

Get behind me Satan!



“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”
2 Tim 3:16-17)

You are a hindrance to me...

“Get behind me Satan! You are a hindrance to me...”

Matthew 16:23

These blunt words were spoken by Jesus to his disciple Peter. Strong stuff! He didn't say, perhaps as we British might, “Actually Peter, you're incorrect. Perhaps you should think again.” On the contrary, this was a force-10 rebuke.

Would Jesus ever speak to us in a similar way? If he wanted to, would we recognise it? Most of the time our ears are tuned to receive words of assurance, comfort or encouragement or perhaps loving exhortation. But there were occasions when Jesus did not conform to the gentle Jesus meek and mild image we are sometimes given. He called a group of Pharisees *“hypocrites! White painted sepulchres, beautiful on the outside, but full of dead men's bones...”*

Actually, in the previous paragraph, Peter had been doing rather well. He was the first to openly declare that Jesus was the Christ (the Messiah) and for this he was commended. Jesus affirmed him, saying that it had been revealed to him by his Heavenly Father but he also directed Peter not to go public on this at the time. So, this sudden reversal of tone comes as quite a shock! Indeed, it raises some questions.

What was it that Peter said, that deserved such a censure? How is it possible to be spot-on at one moment and so off-target shortly afterwards? We're quite used to the thought that Jesus would be very outspoken and critical of the Pharisees, but surely the disciples were his hand-picked followers and his friends? Might we, unwittingly do reproduce the same mistake? In what circumstances would Jesus feel it necessary to speak to us in this way?

A careful reading of the passage gives us some answers. Firstly, it was precisely because Peter was a chosen disciple that Jesus needed to speak to him like this. Peter whose name could be translated “Rocky” in modern parlance, had a significant breakthrough in his understanding of God's ways when he recognized who Jesus was. And it was upon this openly stated confession (*“this rock”*), that Jesus (using a play on words) declared that he would build his church. (Not incidentally Peter, the person.) But well-done Peter for getting that bit of the picture right!

However, what he hadn't got at that time was an accurate picture the kind of Christ (Messiah) that Jesus needed to be. He hadn't yet revised his concept of messiahship from the popular idea doing the rounds. In particular he hadn't made the link with the *suffering servant* passages nor the full implications of Jesus' preferred way of talking about himself as the *Son of Man*. He was missing a crucial piece of the picture. Without this, the mission of the gospel of the Kingdom for the whole world could not proceed. Unless things changed, he would be living with a half-truth and indeed he would be a hindrance to the purposes of God. No wonder Jesus spoke to him so directly. Hindering the work of God was precisely what Satan would wish to do. His disciples had been specially chosen to *advance* the kingdom. Peter had got a large piece of the “what” picture but was missing an equally large piece of the “how” picture.

Might we be in a similar position sometimes? Very possibly. How can we avoid it? I offer just a few suggestions.

1. Firstly, by holding some of our convictions about how God works, or how he *ought* to work, or how we should expect him to work – lightly. “My ways are not your ways!” taught Isaiah. The truth is God often does things very differently to the way we expect. Whom did God choose to take the gospel to the Gentiles (non-Jews)? A Jew of course! A Jew who had been persecuting and destroying Christian communities of course! A man who had to spend many years undoing the thinking he had learned as a child and a young man, of course! And by the way, a man who had not been one of the twelve disciples! We need to give God the freedom to be God and to do things *His way*.
2. Secondly by being willing to listen to the advice, opinions and judgements of others, most especially when they clash with our own. This is humility and it shows in a willingness to adapt and change one’s mind. Young Christians tend to be very black and white about things. The basic gospel seems so straightforward and simple! It is indeed. But, as mentioned in another post, there are many things in the Christian walk that have to be held in balance. As we grow-up in the faith we learn that there are shades of grey, truths to be held in balance and of course there are areas where God has not revealed a complete picture. This does not mean that we should have no firm convictions; certainly, we should. James warns us about instability and being tossed about like waves on the sea. But it is right to allow ourselves to test and scrutinise our thinking lest we make Peter’s mistake.
3. Thirdly, we should be careful not to overgeneralise from our own experience especially in how we expect God to work. We may be able to say rightly and with confidence that we have seen God work in a certain way in times past, but that does not necessarily mean he will work in precisely the same way in the future.
4. By asking God to renew our minds by his Spirit and His Word. It’s good to ask God questions.

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”
2 Tim 3:16-17)

It is significant that scripture rebukes and corrects. But the Bible is not a recipe book. To treat it as such involves too much scissor work. Some truth appears in the form of trajectories as God’s purposes unfold. We also need to remember that the Bible was written *for* us but not actually *to* us. This is important because it is possible to read some parts through 21st century spectacles and take away a meaning that was never intended.

“But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth.”
John 16:13

5. Fifthly, by reflecting on those occasions when we have come to see things in a different way. What kind of things are they? How did we come to a rethink? God, our Heavenly Father deals with us as individuals because we are different. His ways with you are tailored to your needs and his purposes for you.

None of these grants us immunity from making mistakes from time to time. Indeed, that is *also* one of the ways we learn. May God give us grace to make mistakes and benefit from them rather than make mistakes and miss a valuable learning opportunity! Perhaps Peter did this. Certainly, his later letters reveal that he made a great deal of progress since his three-year basic discipleship training course!

Chris Moffett, Trust Director