

Lesson 4

Proper 17

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 16:21–28

Have you ever been really sure of something and felt really good about it, only to come up with new information that turned things around and left you puzzled? That must be how Peter felt. He had confessed Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God, and had been affirmed in this by Jesus, who pronounced him “blessed” and gave him the Keys of the Kingdom. But then Jesus began to tell the disciples about things that were going to happen that just didn’t fit the picture of what they expected of the Christ. Suddenly, when he expressed strong reaction to Jesus’ words, good old Peter, the enthusiastic confessor, became “Satan,” a stumbling block to Jesus.

We who live on this side of the cross and have the New Testament and centuries of theological explanation easily say, “Jesus suffered on the cross for our sins.” For the disciples, as they followed Jesus into circumstances that led to His being God’s atoning sacrifice for sin, it was not so simple. This contradicted what they and all the Jewish people hoped for in the promised Messiah. They just could not understand. (See Luke 18:34.) They would understand only when Jesus’ mission was completed. (See Luke 24:44–49; Acts 2:22–24.)

48. How did Peter’s objections make him “Satan,” a stumbling block, to Jesus?

49. At what other times did Jesus have to deal with that kind of temptation to reach His goals in ways other than the cross? (See Matthew 4:8–10; 26:38–39, 42; John 6:10–15; 12:20–28.) How were these times of testing resolved?

For men who didn’t want to hear about His suffering and death, men who had the popular view of the Promised One as a kingly Messiah who would rule in glory and bring prosperity to Israel, Jesus had more surprising words. He said that His experience would also be their experience as His followers. They would not enjoy the easy path of glory they anticipated. His “If anyone would come [literally, ‘wills to come’] after Me” stresses the vital importance of our making up our minds, in the power of the Spirit, about discipleship—not being content with sentimental “believing.”

50. Why must we deny ourselves if we want to follow Jesus? What is meant by taking up our own crosses?

Jesus' words about saving or losing life and His searching questions force all of us to ask ourselves, "Am I making things, people, or my own will and its desires more important than the health, welfare, and security of my soul in relation to Jesus?"

There is always a temptation to stress a theology of glory instead of a theology of the cross. A theology of glory keys in on the victory won by Jesus, not only in terms of rebirth to a new relationship with God and assurance of eternal life, but also in terms of a Christian's present experience in the world. It suggests that "it is God's will that Christians enjoy prosperous and healthy lives as we serve Him." God, of course, can and does bless His people with prosperity and health, according to His will, but God's blessing is not to be equated with earthly prosperity and health, as if anything less would not be in accord with His will for His people. Jesus pointed to the cross, His own and ours, as the way to ultimate glory—a way that involves self-denial, service, and even suffering. The true blessing is that Jesus' cross proves that God is for us and with us in everything, and it may be that we appreciate this most fully as we carry our own crosses in Christ-related self-denial, service, and suffering. (See 2 Corinthians 12:7–10; Romans 8:17, 28, 31–39.)

51. What dangers to the Church are inherent in adopting a theology of glory?

52. What assurances are ours as we hold to a theology of the cross? What challenges are presented to us?

53. How do Jesus' closing words in this Holy Gospel underscore the vital importance of denying ourselves, taking up our crosses, and following Jesus? What was Jesus referring to with "there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom"?

The Old Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 15:15–21

Jeremiah, a priest, was called at a young age to be God's prophet. His name means "Yahweh throws," and he was thrown into a prophetic mission he did not choose or relish. He had to bring a message of unavoidable judgment and doom to Judah. He is sometimes called "the weeping prophet" because his rejection by the leaders and the people, who did not want to hear a doom-and-gloom message, often led him to call out to the Lord for redress against his opponents. In this pericope, Jeremiah expressed his fear that the Lord, because He is long-suffering, might even negate his prophecy and end up sparing those who had so strongly opposed Jeremiah.

54. In calling Jeremiah, the Lord had touched his mouth and said, "Behold, I have put My words in your mouth" (1:9). How do Jeremiah's words here show his initial eagerness and excitement about God's inspiring him to bring His message?

55. Why did Jeremiah say to God, “I am called by Your name”?

56. What was behind Jeremiah’s intense feelings of loneliness?

57. What led Jeremiah to think of his pain as unceasing and his wounds as incurable, refusing to be healed? What questions began to creep into his mind and heart?

58. What instructions did the Lord give His complaining, questioning prophet? What did the Lord mean by telling Jeremiah, “They shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them”?

There is an interesting literary quality in this section, a play on words, in the fact that “return,” “restore,” and “turn” are all from the same Hebrew root word.

59. What assurances was the Lord giving Jeremiah in all of this?

60. In what ways do we, as Jesus’ spokesmen to our world, relate to Jeremiah and his mission, his feelings about it, and his instructions and assurances?

61. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 12:9–21

In a series of rapid-fire exhortations in verses 9–16, Paul applied what it means to be living sacrifices in the practical setting of daily life. They encourage us to practice a sincere love that reflects sensitivity to our Lord’s presence with us in our own situations and sensitivity to the situations of those around us. Read Paul’s apostolic encouragements aloud together to get a sense of their impact.

Paul then moved to a practical reality: there are going to be times in our life experience when other people’s words or actions do hurt us. Paul’s words were especially pointed for the Roman

Christians, who were beginning to feel the pressures of official persecution. Through Paul's instruction, God wants also us to know that it is important that we neither initiate conflict nor respond in kind. We are to keep before us and imitate the example of our Lord Jesus Himself. (See 1 Peter 2:21–23.)

62. How will giving thought to doing what is honorable in the sight of all help us avert situations that produce conflict?

63. What happens to us and to our antagonists when we try to get even with those who have hurt us?

64. What dynamic is brought into play for us and for our antagonists when we refuse to repay evil for evil and instead turn matters over to God?

65. What will motivate us to work at overcoming evil with good? (See Matthew 5:43–48; 2 Corinthians 5:14–15.)