

Good Intentions
Matthew 16:21-28
September 3, 2017

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

If there is one thing there is never a shortage of in Christians congregations it's good intentions. Churches big and small are most always filled with good intentions. I've never personally known a true Christian whose heart was set on destroying their church or working against Christ. I know many, many Christians whose hearts are overflowing with good intentions, especially when it comes to serving the Lord and his church.

And yet, good intentions don't always translate in joyous, harmonious results, do they? So many times Christians end up fighting each other because their good intentions don't line up with the good intentions of others. Often times, congregations suffer, and have been destroyed, because little camps of Christians, with all their good intentions, are at war with each other. It's sad that the old adage is proven true: The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Good intentions brought about the problem in today's text. It's easy for us to frown at Peter as he pulls Jesus aside and reads him the riot act for announcing he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die at the hands of the Jewish leaders. Peter hears what he thought sounded like defeat, he didn't like it, and he lets Jesus know it in no uncertain terms.

The Bible says Peter rebuked Jesus. That's a very strong word. Rebuke is often used for dealing with evil spirits or Satan, for dealing with the enemies of Christ. Peter was saying, "Not on my watch, Lord. You will never suffer and die as long as I have something to say about it." Of course, Peter didn't have anything to say about it. Nonetheless, he was telling Jesus, "You're wrong. You don't know what you're talking about."

Before we start rebuking Peter, we should remember he only had the best of intentions when he confronted Jesus. He didn't want to see his friend, his master, his Savior suffer to the point of a cruel and painful death.

Make no mistake, Peter knew exactly who Jesus was. He said so in last week's text: *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God* (Mt 16:16 NIV). Peter recognized Jesus as God's Messiah, God's promise of forgiveness and salvation. However, the thought of God dying was totally unacceptable to Peter. Peter speaks the best news the world has ever heard and Jesus follows with what sounds like the worst possible outcome.

Think on that a second. Peter no more finishes his confession about the true nature of Jesus when Jesus (in good Lutheran fashion) follows up with "What does this mean." With the best possible intentions for his friend and Savior, Peter rebukes Jesus for speaking what Peter didn't want to hear.

Why would Peter do such a thing? Because Jesus' plans were not in alignment with Peter's paradigm of what salvation in Christ Jesus truly meant and entailed. Jesus' plans and ideas for faithful ministry weren't matching up with Peter's plans and ideas for faithful and effective ministry. How many of you can relate to that?

Something interesting and well worth noting is this: Jesus doesn't let this foolishness slide. He doesn't quietly dismiss it. He doesn't take the approach so many of us do when we come up against something we disagree with, "Well, we can agree to disagree. That's your opinion and this is my opinion, and we can both be right so long as everyone gets along."

That sure wasn't Jesus. In fact, he does something that goes against what many people think was Jesus' approach to ministry - gentle, light, and fluffy. Instead, Jesus lights up Peter right in front of everyone – publically. "Get behind me, Satan! You are trying to hold me back. You're not thinking about God's plans. You're only concerned about what you want and the way you think things should be done."

I bet that made Peter take a step back. Jesus just called one of his favorite and most loyal disciples "Satan," and he did it in front of God and everybody.

Now we are confronted with another why. Why did Jesus behave in such a rude and unloving manner. Well, rude and unloving in whose opinion? In today's cream puff, marshmallowy, Lifetime channel perspective, Jesus' words and actions do come across as offensive, rude, and unloving. "My Jesus would never say or do anything like that."

If that thought just went through mind, you're absolutely right. Your Jesus would never have acted like that, but the Jesus of Scripture; Jesus Christ the Son of the living God absolutely would and does talk and behave like that. Why? Because he loves us.

Jesus loves us so much he won't let us wallow around in ignorant error and wrong intentions. No matter how good our intentions seem to us, no matter how good they make us feel inside, ignorant error and misguided intentions all lead us away from Jesus and the truth of his Word.

Jesus tells it like it is. Scripture doesn't sugar-coat sin and error. If Peter's feelings got hurt, if his thin skin and pride got bruised, so be it. Peter needed to be stopped in his tracks as he headed down the road of false doctrine. Jesus wasn't interested in the condition of Peter's pride. He was interested in the condition of Peter's soul. It's better to be bruised and eternally alive than cradled in false beliefs and eternally dead.

I suppose I could run out a long laundry list of the ways we can stand as roadblocks in the accomplishment of God's plans, but time doesn't allow for that. I just want to ask one question. How often have you prayed "Thy will be done" but actually meant "My will be done?" Have you ever found yourself angry with God because the answer to your prayer wasn't the answer you wanted? Things don't always work out according to our plans and good intentions.

Jesus said: *If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me* (Mt 16:24 NIV). There are many crosses in our lives, but one of the heaviest is the cross of self-denial. That's the cross we try hard to avoid because it crushes our pride, our ego, our good intentions, and our feelings. That's the cross that shows us who is truly in charge. That's the cross that demands we fear and trust God, even when we don't agree.

Many a self-professed, well intentioned Christian, just like Peter, is turned off by the thought that God died for them. Sure, Jesus died, but not God. God can't die because he's God. Church history is littered with false teachings all proclaiming the same thing. They say Jesus was a very good man, but not truly God. Or, Jesus was God, but didn't really die in the flesh because God dying doesn't make sense to us.

Arianism, Modalism, Mormonism, Jehovah Witness - these are just some of the heresies that deny the reality of Jesus the Christ and his all-redeeming death and resurrection. Such heresies not only stem from a lack of understanding (or faith) in who God is, but from a lack of understanding and belief (sometimes willful) in who God says we are – sinners who deserve nothing but present and eternal punishment.

Here's the real truth: Our sin is so great, so damning, and so deadly that **only** the blood of Almighty God himself could pay the debt we have racked up. If God didn't die for you than you are still in your sin, you are not forgiven, and you are headed for eternal condemnation. It's that simple.

In fact, that's the whole point of the Gospel. One can see the irony in the Gospel message being delivered in conjunction with the command to take up one's cross and follow Jesus. Life can have many crosses for us to bear and we are to bear them as we follow Jesus. Where is Jesus leading us; through the valley of the shadow of death.

For the Christian who is following Jesus, death is nothing more than a shadow. It's nothing to be feared. It's just a shadow. I can be struck by the shadow of an 18-wheeler a thousand times, but that shadow can't hurt me. The same is true for us as we follow Jesus through the shadows of this life and into the reality of eternal life with God.

On the cross, Jesus paid the full price of our sinfulness, our waywardness, our pride, and our bad intentions. God loves us so much he bore the heaviest of crosses for us. He took the sin of the whole world and drowned it in his blood. Jesus went where we cannot go. He did what we could never do. Jesus opened the door of salvation through faith alone in God's grace alone.

The road to hell may be paved with our good intentions, but the one and only road to heaven is paved with the blood of Jesus Christ. Jesus didn't just intend to save you, he did save you. He did that, not because you in any way deserve it, but because he loves you – plain and simple.