

# Teachings of Jesus

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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## Jesus' Teaching in the Gospel of Matthew (Part VI)

### 16:1-4, Sadducees and the Pharisees join forces; the sign of Jonah (again!)

Then the Pharisees and Sadducees: These two groups working together show a deep fear among the religious leaders of the day. The Sadducees and Pharisees were actually long-standing enemies, and the fact that they came together against Jesus shows they regarded Him as a serious threat. Perhaps we should not be surprised, then, when it seems that so much of the world today stands against the Person and Gospel of Jesus Christ, even when those factions war against each other, too!

- The Pharisees lived a life of observance of the smallest points of both oral tradition (remember the "Tradition of the Elders" from chapter 15) and scribal law; the Sadducees considered only the written word of the Hebrew Scriptures to be authoritative, yet had peculiar and specific teaching about them
- The Pharisees believed in angels and the resurrection; the Sadducees did not (Paul used this division in Acts 23)
- The Pharisees were not a political party per se, and were willing to live under any government that would leave them alone to practice their religion the way they wanted to; the Sadducees were rather aristocratic and were willing to collaborate (collude, perhaps?!) with the Romans to keep their wealth and power
- The Pharisees looked for and longed for the Messiah; the Sadducees did not, seeking instead to make the most of life in this world

And testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven: They were not convinced by the signs "on earth" Jesus had already done. You may recall that Jesus had already been asked for a sign in Matthew 12, and in response He had already pointed them to the sign of Jonah. Tradition held that a sign done on earth could be a counterfeit from Satan, but signs done from heaven (coming in or from the sky) were assumed to be from God.

You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times: Jesus condemns their hypocrisy. They felt confident about predicting the weather from the signs they saw around them, but were blind to the signs regarding Jesus' Messianic credentials right before their eyes. The proof that they cannot discern the "signs" is that they *ask for a sign!*

No sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah: Jesus promises *the* sign that would have power to bring people to faith – His resurrection. He had previously mentioned the sign of the prophet Jonah in Matthew 12:39-41, clearly explaining it as His coming resurrection.

### **16:5-12, Jesus cautions the disciples against false teaching**

Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees: We noted previously in the parable of the leaven (Matthew 13) that leaven is consistently used as a picture of sin and corruption (especially in the Passover narrative of Exodus 12:8, 12:15-20). It was a common Jewish metaphorical expression for an evil influence.

We brought no bread: This seems an odd analysis or concern after Jesus had, just recently, miraculously fed crowds 5,000+ and 4,000+. Yet it seems the disciples missed the point completely, and didn't understand Jesus here, or His use of "leaven" as a metaphor.

But Jesus, aware of this.... Then they understood....: So Jesus gets that they don't get it, and teaches them, impressing the importance of being on guard against false teaching, especially teaching in the service of self-righteousness religious hypocrisy. Are there any lessons for us here?

### **16:13-20, Peter's great confession**

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi: Jesus again withdrew from the mainly Jewish region of Galilee and came to a place more populated by Gentiles. Perhaps as a retreat from the always-pressing crowds. According to Barclay:

*"Caesarea Philippi lies about twenty-five miles [46 kilometers] north-east of the Sea of Galilee...The population was mainly non-Jewish, and there Jesus would have peace to teach the Twelve."*

Who do people say that the Son of Man is? Jesus asks this question as an introduction to the more important follow-up question. It's not that he truly didn't know what people were saying about Him; this question was asked to set up His disciples to consider very deeply who He was – Who He had *become* – to them.

Caesarea Philippi provided a great setting to ask this question. It was an area rich with idols and associated with various deities. Barclay once again:

*“The area was scattered with temples of the ancient Syrian Baal worship... Hard by Caesarea Philippi there rose a great hill, in which was a deep cavern; and that cavern was said to be the birthplace of the great god Pan, the god of nature... In Caesarea Philippi there was a great temple of white marble built to the godhead of Caesar... It is as if Jesus deliberately set himself against the background of the world's religions in all their history and splendour, and demanded to be compared to them and to have the verdict given in his favour.”*

Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others...: Those who thought that Jesus was John the Baptist didn't know much about Him *or* the Baptist, not realizing that Jesus and John had ministered publicly at the same time! Yet John, Elijah, and Jeremiah (along with other prophets) were national reformers who stood up to the corrupt rulers of their day.

Perhaps in seeing Jesus in these roles, people were hoping for a political messiah who would overthrow the Roman powers currently oppressing Israel.

Ironically, as heroic as those hopeful guesses might be, the tendency in all these incorrect answers was to underestimate Jesus; to give Him a measure of respect, honor, and even glory, and yet fall far short of honoring Him for who He really is.

Who do you say that I am? This is the question answered by what we believe, by what we say, and by what we do.

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God: Peter knew that the opinion of the crowd, while complimentary towards Jesus, wasn't adequate or accurate. Jesus was much more than John the Baptist or Elijah or a prophet,

more than a reformer, or even a miracle worker. Jesus is a Singularity; He is the Christ, the Messiah.

Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven: This understanding is something that Peter and the other disciples came to over time as a result of what they heard and saw and experienced, but it was also supernatural. In the beginning, they were attracted to Jesus as a remarkable and unusual rabbi. They committed themselves to Him as His disciples or students, as was practiced in that day. Over time, Peter – and presumably the other disciples – understood that Jesus was in fact not only the Messiah (the Christ), but also the Son of the living God. To receive the title “the Son of the living God,” in a unique sense, was to make a claim to deity itself.

So Jesus *reveals* to Peter that he spoke accurately here *by divine inspiration*, even if he didn’t even know it at the time! In this, Peter was genuinely blessed, both by the insight itself and how it came to him.

This also speaks to our need for a supernatural revelation of Jesus. Our faith is not a product of cognitive processes reaching a logical conclusion based on evidence, inference, and/or observation, even though all those things may be part of our experience of that faith. Faith is given by God. The Author of faith is God. The Perfector of faith is God. The substance of faith is God.

We can only speak accurately of Jesus and our faith the exact same way Peter did, *by divine inspiration*, even if we don’t know it at the time!

And I tell you, you are Peter: This was not only recognition of Peter’s Greco-Roman name (Πέτρος, “Petros”); it was also a promise of *God’s work* in Peter; binding that confession of who Jesus is to Peter’s heart. The name Peter means “Rock.” Though perhaps an unlikely one, Peter was, and would further become, a rock. God would indeed transform Peter’s natural character into a solid and reliable rock of faith.

On this rock I will build My church: The words “this rock” (ταύτη τῆ πέτρα, “petra”) have been the source of much controversy. It is best to see them as referring to either Jesus Himself (picture Jesus gesturing to Himself as He said this), or as referring to Peter’s confession of who Jesus is. Either way, the heart of “the rock” is Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, and

not Peter, the man. Peter, notably, never considered himself as the rock on which the church was built. He said as much in 1 Peter 2:4-5:

*Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

I will build My church: This is the first use of the word church (ἐκκλησία, “ekklesia”) in the New Testament. This was well before the beginnings of what we normally think of as the beginning of the church on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2.

The Greek word ekklesia was not an exclusively religious word at all; it just meant “group”, or a “called-out group”, in other words a group called together for a specific purpose. It’s interesting and perhaps instructive that Jesus chose to use this word, and not “synagogue” (συναγωγή) as one might have expected, since synagogue has very religious (and Jewish) meaning!

Taken together, Jesus’s statement here is quite amazing:

- Jesus is the architect: I will build...
- Jesus builds His church on faith: On this rock I will build...
- Jesus takes complete ownership of it: I will build My church...
- Jesus builds it as a fortress: ...Hades shall not prevail against it

...And the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it: This is a valuable and comforting promise in dark or discouraging times for the church.

And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven: In artistic representations, Peter is frequently shown with keys because of this verse. It’s also the basis for the popular image of Peter standing at the “Pearly Gates”, allowing people to enter or turning them away. And of course, the Papal insignia of the Roman Catholic Church is made up of two prominent keys crossed together.

Peter indeed had a special place among all the disciples:

- He is always listed first in the listings of the disciples
- He opened doors of the kingdom to the Jews in Acts 2:38-39
- He opened doors of the kingdom to the Gentiles in Acts 10:34-44
- He is called out for denying Christ at the time of His Passion, as well as for his repentance for that denial, and for receiving forgiveness
- He is the only one of Jesus's inner circle disciples called out by another apostle -- Paul -- as being in error with regard to his relationship with Judaizers

There is no Biblical argument that Peter's privilege, authority, guilt, or anything else, was passed on directly from man to man. Jesus is handing the keys to His apostles, or perhaps more broadly, the community of those who share the confession – and gift of faith – that Peter had just confessed.

And whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven: The language Jesus uses here - power for binding and loosing - is something that the Jewish rabbis of that day used. They bound or loosed an individual in the application of a particular point of the law. Jesus promises that Peter – *and the other apostles* – would be responsible for setting the boundaries authoritatively for the church – the New Covenant community, and we do indeed see James and others apostles doing just that in Acts and in the epistles of the New Testament.

Jesus followed up after His resurrection, before His ascension into heaven, in John 20:22-23:

*And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."*

Sometimes visitors (shoot, even members!) in a Lutheran worship service are surprised or uncomfortable to hear our Pastor(s) saying: *"Upon this your confession, I, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God to all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."*

The Lutheran Confessions rather succinctly help us understand why our pastors can and should say those words: “It is not the voice or word of the man who speaks it, but it is the Word of God, who forgives sin, for it is spoken in God’s stead and by God’s command” (Augsburg Confession XXV.3)

Some churches teach that such permission and authority were given by Jesus only to the first-generation apostles, to make such rulings for the early church. However, nothing in scripture leads us to that conclusion, and that interpretation takes the focus of Jesus’ words away from the faith and His power, and puts it on the historical context and man’s role, which clearly was not His intent here, or in John 20.

He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ: Jesus was pleased that His disciples were coming to know who He was, but He still didn’t want the fullness of His identity widely spread before the proper time. His disciples were just now ready to understand and accept this truth; the rest of the multitudes, and certainly the religious authorities, not so much!

### **16:21-23, Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection**

He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things...and be killed: This must have come as quite a shock to His disciples. After fully understanding that Jesus was the Messiah, the last thing they expected was the Messiah would “suffer many things” and be killed.

But this was in fact the predicted work of the Messiah; He must die and be raised from death on the third day (Isaiah 53:3-12). Why? Two reasons: man’s sin, and God’s love. While Jesus’ death would be the ultimate punishment of man’s sin against God, it was also the supreme expression of God’s love for man.

And be raised the third day: The disciples may have been so shocked that Jesus said He would be have to be killed in Jerusalem that these words about being raised may not have sunk in! Remember, an angel later (at the tomb) had to remind them of these words.

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him: Peter had the *chutzpah* to rebuke Jesus. Peter did it privately (“took Him aside”), yet was confident

enough to tell Jesus that He was wrong to consider going to Jerusalem to be killed. So, let's review:

- Peter confesses Jesus as the Messiah
- Jesus praises (and renames) Peter, telling him that God revealed this to him
- Jesus tells of His impending suffering, death, and resurrection
- Peter feels he has the authority or right to tell Jesus he's wrong about what's coming in the future

Is that inappropriate boldness, or just plain crazy? Well, either way, Peter has this coming to him:

Get behind Me, Satan! This was a strong, harsh, extreme rebuke from Jesus, and *entirely* appropriate. Just a moment before, Peter (somewhat unknowingly) spoke as a messenger of God, he then spoke (fully unknowingly) as a messenger of Satan. Jesus knew there was a satanic purpose in discouraging Him from going to his death on the cross, and He would not allow that purpose to succeed.

Certainly, Peter was not aware that he was speaking for Satan, just as a moment before he was not aware that he spoke for God. Perhaps it is sometimes much easier to be a tool of God *or of the devil* than we want to believe! Barclay makes a very interesting observation about this rebuke:

*“Origen suggested that, Jesus was saying to Peter: ‘Peter, your place is behind me, not in front of me. It is your place to follow me in the way I choose, not to try to lead me in the way you would like me to go.’”*

You are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men: Jesus exposed how Peter came into this satanic way of thinking. *He didn't make a deliberate choice to reject God and embrace Satan*; he simply let his mind settle on the things of men instead of the things of God, and Satan took advantage of it. Peter is a perfect example of how a sincere heart coupled with man's thinking can often lead to disaster. In fact, Peter's rebuke of Jesus is an example of the leaven of the Pharisees mentioned in earlier in this chapter! With his mind on the things of men, Peter only saw the Messiah as the embodiment of power and strength, instead of as a suffering servant. Because Peter couldn't handle a suffering Messiah, he rebuked Jesus.

## **16:24-28, Take Up Your Cross and Follow Jesus**

Deny himself, and take up his cross: This section contains echoes from chapter 10. Everybody knew what Jesus meant when He said this. The cross wasn't about religious ceremonies, traditions, or spiritual feelings. The cross was a Roman way to execute people.

*“Every Christian must be a Crucian, said Luther, and do somewhat more than those monks that made themselves wooden crosses, and carried them on their back continually, making all the world laugh at them.”* (Trapp)

Jesus makes “deny himself” equal with “take up his cross”. The two express the same idea. The cross wasn't about self-promotion or self-affirmation. The person carrying a cross knew they couldn't save themselves.

Denying self is not the same as self-denial. We practice self-denial when, for a good purpose, we occasionally give up things or activities, as we customarily do for Lent. But we *deny self* when we surrender ourselves and our lives to Christ and trust our fate to His will; when we recognize that we cannot lead Him as Peter tried to do, that He always leads us.

“Denying self” shows itself most brightly when we live an others-centered life. Of course Jesus was the only person to do this perfectly, but in faith we follow in His steps (“...and follow Me”).

Whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it: We follow Jesus this way (by faith), because it is the only way that we will ever find life. It sounds strange to say, “You will never live until you first walk to your death with Jesus,” but that is the idea. You can't gain a *resurrected* life without dying first. And you can only die by walking with Christ, whose death becomes your death.

He will reward each according to his works: These are terrifying words to the self-righteous. When in faith we realize that Jesus' righteousness is our righteousness, and that our “work” is to believe in Jesus, they are words we can eagerly anticipate.

Some standing here... shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom: Walking with Jesus doesn't just mean a life full of death and crosses. It means a life full of His power and glory of the kingdom of God.