus began to “*show*” His disciples. This means that Jesus has now moved from those occasional vague hints to more regular statements that are explicit and clear (cf. 17:12, 22-23; 20:17-19). But why the sudden change?

Matthew says: “*From that time, Jesus began to show his disciples...*” From what time? From the time that Peter “got it”. From the time that Peter, for all of the disciples, had confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Before that time, the news that Jesus would suffer and die at the hands of the Jewish high court in Jerusalem, would have been too much for the disciples. Likely, they would have become disillusioned and left off following Jesus. At the very least, they would never have come to the point of confessing Jesus to be *the Messiah*. But *now*, through divine revelation, the disciples *have* come to understand that Jesus *is* the Messiah. And so *now*, Jesus must begin the task of helping His disciples to see that the *Messiah* must *suffer* many things, and be *killed*, and on the third day be *raised*. Peter has declared that Jesus is the Messiah. Now Jesus must clarify what His mission as the Messiah is going to require (cf. France).

Notice that Jesus says He “*must*” go to Jerusalem. The Greek here could also be translated: “Jesus began to show His disciples that *it was necessary* for Him to go to Jerusalem.” It is necessary, Jesus says, because it is *God’s will*. Later on in Matthew we’ll see that God had revealed this will even in the Scriptures of the Old Testament. It had all been foretold long years in advance. It was necessary for the Messiah to go to Jerusalem because apart from the **Messiah’s death**, the doors of His kingdom could never be opened to anyone – not even to Peter.

But this is such a strange and unnatural way of thinking. To the disciples, a suffering Messiah was an unthinkable contradiction in terms – especially when this suffering was to be at the hands of their own religious leaders, and especially when it was to end in the **Messiah’s death**. The idea of such a *suffering Messiah* just didn’t exist in their world. And so we begin to understand, when we read in verse twenty-two:

III. Matthew 16:22 – And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.”

Now Peter is the one who has just confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God. So perhaps he feels betrayed. How can his confession of Jesus as the Messiah be followed immediately by the announcement of Jesus' suffering and death? Peter is in a complete state of shock and total denial. And so being carried away by his emotions, he takes Jesus aside and actually begins to *rebuke* him. And even though he does address Him respectfully as "Lord", his rebuke is about as emphatic and strong as it could possibly be. "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall *never* happen to you." Can't you hear the conviction, and even the vehemence in Peter's voice? What Peter actually uses here is a double negative, and so we could translate something like this: "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall *in no way* and *by no means* happen to you." There is an emotional intensity here in Peter's words that we probably can't even begin to understand. So we see that just the thought of the **Messiah's** *execution* has made Peter totally *incapable* of hearing anything about "resurrection". One day, when he has the advantage of hindsight, he'll remember *all* of what Jesus said – *even* the part about resurrection. But right now, he simply can't get past the suffering and the being killed. The **Messiah!** It's inappropriate! It's not right! *It's simply not possible!!!* Peter's mind is absolutely made up. "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall *in no way* and *by no means* happen to you... (you are the Messiah, the royal Son of the living God!)" And which one of us would not have been thinking exactly the same thoughts if we were in Peter's shoes? If we're not careful, even now we could find ourselves getting caught up in Peter's passion and conviction.

IV. Matthew 16:23 – But [Jesus] turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a ["stumbling block"] to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

What Jesus is saying is that Peter's way of thinking—*our way of thinking*—is a reflection of the diabolical schemes of Satan himself. We might ask: "Is it really that bad?" And the answer is, "Yes, it *is!*" Peter, who is one day to be the rock upon which the Messiah builds His assembly, is now a rock of stumbling that must be taken out of the Messiah's way. Matthew says that Peter "*began*" to rebuke Jesus, but he didn't get far. Jesus immediately and very decisively cuts him off once and for all, and for good. "Get behind me, *Satan!*" On the one hand, Jesus will give no room to temptation. Not for a single moment will Jesus entertain even the thought of another, easier way. And if Jesus responded to sin's temptation with such "violence", then how much more should we, who are sinners by nature? And yet we dabble, and we flirt, and we toy with sin, and think that it won't affect us, and that we can somehow remain unscathed. We need to replace such foolish thoughts with the example of Jesus here in Matthew 16. Lenski writes: "Here is an example for us who frequently dally with the serpent and then find his poisonous fangs lodged in us."

But there was another reason that there could be no room here for the soft touch or the "kid gloves" when Jesus responded to Peter. Jesus knew how very *deeply rooted* and how very *thoroughly ingrained* in Peter were his thoughts about the complete and total *foolishness* of a "*suffering Messiah*." That's why at this point there was *nothing more important* than disabusing Peter of this notion. Peter *must* come to understand that even for the **Messiah** Himself, the path to glory is *suffering and death*. So what seems to be the harshness of Jesus' words is actually an expression of love and compassion. If Peter cannot come to understand this truth, then he will live the rest of his life in total disillusionment and despair. Because the point here is not just the

suffering and death of the Messiah, but also the suffering and death of *all* who follow the Messiah. This would not have been hard for Peter to see, and yet Jesus goes on to make it very clear:

V. **Matthew 16:24** – Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

What Jesus means is very simple: We must be prepared and ready at all times to suffer and to die even as *He* did. Sometimes we comfort ourselves with the thought that we are not given the grace for that which we have not yet been called to face. But as true as this may be, we must still live even today as those who by the grace of God are, indeed, willing to suffer and to die for Jesus. One day, Jesus will say to Peter:

✓ **John 21:18-19** – Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.”

If the lot of the Messiah is to be suffering and death, then the lot of the Messiah’s *assembly* will also be suffering and death. And it’s only when Peter can accept this idea of a *suffering Messiah* and a *suffering assembly* that he can know the true power and comfort of Jesus’ promise: “I will build my assembly, *and the gates of [death] shall not prevail against it.*” The *reason* that’s so profound, and so wonderful, and so encouraging is because the Messiah *will* suffer and die, and the Messiah’s followers will also face suffering and death. But this suffering and death will *not* be a defeat, but rather the path to triumph, and victory, and glory. If the Messiah’s *death* is to be followed by *resurrection*, then He can also say to all of *us*:

VI. **Matthew 16:25** – For *whoever* would save his life will lose it, *but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

Peter just wasn’t able to accept this – at least not yet. It seemed inside out, and upside down, and all backwards. Because, of course, our thoughts are not God’s thoughts, and our ways are not God’s ways. And none of that is innocent. Peter’s mind was still set on the things of man, and not the things of God. That’s why he was not yet ready to proclaim the good news that Jesus was the Messiah. He still needed to understand the kind of Messiah that Jesus had come to be – a *suffering* Messiah who would die for the sins of His people – including the sins of Peter. Peter still needed to understand the kind of assembly that the Messiah had come to build – a *suffering* assembly that must lose its life in order to find it.

Conclusion

Are *we* thinking the thoughts of God or the thoughts of man? There is such a vast chasm between the two! Our thoughts are *not* God’s thoughts. Our ways are *not* God’s ways. The difference here is so great that Peter even dared to *rebuke* the one that he just confessed to be the Messiah! The difference is so great that Jesus was “forced” to respond to Peter with some of the strongest

language imaginable: “Get behind me *Satan!* You are a stumbling block to me.” Can you imagine any two ways of thinking being any more opposed to each other?

Next Sunday is the beginning of Passion Week – which is the week of the Messiah’s *suffering* and *death*. Now maybe to us the idea of a *suffering* Messiah doesn’t seem so backwards, and upside down, and inside out anymore. That may be. But then let’s not forget this Passion week that a suffering Messiah means a suffering *church*. A Messiah that is killed means a church that must also lose its life. What does that mean for our pursuits and agendas here on earth? What does that mean for how we expect to be treated by the world? Are we thinking God’s thoughts or man’s thoughts?

Remember the Peter who took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Him for saying that He must suffer many things and be killed? “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” Thirty years later this same Peter wrote a letter to the church, and the theme of his letter was this: ***Hope and joy*** in the face of ***suffering and death***. What a transformation! As one who would soon be executed for his own faith, Peter sat down one day, and he took up his pen, and these are the words that he wrote down:

- ✓ 1 Peter 2:18-22 – This is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For *to this you have been called*, because Christ [Messiah] also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.

The same Peter who was once so shocked and appalled at the *mere idea* of a *suffering Messiah* would later write these words:

- ✓ 1 Peter 4:12-13 – Beloved, *do not be surprised* at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, *as though something strange were happening to you*. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s [Messiah’s] sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

Will we be surprised and think it strange, or will we rejoice? Are we thinking God’s thoughts or man’s thoughts? This Easter season, we need to remember that Jesus didn’t just suffer and die *for us*, He suffered and died to leave us an *example*, so that we might *follow in His steps*. He suffered and died so that *we might share* in His *sufferings*. He rose from the dead so that those who have ***lost their lives*** for His sake might find them. This Easter season, may God help us to think His thoughts. If Jesus suffered, so must we. If the Messiah suffered, so must His assembly. And so Jesus calls each one of us to take up our own cross of suffering and follow in His steps – even to death.