# Matthew 16:13-26 February 4, 2018

*The Invisible Battle, Part 4*

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Here we go with part 4 of this sermon series entitled *The Invisible Battle*. Every follower of Jesus Christ is in a battle with the powers of darkness every single day. Will we have victory and be part of building the Kingdom of God, or will we find ourselves dazed and confused and discouraged because things aren’t going our way? Today we are going to look at an encounter Jesus had with his disciple, Peter, that I hope and believe will help us become more alert and aware of the tactics the devil uses to get us off course and become ineffective in our walk of faith. Let’s pray:

*Thank you, Gracious God, for giving us your words of love & instruction in the Bible. Thank you for speaking to us in such clear words. May we choose now to listen carefully to what you have to teach us and reject other thoughts that try to distract us. Thank you for the helmet of salvation. We put it on now with grateful hearts. This we pray in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Throughout Jesus’ ministry he had people who were accusing him of all sorts of evil things. Some of the Jewish teachers of the law said (in chapter 9) that *“This fellow is blaspheming!”* “He’s lying! He’s pretending to be God!” To which Jesus asked, *“Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts?”* (Matthew 9:4). Good question. Why, when a thought comes into our minds that we know is not from God because it is not honoring to Him and compassionate towards others, why do we entertain that thought? When I entertain guests at my home I ask them in, I serve them, I interact with them, I spend time with them. Why would I want to entertain evil thoughts? Letting them in, serving them, interacting with them, spending time with them? Jesus asked the teachers of the law, “Why do you do this?” It’s a question and a challenge for us too! When evil thoughts come in, thoughts that tear down the goodness and glory of God, and thoughts that tear down the value of others made in the image of God, do not entertain such thoughts. Do not let those thoughts pull up to the table of your mind. Sometimes when thoughts such as these come into my mind I have to say out loud, “No!” while I shake my head as if to shake them off and out! Some of the Jewish leaders and teachers of the law said about Jesus, “He is blaspheming!” “He’s a liar!” And in v. 34 they accused Jesus of being manipulated or controlled by the prince of demons (Satan) because he was able to heal a demon-possessed man! Talk about entertaining evil thoughts!

Have you ever been accused of being something or saying something or doing something that simply wasn’t true? You know what you said or what you did, but the other person was convinced that you were lying! It is a very frustrating thing to happen, isn’t it? You know you are on the side of truth but it’s as if you are talking to a brick wall to try to defend yourself.

* You are accused of cheating on a test. You did not cheat. You know you didn’t. Not one little peek. But you are not believed and you get a big fat ‘F’ on your test for cheating.
* You are accused of being unfaithful to your spouse or your boyfriend or girlfriend. You haven’t been unfaithful, but you are being accused and your relationship is on the edge of breaking.
* Someone broke the lamp. You know it wasn’t you, but your parents are convinced it was you.

What can you do when you simply are not believed? You know what’s true but the truth is being rejected! My last call in Shippensburg as an associate pastor was a partnership in ministry with a senior Pastor who was not just a colleague in ministry but whose whole family had become friends with my whole family. It was a lovely, exciting, spirit-enriching time in my life. But then one day things started going wrong. One day it was all good, the next day there was a dark cloud that I couldn’t understand. My colleague and friend became convinced that I wanted his job, that I wanted his position, that somehow I wanted more than I had. I didn’t! I loved where I was and what I was doing and the people I was with! But no amount of words could convince him that what he had decided to entertain in his mind wasn’t true. Eventually I had to walk away. It was one of the most painful times of my life.

In chapter 16 of Matthew’s gospel we read the story of Jesus and his disciples at Caesarea Philippi, and something like we’ve been talking about happened between Jesus and Peter. Let’s take a look together:

***13****Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”****14****And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”****15****He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”* ***16****Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah,the Son of the living God.”****17****And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.****18****And I tell you, you are Peter,and on this rockI will build my church, and the gates of Hades* [meaning ‘even death’] *will not prevail against it.****19****I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”* ***20****Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he wasthe Messiah.”*

So, let’s stop right there. This is a marvelous moment for Peter! “Blessed are you, Peter! You are so blessed because obviously the Father in heaven is speaking to you and you are listening! On your own you didn’t come to comprehend that I am the Messiah, the Son of the living God – but the Father in heaven spoke this truth directly to you!” Peter is feeling like a million bucks right here! From fisherman to spokesman for God! Whoo Hoo!! Life is great! Life is awesome! But how quickly can things go wrong, folks? In the blink of an eye and an entertainment of an evil thought…

Have you ever seen a commercial for a new medication on the market that sounds wonderful, sounds like it’s really going to help people who suffer from particular health issues – and then the last 30 seconds of the commercial is a warning against all the possible side effects? We have the good news and the bad news. The positive vs. the negative. The up vs. the down. This is what happened to Peter. He was on the mountaintop and he is about to go to the lowest of the low places. Here’s what happens next.

***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 stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*

This is the first time Jesus has come right out and told his disciples what was going to happen to him. He has hinted at it before this, but this is the first time he lays it right out there. “I must go to Jerusalem, suffer terribly, die, and on the third day be raised.” What? What? I don’t think they heard the last part, “and on the third day be raised.” They heard “suffer.” They heard “die.” And they didn’t hear another word. What? How could this be if he really was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God! It didn’t make sense.

So, here comes Peter, who literally ‘takes hold of’ Jesus. The words translated ‘took him aside,’ mean to ‘take hold of,’ to put his arm around his Lord and forcefully pull him away from the others so he could straighten him out.

What happened here? What happened was a denial of God’s plan. What happened was a ‘No!’ to God’s plan in favor of our plan. Peter and the others heard the words ‘suffer and die,’ and instead of hearing the next glorious words from Jesus, ‘and on the third day be raised,’ they entertained another thought in their minds, i.e. “No!”

We do this all the time, folks. We want to avoid pain and suffering at all costs, and we say, “No!” I do it. When someone calls me to tell me something bad has happened to one of you, often the first word out of my mouth is, “No!” On Wednesday John and I received a call that his beloved uncle Jack had died, the first word I said was, “No!” When we went to the beach together with John’s cousins for his 60th birthday, Uncle Jack came along. He sat on the beach and watched us out in the water, and kept telling me that John and his son Bobby were going out too far. Oh, how we loved him!

But if I believe that God is sovereign, if I believe that God’s plan is best, why do I say, “No!” Why do we do that? It’s just like what Jesus said to Peter, *“You are setting your mind not on the things of God but on the things of man.”* And that’s not good, folks. That’s a surefire way to disappointment, discouragement, and disobedience, because we entertain the thought that we know better than God and we want more than what God can give us.

This is why Jesus spoke so harshly to Peter. *“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block for me!”* From the beginning of his ministry, starting with the temptations in the wilderness, Satan was trying to keep Jesus from going to the cross. He knew the cross meant to kill was Christ’s victory over death for us – the one tool he thought he would wield over us forever. That’s why he offered Jesus the opportunity to rule over the whole world right then and there. “All the kingdoms of the world will be yours and you won’t have to suffer and die. You won’t have to go through that humiliation.” Was Jesus tempted? I think he was. He was tempted in every way as we are…but he was without sin. He was tempted but he didn’t give in to it. He didn’t entertain those thoughts, “avoid the cross, avoid the cross, avoid the cross.” He kicked them out and overcame them with the truth of God’s word. And here’s Peter, being manipulated by Satan to put that same temptation in front of him!

Why? Because we don’t want suffering. We don’t want pain in our pathway. We don’t want anything to divert us from the perfect plans we have come up with for our perfect lives.

The problem is that we can’t see the end. All Peter could see was the process not the end. All he wanted to do for his beloved Savior was eliminate pain. He couldn’t even begin to entertain any thoughts about the ultimate value for that pain.

God’s ways are not our ways. God’s thoughts are not our thoughts. They are higher. They are greater. They are based on infinite wisdom, infinite knowing – seeing how God works all things together for good. Jesus’ disciples wanted Jesus to rule in pomp and majesty – right now – in the way they had envisioned it.

Did Peter learn? Not until after the resurrection. Three times he denied even knowing Jesus following his arrest. He just couldn’t accept that suffering, that loss, that even death could be part of God’s glorious plan to establish his Kingdom now and forever!

But he did eventually learn. In 1 Peter 1:6,7 he wrote, *“Though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come to prove the genuineness of your faith…”.* In verses 13 & 14 he writes, *“Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.”*  He learned. He learned how to set his hope on the things of God by keeping his mind alert to the ways and wiles of the evil one.

How are we doing at desiring and accepting God’s ways over and above our human ways? How are we doing at placing ourselves fully in his hands so that he can clean out the dross and refine us like gold? A study I am doing now with several others is called “Discerning the Voice of God.” In it the author, Priscilla Shirer, writes, *“If the enemy can’t get you to disobey, he will at least try convincing you to delay.”* Oh, I’m going to read my Bible starting tomorrow. Oh, I’m going to start going to a small group Bible study next Sunday. Oh, I’m going to stop texting those things to my boyfriend, just not right now. Oh, I’m going to start really paying attention in church as soon as I figure out how to get out of the mess I’m in.” Shirer continues, *“Delayed obedience is disobedience and leaves us exposed to the enemy’s advances.”*

Our job folks, is not to get God’s plans in line with our plans. Our job is to bring our lives in line with his teaching. It’s no coincidence that right after this encounter Jesus had with Peter, he said these words (vv. 24-26), *“If any want to become my followers, 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?”* The Message puts it this way, *“Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat; I am. Don’t run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I’ll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self. What kind of deal is it to get everything you want but lose yourself? What could you ever trade your soul for?”*

Church people are often people who want things to stay the same. “We’ve never done it that way before,” is heard in church buildings across the globe! I have to say however that this congregation has embraced change throughout the last 15 years of my time here with a lot of enthusiasm and faith. But let’s face it – most of that change hasn’t come with what I would consider real suffering because there’s always been a safety net. All of the changes we’ve been led to make have been for growth and life and greater kingdom impact. By God’s grace that will continue to be what we do. But there is a change coming that is going to be hard for us and I want to put it out there right now so that we don’t begin entertaining thoughts that are of human plans not God’s plans.

Laurie Ruby is not going to be able to continue her preparation for whatever God has ahead for her by staying here in this safe little bubble that is her home church. I know we don’t want to hear that. I know that some people are entertaining thoughts that when I retire sometime in the next 6 or 7 years, Laurie will be primed and ready to step into my shoes and we’ll just continue on without a hitch. Don’t tell me you haven’t thought that. It’s okay. I’ve thought that. When I was being supported by Falling Spring in seminary, some people thought I’d go back there to serve. I thought maybe I’d go back there to serve. Those thoughts are not unnatural, but they are often contrary to the thoughts of God. His ways are not our ways; His thoughts are not our thoughts. Proverbs 14:12 says, *“There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death.”* In other words, we are good at making plans that don’t lead to real, boundless, passion-filled Life! We’re good at making plans that bring us human comfort, security, and present peace. Experts, in fact. But, *“Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.”* (Isa. 40:28)

The Church belongs to God. Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church. That’s one of our core values from Colossians 1:18, “We believe that Jesus is the Head of the Church, therefore He must have first place in everything.” Everything - including Laurie’s training here among us (what a privilege we have to help to nurture & teach her and have her help to nurture and teach us). We need to make the most of it, but we also need to not hold too tightly to it as if any of it belongs to us. It all belongs to God. The Church, including this church, belongs to God. We are His body, for *“in Him we live and move and have our being”* (Acts 17:28), not the other way around. Oh, may we not now be or in the future become a devil-inspired stumbling block to the ways that Christ wants to work in and through us, by wanting our will more than we want His will to be done.

Let us go to the Lord together in prayer. *Father God, thank you for teaching us. Thank you for patiently teaching us. Thank you for lovingly, patiently teaching us. We have a long way to go before we are where you know we can be. Forgive us for pridefully accepting the thought that what we want is better than what You want for us. Forgive us for saying “No” to your ways. Forgive us for blatantly defying you because we know you will forgive. How we must grieve you. Forgive us for choosing safety over sacrifice, personal temporary pleasures over responsibility. Forgive us for not listening to you first. Make us to the image of Christ, whatever that takes. May your Church hunger for your ways. This we pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.*