
Day 307 - November 3

Jesus the Christ (5 BCE-30 CE)

Preparation of Apostles for the End

Readings: *Matthew 16:13-28; 17:1-27; 18:1-35; Mark 8:27-38; 9:1-50; Luke 9:18-50; 17:1-10*

Reflections:

- There is a significant change at this point in the story. Jesus begins to prepare his disciples for his eminent death. What none of the disciples anticipated or could really absorb was that Jesus' prediction of his death is tied directly to confession that he is the Messiah (Hebrew) or Christ (Greek). As we have mentioned, the title Messiah meant anointed one or king. It referred to the one anointed by God to be a uniquely and divinely empowered ruler to deliver Israel. This notion of the dying Messiah was an oxymoron for first century Jews.
- Jesus' question to the disciples regarding his identity is one of the most famous exchanges in the biography of Jesus. Here we see Jesus clearly and unequivocally declare that in fact he understood himself as the Messiah. In other places he is intentionally guarded or ambiguous about his identity. Here he is crystal clear.
- While the disciples admit that the popular opinion is that Jesus is a prophet, when pressed by Jesus, only Simon, in line with his tendencies, takes a bold step of faith and declares that he is the Messiah. Jesus' response to his faith is to label him with a new affirming name. He calls him Peter (or "little rock") and then goes on to say that on this rock or foundation stone I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. Each of these words is very important. Peter is a little rock which means he is of the same kingdom substance but is small in comparison to the larger confession he makes. The foundation stone of this new community is the confession that Jesus is the Messiah. This declaration is the bedrock truth of God's new community on earth. Jesus almost never uses the word "church" to describe his followers. Here (Matthew 16:18) and in Matthew 18:17 Jesus uses the term church. The term church means gathering but not just any gathering. It was a term used of the political gathering of citizens from Roman. In a sense the term church might be compared to parliament or congress. His new subversive kingdom gathered together the citizens as their own counter-empire kingdom. Jesus as the king (Messiah) would establish his revolutionary congress (church) based upon the bold declaration that he was indeed God's Messiah. This new divinely

called political body, the church, would be unstoppable. The gates of Hades could refer to the power of death to threaten or intimidate the church. It could also refer to the church breaking down the gates of the place that held people spiritually captive. In either case, Jesus is declaring that this new kingdom community of unified citizens would be unstoppable in their mission to rescue people from death and all the spiritual forces that seek to keep people in bondage.

- Jesus then goes on to promise his disciples that he will give them the keys to the kingdom of heaven and that whatever they bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Keys represent authority. If you have keys, you can go wherever you want. The keys of heaven represent the rightful authority to act on behalf of heaven. Binding and loosing was Jewish legal terminology and meant that when the disciples declared something allowed or something forbidden on earth, it would already have been accomplished in heaven. In other words, Jesus was telling the disciples that he as Messiah was going to give them ultimate spiritual authority based on what he would accomplish in the spiritual realm. Jesus was giving them the authority to proclaim the truth that Jesus is the Messiah and that no longer would the Law determine what was allowed or forbidden but that there would be a new spiritual authority rooted in what Jesus' would accomplish. This new authority would be directly rooted in what Jesus would accomplish in the spiritual realm.
- Jesus immediately begins to explain to them that he would suffer and die at the hands of the religious leaders. Although the disciples do not grasp what he is trying to say, his death and resurrection will be the turning point of history and will open up a new way for God's forgiveness and grace to embrace their hearts, his presence to fill their lives, and his authority to flow through what they do and say.
- Peter is again first to speak out what is on his mind and this time he totally messes up. He goes from getting the form right, Jesus is the Messiah, to completely rejecting the content of what that means: Jesus must die and rise again. At times we can get part of what God is doing right but then miss the content of his purposes. The path to transformation and salvation often requires suffering and it is natural for us to want to avoid or reject this.
- Just as Jesus tells Peter that his spiritual insight about Jesus being the Messiah is from God, he immediately labels Peter's rebuke as being from Satan, a stumbling block to Jesus, and resulting from Peter thinking humanly rather than from God's point of view. This is a strong warning to all Christ-followers. We must be careful to embrace the cost of what it means to follow Christ. When we rationalize away the cost of following Jesus, the cross we are to carry, we put a stumbling block in the way of full obedience. God's ways are not always our ways.
- Jesus now turns his attention to both the crowds and to his disciples and explains the cost of discipleship: deny yourself, carry your own cross and follow Jesus. This idea of

carrying your own cross would have had profound ramifications. Everyone knew what it meant to carry your own cross. It meant you were being executed by the Romans as a failed revolutionary or a criminal. No doubt the first was implied. The crowds must have known by that point that Jesus was on the hit list of the religious leaders and that if God did not do something miraculous there was a good chance he would be killed. So to follow Jesus teaching of loving your enemies, rejecting violence, and opposing religion was a cocktail for an early death. Jesus was making it crystal clear. If you are willing to die for me and my kingdom, you will truly be able to follow me. The call to bring God's peace into a world of war, to carry God's grace to the persecuted and broken is very dangerous business. If you are obsessed with saving your own life you will never be able to self-sacrificially give yourself to save others. A huge part of this is standing up and speaking out for Christ without fear and shame. Jesus makes it clear to follow him is to lay your reputation down, lay your life agenda down, and to willingly accept whatever comes from living for him.

- Does this mean that following Christ is pure defeat? No, Jesus goes on to say that those present would not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come in power. Now immediately three of them will see the transfigured Christ but this is simply a foreshadowing of the resurrection. We know at least one person present died before the resurrection. That was Judas. His betrayal and suicide resulted in him tasting death before the kingdom of God came in power through the resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. This is great reminder that those that reject the cost of following Jesus have the power to sabotage their own spiritual journey so that they never see the kingdom of God come in power. People who fail to wait for God's fulfillment of his promises to them may never see how God was planning to do something miraculous. Judas' betrayal probably was not him rejecting Jesus as Messiah but rejecting the path Jesus was walking on. Judas probably wanted a military movement and so betrayed Jesus to try to force Jesus' hand. When Jesus didn't call people to war but surrendered to his own death, Judas then realized what he had done and ended his life. There is a profound lesson here we will return to later in the story.
- The transfiguration of Jesus is a fascinating story. Moses and Elijah were the two leaders in the Old Testament that had an incredibly intimate relationship with God. It would seem that they were friends of Jesus by this account and the Old Testament narrative suggests that indeed they were friends of God. This gives us evidence that when people die, although they don't have resurrected bodies, have a spiritual state that allows them to live in relationship with God and the others who have died. We also see here that the Father is tangibly providing support and encouragement to Jesus as his death is approaching. Like at his baptism, the Father clearly affirms Jesus, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" The cloud was a clear reminder of the powerful presence of God. Elijah and Moses represented the summation of Israel's story, the Law and the Prophets. Peter's desire to build tabernacles was natural: we need to make this the new place of worship. Rather than worshipping at the temple,

Peter is thinking that they need to create a new place of worship: one to Moses, one to Elijah and one to Jesus. You can see his logic. It is still rooted in primarily a religious view of how people connect with God. The theophany (appearance of God) knocks them to their knees and face down. When they finally look up everything and everyone is gone accept them and Jesus. Jesus encouragement to them was, "Don't be afraid." To see God we naturally will feel afraid unless we are secure in his love.

- In a very real way, this transfiguration was a clear, experiential foreshadowing of the resurrection. God was giving Jesus, his son, a taste of the other side and encouragement that he loved him and was with him. Was this for the disciples' benefit? Yes. It was also for Jesus as he now entered into that final phase before his eminent death.
- The disciples, after seeing Elijah the prophet, wonder about the prophecy of one like Elijah coming to prepare the way for the Messiah. Jesus declares that this Elijah did come and they connect the dots with John the Baptist. They realize the prophecy has been fulfilled.
- The following story is a powerful illustration of faith and the power of the kingdom. The boy has the evidence of having epilepsy but in the story it is referred to as a demon. We should not assume that epilepsy is demonic but rather that this unclean spirit caused the boy to experience symptoms that look like epilepsy. Jesus' key statement: "Everything is possible for the one who believes." This belief is not magical belief. Rather, once you know what God wants and you fully believe God and align yourself with God, his will is done. We believe not in what we want but in what God wants. The key to faith is to know the mind of God. The disciples' doubt led them to pray but without being anchored in knowing the will of God. So as they prayed, they actually prayed out of unbelief. The boy's father takes a better posture: "I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief." This is a humble and honest prayer that opens the way for God to lead us into a deeper intimacy with him as we seek him alone.
- Jesus concludes this story by saying something profound. "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." We know from a later account, that the mountain refers to the temple mount. At this point Jesus does not talk about destroying the temple ("throw this mountain into the sea") but rather about moving it. In other words, faith has power over the religious system. Faith has more power and the religious system must submit. This boy was not unclean before God and to be rejected from God's presence. Faith was bringing the power of God close to this boy to heal and deliver him. The power and presence of God was not being held captive behind the curtain of the holy of holies. It was now present to heal because of faith.
- Jesus' prediction of his death and resurrection is now a consistent part of his message but the disciples simply don't get it. They think he is talking symbolically or in hyperbole and fail to grasp the fact that he is being literal in announcing what would happen. It is a

good reminder that our preconceived ideas can be some of the most difficult barriers for God to overcome in our lives.

- The story of Jesus, the temple tax and the miraculous coin in the mouth of a fish is only recorded by Matthew, the former tax collector. He may have had special interest in this story because of being a tax collector. When asked to pay the tax, Jesus would have been responsible to pay the tax as a citizen of Israel. Only the Levites who served in the temple were exempt. Jesus uses this situation to highlight for Peter that he was the son of their King, God his Father, and therefore is not obligated to pay the tax. Yet, Jesus indicates they should pay the tax so that they would not cause offense. Now, in the end Jesus doesn't pay the tax as God his Father miraculously provides the money for the tax through a fish with a coin in its mouth. This story reinforced again for future Christ-followers the importance of paying tax even though they were a part of a new kingdom and lived as aliens to whatever country they find themselves within. Jesus' kingdom is of heaven and yet his citizens should remain respectful of authority structures they encounter.
- An argument among the disciples about which one of them is the greatest sparks Jesus to teach extensively on servant leadership. He begins with the key truth, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last and the servant of all." Jesus' kingdom is completely inverted from the power structures of the world. Those with power serve the weak. Those with wealth give to those in need. Those who are socially well positioned befriend the outcast. Jesus' first point is that we should serve because he, our master, has commanded us to serve. If he is our Lord, and he commands us to serve him by serving others, that should be enough. Jesus' second point is to bring a child into their midst and state that if we humble ourselves like a child we will be great in the kingdom. Children historically were the most vulnerable as they were uneducated, physically weak, without wealth, and completely dependent on adults around them for every aspect of their lives. To be like a child is parallel to being poor in spirit. We must realize we have nothing at all. Only when we are emptied and dependent on God can his grace, love and power fill our lives to overflowing. As long as we think we are powerful and capable we will be deceived to think that the kingdom is all about what WE can do, rather than what God can do through our weaknesses.
- Jesus then turns his attention to the high value we are to place on children and those who are vulnerable like children. If we abuse the vulnerable we will receive the most severe judgment from God. If we welcome them, we will be welcoming the presence of Christ. We are not to look down on the weak and vulnerable as if their weakness or vulnerability was their own fault. The angels of the weak are first in line when it comes to God. This is a reference that suggests that we all have angels assigned to us – a cool thought.
- Jesus' next illustration is about lost sheep. Again, rather than prioritizing the many, God as our shepherd values the lost and vulnerable. Our heart is to be the same. We need to

have our hearts trained to be constantly seeking out those far from God or struggling and alone.

- Jesus' statement that God is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost suggests that children, the mentally-challenged, and other deeply vulnerable people are saved under God's grace. If a person is not of the age or unable to respond with a well-informed understanding of God, the notion is that God's grace is sufficient and his heart is to still bring them to himself at death.
- Here, later in Jesus' ministry, we see Jesus repeat teachings he gave, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount. First he says that in the world there are things (cultural or social structures) that cause people to sin but beware of those through whom they come. In other words, if you are actively causing people to sin, then beware of a more severe judgment. Jesus against states it is better to cut your hand off and go to heaven than to have two hands and go to hell (the dumps). Jesus is challenging us again to look at the source of sin rather than the externals. Your hand doesn't cause you to sin and doesn't need to be cut off. Our hearts need to be transformed. The person who is causing others to sin is the root problem within community. The root problem within that person's life is their heart and it needs complete transformation.
- The warning that everyone will be salted with fire simply means that everyone will be tested with a refiner's, purifier's fire. If our hearts are pure we will be shown to be pure.
- Again Jesus points out that salt that isn't salty (an impossibility) can't be made salty because it isn't actually salt. So we must ask ourselves, have we been completely transformed? Being religious means we are trying to be something we are not. We are pretending to be salt when in fact our hearts have not been changed to truly make us salty (or in this case overflowing with the love and grace of God). We are called to be salt and in turn to live at peace with those around us. Our ability to live as peacemakers in the world comes from our inner complete transformation.
- The disciples then move from focusing on who is the greatest to another common question. Who is in and who is out? There was someone who was not obviously one of the key disciples and had performed a miracle. The disciples wanted exclusive rights to the power of God. This is another sin of pride. The desire to be in an inner circle is the fruit of pride at work in our lives.
- Jesus welcomes all people into his circle. In fact, if you don't oppose Jesus and his kingdom, from Jesus' perspective you are helping the cause. If God's power works through a person using Jesus' name then that person is not going to be opposing Jesus or speaking out against him. In fact, even the smallest act of kindness or support to Jesus' purposes and people will not be missed by God. This whole section highlights how incredibly inclusive Jesus was as opposed to the religious leaders who were always dividing themselves and seeking to live as the spiritually elite.

- Jesus then moves on to talk about how to live in community within such an inclusive environment. If everyone is welcomed, how do we all get along? The key here is to be proactive in addressing issues. Jesus' principles are highly relational. Go first to the person to reconcile. If that doesn't work, then bring someone along. If that doesn't work, bring it to the community. If that doesn't work, then treat them as a pagan or tax collector or in other words, keep on loving them but change your expectations. This is only the second time where Jesus uses the word we translate as church. The word church again is not a religious term but a political term for the gathering of citizens. Jesus declared that his followers were kingdom citizens and they were to get together regularly to discuss the work of their king. There was nothing religious about it.
- Jesus now repeats his teaching about the authority of his kingdom citizens to declare allowed or declare forbidden (bind and loose). He goes on to add the power of community in this. As even two come together in agreement about God's will, it is already established in heaven. If two or three come together in Jesus' name, his presence will be there. As Jesus looks ahead to his own death and resurrection, he wants his disciples now and into the future to know he has not abandoned us but through the power of the Spirit he will be right there with us all the time.
- This call to unity in relationship is obviously tested by repeated offenses. Peter wonders if forgiveness should be extended up to seven times if the person repents. Seven was the number of completion. Jesus declares that we should be willing to forgive without limitation. Seventy times seven simply means "don't count". Now the key is that the person is repenting and seeking reconciliation. The role of community to walk with the person should help the person overcome their constant breaking of relationship but our hearts are to always seek reconciliation. Now if the person is sinning and not truly repenting, then although a spirit of forgiveness can offer the person grace rather than judgment, true reconciliation cannot take place. Without repentance there is ultimately no forgiveness of sin before God or reconciliation. The key is always genuine repentance with a desire to restore the relationship. If a person continues to wound and never repents, then they are being abusive and the person receiving that repeated wounding should put up a boundary and seek to stop the cycle of sinful wounding. Perpetual forgiveness being offered to someone who is abusive is only being partner to sin and enabling someone who is destructive and not submitted to God.
- Jesus ends this teaching with a powerful story about a king who demonstrates radical grace in forgiving a massive debt and how he then expects those who have been forgiven such debts to in turn forgive the smaller debts owed to them. We forgive because he first forgave us. Our forgiveness of others is not based or grounded in their earning that forgiveness. Our forgiveness to others overflows from the gratitude of being so profoundly forgiven. Now the story Jesus tells is extreme but he told to drive the point home. Jesus says that this is why we should forgive our brother or sister from the heart when they repent and seek reconciliation. We should also note that forgiving

someone from the heart does not mean that we will instantly feel better. We will have set our hearts to forgive them. This frees us to take the time to work through painful circumstances. We should also note that to forgive a person does not mean we instantly trust them. If someone has broken our trust, we can forgive them (remove our judgment against them) but we will still want to take time to see if the repentance is genuine and if we can truly trust them. Remember, forgiving a debt is not the same as offering the person another loan.