



Roanoke, Virginia

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“The Rebuke”

On This Rock a Lenten Sermon Series Part V

Matthew 16:21-27

George C. Anderson

I remember comments that still make me cringe.

Here’s one that goes back three decades. I was at church- another church I served- talking with two others: an older gentleman and a younger woman. I knew them both well. He made what he thought was a funny remark about her—but it landed hard. She didn’t say anything but I could see it on her face. We didn’t have the language for it back then, but it was the kind of comment we would now call “body-shaming.”

It was so long ago and she may not even remember it. But I do. And it still makes me cringe. Because some words don’t just pass—they linger. They change the air in the room.

The passage I’m about to read has a moment like that.

Just before it, Jesus asks his disciples, “**Who do you say that I am?**” Peter answers, “**You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.**” And Jesus praises him.

- Calls him the Rock.
- Entrusts him with the keys of the kingdom.

It’s a high point.

And then... Jesus keeps talking. Listen.

²¹ From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying,



“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

(And it's worth pausing here... because after a moment like that—after words like that—it would be hard to hear anything else. Elizabeth, could you go check on Peter to see how he's doing. And someone needs to check in on Jesus. That's not like him.

Oh, wait, Jesus is still talking, as if anyone can hear what he has to say right now.)

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples-

“If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

²⁷ “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.”

We are Christians, so we're supposed to take Jesus' side in disputes, right?

And it's not hard to do—

- when he stands between a mob with stones and a vulnerable woman,
- or pushes back against religious leaders who value rules over healing,
- or insists that a hungry crowd should be fed instead of sent away.

In moments like that, we know to stand with Jesus.

But this story? It's different. Because if I'm honest... my instinct is to rush to *Peter's* defense, not Jesus'.

I mean, that was harsh.

This is the same Peter who just confessed that Jesus is the Messiah—and Jesus told him he was right. And now, moments after Jesus says that powerful people will make sure, he is arrested, suffer and be killed, Peter pulls him aside and says, “No. That can't happen. There has to be another way.”

Honestly—doesn't that sound

Like care?

Like friendship?

Like someone trying to protect the person he loves?

And Jesus calls him “Satan.” Jesus calls something that sounds loving... satanic. And to put a little salt on the wound, Peter is rebuked right at the point of his belief that Jesus is the Messiah.



And the air feels different. It's hard to hear anything that comes after, like trying to carry on a group conversation after someone storms out and slams the door. "Get behind me, Satan." Can you imagine? How do you hear anything after that?

Now, a scholar might move quickly past the personal sting and go straight to the theology of the passage. But I'm not just a scholar with thoughts— I'm also a person with feelings. So, maybe we need to walk out of the room of the passage for a moment. Step outside, be mindful, take a deep breath, let the shock settle. And maybe when we walk back into the room we need to focus not on how Peter is doing— we can get back to him-- but on what is going on with Jesus. Because Jesus sounded...uh... triggered.

I probably shouldn't put it that way. It sounds trendy. I also know that the Gospel of Matthew has a larger theological point to make. He wants us to understand that Jesus is being intentional here. Not impulsive but saying something Peter needs to hear and we need to hear.

So, having taken a moment, let's not feel that we have to go back into the room of the passage to be mediators and soften the passage by telling Peter, "Jesus didn't really mean it," or telling Jesus he over-reacted and needs to apologize. Let's take that deep breath, go back into the room, and try to understand where Jesus is coming from. Because it may be that Jesus isn't reacting impulsively at all. It may be that he is naming something that gets in the way of what he needs to face... but very much doesn't want to face.

So, why Jesus would call Peter "Satan" when Peter is simply saying he doesn't want him to suffer—doesn't want him to die? Peter is not Satan- we know that- Jesus knows that- but if we think back in Matthew's Gospel to where Jesus has been, we'll remember that he has heard this voice before.

In the wilderness, after his baptism, Jesus goes into the wilderness to fast and pray, and there he is tempted by Satan three times.

- One temptation is to turn stones into bread—to use his power to meet his own needs, rather than trust God.
- Another is to throw himself down from the temple and let the angels catch him— proving God will protect him from harm, even save him from death.
- And the final one is to gain all the kingdoms of the world without the cross— to take the crown without the suffering.

Different temptations... but all pointing in the same direction:

A way of being the Messiah that
avoids suffering,
avoids surrender,
avoids the cross.

And now Peter speaks,
and it sounds like love.

But to Jesus, it sounds like that same temptation again—



a way around the cross,
a way to follow God
without the cost.

The most compelling temptations we face don't always come from some dark, sinister place.
It's not always obvious.

It's not always the kind of temptation we recognize right away—

- like being tempted to take what isn't yours,
- or hurt someone just because you get something out of it.

Sometimes, the most powerful temptation comes wrapped in good intentions.

It sounds like care.

It feels like kindness.

What a temptation it is for a parent to spare a child from consequences— to step in too quickly, to shield them from struggle, to keep them from pain. It feels loving. And yet...

Jesus knows what is ahead of him. He names plainly what he sees coming —suffering, rejection, death. He even calls it the will of God. Not because suffering itself is good, or because his death is something magical and has nothing to do with life as we live it— but because Jesus's eyes are open. He knows that if he continues to live and speak the truth of God's kingdom, there will be a cost because he can see it coming.

He can see the powers already aligning against him. Religious leaders, political leaders— people invested in keeping things as they are. And Jesus sees clearly that if he stays on this path, it will lead to the cross. That road is not an accident. And it's not avoidable.

Unless...

Peter gets his way.

Unless Jesus listens to him and pulls back.

Softens the message.

Stops confronting what needs to be confronted.

Become the kind of Messiah people are comfortable with.

It sounds like love.

But it would mean abandoning the very thing he came to do.

For he is not the sort of Messiah Peter believes in at this point in time—
one who succeeds, who conquers.

but a Messiah

who suffers.

And that's where this passage turns toward us.

Because most of us are not tempted to do terrible things, evil and destructive things. We're not waking up in the morning wondering how we might hurt others for our own gain. We're trying



to be good people. Faithful people. Loving people. Do right by our family, our friends, our community.

And yet...

- How often are we tempted to avoid the hard conversation—because we don't want to hurt someone's feelings?
- How often do we stay quiet about something that matters—because we don't want to create tension?
- How often do we settle for keeping the peace—instead of doing the deeper, harder work of making peace?

It feels loving.

But sometimes it's just easier.

Or think about this—

How often do we pull back from doing something we know is right because it might cost us something?

- Our reputation.
- A relationship.
- A sense of control.

So, we delay obedience. We soften the truth. We tell ourselves, “[This isn't the right time.](#)” And sometimes that's right. Often reasonable. Often wise.

But sometimes...it's just another way of saying, “[This path is too hard.](#)”

And that's exactly what Peter is saying when he says to Jesus. “[You don't have to do this. There's another way.](#)” Jesus hears the concern—and also the temptation wrapped by the concern. Find a way around the cross.

Maybe now we can invite Peter back into the room because he is not singled out anymore. This rebuke isn't just for him. It's for us—when the path feels too hard.

It shows up in small, ordinary moments.

- When we know we need to say something that is true—
 - but we soften it so much that it is no longer true anymore.
- When we need to have a hard conversation—
 - and we keep putting it off.
- When we sense God calling us to step into something—
 - and we quietly step back instead.
- When we think we're being kind—
 - when we're really just being careful.

Not because we don't care,
but because it might cost us.



So we share Peter's struggle to follow a Messiah who suffers.

But here is the hope. Not today—when Peter is still stinging from the rebuke— but one day, he will understand.

He will see why the cross could not be avoided. And he will discover that following Jesus—in a life shaped by compassion, justice, and reconciliation— comes with a cross... comes with cost. When that day comes, he will not follow reluctantly, as if the path is too hard. He will follow with joy— because it is the path to life with God.

And the air will feel different— not with the weight of words that wound, but with the freedom of a life given in love. Because the one who rebukes him is also the one who calls him— not to avoid the cross, but to share in the life that comes through and beyond the cross. He will understand.

And, by the grace of God..., so will we.

Charge and Benediction at the End of the Service:

I could charge you to resist temptation—
but when temptation comes wrapped in kindness,
that may be asking more than we can deliver.

So instead, I charge you to pray.

Pray as Jesus taught us:

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

Because it is not always easy to recognize the ways we are tempted—
to believe what makes us comfortable,

to justify what costs us less,

to settle for what feels right instead of what is faithful.

It is easy to believe that we are only responsible for ourselves—

that we need only look after our own—

even when we could do something to relieve the suffering of others.

And it is easy to believe that we are just fine as we are.

And yes—God loves you as you are.

But God loves you too much to leave you that way.

So pray.

Pray for clarity.

Pray for courage.

Pray for the grace to follow Christ, even when the path is hard.

And go knowing this:

You are in this with Peter.

Which means God is not finished with you.

And go knowing that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit

Goes with you.

