

Text:

Matthew 15.1-16.28

Big Picture:

The Gospel of Matthew records several events in chapters 16 and 17 that mark a climax, in a sense, of the narrative. The first of these is Peter's confession that Jesus is the "Messiah, the Son of the living God." If we had doubts about the disciples understanding of Jesus' identity before now, Peter's words remove those doubts and put into motion a trip that will ultimately end on the cross.

Preparing for the Lesson:

It is difficult to fully comprehend the importance of both the passage we are looking at today and the one that will begin our section for next week. Several pivotal things happen in these passages.

First, although we have heard the disciples acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God, Jesus' response to Peter's confession here seems to recognize that Peter "gets it." We find out in a few verses that Peter does not understand as much as we—or he—thinks he does, but there is no doubt that his confession is a watershed moment in the gospel.

Second, Jesus affirms Peter as the one on whom his church will be built. This gives us some idea as to the nature this group of people will take on when Jesus is gone. Obviously, the disciples are not thinking in terms of "when Jesus is gone," but this reality will be introduced here as a direct connection of Peter's confession.

Third, verse 21 marks a shift in the direction of the narrative. Prior to this, Jesus traveled around the area preaching, teaching, and healing, but after this point, he moves closer to the cross. Some scholars divide the book at this point because of the literary marker "From that time on..." Whether Matthew intended this to be a breaking point or not, it certainly functions as one.

Fourth, although Matthew tends to write in a way that is more sympathetic to Jesus' disciples, that is, he does not always portray them as bumbling idiots, we still see a tension between what the disciples understand Messiah to mean and what Jesus knows it means. Just verses after Peter's confession, he is called Satan and told he has his own end in mind, not the purposes of God. (Although this moment may have happened some time after Peter's confession, the way Matthew lays out these texts makes Peter's admonishment to Jesus happen immediately after he has just confessed him as Messiah.) For Matthew's audience, questioning the choice they have made in following a crucified savior, Peter's words are in some ways actually reassuring.

Last, the transfiguration of Jesus (found in 17.1-13, which is a part of the texts for next week) is another key moment in the gospel. I do not think it is coincidental that this moment happens immediately following Jesus' turn toward Jerusalem and the greater attention he gives to telling his disciples he must die. Because Jesus is on that journey, he is more focused on everything associated with his death on the cross. Naturally his role as God's Son is highlighted during this time period.

Possible Lesson Outline:

We are accustomed to seeing children stomp their feet and say “That’s not fair!” Describe a time when you as an adult wanted to stomp your feet and yell: “That’s not fair!” Why do we try to ensure life is fair for us at all times? What does it say about us that life should always be fair? Is there ever a time when we try to make life unfair and intentionally place ourselves on the short end of the straw?

Ask discussion questions.

Close with a time of prayer.

For the Kids:

One thing you might do with the children of your group is to have them circle up and then give all but one of them a prize (candy, a toy, or the like). Then go on just like it was not big deal. Wait to see the reaction of the one who did not get the prize, as well as others in the group. When he or she complains—which I am fairly confident will happen—discuss the exercise by using some of the following questions:

- What was the problem with me not giving _____ a prize?
- Why was it not fair?
- Why should things be fair?
- What if I was one prize short? What would the rest of you do for the person who did not get anything?
- What do you think Jesus would have done if he were here?
- What does Jesus want us to do if we are in a situation like this?

Discussion Questions:

1. How would you answer someone who asked you: “Who is Jesus?”
2. Why do you think Jesus would even ask his disciples this question in the first place? What is he trying to find out or what is he trying to teach in this story?
3. Why was Peter’s confession so important? How are his words different from previous statements we have seen about Jesus in Matthew’s gospel? Do you think he really understands what he is saying here? Why or why not?
4. What does Jesus’ statement about the church that Peter would build tell us about the definition of “church?” How does this change how we view church today? Should we hold it in higher regard based on Jesus’ words? In what ways have we missed Jesus’ point as we go about being “church?”
5. Why would Jesus tell his disciples not to tell anyone he was the Messiah? Does he think that people are not starting get suspicious? What would be different if everyone knew he was the Messiah?
6. If you were a disciple, what would you expect the next step in becoming fully “Messiah” would be now that Jesus has been identified as the Messiah? What *is* the next step in actuality? How do you think you would have reacted to this news or understanding of what it means to be Messiah?
7. What does it mean to deny oneself, to take up your cross, and to follow Jesus?

This Week:

Jesus' words in Matthew 16.24-27 are some of the most challenging anywhere in scripture. We are conditioned by our environment to believe that life must be fair and we are entitled to just as much as the next person (if not more).

This week, spend some time reading, and then re-reading Matthew 16.24-27. As you do, discover moments in your life this week that you can live in such a way so as to deny yourself and live for Jesus. Give up things that are rightfully yours. Build up others even if it means you are stepped on. Desire that others receive a reward more than you.

What's Next:

Next week's section is Matthew 17.1-18.35. One Groups will be looking at 18.1-14.