

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.)

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Almighty God, Your Son willingly endured the agony and shame of the cross for our redemption. Grant us courage to take up our cross daily and follow Him wherever He leads; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 16:21–28

As Jesus talked about what lay ahead for Him, He said that He had to go to Jerusalem. The Greek word *dei* means “it is necessary.”

48. Peter became “Satan,” a stumbling block to Jesus, because he was suggesting that the way of the cross was not the right way to go. The Greek *epitiman*, “rebuke,” is a very strong word. Peter was trying to dissuade Jesus from what He had just said He must do.

49. In His testing in the desert by Satan, Jesus had also faced the suggestion that there was an easier way than His Father’s way; in Gethsemane, He showed that He had to contend with the human inclination to avoid suffering and sacrifice; after miraculously feeding the multitude, Jesus had to withdraw because they wanted to make Him their king by force; when some Greeks wanted contact with Him, Jesus was faced with the fact that He came to be the Savior of the world. Jesus’ times of testing were resolved through His use of the Word and prayer as Jesus committed Himself again and again fully to His Father’s will for the salvation of the world. Those resources are available also to us.

50. Anyone who wants to follow Jesus must deny Himself in terms of self-determination and self-service. These qualities were involved in the original sin, and Jesus calls us to find new life by renouncing self-will and our self-styled righteousness and accepting Him fully as both our Savior and our Lord. Our crosses are not just the tough circumstances that life may place on us or that may come because of our own foolish and sinful actions. Our crosses are those circumstances that are a direct result of our fellowship with Christ.

Jesus’ words force all of us to prayerful introspection to determine if our priorities are proper. Urge this personal exercise, and do it yourself.

51. A theology of glory, claiming the victory of Jesus as our own, is indeed a biblical theme. But when it is the major emphasis, it has built-in theological dangers. It pursues victory over life’s negatives now—which is biblical—but we must also deal with the continuing experience of Christians that we are at the same time sinners and saints. We are God’s holy sons and daughters through faith in Christ, but we are always still becoming what He wants us to be in daily living. When a theology of glory emphasis is materialized to the point of suggesting that it is God’s will that Christians be prosperous and healthy, what does this say to Christians whose experience is one of illness or handicap or poverty? Does it mean that they just aren’t believing strongly enough or that they haven’t committed themselves to Jesus fully enough—as some suggest? A theology of glory can

become a theology of doubt and defeat, in need of the Good News that Jesus loves us even when—and especially when—we know we are down and out and see that we are less than we would like to be.

52. A theology of the cross continually emphasizes the Good News that we live daily under God’s grace and forgiving love—even with all our falling and failing. We need to know that. Christ’s love then challenges us to take up our crosses in Christian faith, to give our identification with Him its deserved priority in life, to live new lives of holiness and service and be the best Christian disciples we can be—always with the assurance that when we fail, and we will, that He forgives us and lovingly puts us on the path of service again. (See Romans 8:1–4.)

53. Jesus says that when He comes in glory, “He will repay each person according to what He has done.” Our daily discipleship has eternal repercussions! How much more strongly can you stress its importance than that? Jesus’ words may be seen as pointing ahead to His resurrection, His ascension, and His bestowal of the promised Holy Spirit on His apostles and on the Church. Some also take these words as a reference to the coming destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

The Old Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 15:15–21

54. Jeremiah’s first utterances in the power of the Spirit excited him. He probably expected a positive response to them. He ate the Lord’s words with joy and delight—like when we “devour” some book that has caught our complete interest.

55. “I am called by Your name” reminded the Lord that He had called Jeremiah and given him his message. Jeremiah had been faithful—and he wanted the Lord to be faithful to him.

56. Jeremiah had been ordered not to marry but to devote himself to his mission. He set himself apart for his work—and his work, its unpopular message, caused people to set themselves apart from him.

57. Jeremiah saw that he was making no headway convincing either the leaders or the people of Judah of the truth of his message. He felt their opposition would continue to make his life miserable and perhaps even lead to his death. Jeremiah began to wonder if the Spirit of God was forsaking him—the flow of living water he had experienced at first had become what he saw as “a deceitful brook” and “waters that fail.”

58. The Lord instructed Jeremiah: “Return. . . . Utter what is precious, and not what is worthless.” In other words: Stop complaining and get on with your mission! Jeremiah was not to turn to the people and adapt his message to their desires, but was to await their turning to him, their listening to and responding to his message.

59. The Lord assured Jeremiah that if he faithfully carried out his mission, he would be “a fortified wall of bronze” against which his hearers might fight but never prevail. The Lord would save, deliver, and redeem His faithful prophet.

60. Like Jeremiah, we are called by God and bear God’s name; we are given inspired words; we are assigned to proclaim a message that is not popular; we get discouraged and “burn out” at times; we begin to question the Spirit-power of our message and mission; we complain to God; and, like Jeremiah, we hear our Lord’s “Stop complaining! Repent! Get on with your mission! You are Mine! I will fortify you and save you!”

61. Jeremiah’s situation easily relates to Jesus’ call to carry our crosses and follow Him.

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

62. When we make it our aim to do what is honorable in the sight of all, we lessen the possibility of stirring up antagonism. This, of course, requires that we do what is right without making a show of it. A better-than-thou pose antagonizes rather effectively.

63. When we make it our goal to get even with someone who has hurt us, it means we are going to carry the hurt around with us and nurse it until it becomes bitterness within us. Health of spirit requires that we forgive the one who hurt us instead of trying to get even. Trying to get even displays an attitude that will affect those who have hurt us only by deepening their antagonism.

64. Consciously and formally turning the matter over to God releases us from feelings of hurt and the danger of a bitter spirit. Because feelings so easily return, we will probably have to turn things over to God again and again. In this spirit, we ask God to deal with those who have hurt us according to His will for them. He surely has His ways of standing up for us and can avenge the wrong if He wants to. But we should always remember that He wants to lead our antagonists to stand before Him in the same way we stand before Him—as recipients of His grace and mercy.

65. What will motivate us to overcome evil with good is the fact that this is the way God has worked in our lives. His Son overcame the evil consequences of our sin through His atoning sacrifice on the cross. His Holy Spirit overcomes the evil tendencies of our sinful natures by renewing our minds and leading us to new attitudes and actions. When we act lovingly toward those who hurt us, we do so because God acts lovingly toward us in Christ all the time. He may use our attempts at overcoming evil with good to accomplish just that—by leading those who are hurtful to repent and turn to Him. We are called to be like our heavenly Father, and Christ's love compels us to that goal.