



LESSON 2

PETER

THE UNLIKELY LEADER

“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

MATTHEW 16:18-19

When you read the stories of the twelve disciples in the Gospels, you quickly realize they were an amazingly varied group. Their personalities and interests swept the spectrum. Perhaps there is no greater example of this than the disciple Peter. He stands out from the rest as having an aggressive, bold, and outspoken personality—one that often led to him revving his mouth while his brain was in neutral. We can, in fact, think of Peter as the disciple with the foot-shaped mouth. Yet, even with his tendency to be outspoken, Jesus saw great potential in him.

In the four biblical lists of the disciples (Matthew 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:13-16; Acts 1:13), Peter is always listed first, which indicates that he was the leader and spokesman for the whole company. In all four lists, the disciples are then arranged in three groups of four. Group one always has Peter at the head of the list, and that group includes Andrew, James, and John. Group two always features Philip first and includes Bartholomew, Matthew, and Thomas. Group three is always led by James the son of Alphaeus, and it includes Simon the Zealot, Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot (though he is omitted in the list in Acts).

Peter, this disciple with the foot-shaped mouth, was born Simon Bar-Jonah (meaning Simon, son of Jonah). He first appears in the Gospels when “Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen” (Matthew 4:18). It was Jesus who later gave him the nickname Peter, which in the original Greek means “rock” or “stone.” Certainly, a name like “Rock” would remind a person with an impetuous personality to remember who he *should* be in his best moments. It would also remind him how Jesus had disciplined him to behave and act—a reminder that Peter would need later when he sinned by denying Christ.

The name would also help Peter after Jesus forgave him and gave him a mission. In fact, after Peter was forgiven, he would never look back. Ultimately, the record in the Gospels and book of Acts reveals that Jesus molded Simon Peter’s strong personality into a rocklike leader, the greatest preacher among the apostles, and the dominant figure when the church was born. Peter’s story serves as a great example for us today, for Jesus is still shaping the personality, character, and gifts of His disciples—and still giving them a new identity in Him.

STARTING OUT

Whether you know a little or a lot about the disciple Peter, what do you hope will happen as you learn about his life in this lesson?

EXPLORING THE STORY

There is a long-standing debate about whether leaders are born or made. Peter is a strong argument for the belief that leaders are born with innate gifts but must also be properly shaped into true leaders. In this section, you will explore stories from the Gospels about how Jesus enacted this particular kind of “shaping” process in Peter’s life.

The Raw Material of a Leader

Peter had several God-given qualities of leadership that were woven into the fabric of his personality from the very beginning. These rather obvious features in his natural disposition were not characteristics that could be developed merely by training. These three innate features of Peter’s temperament were *inquisitiveness*, *initiative*, and *involvement*.

Inquisitiveness can be defined as “a strong interest in learning about many different things.”¹ People who are inquisitive ask lots of questions to satisfy their curiosity. This is a necessary trait for a leader to possess, as those who are content with remaining ignorant about what they don’t understand, complacent about what they haven’t analyzed, and comfortable living with problems they have not solved do not make good leaders. Peter was inquisitive—he was genuinely hungry to gain knowledge from Christ and willing to ask the questions to get it.



THE LEADER OF THE APOSTLES

We know Peter was the leader of the apostles—and not only from the fact that his name heads every list of the Twelve. We also have the statement of Matthew 10:2: “Now the names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter.” The word translated *first* in that verse is the Greek term *protos*. It doesn’t refer to the first in a list; it speaks of the chief, the leader of the group. Peter’s leadership is further evident in the way he normally acts as spokesman for the whole group. He is always in the foreground, taking the lead. He seems to have had a naturally dominant personality, and the Lord put it to good use among the Twelve.²



Initiative can be defined as “the power of opportunity to do something before others do.”³ Those who demonstrate initiative have the drive, ambition, and energy to make things happen. This is obviously a crucial trait for leaders to possess, as they are the ones who blaze the trail for others, casting the vision for those who follow behind them. Peter took initiative—he was often not only the first to ask questions but also the first to answer those posed by Jesus. Peter was a man who seized the moment and charged ahead.

Involvement can be defined as “the act or process of taking part in something.”⁴ People who are involved always want to be right in the middle of the action. They do not sit in the background telling everyone else what to do while they live comfortably away from the fray. Rather, they go through life with a cloud of dust around them—an essential characteristic for all leaders to have. Peter was certainly involved in what was happening around him. In fact, he often jumped ahead of the other disciples without first thinking through his actions!

- Read Matthew 19:23–30. Inquisitiveness is the quality of being curious and eager to learn. What are some signs of Peter’s natural inquisitiveness that you find in this passage?

- Read Matthew 16:13–20. Initiative is the quality of assessing a situation and taking action. What are some signs of Peter’s natural initiative that you find in this passage?

- Read Matthew 14:22–30. Involvement is the quality of wanting to be in the middle of the action. What are some signs of Peter’s natural involvement that you find in this passage?

- Overall, what do you notice about Peter’s personality in these passages? What are some traits of Peter’s natural personality that you also possess?

The Experiences That Shape a Leader

It wasn’t enough for Peter to just possess innate abilities of leadership. Those rough qualities alone would not make him into the kind of leader Jesus wanted him to be. So, for three years, the Lord took Peter through tests and trials to give him a *lifetime* of the kind of experiences that every true leader must endure. Peter learned at least three things through this process.

First, Peter discovered that *defeat and humiliation* often follow on the heels of victory. In a story told in Matthew 16:13–20, Jesus commended Peter and called him blessed for his response that Jesus was “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus said, “On this rock I will build My church.” This was a great victory for Peter. However, a few verses later, we find Peter rebuking Jesus for saying that He must suffer and die. Jesus then said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men” (verse 23). This was a crushing defeat and humiliation for Peter as a leader.



“GET BEHIND ME, SATAN!”

The harshness of this rebuke in Matthew 16:23 contrasts sharply with Jesus’ words of commendation to Peter in verses 17–19. Jesus suggests that Peter is being a mouthpiece for Satan. Jesus’ death is part of God’s sovereign plan (see Acts 2:23; 4:27–28). “It pleased the LORD to bruise Him” (Isaiah 53:10). Christ came with the express purpose of dying as an atonement for sin (see John 12:27), and those who thwart His mission are doing Satan’s work.⁵



Second, Peter learned that he was *not as strong on his own* as he thought. Peter declared to Jesus, in front of all the disciples, “Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble” (Matthew 26:33). Peter was confident in his strength to remain faithful to Christ no matter what happened. However, again just a few verses later, we find Peter denying that he even knew Jesus—just as the Lord said that he would. When the rooster crowed, Peter recognized that he was not as strong or secure as he had thought.

Third, Peter learned that Jesus *could still use him in spite of his failings*. The days following Jesus’ resurrection found Peter and a few of the disciples back to fishing on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus met them there . . . and even cooked breakfast for the men. It was then that Jesus restored Peter and revealed that He still had great plans for him. Peter was to feed and tend to His sheep (see John 21:1–25). Failure would not define Peter as a leader.

- Read 2 Samuel 11:1–27. Peter was not the only leader in the Bible to experience defeat after victory. These events in this passage occur right after King David won a great battle against the Ammonites and Syrians. What defeat did he experience in this story?

- Read 1 Corinthians 10:12–13. What warning does Paul offer? How did the truth of these words play out in the events leading up to Peter’s denial?

- Read 1 Peter 5:5–6. What did Peter learn from his failure?

- Overall, what did Peter learn from the difficult life experiences he endured? What are some important truths you have learned about yourself because of your life experiences?

The Qualities That Define a Leader

The final element needed for Peter to become an effective leader was the right *character*. Jesus understood that people would not respect and trust Peter—and thus not follow him—if he lacked character. So Jesus closely associated Himself with Peter and demonstrated through His life three character traits He wanted him to have: *submission*, *restraint*, and *humility*.

SUBMITTING TO GOD

“Therefore submit to God” (James 4:7). The Greek word for *submit* literally means “to line up under.” The word was a military term used of soldiers under the authority of their commander. In the New Testament, it describes Jesus’ submission to His parents’ authority (see Luke 2:51), submission to human government (see Romans 13:1), the church’s submission to Christ (see Ephesians 5:24), and servants’ submission to their masters (see Titus 2:9; 1 Peter 2:18). James used the word to describe a willing, conscious submission to God’s authority as sovereign ruler of the universe. A truly humble person will give his allegiance to God, obey His commands, and follow His leadership (see Matthew 10:38).⁶

Submission can be defined as “the act of yielding or surrendering . . . to another for a decision or consideration.”⁷ At first this might seem to be an odd quality for a leader to possess, as the general assumption is that leaders are the ones in charge and other people submit to them. However, true leaders provide an example of submission to their followers through the way they submit to the Lord and those in authority over them. Peter learned the importance of *submission* in a leader by submitting to Christ—the one in authority over him.

Restraint can be described as “the ability to control or moderate one’s impulses and passions.”⁸ Self-control, discipline, moderation, and reserve are not always qualities that come naturally to those who live at the head of the pack—which is why anger is such a common and serious problem among leaders today. Peter certainly had his hotheaded moments. Jesus had to *constantly* teach him the value of restraint so he would become an effective leader.

Humility can be defined as “the attitude that you have no special importance that makes you better than others.”⁹ Leaders are often tempted by pride. In fact, one could say the besetting sin of leadership is the tendency for leaders to think more highly of themselves than they should. As noted previously, Peter had tremendous confidence in his own strength of will, which often got him into trouble. So Jesus allowed Peter to go through experiences that took him down a peg in the estimation of himself. In this way, Jesus taught Peter humility.

- Read Matthew 17:24–27. Peter evidently was wondering whether Jesus was morally obliged, as the Son of God, to pay for the upkeep of the temple like any mere human. What lesson did Jesus teach Peter in this case about submission to human authorities?

- Read John 18:1–11. This story relates what happened when Jesus was arrested. How did Peter fail to demonstrate the quality of restraint in this episode?

- Read Luke 22:31–34, 54–62. This is the account of Peter's denial of Christ as told by Luke. What are signs in this passage that Peter was prideful? How did he learn humility?

- Overall, why was it necessary for Peter to learn these character traits? What are some other character traits you think a good leader needs to have?

CONSIDERING YOUR STORY

Read John 13:1-17. This story reveals one more quality of a good leader that Jesus modeled for Peter: *love*. All the disciples struggled with learning that true spiritual leadership meant loving service to one another. So Jesus demonstrated this to them by washing their dusty feet.

- Notice Peter's initial refusal to have his feet washed, followed by his insistence that he be entirely bathed. How would you react if Jesus said that He wanted to wash *your* feet?

- When have you performed a lowly act of service like Jesus did for the disciples? What did you learn about loving others through the experience?

- Although Peter denied Jesus, the Lord forgave, restored, and empowered him. The book of Acts reveals that Peter went on to serve as an integral leader (a rock) in the early church. As you reflect on this, circle the qualities below that you currently have or would like to have. Underline the qualities that you most want to be present in your life.

Inquisitiveness	Initiative	Involvement
Courage	Humility	Compassion
Submission	Restraint	Love

APPLYING TO YOUR LIFE

Although we think of the disciples as extraordinary, they were just ordinary men who followed the Savior. How would you like Jesus to shape and form your ordinary life as you follow Him? What would you like Him to teach you today?



CLOSING PRAYER

Jesus, Peter got it right and got it wrong on the same day. I can relate. Somehow, I've allowed myself to believe that the life You have for me only includes wonderful plans. If God's will for Your life included a cross, should I expect any less? Help me today to expect disappointment and difficulty and to prepare for them with Your Spirit's help. In our Lord Jesus' name. Amen.

Notes

1. "Inquisitiveness," *Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/inquisitiveness>.
2. John MacArthur, *Twelve Ordinary Men* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 38.
3. "Initiative," *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/initiative>.
4. "Involvement," *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/involvement>.
5. John MacArthur, author and general editor, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), note on Matthew 16:23.
6. MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, note on James 4:7.
7. "Submission," *Collins Dictionary*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/submission>.
8. "Restraint," *Collins Dictionary*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/restraint>.
9. "Humility," *Collins Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/humility>.