

IT'S LIFE OR DEATH

18th in a Series on the Book of Matthew

Passage: **Matthew 16** – Topic: Finding Life

You've undoubtedly seen a movie or television show with a story that goes something like this. The central character, a young woman, finds herself attracted to both her big city fiancé and the small-town guy she has recently met and experienced an undeniable connection with. She is torn about what she should do. At some point someone tells her that she needs to listen to her heart. She should do what her heart tells her, because if she lets her heart guide her she can never go wrong.

We hear that a lot. Follow your heart. Listen to your gut. Writer Malcolm Gladwell wrote a best-selling book titled *Blink*, in which he presented a case that often our first impressions, our intuition, is our best decision. So we should listen to our gut and go with what it tells us. There is some value in that message that you should follow your heart. Most of us tend to be people pleasers to one degree or another, and the "listen to your gut" or "follow your heart" message is an attempt to free us from the tyranny of what other people think.

However, there is a major flaw in the call to follow our heart or go with our gut. It is that our hearts and our guts don't always tell us the truth. Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure." The most dishonest thing on the planet is the human heart. This and other verses warn us that our hearts and our intuition are not completely trustworthy.

Well, that's just what you frowny, negative religious people think. Actually, it's not. It turns out that current research is confirming what the Bible has been telling us for a long time. Surprise, surprise. Psychologist Daniel Kahneman, who wrote the book, *Thinking, Fast And Slow*, said in an interview, "Malcolm Gladwell does not believe that intuition is magic. He really doesn't... But his story has helped people in a belief that they really want to have, which is that intuition works magically, and that belief is false." In other words, much of the time our intuition is not nearly as reliable as we want to believe.

In their book, *Mistakes Were Made*, Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson wrote, "Most of us, most of the time, are neither telling the whole truth nor intentionally deceiving. We aren't lying, we are self-justifying." They say we do it subconsciously and continually. We can't help ourselves. Social psychologist Anthony Greenwald says the self is ruled by a "totalitarian ego" that ruthlessly destroys information it doesn't want to hear and rewrites history.

Distinguished cognitive psychologist Ralph Haber often tells the story of how when he was young he chose to go to grad school at Stanford against his mother's objections. She wanted him to go to Michigan where he would be close to home. But when Stanford offered him a fellowship he jumped at it with enthusiasm. He was anxious to spread his wings and boldly broaden his horizons. However, he relates that when he went back to Michigan for his mother's 80th birthday

many years later she gave him a box full of letters he and his mother had written each other. The first letter he pulled out of the box stunned him. He learned from his own writing that the truth was the exact reverse of what he was sure he remembered. In fact he had been determined to stay at Michigan and it was his mother who pleaded passionately for him to accept the offer to Stanford and leave home. Somehow he had totally rewritten history to fit the image he wanted to have of himself as bold and anxious to spread his wings, though he had no recollection of ever consciously choosing to do so. His memory and his heart were telling him something that absolutely was not true.

Listening to our heart is often listening to a pack of lies. In fact, we know that frequently the counterintuitive is true. There are in fact some counterintuitive realities that are essential to life. Today in Matthew 16 we will encounter one of them. It is a reality that runs contrary to everything our hearts tell us. Yet it turns out to be the key to life. There are several things Jesus said to various people in this chapter. Let's look at them.

YOU WON'T GET SIGNS

In the opening segment of this chapter the Pharisees and Sadducees, two leading sects of the day, insist that Jesus show them some signs. Jesus has been debating them pretty continuously and absolutely shredding them, making them look bad. So they now claim that he needs to come up with some evidence that he is who he claims to be by doing something miraculous.

The amazing thing is that they trotted this out challenge at all. Jesus had recently astounded thousands of people by miraculously feeding them with food that came from nowhere on two occasions. In addition he has been healing people left and right. People who were paralyzed, had crippled limbs, couldn't see, couldn't hear, who had dreaded leprosy, had been healed by Jesus. In one case a young girl who had died had been made alive again by Jesus. Excuse me, but I'd say they'd been given all the signs they needed.

Jesus pointed out that they could look at the sunset and seeing there were no clouds conclude it was not going to rain. Or they could see clouds at sunrise and know that a storm is coming. But they couldn't see the signs of the times. In other words, they somehow couldn't see the many unmistakable signs happening in front of their eyes. He calls them "a wicked and adulterous generation." Notice he didn't say, "a really stupid and clueless generation." The problem was not that they were so dumb that couldn't see the signs, but that they were so hardened against the truth that they refused to do so. Their problem was neither that there were no signs nor that they couldn't see, but that they wouldn't see them because their hearts were hard.

Jesus knew that no matter how many miracles he produced they were not going to believe in him. In the face of astounding, conclusive evidence in his favor they had chosen to oppose him no matter what he did. There was nothing he could do to change that situation. He knew that. So he refused to do a trick for them. He said he would give one more sign. It was the sign of Jonah. We

have seen this before and know that he referred to his own resurrection. That would be the final proof of his divine nature. Yet they would reject that too.

YOU DON'T NEED YEAST

After that interaction Jesus and the guys took to their boat and headed back across the Lake. On the way, reflecting on the hard hearts of the religious leaders, Jesus warned his men to be careful and guard against the “yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” The disciples had forgotten to bring bread along on the trip and thus had nothing to eat. So when Jesus started talking about the yeast of the religious leaders they figured he was peeved because they didn’t have bread.

My immediate reaction when I read this passage is, “Dudes, seriously? How could you be so dense?” But let’s operate on the premise that while these guys may not have been the crème de la crème, neither were they dumber than a fence post. I suspect there was some bickering about who was responsible for the lack of food. Along with the finger-pointing there were likely some guilty feelings. “I’ll bet Jesus is really hacked off at us.” So when Jesus started talking about yeast they went straight to the, “Well it wasn’t my fault we don’t have any bread” position.

I wonder if Jesus slapped his forehead in dismay at the shallowness of his guys and said, “Are you kidding me right now?” Whatever the case, he set them straight. He was not concerned about the lack of bread. “Um, excuse me, guys, but were you there when I fed thousands of people twice with food that had not existed until I started passing it out? Did you miss the point of that? Don’t you think if I felt we needed bread I could manage to come up with some?”

He then spelled it out. The yeast he was talking about was the ideas and the thinking of the religious leaders. Even a little of their thinking with its pride and hypocrisy would spread through their whole perspective and taint the whole thing. They needed to be careful about letting any of it seep into their hearts.

YOU FINALLY GOT THE PICTURE

Jesus has been pushing his men to choose between him and the religious leaders of Israel whom they had admired all their lives. In the previous chapter he called those leaders hypocrites and blind guides, and told his guys to leave them. Now he tells them to not have even a little bit of the yeast of the religious leaders, meaning their teaching, in their hearts and minds. He was calling for a clean break, a total rejection of the ways and teachings of the Pharisees. To push them closer to making the choice he was urging on them he makes them face who he really is. He starts by asking, “Who do the people think I am?”

Jesus knew what people were thinking. He didn’t need to conduct a poll to learn what his Messiah approval ratings were. He asked the question because he wanted his followers to think about who he really was. As we have seen, Jesus is bringing them to a point of decision. There can be no “believe in Jesus and follow the status quo religious system,” so the question of who he was became the critical issue. They had to choose, either Jesus or the status quo.

Most people knew that he was no ordinary man. He clearly had divine power and authority. Perhaps he was a miraculous re-appearance of John the Baptist, or Elijah or some other prophet. They weren't ready to believe he was Messiah, but they could not deny that something divine was going on with him.

Then Jesus popped the crucial question. Who do *you* think I am? I imagine there was some hesitation, some serious thinking going on for a few moments as they considered that one. Was he a prophet? Elijah had demonstrated the ability to affect weather when he prayed that it would stop raining and it did. He also had made food miraculously expand for a poor single mom. So maybe Jesus is a prophet like that since he had stopped a storm in its tracks and miraculously provided food. What category could you put Jesus in?

Peter, ever outspoken, finally blurts out, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." This was a continental divide type answer. With it Peter crossed into new territory. He was saying Jesus was the one who fulfilled the ancient prophecies that one man would be the anointed one, the chosen one, a descendant of David who was uniquely the Son of God. This one would come and rule without end. This was a profound and crucial answer, for there would be no question about who to follow. If you had to choose between Messiah and the religious elite, Messiah would win every day of the week and twice on the Sabbath.

I don't think Peter understood the full implication of his statement. I don't believe he totally grasped that Jesus was God in human form. We know that he didn't because in a few moments he will try to show Jesus the error of his thinking and straighten him out. But this was a monumental moment. My guess is that the other disciples were probably nodding in agreement with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

Jesus commended Peter. You're exactly right, Peter. The disciple passed the quiz with flying colors. In response, Jesus said to Peter, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." The Roman Catholic Church has made a huge deal over Peter. They call him the first pope. In reaction to that some non-Catholics try to lessen the impact of Jesus' statement here. They will say things like the rock that Jesus referred to was Peter's proclamation that Jesus is the Son of the Living God.

However, the name Peter meant "rock." Jesus said literally, "You are a rock, and on this rock I will build my church." The normal, unbiased understanding of Jesus' statement here is that he was referring to Peter. Some people pick up on the fact that Matthew uses two slightly different forms of the word rock, but that's just because the grammar demanded it. We should also recall that Jesus actually spoke in Aramaic and in that language the grammatical variation would not have occurred.

This emphasis on Peter's role should not bother us, because Peter played the key part in the early stages of the church. In Ephesians 2:19 Paul said that we Gentile believers are now members of

God's household, and in verse 20 went on to say, "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets." Peter was a key part of that foundation. He was a rock the church was built on.

Jesus says "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." This has led to some confusion about Peter at the gates of heaven determining who gets in and who doesn't. For instance, there's the story of the engaged couple who died in a car accident the day before their wedding. At the gates of heaven Peter welcomed them in and asked, "Is there anything I can do to add to your enjoyment of heaven?" They said, "Well, yes. You see we died just before we got married. Is there any way we could get married in heaven?" Peter said, "Why, yes, I will start making the arrangements now and will let you know when all is ready." They were very pleased, but they waited for 100 years and heard nothing. After that delay they asked Peter about it and he said, "Everything is being arranged." But another 100 years passed, and still no wedding. Again they spoke to Peter. "We've been waiting 200 years. We realize that heaven is eternal, so 200 years isn't that big of a deal, but we'd really like to get married. We're getting a bit impatient. When will the wedding be?" Peter said, "I'm really sorry for the delay, all the arrangements are in place, but we've been waiting for a pastor to finally get in up here."

I have my doubts about how true that story is. But it reflects that Peter at the pearly gates idea. There is an important grammatical point in the Greek text that doesn't show up in English. When Jesus said, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom," he used the plural "you." In other words, it wasn't just Peter, it was all of the disciples that were given the keys. By that Jesus meant they were the ones he would use to open up the kingdom to all people, Jew and Gentile alike.

The statement about "binding and loosing" was a colloquialism for proclaiming what is right and wrong, what is God's will and what is not, which was a critical role of the apostles.

YOU NEED TO DIE TO LIVE

That brings us to the part of this chapter that tells us one of the most counterintuitive, but important truths we will ever hear. Jesus told the disciples about his coming execution. Peter was having none of that kind of talk. He took Jesus aside to try to straighten him out. Obviously Jesus needed some help with PR. This talk of being rejected and killed is a real downer, and won't help people get the idea of who you are at all. Everybody knows Messiah will rule forever, not be killed. You can't keep up this discouraging talk of being killed and expect people to believe you're Messiah.

Jesus was neither subtle nor sensitive in his response to Peter. "Get behind me, Satan." Yikes. Jesus just called Peter Satan. That's because Peter had just made the same suggestion to Jesus that Satan had made to him earlier when he tempted him in the wilderness. You both can and should have the throne over all the kingdoms of the world without this dying business. Peter didn't intend to, but he was playing the role of Satan at that moment by tempting Jesus to bypass the cross.

But why did Jesus speak to him so harshly? Calling him Satan was more than a little unkind, don't you think. Pretty sure if I were in Rocky's sandals that would have hurt. I wouldn't have liked it at all. Why would Jesus do such a thing to one of his best friends? This is just my guess, but I think he wanted Peter to understand how crucial this was. This wasn't just a big deal, it was the biggest deal of all time. Peter needed to understand that Jesus wasn't being pessimistic. He wasn't just in a down moment and kind of discouraged. He was telling his guys what he had come to do. He was telling them once again that their idea about the kingdom and how it would come about was not going to happen, for God was doing something dramatically different and bigger through Jesus. And what God was doing required that he die. Jesus could not accomplish God's will, God's huge kingdom plan, unless he died.

Jesus said in verse 23, "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." Peter was thinking the way humans usually think, not the way God thinks. Peter was listening to his heart, and his heart wanted Jesus to win, to overpower every opponent and rule the world, with Peter right by his side.

That statement gets to the heart of an issue that all of us stumble over. What Peter and the others wanted was the kingdom of God to fit in their pre-conceived notions. They wanted the kingdom to come with power and glory. They wanted Rome to be defeated, Israel to rise and become the superpower in the world. They wanted Jesus to be an earthly king of an earthly kingdom. And they wanted to be part of his administration. They wanted to have the status, the wealth, the power that would come with such an exalted position. They wanted life on this earth right now to be idyllic, with peace and unimaginable abundance.

Jesus hadn't come to bring that. The concerns of God were totally different. God was concerned that all people were separated from him by their rebellion and guilt. He was concerned that people were pursuing every pleasure of this world and yet dying in their souls. God was concerned with saving them from the condemnation that they were continually deserving. He was concerned with bringing people into loving relationship with him and into his eternal heavenly kingdom.

We are right there with the disciples. All of us are preoccupied with the concerns of humans rather than the concerns of God. Oh, yes, we want to be forgiven and have eternal life in his kingdom and we want that for others. But we also want desperately to be happy in this life right now. We think about it all the time. We are ever fearful that something is going to happen to us that will hurt so badly it will crush us, or that will make it so we can never be happy. We dream of what needs to happen so we can be really happy. That's what we want! That's our vision of the kingdom of God. It is our ideal life right now.

Our hearts play a recording continually that says we need to be happy and that happiness absolutely requires certain conditions in this world. To be fully alive is to be happy, so I need to have a certain amount of financial wealth, I need to be loved in particular ways, I need to have some sense of success and worth, I need to be physically healthy, and so on. The obvious

implication of this is that if God loves me he will give me what I need to be happy. What father wants his child to be unhappy? If God is our Father he must want us to be happy. This is what our hearts tell us. Surely he will give us what we need. This is what the kingdom of God must be like.

Author and pastor Matt Chandler says, “We are all...hedonists at our core. Hedonism means to pursue your own pleasure. By our default...that thing in our guts and the thoughts of our minds, are leading us toward and driving us to what we believe is going to most satisfy us, give us the most pleasure, and give us the most life. Every decision you make is leading you to that end.”

He’s right. That is the way humans think. It is how we are. We all want the earthly Kingdom of Me. And we are all certain that we must have love, friends, status, security, money, success and health in order to have that fulfilled life we want.

Jesus told them, and us, if you want to follow him you must take up your cross. We saw this before in Matthew 10:38. We think of the cross as some sort of burden in life. Maybe your cross is some person, an annoying boss or an irritating neighbor. Or maybe it is some difficult physical condition. But that’s not what the cross meant back then. It meant the end of you. The cross meant death, and it was death in the most gruesome way possible.

Jesus says you have to deny yourself. Again, we tend to think of that as sacrificing a few things. Maybe for this season I’ll deny myself ice cream. That’s not what Jesus was saying. He was saying something a lot larger. He was calling his followers to quit living for themselves. Stop seeing yourself as the one who decides what is wrong and right in this world, what is best for you and for others. Stop seeing yourself as the one who is the captain of your ship. Stop believing that the true goal of all things is for you to be happy and demanding that God work to that end.

What that meant for Peter and the other disciples was they were going to have to let go of the dream of the powerful earthly kingdom that would bring them glory, fame, power, riches, status and abundance of every kind. Instead they would have to live for what God is pursuing. And for them personally that was going to come at a high price. Every one of them would suffer in the service of God’s kingdom. They had to give up their kingdom to serve the kingdom of God.

Laurie and I were saddened when we learned recently that there is a young woman friend in her mid-20’s who has been diagnosed with leukemia. I have been thinking about that young woman. No one is going to be happy to have that happen. The common reaction in that situation is “why has this happened to me?” Right along with that is the “Where are you, God?” question. How could God let that happen if he really loves her? Those are normal human reactions. They are the way humans think. That young woman is faced with the question of whether she can deny herself and live for God’s kingdom, whatever that might entail, even if it means leukemia. But I don’t see how leukemia could have anything to do with God’s kingdom. *The thing is, we don’t have to*

see. We just have to choose. Peter could not see how Messiah dying could have anything to do with God's kingdom. He didn't have to see, he just had to choose.

Taking up the cross, denying ourselves, isn't always so life and death. It is not always big drastic things. It happens every single day in myriad small ways. Laurie and I are taking care of our granddaughters while their Mom and Dad are out of town. This has been a vivid reminder that we don't have as much energy and stamina as we did when we were raising young children of our own. One night Cara, the younger one, woke up crying. It was her usual routine to wake up in the middle of the night wanting to be fed a bottle. I had to go to the bathroom, so I answered that call. Our bathroom wall is shared with the room where Cara was, so I could hear her crying quite well. And it occurred to me that it wasn't stopping. It wasn't stopping because Laurie wasn't getting out of bed to take care of the problem. I started thinking, "Come on, Laurie. I know you're tired and it's the middle of the night, but you need to take care of the poor little girl. I know you want to sleep, but get on it!" I started getting a little annoyed and having those thoughts like, she's probably wanting me to do something about it, but what am I supposed to do? I don't know the exact procedure. It was then that I had a rather guilty realization. I had maintained my ignorance so I would not have to get out of bed. I don't recall ever deliberately avoiding learning the procedure so I could intentionally duck that duty, but I had to admit I had never made an attempt to learn it either. I thought about what it would mean to serve Jesus. In his kingdom I would give up self and love my wife. So I resignedly determined I would go tell her I would answer the call if she would just tell me what to do, and that she could stay in bed. The good news was when I came back to bed she was already gone. So I went back to sleep. But there was that moment when I had to decide whether I wanted to live for my kingdom or serve Jesus by loving my wife. Every day of our lives we will be presented with many opportunities to either serve ourselves or give up self and serve Jesus.

But why should we live like that? Why should we deny self, follow Jesus, live for his kingdom and not listen to our hearts, which tell us we need to look out for ourselves above all else? First we should because he is Lord and he deserves our service. But Jesus also gave us a less altruistic reason for denying self and serving him. It's because, "whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it." In other words, listen to your heart, which tells you to do whatever you must to make yourself happy, do whatever is necessary to get what you think will give you life, and you will get the opposite of what you seek. You lose your life, meaning you get death. Somehow you end up not with fullness of life, but with emptiness, disappointment, frustration and bitterness. But when you give up self, when you say no to "me" and yes to Jesus, you find life. This is where you find meaning, peace, even joy. This is totally contrary to everything our hearts tell us, but it is true. Finding real life comes by serving, living for Jesus, and serving self only kills.

We have had a number of occasions when we are out celebrating an anniversary and people ask how long we've been married. We tell them 38 years. Invariably we get the same reaction. They are shocked and say, "How is that possible? Did you get married when you were 2?" That happens because Laurie does not look her age. People often think she's 15 years younger than

she is. When they get over the shock the next question almost is, “It’s obvious you guys are happy. What’s your secret? How have you been able to do this?” A key part of our answer is that we have diligently sought to serve and care for each other rather than for ourselves.

People love to see a marriage where the husband and wife are truly in love with each other, where there is joy in each other. They long for that themselves. But that kind of relationship only happens when a husband and wife deny self and serve the other. That is a demonstration of the fact that while our hearts tell us the opposite, denying self produces life, and serving self produces death. I have seen the negative side of this. I have seen marriages where a spouse decided to follow their heart and live for self. Every time it brought death. It absolutely shredded the marriage.

The strange thing about this is that we know this is true, yet we are so addicted to taking care of ourselves we keep listening to our hearts that insist we do whatever is necessary to make ourselves happy and safe. At least we think it will. Our hearts are so deceitful at times it doesn’t even occur to us that we are pursuing self. We don’t even notice that we are not serving Jesus at all, but serving self. But the truth remains, that approach kills, while serving Jesus is the only source of true life.

I mentioned that Laurie and I are taking care of Ella and Cara. Actually, that statement doesn’t fully explain what is happening at our house. We are also taking care of Toby and Anna’s two dogs and Michael and Carissa’s rabbit, Lily Belle. This is a problem because to the dogs Lily looks like a tasty morsel, and to Lily the dogs look like a heart attack about to happen. So we have not one, but two gates up on our stairs to keep the dogs from going upstairs to the area where the rabbit is housed. That’s because the dogs have already proven that one gate is not enough. So in the middle of Friday night, our first one with Lily in our house, I found myself marginally awake and heard a thump. It sounded like Laurie had maybe knocked something off her nightstand onto the floor. But I looked over at her and she was sound asleep and not moving. Since I was groggy, I thought maybe I had just imagined it. Then I heard it again. What is that? Then it hit me. When she’s upset or scared Lily thumps just like that. Oh shoot, the dogs must have defeated the gates and they’re upstairs going after the bunny! I jumped out of bed and went out in the hall hoping to rescue her before tragedy occurred that would be very difficult to explain to Michael and Carissa. No dogs, no threat, all was quiet. I still don’t know what those thumps were. What I know is my sleep has been disturbed a lot this past week. In the midst of this, while in my exhausted state I am chasing a two-year old who has a nearly inexhaustible supply of energy and a motor that runs constantly. She is a delight, she is a huge joy, but it is exhausting trying to keep up with her.

My point here is that we have sacrificed a lot to help our kids. But what a return we have received on our investment of time and effort. We have tremendous joy in our relationship with them. There is life there, full life bursting with joy. Right now, we are tired beyond description, but we are loving every minute of it. In everything we’ve done for our kids and grandkids there is

sacrifice and it can make life hard, but it is all a great joy. The very act of serving, of giving, is a joy and a delight, even when it is hard. We might go to bed utterly spent, but we do it happily.

One night after fighting and winning the battle of bed time with Ella, Laurie was upstairs reading to Ella one more book. Ella reached over and put her arm around Laurie's arm, leaned her head against Laurie and said, "Oh, Nana, I love you." How much is that worth? There is no price tag for something like that. And that only comes about when you give up self, sacrifice, and serve. Do you see the lesson here? Once again, denying self and choosing to serve produces the best that life has to offer. That's what Jesus said.

Our hearts say, "Denying yourself is death! Don't do it." But Jesus says take up your cross and follow me. Choose to say no to self, follow me, and you will experience life. We die, in order to live. It is counterintuitive, it goes against everything our gut tells us, and it is absolutely true.

If you want to die, live for yourself. If you want to live, die to self and live to serve Jesus by loving other people. The choice is before us every single day. Will you listen to your heart and live for your kingdom? Or will you live for the kingdom of Christ? It's a matter of life and death.