

"You are the Devil!"
"Jesus Said That?!" part 1

Matthew 16:13-28

[64] 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. 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. We need each other. I implore you, don't just notice the people who are here: notice the ones who aren't here, and tell them the same thing. We need each other.

Would you please join me in prayer? Holy God, 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.

[65] I once 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.

Many of these sayings are problematic if you take them strictly literally. Therefore there is something I want to make clear: that is not how I interpret the Bible. 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 to us today. I do not have all the answers; it's OK if you disagree with my interpretation, as long as you are willing to do the hard work, too. I simply won't assume there is only one way to understand the words of Christ.

[66] The first difficult saying of Jesus we encounter might be familiar. 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.” Why would Jesus say that to his own disciple, and what might Jesus say to us today?

[67] Context is crucial to understanding a passage, and Matthew 16 is no different. The author tells us that Jesus and his disciples were traveling through Caesarea Philippi. That 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 was 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. (Daniel 7) This was the title Jesus prominently used to describe himself.

[68] 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! Umm, Jeremiah! Err, a prophet? How about E) none of the above”?

After Jesus had them warmed up, he asked them the real question. “OK, but who do you say that I am?” Jesus made it personal. He wasn’t asking an abstract or rhetorical question. He wanted to know what the disciples thought.

We all have to answer this question 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?

[69] Now the conversation takes a serious turn. Peter, 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. Jesus names 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.” Not a skipping stone, but a boulder or solid bedrock. The rock is Peter’s confession itself – 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.

[70] Now, up to this point, the conversation is going well. Peter and the disciples “get it”. The lesson is 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.

[71] Did you ever have a 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 the rest. It’s like the teacher’s voice in Peanuts. “Wah wah wah, wah wah wah wah. And that’s what will be on the test.” Peter stops listening to Jesus. Instead, with great irony, 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.”

[72] I don’t believe Jesus’ intent is 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. The term “Satan” also means “accuser” or “adversary” (NIV Study Bible). Jesus is not really calling his friend the literal devil. Jesus is making a point that all of us need to hear, and hear it well: Do not become so arrogant that you completely miss what the gospel is all about.

Look at the rest of verse 23. Jesus says to Peter, "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 and Jesus' Messiahship. Jesus' death and resurrection are the foundation of the gospel! Peter would try to tear all that down.

His reaction is natural, in a way. Peter can't imagine someone he loves and respects going through something painful. Peter can't see how God's plan for forgiveness and salvation involves suffering and death. Peter can't wrap his mind around something so terrible turning into something so good.

[73] 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 a good story, as long as it doesn't interfere with our own plans.

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? Why do we try to build up little kingdoms of our own?

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.

[74] 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.) 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 commit to that promise, we become a stumbling block, for ourselves and for others.

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.”

[75] “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 you must be willing to 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 devil.

We know Peter learned his lesson, and the church flourished. And Peter himself even gave us this final promise.

[76] “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.....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. (1 Peter 2:4-5, 9 NIV)

[77] I don’t want to be a stumbling block. I don’t want to live for myself. I don’t want to be a devil. I hope you feel the same. I hope you see that the salvation Jesus offers every one of us is worth more than the riches of the entire world. May God give all of us the grace and courage to be building blocks, and not stumbling blocks, of the kingdom of heaven.

Let’s pray.

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
Grace UMC with your prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness?