

Discipleship in the Lectionary - 09/03/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, September 3rd

Matthew 16:21-28

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Getting behind the Messiah

In last week's Gospel lection, through Peter's confession and Jesus' response, the disciples now know that Jesus is the Messiah (16:13-20). Surely God's warrior king would now sweep away such pagan religions and the Roman occupiers from Palestine and restore Israel to her rightful place? This week's Gospel lection reveals how the disciples still have a very worldly understanding of Messiah which Christ calls a hindrance to His ministry. In our lives too, when we place too much emphasis on worldly concerns, we become a stumbling block to Jesus' continued ministry in our world.

Matthew 16:21-28 Commentary

In last week's lection, Peter confesses Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God – knowledge that only God could reveal (16:16). A major pivot occurs in Matthew's Gospel at this point as Jesus "*strictly charged his disciples to tell no one that He was the Christ*" (16:20). Jesus' public ministry that began at 4:17 is now over. Jesus' emphasis shifts to His disciples. From 16:21 onwards, the focus of Matthew's Gospel is the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah.

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.

See 4:17: "*From that time, Jesus began to preach...*" The emphasis of Jesus' ministry now shifts to His disciples to ensure their correct understanding of His identity and what must happen. The elders, the chief priests and scribes are the three groups which make up the Sanhedrin, Israel's highest court, and is thus synonymous with orthodox Jewish religious leaders. Jesus foretells His death and resurrection.

²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you."

Only a few verses earlier, Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God (v.16) but his words and actions here reveal only a worldly understanding of such a confession. This is the reason why Jesus charged them to tell no one that He was the Christ. If the crowds got wind of this, it would lead to another violent insurrection against the Romans and their Jewish collaborators. Peter, acting as the spokesperson for the disciples, continues to be the focus of the text. Jesus' prediction is so radically different than Peter's understanding of Jesus' role as the Messiah that Peter, the disciple, takes his Master to one side and gives Him a talking to! Peter prays that God

will spare Jesus from this fate. After all, did not Jesus just mention something about His church and the gates of hell never prevailing against it?

²³ But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

Jesus turns and addresses Peter in front of His disciples (see Mark 8:33). If Peter's earlier confession was seen by Jesus as originating from God, then Peter's most recent pronouncement is seen as originating from Satan. The former brought a blessing, the latter brought a firm rebuke. There is a connection here with the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness by Satan (4:1-11), specifically with Jesus' commands: "*Be gone, Satan!*" (4:10) and "*Get behind me, Satan!*" (16:23). Jesus perceived Peter's response as a continued temptation by Satan and thus a hindrance to God's mission. Temptation was never far from Jesus. Luke's Gospel notes "*And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time*" (Luke 4:13). Clearly, this was one of those opportune times.

The expression "get behind me" is also of interest. In 4:10 the command to Satan is to "go" (*hypagō*). In 16:23 the command to Peter is to "go behind me" (*hypagō opisō egō*). Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus calls Peter and Andrew to discipleship on the shore of the Sea of Galilee: "*Follow me and I will make you fishers of men*" (4:19). This "follow me" call associated with discipleship is "*come opisō egō*." We find a similar *opisō egō* in 10:38 when Jesus talks about taking a cross and following Him. We also find the same expression in the following verse: "*If anyone would come after me...*" (16:24). To "follow" or to "come after" in the Gospel of Matthew signifies discipleship. Whereas Satan is told to "*be gone*" in 4:10, Peter here is reminded of his proper place as a follower and disciple - *opisō egō*.

Jesus calls out Peter's error for all to see. Peter's problem is that he still has a worldview that is world-focused rather than God-focused.

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. ²⁸ Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

If discipleship means following the Master, then Jesus' disciples must expect to share the same fate as Jesus. These verses build upon what is written in 10:24-39. In the verses above, "*life*" (two occurrences in v.25) and "*soul*" (two occurrences in v.26) are all the same Greek word (*psychē*). Discipleship is costly to a life of self-idolatry. In this context, "*deny himself*" could even mean denouncing the right to life. After all, what is the point of saving your physical life if it costs you your true self? These verses essentially confront us with the need to choose between allegiance to God or allegiance to the world. These are mutually exclusive!

Reflection and Application

Peter's problem here is his worldview. He had just been blessed with a divine revelation of Jesus' true identity, but he is attempting to conform Jesus into his own worldly understanding of this identity. Peter is attempting to lead Jesus where Peter wants Jesus to go rather than following Jesus. How many modern Christians have a same misunderstanding and still have their set their mind on earthly things rather than heavenly things?

Are you seeking to follow Christ, or do you expect Christ to follow you?

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