

Training the Disciples; Kingdom Life

After the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus withdraws for a time of prayer, and He sends His disciples on across the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee is about 17 miles long, and, at its widest point, 8 miles wide. Good rowers, men who know how to get around the Sea of Galilee, could traverse the widest possible part in a couple of hours. Since the disciples were fishermen, they should have been able to do this. But it says that in the fourth watch of the night they were still tortured by the wind, and Jesus came to them on the water through the wind. They were terrified, thinking He was a ghost, but Jesus told them, "Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid." Peter said, "Lord if it's You, let me come down to You on the water." This is a perfect picture of the disciples at this phase. They had enough faith to get out of the boat, enough faith to walk on the water to Jesus, but not enough faith to stay up. They had enough faith to go, but not enough to endure. Jesus said to Peter, "You of little faith, why did you doubt? Why did you hesitate?" Perhaps the disciples were learning a few things. The Jewish leadership strongly opposed Jesus, the crowds understood nothing, but the disciples were beginning to understand and exhibit a bit of faith.

This cycle continues in the very next account, found in Matthew 15:1-20. Here, the Pharisees opposed Jesus, asking why He and His disciples didn't perform the traditional washing of their hands before eating. Jesus said they were concerned about all the wrong things, holding to the traditions of men, but their hearts were far from God. He chided them, "It's not what's on your hands that makes you clean or unclean; it's what's in your heart."

Matthew then records the healing of the Syrophenician woman (which we studied in a previous lesson), and the healing of the great crowds that were coming to Him. They were healed and amazed, and they praised God, a much better response than the lack of response after the feeding of the 5,000. Now Matthew records another feeding, the feeding of the 4,000. In Matthew 15:32, Jesus says, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and having nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry or then they collapse on the way." The disciples answered, "But where can we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?" They should have thought, *Let's do what we did just 40 verses ago*. In the actual events of Jesus' life, it may have been weeks; the time frame between the stories is unknown. But they should have known the answer to their question. John Calvin comments on this passage, "All who have once or twice experienced the power of God and distrust it for the future are convicted of unbelief, for faith cherishes in the heart the remembrance of the gifts of God." Calvin gets right at the heart of the matter. If they really appreciated what God had done, even if it had been a month or two months before, they would have known where their food would come from. Nonetheless, Jesus acted despite their lack of perception. He took care of things and fed the people.

In Matthew 16:1-4, the Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus asking for a sign from heaven. He just fed 4,000 people, and before that He fed 5,000. He has healed people who are demon possessed, as well as the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others (see Luke 14:30). What more could they have wanted? Jesus was not in the business of performing enough miracles to force faith, and so He said He would not give them a sign, calling them a wicked and adulterous generation looking for a miraculous sign. The only sign He would give them would be the sign of Jonah, the sign of the prophet who was, for all appearances, dead and then came to life again.

Jesus then goes across the sea again in a boat and warned His disciples to be on guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and the Sadducees (Matthew 16:6). After His disciples discussed among themselves what He said, they came to the conclusion that Jesus was upset because they didn't have any bread. This

conclusion was discouraging, as the problem wasn't a lack of bread, but was their lack of understanding, insight, and discernment. Jesus says to them again in verse 8, "You have little faith. What are you talking about? I'm not talking about bread. You know that I can create all the bread that's necessary... You have to be on guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

He said the exact same thing earlier, in verse 6, and they completely misunderstood. So He says, "No, no, no. You have to beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." When you say the same thing to somebody twice, and the first time they don't understand it and you say it again, what are you doing? You're implying that if they just listen, they can understand. He didn't explain it; He just let them know that they needed to listen to Him again. Verse 12 says they understood that He was not talking about bread but about teaching. Slowly, slowly, the disciples were coming to understand.

The next passage is the confession of Peter. In Matthew 16:13, Jesus took His disciples to Caesarea Philippi, far to the north, and asked them, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They answered that people thought the Son of Man was John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. All of these are prophets, all are in under the old covenant, and all are persecuted. Clearly the disciples were trying to be nice, because people were saying worse things than this. Jesus was not satisfied. He asked them again, "But you, who do you say that I am?" He does it twice. "But you, who do *you* say the Son of Man is?" The Greek shows this a little more carefully than most of the English translations. The answer came from Simon Peter, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." That is an excellent answer and Jesus said so: "You are blessed by God; God revealed this to you."

Peter's answer was right in two respects. First, he knew that Jesus was the Christ, the one anointed to do God's work among God's people. Then he added something crucial that not everyone in that time understood—that Jesus was also the Son of God. Many people thought that the Christ would be a Davidic figure, a great king, a great leader, a military conqueror, one who would eradicate the hegemony of the Roman Empire over Palestine, over Israel. They expected a human figure. It is also true to some extent that any figure who would have had the capacity to drive out the Romans would have also been considered to have a spark of the divine empowering him. So for Peter to say the Christ, the Son of God, was a very good answer, one which a fair number of people could have agreed to, in some vague sense. But Peter was actually confessing the truth more than he knew, for Jesus is indeed the Son of God, fully man and fully divine.

Jesus went on to bless Peter, telling him, "You are the rock on which I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it." The Roman Catholic Church says that the church is built on Peter, that Peter was the first Pope, therefore the Roman Catholic Church is the true church because it has the succession from Peter. Is this what this passage really means? Is Jesus really making Peter the rock, the foundation of the church? If Peter is the rock on which the church will be built, the church has is a very rickety foundation. Furthermore, we know from elsewhere in the Bible that Jesus is the sure rock and foundation. In Matthew 7, Jesus is the rock, and the prophets and the apostles build on Him. Jesus Himself says in Matthew 21:42 that He is the stone which the builders rejected, the key stone. Although there are variations in the stone terminology changes, from foundation stone to key stone or capstone, the idea is that there is one stone or one rock on which the church is built—Jesus Christ. Once He lays the foundation, the apostles and the prophets build on that (see Paul's words in Ephesians 2 and 1 Corinthians 3).

Next, Jesus said, "The gates of hell will not prevail against it." Very likely you have heard this means that no matter how much Satan attacks, the church will never be destroyed. But we need to think about the nature of gates. What do gates do in warfare? They keep people out or in, they protect, they close the

city off. So what might the phrase “the gates of hell will not prevail” mean? One view is that it means the church is on the offensive and that the gates of hell will not be able to hold off the advance of God’s kingdom. It is also possible that “the gates of hell” mean the powers of hell, because there are some references like this in the literature of the period. Therefore, Jesus would mean that the powers of hell won’t prevail against the church. Either way, the sense is that the advance of the church cannot be stopped.

The Gospel is going to grow like a seed and have a mighty harvest, being preached to the ends of the world. We should not be thinking defensive, insular, fortress-like thoughts; rather, God’s kingdom, God’s church is advancing, is on the offensive. Another reason that makes more sense is the fact that Jesus says, “I will build it.” This is about advance, not about holding off attacks. If we look more closely at the grammatical construction of the verse we notice that the antecedent to the pronoun “it” is “church,” so “it” must refer to the church. This is a basic rule for understanding the use of pronouns. Therefore, it is the church that is not going to be overwhelmed.

The next passage continues to give us insight into the nature of Christ’s work and the nature of the church. Matthew 16:21 says, “From that time on Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Jesus is saying, “You’ve confessed that I’m the Christ, the Son of God, but I’m not a mighty, conquering, stallion-riding Christ; I’m a suffering and dying Christ. This will be the nature of my church, too.” When Peter hears this, he can’t accept it. He thinks this cannot happen, revealing how little he understood when he said, “You’re the Christ. You’re the Son of God.” He would have to grow into an understanding of his confession even as we all have to grow into many things. Peter understood what he was saying in the same way that you understood the words “I love you” the first time you said them to somebody of the opposite gender. You said it, but you really didn’t understand all that would be entailed by these words. You had to grow into that love for that person; maybe you still are growing into understanding what that means. It takes time.

We can be hard on Peter, and in some respects this is warranted. Peter tells Jesus not to go to the cross, thereby acting as Jesus’ adversary, and receiving Jesus’ rebuke, “Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” (Matthew 16:23). Peter has also assumed a position of knowing better than Jesus, showing that he has not fully comprehended that Jesus is the Son of God.

When Jesus calls Peter a stumbling block, or stumbling stone, He used another Greek word for “rock.” Peter functions as a rock, then, in two senses. When he confesses, “You are the Christ, the Son of God,” he is the rock on which the church is built. The word is *petros*, a play on words in the Greek. Jesus says, “You are Peter, *petros*, and on this rock, *petro*, I will build my church.” Jesus changes the word slightly, perhaps to make it clear that Peter himself isn’t the rock. But when Peter makes a bad confession, when he says something false and something that Satan would have him say, when he has his mind on human ideas like conquest, victory, painlessness and glory, then he is stumbling stone.

So when Peter makes a good confession, he is foundational to the church, but when he makes a bad confession, he is not at all the foundation. It is not Peter the man that is the rock; it is Peter as he confesses Christ. This is the sense in which Peter and all the apostles are foundational. The proclamation of Christ by those 12 witnesses is the foundation of the church. Even to this day, the foundation of the church is not men, but confessing men, men who say Jesus is the Christ, men who testify to Him and to His work. Central to this passage is not Peter, contrary to the Roman Catholic understanding of it, but the apostolic confession and teaching.

We must not be too hard on Peter, though. His failure to comprehend is understandable. He saw Jesus' humanity day by day, and now he had to learn something new. We have our share of problems; we undercut the reality of Christ's humanity in all kinds of ways. We are right to think of Him as our Lord, but He is also a real man. For example, we struggle to believe Christ was really tempted in the desert, because we don't take His humanity seriously.

In the next passage in Matthew 16, Jesus makes a statement that is vital to our understanding of discipleship: "If you want to be My disciple, not only do you have to stop thinking the things of men, but you actually have to take up your cross and deny yourself and follow Me. My life is a pattern for yours. I'm not just talking about Me; I'm talking about the way of discipleship, the way of belief." Here we move from the matter of right theology about Christ to the matter of personal commitment. Once you discern, you have to commit. Once you see what the issues are, you have to resolve how you will respond.

By way of analogy, suppose you are by a lake and you see a boat about 200 yards out that capsizes. There are two people on the boat, a teenager and a little child. You can see that the teenager is not a great swimmer but is good enough to make it to the shore. But he is not good enough to rescue the child, who is floundering. You are not a great swimmer, but you can swim. Discerning that the child is drowning is not enough; you must commit. Seeing that he is drowning is worthless unless you commit, unless you swim, get a boat, get a piece of wood, get a rope, do something! If you discern, you must act. This is somewhat like what Jesus is saying. Right theology leads to commitment. Right theology means you must be willing to take up your cross and follow Jesus.

This is a hard teaching so Jesus gives some encouragement and enlightenment to His disciples. The next scene is what we call the transfiguration, in Matthew 17:1-8. When He is transformed before them, when His clothes become as white as light, when His face shines like the sun, they see Christ in His eternal glory, in His deity. They see Him the way He appears in the book of Revelation, so glorious that when people see Him they instantly fall before Him, in terror if they don't believe, in joy and adoration if they do believe. As Jesus is transfigured on the mountain the voice from heaven says, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him" (Matthew 17:5). God the Father confirms Peter's confession, and commands him and the other disciples to listen to Him: "He's going to tell you about hard things, about the way of His crucifixion, about the fact that you're going to have to follow that. Listen. Hear what He has to say." The point of the passage is that Jesus is divine and that we need to listen to Him.

Later in Matthew 17 we read of the miraculous healing of a demon-possessed boy and learn that it doesn't take a lot of faith, just a little. We also read of another prediction of Jesus' death and resurrection, as well as another episode showing that Jesus is indeed the Christ, the Son of God.

Kingdom Life (Matthew 18-20)

I would like to encourage you to listen to one (or all) of the Gospels on tape, from begin to end without stopping. Resist the urge to stop and think about what is happening and why. When we read just five, 10, or 15 verses at a time we lose the sense of urgency, the sense of forward progress, the sense of coherency. By hearing it all at once you will notice how quickly things moved and how a question that comes up in chapter 4 is answered in chapter 10, only minutes later. There is a sense of rapid momentum toward the cross. From Matthew 16:21 on, Jesus begins to explain to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, be killed

and raised to life. He says it in 16:21, in 17:22-23, and again in chapter 20 and 21. By chapter 22 the cross is looming. So from Matthew 16 forward, the Gospel is constantly warning about Jerusalem. Luke 9:52 says Jesus set His face resolutely for Jerusalem. He would not be deterred even though He knew that every prophet must die in Jerusalem. The Gospels are moving toward their climax, and they cannot be understood apart from that climax, so it helps to take the time to read at least one of the Gospels in one sitting. This will help you see its coherence and its redemptive focus.

But there are also values in reading slowly and noticing the structure of Matthew. Matthew 18 forms the fourth block of teaching in Matthew's Gospel. The first, the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, focused on the mind and values of a disciple, quite fitting since chapter 4 ended with great crowds following Jesus. The second, in Matthew 10, was Jesus' mission discourse, His description of His own mission and the subsequent mission of His disciples. The third featured parables of the kingdom parables, in Matthew 13, and helped explain all the opposition Jesus faced in chapters 11-12. Now in Matthew 18, Jesus teaches about community life in the kingdom, and His teaching comes at just the right time.

In Matthew 18:1 the disciples ask Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" again revealing how little they understand what He has been teaching. He tells them they have to become like children or they will never even enter the kingdom. The first mark of kingdom community is humility, humbling yourself like a child. The second mark of the community is the way you treat children. Verses 9 and 10 say that in order to be great, you have to welcome children, reach children, teach them carefully and well, don't lead them astray. Be careful that you don't despise them, verse 10, because God doesn't. God values them. In verses 11 - 14, Jesus teaches that you should seek the lost. Throughout this section it is clear that in Jesus' community true greatness is revealed in how you treat the little ones, the insignificant, and the lost. Do you take care to teach them well and honor them?

Jesus also explains that things will go wrong in His church, in His community, and He gives instruction about what to do. What do you do if your brother sins against you? What are the steps you're supposed to take? What's the plan of Jesus? First, Jesus says go to your brother who has sinned against you. Don't give him the silent treatment and hope he can figure out why you're not talking to him. Don't sulk, withdraw and gossip, but go to him. Second, show him his fault. The word "show fault" relates to logic, demonstration or proof. In other words, prove his fault, show him what he did wrong, don't just share your feelings. Third, if he listens, you can win him back. The goal is to win your brother, and this is why you go to him privately. If you rebuke him publicly, he is going to be defensive and try to take care of his honor. But if it's between the two of you, maybe there will be conversation and you can help your brother, overcome it, forgive him. These are the three things you are to do, with the goal of winning your brother.

This passage is generally considered to be about church discipline, about how to kick people out of the church. But in reality this is a positive, constructive passage, aiming at reconciliation within the body. Later Jesus explains the steps to take if your brother doesn't listen, namely, taking two or three witnesses with you, and if he doesn't listen even to them, put him out of the church and treat him as an outsider. Then Jesus says this: "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18). The Greek literally reads, "Whatever you bind will have been bound and whatever you loose will have been loosed." Notice the past tense, indicating it has already been done.

Classic Catholic theology says, "This demonstrates the power of the pope and the priests to release and to forgive sins; whatever they say happens." But it is important to understand the culture of the day and

the meaning of the key words in the passage. “To bind” means to forbid entry; “to loose” means to permit entry. These were idioms. When the church disciplines the person who refuses to listen and heed correction about his sin, the person who says, “I don’t really care about holiness or the life of discipleship; I’m going to live as I please” then the church binds that person. The church declares that if he is persistently impenitent with regard to a sin, then he is not in the kingdom. I am not saying you are saved by works, but a Christian does not persist in deliberate sin when it has been demonstrated to him. If you say, “I want to keep on doing this,” you are saying “I’m not a disciple.” Church discipline is merely the response, “If you really mean that, if you really mean you’re not going to change and you want to continue in sin, then we cannot call you a disciple, because God doesn’t.” This is what it means to bind, to forbid entry. If that person says, “I’m sorry, please forgive me,” then of course, he is in the kingdom.

When the church exercises this type of discipline, it is simply proclaiming God’s standards, proclaiming what it means to be a disciple and telling those who refuse to live as disciples that they are excluded from the kingdom. Those who repent and take their sorrow to God are, of course, permitted into the kingdom. All the church does is proclaim what God has already proclaimed. Our responsibility is not to make people in or out, but to declare again what God has already said. This is church discipline and it is fundamental to the life of the church.

The next verses, Matthew 18:19-20, are two of the most widely quoted, and abused, in the entire Bible. Verse 19 is very familiar: “If any two of you agree about anything on earth, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.” It is easy to see how this could be abused, used by people who together ask God for extravagant things and expect Him to answer. “We asked Him for a new car and we agreed, so He has to answer.” They might point to the next verse, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them,” and say, “Two of us have come together, and we even asked in Jesus’ name so we know we’re going to get our car.” That is not what this is about.

People should indeed gather together to pray, but these verses are about church discipline. They are promises to comfort those in the church who are in the agonizing position of trying to restore someone who has strayed from God and who is refusing to heed the church’s rebuke. God promises, “I will be there with you.” When verse 19 says, “if you agree on earth about anything,” the Greek word for “anything” here is *pragmatos*, and it has a legal overtone. It does not mean any request, any prayer, but any matter or case. Jesus is assuring His disciples, saying, “When you take any one of these cases of sin in the body of Christ to God and you ask for help, He will guard you as you guard My Gospel. I will protect and encourage you as you declare my standards to the world.” This is the meaning of these verses. While it is good and right to pray in groups of two or three, these verses are really about the purity and preservation of the church and the true Gospel.