

Remembering What We're About

Matthew 16:21-23

In Louisville, Kentucky, there is a very interesting bridge. It is called “The Big Four Railway Bridge,” and crosses the Ohio River. It was built in 1885, and its total length is more than 2500 feet. What makes this bridge so interesting is that the access to the bridge was removed on both sides of the river in 1969 to keep people off. But the rest of it is still there. In the middle of the river, there are four or five massive pillars which support what is left of the structure. The bridge is a beautiful thing to see, but it goes nowhere. In fact the bridge even has a nickname: “The Bridge That Goes Nowhere.” It stands there as the water swirls around its base, but it is useless. It has lost its purpose for even being there.

All across our country, there are church buildings which at one time were opened with a great deal of excitement and anticipation. The charter members of those congregations had a vision of what their churches could become, and perhaps for a time, they made great strides toward those goals. Occasionally, we hear of a church which has fulfilled its vision and dream given to them by God, and continues to stretch itself to become all God would have it be. More common, however, are those churches which have grown comfortable and lose sight of their purpose for existing. Like “The Big Four Railway Bridge” in Louisville, Kentucky, the superstructure of those churches may be in place, but they're going nowhere. Somewhere, sometime, they forgot what they were about.

It is relatively easy for us to forget what we're about, too. Or it may simply be that we have misunderstood what our purpose is supposed to be. We may become confused about what our mission is when we fail to look deeper than the surface in any particular issue. Nicodemus merely glanced at the truth Jesus was presenting him about being born again, and with a shrug of the shoulders, he replied, “*How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!*” (John 3:4).

In our church, we may forget what we are about when we become preoccupied with our own interests and feelings. In her grief and sorrow, Mary of Magdala made her way to the tomb where Jesus had recently been buried. When she saw that the stone had been rolled away from the door of the tomb, she ran to Peter and John, and exclaimed, “*They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!*” (20:2). Her feelings prevented her from understanding the truth of the Resurrection.

Jesus outlined His purpose in Matthew 16:21: “*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.*” Jesus understood His purpose for coming into the world, but those who knew Him best could not comprehend it. Peter’s mind could not grasp the significance of what Jesus said, so he violently protested: “*Never, Lord! This should not happen to you!*” In one of the most famous rebukes of all time, Jesus whirled about, looked Peter in the eye, and commanded, “*Get behind me, Satan!*” One of the very men whom Jesus had entrusted more than anyone else apparently was now being called by the name of Satan himself.

At this point in Matthew 16, the disciples had begun to understand that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Just a few verses before, Jesus had asked, “*Who do you say I am?*” Peter replied, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*” (16:15-16). But as soon as Jesus said something Peter did not want to hear, he suddenly forgot what it was all about. Peter and the rest of the disciples were a little sluggish in their comprehension of what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah. How different this scene could have been, if only Peter had remembered what the coming of Jesus was about!

What happens when a church remembers its purpose? From the exchange between Jesus and Peter, we can learn in a very positive way the metamorphosis which takes place in a church with a firm grasp of what it’s about.

1 We take the way of sacrificial service, rather than the easy way, v. 22

Because Peter did not comprehend, he was ready to choose the easy way. The wording of verse 22 indicates that Peter whirled about, flung an arm around the shoulders of Jesus, and quickly pulled Him aside. His words in the original language show us that Peter said something like, “This must not and cannot happen to You!” And we can imagine a tone of desperation in Peter’s voice, that Jesus should even suggest such a thing. Peter did not understand the purpose of Jesus’ coming into the world, and because he did not understand, he would have chosen the easier way.

But Jesus knew His purpose. Because He understood His mission, He would not allow anyone to pull Him away from that mission. But there was no shortcut in providing redemption for mankind. If the mission was to be fulfilled, Jesus had to

die on the cross. There was no other way. There were no shortcuts or an easier path.

In talking about our church, it would be far easier to say, “Why can’t we just go on like we’ve been doing? Why do we have to do anything different from the way we’ve been doing them?” That would be far easier. It would be easier on you, on your staff, your deacons, and our pocketbooks.

But if we remember what we are about here at our church, we will know that the only way for us to fulfill the mission we’ve been given as a body of believers is the way of sacrificial service. We will remember that the work of the church does not happen automatically, nor does it happen just because we throw a few dollars at a mission need. It certainly doesn’t happen when we choose the easier way—just because it’s easier.

Dr. F. B. Meyer was a well-known Bible scholar in another generation. He once said this about the local church: “It is urgently needed that the Christian people of our charge should come to understand that they are not a company of invalids, to be wheeled about, or fed by hand, cosseted, nursed, and comforted, the minister being the Head Physician and Nurse; but [they are] a garrison in an enemy’s country, every soldier of which should have some post or duty, at which he should be prepared to make any sacrifice rather than quitting.”

A keen understanding of our purpose, and a firm commitment to that purpose, will keep us from settling for what is merely easy.

2 We become useful instruments in the hands of God, rather than unwitting pawns in the hands of Satan, v. 23a

Peter didn’t realize it, but Satan was using him in a powerful way. Satan had offered Jesus easier ways before, and now here was one of Jesus’ own disciples trying to persuade Jesus to take the easier way. Peter meant well. He would never have chosen to allow Satan to use him this way, but it happened because Peter forgot what the purpose was. If we stop and think about it for very long, we will realize, perhaps with a shock—that many times Satan delights in using us to do his work for him. Yes, even Christians sometimes become unwitting pawns in the hands of Satan. And Satan’s work is more effective if he can use a respected Christian leader.

Sometimes we confuse our own desires with the sovereign will of God. As a result, we see anything or anyone who thinks differently than we do as being directly opposed to God. This is what was happening here with Peter, and it is repeated hundreds of thousands of times across our land, by people who mean well, but who have forgotten what it's all about. Peter didn't understand the purpose, and he became a prime candidate for Satan's pawn. Jesus understood the purpose, and God used Him to bring redemption.

We don't have a church so you and I can be catered to, or pampered, or coddled. This church does not exist for the sole purpose of satisfying everyone who claims membership here. It is great if that happens, but that is not our purpose. That is not why we exist. Not even Jesus got everything He wanted. When we remember what we're about, then it won't matter if I don't get my way about everything that happens. Little disagreements that people have as an inevitable part of life should not be allowed to interfere with our service to God.

No, our purpose is much, much deeper than that. Our church's mission is founded in the very heart of God as it is expressed in His plan of redemption, and reaches far beyond personal whims and desires of any one individual, the pastor included. Remembering what we're about causes us to become useful instruments in the hands of God.

3 We become building blocks, rather than stumbling blocks, v. 23b

Because Peter had allowed himself to become a pawn in the hands of Satan, Jesus told Peter that he was a stumbling block to the purpose of God. The KJV uses the word "offense" rather than "stumbling block," but let's take a closer look. The word in verse 23 gives us our English word "scandal." It refers to anything placed in the path that might cause someone to stumble.

Now Peter was doing what he thought was the right thing to do. Peter's concept of the Messiah was not unlike that of most everyone else, that the Messiah was going to be a Conquering Warrior who would run the Romans out of Israel.

Now the idea presented to him was that this Messiah was going to die a violent death at the hands of those hated Romans, and that ran counter to Peter's preconceived ideas. Perhaps Peter was even acting out of deep conviction of what he believed to be true. But the truth was that Peter had misunderstood the purpose of the Messiah, and as a result, he became a stumbling block to Jesus in His

journey to the Cross. We should note that Jesus did not call the Pharisees, Sadducees or scribes a stumbling block. He did not refer to the Romans this way. Instead, Jesus directed this statement to one of His own disciples.

Think of how much it would have meant to Jesus to know that Peter understood what it was really all about! Think of the support Jesus would have received from Peter kneeling there beside Him in the Garden of Gethsemane, sharing His pain and tears and agony as He faced the Cross! But ultimately, Jesus had to do it alone—all by Himself.

Later, when Peter did begin to understand the purpose for which Jesus had come into the world, he also began to understand the purpose for his own life. And what a difference we see in him! Peter is the one in Acts 1 who encouraged the disciples to select a replacement for Judas—because Peter was now a building block rather than a stumbling block. Peter is the one in Acts 2 who preached about Jesus being both Lord and Christ, even using a quotation from the minor prophet Joel as a building block in his message. At last, all the things Peter had ever heard about the Messiah made sense to him, and he was a building block in the kingdom.

Peter was the building block in Acts 4, as he stood with John before the rulers, elders and teachers of the Law in Jerusalem, accused of preaching in the name of Jesus. He quoted from the Psalms, *“the stone you builders rejected...has become the capstone.”*

Peter only got in the way—he was a stumbling block—until he understood God’s purpose in Jesus. Then he was a transformed man, as he became a building block in the kingdom of God. How tragic it is when churches forget their purpose, and instead focus on trivialities that have nothing to do with the Kingdom of God. How tragic it is when Christians who forget the purpose of the church react with great bitterness to trifling things, and in the process, they become stumbling blocks to younger or weaker Christians. It is heartrending when pastors and staff members forget the purpose of the church, or forget the purpose of their serving that particular congregation, and as a result allow themselves to become stumbling blocks to the entire body.

You may be familiar with Mark Twain’s story, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*. The hero of that story had dynamite installed under the foundations of all the munitions plants and factories he had built. He realized that if there should be a rebellion against his seemingly “new” ideas, those factories could be used against him. The dynamite was installed so that the factories and plants could

be destroyed very quickly before that happened. It may be that at least mentally we need to do the same thing in the church. Every building, every program, every class, every organization should have dynamite built into its foundation, so that if it ever becomes a stumbling block to the church accomplishing the purpose God intends, it can be removed to clear the ground for greater growth. In fact, God's Word warns us in Romans 16:17, *"I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them."* Instead, each of us is to be a building block in the Kingdom of God.

4 We approach our work from God's point of view, rather than from a human point of view, v. 23c.

He was involved in the work of Christ, but because Peter misunderstood the purpose, he approached his work for the Messiah from a human perspective. And that was the thing which Jesus pointed out to him now with such force. Jesus was saying to Peter "Back up and take another look. This time look through the eyes of God. He has a different purpose than the one you have in mind."

The last thing Jesus said to Peter in this encounter in Matthew 16 was *"you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."* The King James Version uses the word "savor" where the NIV reads "You do not have in mind." Though it appears differently in our English translations, Paul used the same word in Colossians 3:1-2, which reads, *"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your minds on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things."*

Once you approached everything from a human perspective, Paul was telling them, and that was all that could be expected from people who did not know Christ. But now, he told them, you are to have a different perspective. Your goals are to be different. The things you treasure most are to be different. The things in which you take most pleasure are to be different. Why? Because Christ has taken over your life. *That* is the difference! It's a matter of perspective.

Audrey Kelly wrote in *Reader's Digest* (January 1987) of a visit she made to a pharmacy. A couple of teenagers came in. They were both dressed in leather, chains and safety pins. The boy had blue-and-purple spiked hair, and the girl's hair was dyed a bright yellow. Suddenly the boy picked up a pair of sunglasses and tried them on. "What do you think of these?" he asked his girlfriend.

She howled, “Take them off! They make you look ridiculous!” I guess you could say it was a matter of perspective.

One man driving through New England stopped for gasoline in a tiny village. He asked the station attendant, “What’s this place called?” The attendant replied, “All depends. Do you mean what’s it called by them that has to live in this dad-blamed, moth-eaten, dust-covered, one-hoss dump, or by them that’s merely enjoying its quaint and picturesque charms for a short spell?” It was all in the way one looked at it.

An artist who wanted a home in the Taconic Mountains of Vermont was talking with a farmer who said that he had a house for sale. The artist said, “In my line of work, I must have a good view. Is there a good view from the house you’re selling?” The farmer drawled, “Well, from the front porch you can see Ed Snow’s barn, but behind that there ain’t nothing but a bunch of mountains.” It was a matter of perspective.

Those are humorous examples of how different people have different perspectives. But in the Kingdom of God, and in the church, it can be much more serious than that. If you can understand your own purpose in life, and get a grasp of the purpose of our church, then you will be able to approach your work for Christ from a different perspective. It will be from the point of view of God, rather than from the limited perspective of mortal human beings.

When a church has sincerely sought the face of God concerning its purpose and mission, everything changes. The church which remembers what it’s all about is not like The Big Four Railway Bridge in Louisville, Kentucky. It is not the church which stands in the middle of the river of humanity with no access. It is the church which is constantly looking for ways to build bridges to those who do not know Christ, whatever the cost involved.