

Matthew 16:21-26

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me.” So the saying goes. But Peter’s pride took a terrible beating when Jesus called him Satan to his face. He never saw it coming. Peter thought his intentions were honorable. He was looking out for his dearest Friend. Jesus, apparently, had some sort of death-wish, and Peter was going to put a stop to it. “Never Lord!” he said. You must forget this nonsense talk of going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. “This shall never happen to you!” “Get behind Me, Satan!” Jesus said. “You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”

We’re not told, but I’ll bet Peter’s mouth dropped open in utter shock. Just moments before, Peter had given the glorious confession of faith: You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. He had just gotten an “A” in Catechism Class. He had passed his confirmation test with flying colors. And now, minutes later, this very Christ of the living God turns to him and says, “Get behind Me, Satan!”

We should not be shocked. Satan is notorious for working extra hard on those who boldly confess the faith. Perhaps you have kids or grandkids who stood before God’s altar, and like Peter, publicly confessed Jesus Christ, but now standing before God’s altar is the last place they would be on a Sunday morning. How true Jesus’ words are concerning them as well: You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.

And how true those words are, also, with regard to you and me. Let me explain. Peter thought he knew better than Jesus. He believed his thinking—his plans, were best. We’re like Peter whenever we set aside God’s commandments and say to ourselves, “I know best what to do.”

Peter wanted to avoid a fight, bloodshed, death—even though Jesus had said that these things must take place. Jesus had to die...there was no other way to gain our freedom from sin. We’re like Peter whenever we run from conflict. There are times in the Church when we have to fight. It’s called the “good fight of faith,” or “taking up our cross.” We are called upon to take a stand for the truth of the Gospel. We may need to speak to a friend about a serious problem which is hurting or even killing their faith. And like Peter, we want to avoid the conflict. We want to go the easy way through life and lay aside our cross.

But Jesus would not go that way. Even though it meant suffering and death for Him, Jesus set His face to go to Jerusalem. There He was crucified for the sins of the world. Every one of us has become like Peter. Satan has gotten us to have in mind, not the things of God, but the things of men. And that’s not just today—it’s every day. That’s how we live. But that’s not how Jesus lived. He always had in mind the things of God. And what are the things of God? You. Saving you. Rescuing you from sin, death, and Satan.

Jesus didn’t have in mind sexually impure thoughts—He had in mind going to the cross to suffer the price for our immoral thoughts. Jesus didn’t have in mind angry words and thoughts of getting even—He had in mind the nails that would pierce His flesh so that our hatred, and plans for revenge would be paid for in full. Jesus’ thoughts were for you to be forgiven. His thoughts were for you to be given eternal life in heaven.

Perhaps we're shocked a little at the way Jesus spoke to Peter. Such harsh language—calling him Satan. But do you realize that Jesus spoke in love? The height of cruelty would have been for Jesus to ignore Peter's words; to let him continue to think only the things of men, and not the things of God. Because Jesus loved Peter, He rebuked him. Peter was closing his eyes to the cross. But the cross is the way of salvation. Jesus' cross is the way of life. Jesus walked to the cross to win life and salvation for all sinners, and He wanted Peter to have a portion of that eternal life.

And that life He also has for you. He calls you to deny yourself. What does that mean? To deny yourself means to repent; to admit that I am the problem in my life. It's not others—it's me. It's not my spouse—it's me. It's not the other workers, other students, other members—it's me.

And Jesus would have us deny ourselves so that He becomes everything to us. I am the problem, but He is the solution. I am the sinner, but He is the answer to sin. Peter could not keep Jesus from going to the cross, and your sin cannot keep Jesus' cross from forgiving you. Jesus will not let your angry temper get in the way between His cross and you. He forgives you for the angry words you have said. Jesus will not let your impure thoughts get in the way of His cross. He forgives you for your lust. Even though you and I have in mind, day after day, the things of men and not of God, Jesus will not let our selfish thinking and living keep His cross from us. For He has in mind only grace and mercy for you. He forgives you for your selfishness.

Do you realize that the same words Jesus rebuked Peter with, were said to you in your baptism? "Get behind Me, Satan!" Jesus said. And it was said in love. For Jesus would not allow Satan to keep his stranglehold on you. Jesus, through Word and water, claimed you for His own. Martin Luther encourages us who are Christian, every morning and evening, to make that sign of the cross upon our heart which was made on us in our baptism. And as we do that, beginning and ending each day in Jesus' name, we tell the devil: Get behind me, Satan. I belong to Jesus. He has claimed me. He has forgiven me. He gives me eternal life. My sins cannot keep me away from Him, for He died for me. Yes, it is true that I have in mind, so often, not the things of God, but the things of men. But Jesus had me in mind when He said, "Father, forgive them." He had me in mind when He said, "You shall be with Me in Paradise." He had me in mind when He said, "He who believes and is baptized shall be saved." He had me in mind when He gave His body and blood with the bread and wine and said, "Shed for you for the remission of all your sins."

There was nothing that could keep Jesus from going to the cross for you, for He had you in His heart and mind. And there is nothing that can keep Jesus from forgiving your sins today and every day, for in His mind, His only thought toward you is that of mercy and love. Amen.