



Turning Point

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Matthew 16:13-24

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A *turning point* equates to a defining moment in a story or real-life situation when everything changes. We call it a turning point because everything turns in a new direction when this decisive moment occurs.

Some of you will remember the epic light saber duel between Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker in *The Empire Strikes Back*. It's an iconic moment on a balcony high above Cloud City when Darth Vader summons Luke to join him on the dark side. It's one of the most quoted movie lines of all time, "No, I am your father." Everything in the story changes from this point forward.

There have been major turning points in American history. The bombing of Pearl Harbor and John F. Kennedy's assassination come to mind. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 9/11 certainly qualify as turning points.

Chris and I attended our nephew's wedding yesterday in Pittsburgh. Weddings are major turning points for couples and families.

We come today to a major turning point in Matthew's gospel. Two unlikely groups, Pharisees and the Sadducees have coalesced to oppose Jesus. They represent the two primary religious and political parties in Israel. They are unlikely allies; about as implausible as Republicans and Democrats agreeing on something. They share a common enemy. They forge a mutual alliance in Matthew's gospel to destroy Jesus (Matthew 12:14).

In the beginning of chapter 16, they set a trap for Jesus (Matthew 16:1-4). Jesus doesn't take the bait. He then

warns the disciples about their insidious teachings (Matthew 16:6, 11). He knows the religious establishment is closing in on him and his days are numbered.

Jesus and his disciples travel to Caesarea Philippi, well to the north of Jerusalem, what amounts to “religion central” for the Jewish people. This is Gentile country. The city is inhabited with people that the Jews consider far from God.

Jesus asks his disciples in verse 16, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” The disciples repeat what people are saying about him. Some, like King Herod, speculate he is John the Baptist risen from the dead (Matthew 14:2). Some associate Jesus with Elijah, who was taken into heaven in a chariot and will appear before the great Day of the Lord (Malachi 4:5). Others speculate he is Jeremiah or one of the prophets.

Jesus intensifies his question the second time he asks it, “What about you? Who do you say I am?” (Matthew 16:15)

Peter, impetuous Peter who often gets it wrong, this time nails it, “You are the Messiah, Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). *Messiah* is the Hebrew translation for the Greek word *Christos* or Christ. It’s a word meaning “God’s anointed One.”

Jesus responds, “Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. I tell you that you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:17-18). Peter is a Greek name (Petros) that derives from rock (*petra*). Don’t miss the

play on words. Peter, you are Rock and on this rock I will build my church.

There is a division of the house among Catholics and Protestants as to whether Jesus will build his church on Peter or Peter's confession. Catholics believe Jesus will build his church on Peter, making him in essence the first pope. Protestants counter that Jesus builds his church on Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah.

Jesus seizes the moment to tell his disciples what is about to unfold. "He [meaning Jesus] must go to Jerusalem, suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, be killed and on the third day, be raised" (Matthew 16:21). The adverb "must" is used to describe all four verbs. Jesus must go to Jerusalem, must suffer many things, must be killed, and must be raised to life. *Must* conveys divine necessity. Jesus is on a divinely appointed mission to do these things.

Peter takes Jesus aside to rebuke him for talking this way (Matthew 16:22). *Rebuke* is a strong word. The only other time it is used is when Jesus rebukes evil spirits (Matthew 17:18). Peter is convinced Jesus' mission must end in triumph, not death. A dying Messiah to Peter makes about as much sense as trees walking.

Jesus's response to Peter is jarring, "Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me" (Matthew 16:23). Jesus just renamed him the Rock. Now, he calls Peter a stumbling block. Peter tempts Jesus the same way Satan did earlier in Matthew to put aside God's plan. Peter is getting in the way of Jesus. If Peter is the first pope and this is his first encyclical, it is an abysmal failure.

Peter is half right about Jesus. He is spot-on about Jesus' identity. He is the Messiah, the son of the living God. Yet he is dead-wrong about Jesus' mission. Jesus must go to the cross for our sins and be raised from the dead.

Jesus first words to Peter in chapter 4 of Matthew's gospel, "Follow me," amount to a directive to get behind Jesus (Matthew 4:19). Yet here we find Peter in front of Jesus. That's why Jesus tells him, in no uncertain terms, "Get behind me, Satan." Your rightful place is behind me, not in front of me.

Jesus' first words to Matthew are "Follow me" (Matthew 9:9). Jesus first words to Andrew, James and John are also, "Follow me" (Matthew 9:19, 22). "Follow me" is what Jesus tells a temple scribe (Matthew 8:22) and a rich young ruler (Matthew 19:22). He tells any would-be disciples, "Anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:38).

We come to the so-what moment in today's sermon. I offer you two applications. One is about following Jesus. The other is about leaving things behind.

First, here are some observations about following Jesus. Be honest about answering this question. Are you a real follower of Jesus or a tag-along? Following Jesus requires more than clicking the "like" button on your iPhone. Those of us who talk about following Jesus must take concrete steps to actually follow him. It will take real intentionality on our side to stay close to Jesus. Dallas Willard's words continue to replay in my head, "Grace is opposed to earning but not to effort."

Let me highlight three spiritual practices for your consideration.

1. Make it a regular practice to meditate on Jesus' teachings. This is why we are reading Matthew together this fall. Matthew's gospel is a virtual compendium of what Jesus considers important. We read Matthew because it catalogues what Jesus wants us to know and do.
2. Engage in prayer on a consistent basis. Jesus models for us the importance of spending alone time with God. I am struck with how many times Jesus separates from the crowd in Matthew's gospel to center his life with God the Father in prayer.
3. Invest time with Jesus' followers. Jesus never goes about ministry solo. He always picks people with whom to share life and engage in ministry together. It's not going to work for us to be "Lone Ranger" Christians. We need believers to encourage us, support us, and tell us the truth. We need in COVID to become even more intentional about making spiritual connections with people. Zoom calls aren't the same as being together in person, but it's the best we've got under the circumstances. Join a Sunday morning Learning Community or a daytime or evening Bible Study. Do something concrete to establish deeper spiritual bonds with fellow believers.

I talk often in sermons about the value of regular prayer, Scripture meditation, and cultivating spiritual friends. Despite my frequent urgings, some of you must think this message is for someone else. You regard these practices as

laborious, much like homework or doing your job. You may think I'm talking about something onerous, like a root canal.

Today, I want you to see this invitation to engage in spiritual practices as something enriching and enjoyable. Join us in reading chapters 17 through 19 this week in Matthew's gospel. Subscribe to our daily devotional and watch our five-minute Word and Prayer segments each day. Become more intentional about cultivating a prayer life and making stronger spiritual connections with people. We are eager, as staff, to coach you in these practices. Send an email to one of us. We are ready and available to help you incorporate spiritual practices into your life.

Second, here are some observations about leaving things behind. If we are serious about following Jesus, we will need to leave some things behind. Peter left his fishing nets and Matthew his tax-collecting. We need to leave some things behind to follow Jesus.

Maybe you need to leave behind friends who do not share your resolve to follow Christ. Maybe you need to leave behind a painful memory that cripples or shames you. Maybe you need to leave behind a resentment or bitterness you are holding against someone. Maybe you need to leave behind a nagging sin that is holding you back. Maybe you are ready to take leave of living a self-absorbed life. Men, I would add to this list of things to leave behind the damaging effects of pornography. It's a silent killer among men in churches that no one seems to want to talk about.

Leaving things behind is not easy to do. We have run to these things for so long for comfort and support that it is hard to part with them. C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere*

Christianity, “Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is... We never find out the strength of an evil impulse until we try to fight it.”

Every decision starts with a first step. Tell God what you want to leave behind and find an accountability partner to hold you to it.

Today may be the day you say with greater urgency and sincerity, “I’m leaving this [fill in the blank] behind.” “Follow me,” Jesus said. Peter left his nets, Matthew his tax-collecting and followed Jesus.