

Peter, the representative disciple, the stand-in for each of us, moves from confessing the faith upon which the church is built to being called “Satan” in the blink of an eye. Peter, entrusted with the keys to the kingdom becomes a stumbling block (a temptation to sin) to Jesus himself.

Why this sudden shift in Peter’s fortunes? In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says: *Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.*

When Jesus is late for dinner, Mary and his brothers come to retrieve him. Jesus asks: *Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?* His answer: *Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, my sister, my mother.*

Peter, like most of us, lives in the ambivalence of trust and doubt, of confessing and fear of the consequences of confessing, of betrayal and remorse. Why does Peter rebuke Jesus? Is it because he shares the Jewish Messianic understanding according to which the Messiah is a political military figure?

Is it because Peter loves Jesus and doesn’t want to see him suffer and die? For Matthew, Peter is not simply protesting against Jesus’ suffering but is also protesting against the disciples’ own suffering. Peter’s protest is ours; he wants to keep his life. Who can blame him?

A Christianity which has ceased to be serious about discipleship, which can no longer see any difference between an ordinary human life and a life committed to Christ, which promises self-fulfillment rather than practicing self-denial, *is setting its mind not on divine things but human things.*

For Calvin, self-denial stands in radical opposition to every shrewd adjustment to the circumstances. Such adjustments are justified by the most ravening beast of all, what Calvin called the “wisdom of the flesh.” Calvin knew human reason is not neutral; it resists the displacement of the ego from the center of the universe.

You can get your theology correct, but absent doing the will of God it matters little. You can have a mountain top religious experience, but absent doing the will of God it matters little. The distinctive mark of the church is living and suffering in conformity to Christ. In the end, each will be rewarded according to his/her *conduct*.

The disciple must not passively observe Jesus and what he does. The disciple is not to be a seated spectator watching from the grandstand as Jesus parades into Jerusalem. The disciple must enter the arena after Jesus.

For Matthew, Jesus is not a substitute but a leader. He does not do something for those who do nothing. Instead, he commands *Follow me*. Peter is to get behind Jesus

and follow, not pretend he knows the way. The authoritative command leaves no room for consideration of convenience or even self-preservation.

Discipleship is doing what is right, no matter how irksome the privations, no matter how great the dangers. Faith means obedience, and obedience is the grave of the will. (Davies and Allison, *Matthew: A Shorter Commentary*, p 278)

No wonder Peter protests! So do we. Who but saints and martyrs can qualify as disciples? Fred Craddock speaks for most of us. As a youth he went to summer camp and experienced one of those inspiring consecration services by the lake. Gathered around the camp fire, they sang "Are you able?"

Fred went back to his dorm and lay on his bunk and said to God, "I am able. I'll give my life." Fred pictured himself running in front of a train to rescue a child, swimming out in dangerous seas to save a drowning man. He pictured himself against a gray wall with some soldier saying, "One last chance to deny Christ and live."

Fred imagined himself confessing his faith and hearing, "Ready, aim, fire." His body slumped, the flag was at half mast, and widows weeped in the afternoon sun. Later, a monument was erected. People with cameras came. "Susie, you stand over there where Fred gave his life. Let's get your picture."

Fred was sincere then and remained so until his death a month shy of his 87th birthday. "I gave my life," he said, "but nobody warned me that I could not write one big check. I've had to write sixty years of little ones: 87 cents, 21 cents, a dollar and three cents. Just nibbled away at this giving of life."

For Matthew it is truly possible to understand Jesus only by following him in the way of self-denial.