

Session 4: The Things of Men

Matthew 16:21-28 and 17:1-8 | 75 to 90 minutes | Young Adult Inductive Study

PART ONE: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim: The group discovers why the rock became a stumbling block in five verses: Peter confessed the right Christ with the wrong dictionary, a salvation without a cross. They discover that following Jesus means letting Him define the words we confess, and that the Transfiguration is given to sustain, not to replace, the road to Calvary.

Catholic Touchstone: There is no Christianity without the cross: not for Christ, and not for His disciples (CCC 618). The instinct to want the Messiah minus the suffering is not modern; it is apostolic, it earned the sharpest rebuke in the Gospels, and it lives in every one of us.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Matthew 16:21 opens with a hinge: “From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things... and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” From that time: the confession unlocked the curriculum. Now that they know who He is, He can begin teaching what He came to do, and the Greek carries a small iron word, *dei*, it is necessary. The cross is not a risk He is running; it is the plan He is walking.

Peter's reaction is the whiplash of the New Testament: “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you” (Matthew 16:22). He even takes Jesus aside to correct Him privately, the student rebuking the Teacher he just confessed. And Jesus answers with the harshest words He ever speaks to a friend: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men” (Matthew 16:23). The word for hindrance is *skandalon*, a stumbling stone. Five verses ago Simon was the rock the Church would be built on; now he is a rock in the road. Same man, same love, opposite function, and the difference is a single move: he confessed the right title and then tried to define it himself. A Messiah of victories without wounds is not the Father's plan; it is, quite literally, the devil's suggestion, the same kingdom-without-a-cross shortcut Satan offered in the wilderness. When Jesus says “Get behind me,” He is not expelling Peter; behind Him is where a disciple walks. He is telling Peter to stop standing in front of the plan and fall back into line.

Then Jesus universalizes it: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). Be careful here as a leader, because this verse is mishandled in both directions. Denying yourself is not self-hatred, and the cross is not a poetic word for life's ordinary

annoyances. To deny yourself is to dethrone yourself: to stop being the final authority on what your life is for. To take up the cross, for the first hearers, meant one thing: a condemned man carrying the instrument of his own death through town. Jesus is asking for our lives, and He is honest about it up front.

Six days later He takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain and is transfigured before them: face like the sun, garments white as light, Moses and Elijah, the bright cloud, and the Father's voice: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him" (Matthew 17:5). The timing is the interpretation: one week after the cross was announced and rejected, glory is unveiled to three witnesses so that scandal of the cross will not break their faith when it comes. St. Leo's reading, below, is the classic. Notice Peter in the scene: "Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths." It is a lovable instinct and a wrong one: to freeze the glory, build on the summit, and skip the descent. The cloud interrupts him mid-sentence, and the Father's "listen to him" answers Peter's "God forbid" from the week before. The mountain is fuel for the road, not a substitute for it; they come down, and Jerusalem is still where the road goes.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Isaiah 53:3-6 (the live discovery text; do not preview it). The suffering servant: despised, rejected, wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities. Peter's "God forbid" collides not just with Jesus' prediction but with his own Scriptures. The Messiah who must suffer was already on the page; it was the page nobody wanted to read at the coronation.

Sinai behind the Transfiguration. Exodus 24:15-18 (the cloud covers the mountain, the glory of the LORD, Moses enters the cloud) and Exodus 34:29 (Moses' face shines from speaking with God). Matthew paints the mountain (traditionally identified as Tabor) with Sinai's palette: mountain, cloud, radiant face, terrified witnesses. Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets, appear beside Jesus and then vanish, leaving "Jesus only."

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. Leo the Great | *Sermon 51 (on the Transfiguration)*

St. Leo's reading of Tabor is the Church's classic: the great reason for the Transfiguration was to remove the scandal of the cross from the hearts of the disciples, so that the humiliation of the Passion, freely undertaken, would not shatter the faith of men who had been shown the hidden excellence of His dignity. Glory is unveiled for one week's worth of witnesses so that on the worst Friday in history, three men would carry a memory stronger than what their eyes were seeing.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom | *Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew, Homily 54*

Preaching on the rebuke, St. Chrysostom marvels at the whiplash and refuses to soften it: the blessing and the "Satan" come from the same Lord to the same man within moments, because the

confession was from the Father and the correction was from the flesh. Peter's error wore the costume of devotion, wishing his Master well, and Chrysostom's warning lands on every generation: our affection for Christ, when it argues against His cross, stops being on God's side without ever feeling like betrayal.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) | *The Science of the Cross and final writings*

A philosopher, a Jewish convert, a Carmelite, and a martyr at Auschwitz, St. Teresa Benedicta gave her life to what she called the science of the cross: the truth that the cross is not an obstacle on the way to God but the way itself, and that we hand ourselves over to it not because suffering is good but because Love is hanging there. She wrote that one can only learn this science by coming to feel the cross's weight personally, and she signed her learning in blood. Her whole life answers Peter's "God forbid": the world is not saved by avoiding Golgotha.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 554-556:** The Transfiguration: a foretaste of the Kingdom given precisely after Peter's confession and the first prediction of the Passion, to strengthen the disciples for the scandal of the cross.
- CCC 618: The cross is the unique sacrifice of Christ, and He calls His disciples to take up their cross and follow Him, making them partners in His paschal mystery.
- CCC 2015: "The way of perfection passes by way of the Cross. There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle."
- **CCC 540:** Jesus' rejection of the tempter's shortcuts; the kingdom-without-the-cross proposal was made before, in the wilderness, and refused there too.

THE WAY OF SALVATION (STUDY STRAND, LEADER ONLY)

MOVEMENT 4 OF THE KERYGMA: THE CROSS

There is no salvation without the cross. The kerygma's center is not that God is nice but that Christ died for our sins and was raised. Didactic texts: 1 Corinthians 1:18 (the word of the cross, folly to the perishing, power of God to the saved); Isaiah 53. And plant this quietly in your memory for the final session: 1 Peter 2:24, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree." The man who said "God forbid" tonight will one day write the theology of the cross with his own pen. Say nothing; the group will find it in Session 12. Do not teach this strand aloud.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY, NEVER REVEAL)

- **The name whiplash.** Rock in verse 18, Satan in verse 23. The name thread takes its first hard swing. Track it silently.
- **“Listen to him.”** The Father's command on the mountain is the direct answer to Peter's “God forbid” in the valley. If a participant connects them, celebrate loudly.
- **The booth instinct.** Freezing glory to avoid descent will echo later; Peter's whole arc is learning to come down the mountain and walk to the cross. Say nothing.
- **Silence resolved.** Last week's “tell no one” now has its answer: the title needed the cross added to its definition first. Make sure the group closes that loop themselves in Question 1.

SESSION GOALS

1. The group resolves last session's cliffhanger: why Jesus silenced the confession.
2. The group names how the rock became a stumbling block: right title, self-written definition, a Christ without a cross.
3. The group discovers Isaiah 53 and articulates that the suffering Messiah was in the Scriptures all along.
4. The group states what deny yourself and take up your cross do and do not mean, concretely.
5. The group reads the Transfiguration through its timing: glory given to sustain the road to the cross, not to replace it.

TIME NOTE

Core session runs about 80 minutes; it carries two scenes. If long: cut the second Dig Deeper and compress Win to one question. **Do not cut** the Isaiah 53 discovery or the Send questions.

PART TWO: DISCUSSION GUIDE

OPENING PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, you set your face toward Jerusalem and called it necessary. We confess that we love your glory and flinch from your cross, and that we have often wished you well in ways that argued with your plan. Father, say to our hearts tonight what you said on the mountain: this is my beloved Son; listen to him. Give us ears for the whole Christ, crucified and risen. Amen.

WIN: OPENING QUESTIONS

Open questions; every answer is welcome.

W1. Tell us about a time someone you love made a choice you were sure was wrong, and you tried to talk them out of it. What was that like, and how did it turn out?

W2. What is the hardest thing anyone has ever asked of you where you said yes anyway? What made the yes possible?

BUILD: INTO THE TEXT

READ ALOUD: Matthew 16:21-23

1. Verse 21 begins “From that time”: the moment they confess who He is, Jesus starts teaching what He came to do, and Matthew says He MUST go and suffer. First, close last week's loop: does this explain why He said “tell no one”? And what is the weight of that word “must”?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

It does close the loop: the title was true but the dictionary was wrong. A crowd hearing “Christ” would most likely hear conquest; popular hope ran heavily toward a triumphant royal deliverer; the disciples themselves still heard it that way, as Peter is about to prove. The confession had to be completed by the cross before it could be preached, which is why the curriculum changes the moment the confession is made. And the “must” (the Greek *dei*) is iron: the Passion is not a tragedy Jesus fails to dodge; it is the necessity He is deliberately walking toward. The cross is the plan, not the accident.

2. Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes Him: “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” Be honest: is there anything wrong with what Peter wants? He loves his friend and doesn't want him tortured to death. So why does this earn the harshest words Jesus ever speaks to a disciple: “Get behind me, Satan”?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Nothing is wrong with the affection, and that is exactly what makes the moment terrifying: Peter's error wears the costume of devotion. But look at what his sentence actually does: it sets his plan for Jesus against the Father's plan, and a Messiah without a cross is precisely the proposal Satan made in the wilderness (all the kingdoms, no Calvary; see CCC 540). When Peter repeats the offer, Jesus names its true author. Note the word translated hindrance: *skandalon*, a stumbling stone. Five verses after becoming the rock the Church is built on, Peter is a rock in the road. Same man, same love; the difference is who gets to define the word Christ. And hear “Get behind me” precisely: it is not expulsion. Behind Jesus is where a disciple walks. He is ordering Peter out of the road and back into line.

3. Peter confessed the right title with the wrong definition, and he got the definition from “the things of men.” Where was the right definition available all along?

Live discovery: say: “Seven hundred years before this conversation, the definition was written down. Read Isaiah 53:3-6 in pairs. What kind of Messiah is on this page, and what does His suffering accomplish?” Let pairs report before the answer box.

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

The pairs should find the servant: despised, rejected, a man of sorrows; wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement that made us whole was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed; the LORD laid on him the iniquity of us all. Two discoveries matter here. First, the suffering Messiah is not a Christian retrofit; He was in Israel's own Scriptures, on the page nobody read at coronations. Second, and this is the session's center: the suffering is FOR us. Isaiah does not describe a martyrdom that merely inspires; he describes a substitution that heals. The cross Peter forbade is the very thing that saves Peter. That is why “God forbid” had to be answered so hard: he was, with the best intentions, forbidding his own salvation.

4. Then Jesus turns to everyone: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” Two dangers: making this mean too little (my cross is slow traffic) or something toxic (God wants me to hate myself). What does it actually mean to deny yourself and take up a cross?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

To deny yourself is not to despise yourself; it is to dethrone yourself: to resign as the final authority on what your life is for, the same movement as “at your word” in the boat, now made permanent. And to take up a cross, in the first century, had exactly one meaning: a condemned man carrying the instrument of his own execution through town. Jesus is not asking for our inconveniences; He is asking for our lives, and He is honest about the price up front. Then the paradox that makes it good news rather than grim news: whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. The self we cling to shrinks; the self we surrender He returns to us, larger and alive. Nobody in this room has ever met a bitter old saint who regrets having given Christ too much.

READ ALOUD: Matthew 17:1-8

5. Six days after the worst week of Peter's discipleship, Jesus takes him, James, and John up the mountain and unveils glory: the shining face, Moses and Elijah, the cloud, the voice. Why now? Look at what happened six days ago and ask what this vision is FOR.

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

The timing is the interpretation, and the Church has read it this way since St. Leo: one week after the cross was announced and rejected, glory is shown to three witnesses so that the scandal of the cross will not shatter their faith when it arrives (CCC 555-556 gathers this reading). The scenery is Sinai's: mountain, cloud, radiant face; the Law and the Prophets stand beside Jesus and then vanish, leaving “Jesus only.” And the Father's command is precisely aimed: “This is my beloved Son... listen

to him.” Listen to Him: including, especially, the part about Jerusalem and suffering that Peter refused to hear last week. The mountain does not cancel the road; it fuels it.

6. Peter, of course, has a plan: “Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths.” He wants to build on the summit and stay. What is right about that instinct, what is wrong with it, and where do you recognize it in yourself?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

What is right: he recognizes glory when he sees it and wants to remain with Christ; the instinct to stay near the Lord is the best thing in him. What is wrong: he wants to freeze the mountaintop and skip the descent, to keep the consolation and cancel the mission, and the cloud interrupts him mid-sentence. Every believer knows this instinct: to live retreat to retreat, high to high, treating the valley and the cross as the parts of discipleship God surely did not intend. But the Gospels are blunt: they came down the mountain, and the road still went to Jerusalem. Consolations are fuel, not destination. The group should name their own booths honestly; the leader may need to go first.

DIG DEEPER: GET BEHIND ME

The Greek is *hypage opisō mou*, go behind me. In Matthew 4:10 Jesus dismisses the tempter with “Begone, Satan”; here the command adds “behind me,” and the difference matters. The devil is sent away; Peter is sent back into formation, because behind the Master is precisely where a disciple belongs. The rebuke and the retention happen in the same breath: Jesus refuses Peter’s plan without refusing Peter.

DIG DEEPER: BOOTHS

Peter’s offer to build booths (*skēnai*, tents or tabernacles) likely reaches for the Feast of Booths, when Israel camped in shelters to remember the wilderness and to anticipate God dwelling with His people. The instinct is liturgically beautiful and chronologically wrong: the true tabernacled of God with man is standing in front of him, and it will be accomplished not by tents on a summit but by a body on a cross and an empty tomb. St. John will later say the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.

SEND: TAKING IT WITH YOU

S1. Where in your life right now are you saying “God forbid” to something Jesus has made fairly clear, defining for Him what your life as a Christian should cost? Name it to yourself honestly.

S2. What is one concrete act of self-denial you can take up this week, chosen not as self-improvement but as a deliberate step behind Jesus, letting Him lead and you follow?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1. Pray with Isaiah 53:3-6 once this week, slowly, replacing the pronouns: wounded for MY transgressions, bruised for MY iniquities. Stay until it stops being information.
2. Choose one real act of self-denial this week (something with a cost: time, comfort, preference, or pride) and offer it silently with the words “Behind you, Lord.”
3. When something good and consoling happens this week, enjoy it, thank God for it, and then deliberately ask: “What is this fuel FOR?” Come ready to share what you noticed.

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, on the mountain you told us everything: this is your beloved Son, and we are to listen to him. Forgive us for the times we have edited His words to fit our comfort, and loved Him in ways that argued with His cross.

Lead us down the mountain behind Him, through the valley, wherever the road goes, until we see Him in glory with nothing to interrupt. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

Matthew 16:24 (RSV2CE)

Before you dismiss: hand out Take-Home 4; standing reminder about the sealed Session 1 sheet.

PART THREE: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

EVERY PASSAGE IN THIS SESSION

Primary Texts

- Matthew 16:21-23, the first Passion prediction, Peter's rebuke, “Get behind me, Satan”
- Matthew 16:24-28, deny yourself, take up your cross, lose your life to find it
- Matthew 17:1-8, the Transfiguration, the booths, “listen to him”

Live Discovery Text

- Isaiah 53:3-6, the suffering servant, wounded for our transgressions

Supporting Texts

- Matthew 4:8-10, the wilderness shortcut refused (kingdom without a cross)
- Exodus 24:15-18 and 34:29, Sinai: cloud, glory, shining face
- John 1:14, the Word tabernacled among us (Dig Deeper)

Way of Salvation Strand (leader only)

- 1 Corinthians 1:18, the word of the cross: power of God to the saved
- 1 Peter 2:24, he bore our sins in his body on the tree (plant; resolves Session 12)

Catechism

- CCC 554-556, the Transfiguration and its purpose
- CCC 618, taking up the cross and sharing in Christ's sacrifice
- CCC 2015, the way of perfection passes by way of the Cross
- CCC 540, the tempter's shortcut refused

Memory Verse

- Matthew 16:24