

Matthew 16:13-23 – “Confessing Jesus as the Christ”

Jesus is spending more and more time teaching His disciples truths about Who He is and the mission He is on. This passage we're in today brings us to a monumental moment in this progression.

16:13-14 - *When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?”¹⁴ So they said, “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”*

Caesarea Philippi is a great place to visit when touring in Israel. Again, it's one of those places where you're just out in nature, you don't have a big Catholic church ruining the authenticity of the place. It's a place I could see Jesus going for a little retreat or getaway. I could see Him needing this as a retreat from His own disciples at times, but here He is in His grace with His disciples.

And it's here that Jesus asks a very important question. His purpose is to grow the disciples understanding of Him. God doesn't want us to be stagnant in our knowledge of who He is.

So, Jesus draws His disciples away from the distraction of the religious leaders that have been harassing them, He draws them away from the distraction of the crowds that have been hounding them, and He brings His disciples to this retreat like place to give them a deeper revelation of who Jesus is.

- This is what God wants to do for us. Sometimes we never have those experiences because we never take time to just focus on the Lord.
- It blows my mind that God invites us to come and seek Him. This isn't a test of obedience, it's an opportunity for growth as we learn and see how amazing He is. God wants to be in relationship with you and He's made Himself accessible and known to us. That's incredible!
- Are we taking time to learn of Him and know Him more?

People in this day did not fathom the idea that their gods could be relational, accessible, or benevolent.

In fact, some important history for this place Caesarea Philippi, it was known as a place of idolatry. It's more readily known today as Banias, an Arab form of its previous name – Panias.

- In the Old Testament it states that there was a shrine dedicated to Baal located here (Joshua 11:17). When the Greeks invaded the land, they set

up a shrine to the god Pan. Pan was the god of nature and the Greeks called the place Paneas (i.e. the city of Pan). So, this was a place of worship to Pan. Worship of Pan was not pleasant. Pan was a goat-headed god, which continues to be closely associated with Satan. The Baphomet is an occultic symbol of a goat headed deity. Pan was a frightening god that people lived in fear of and were only trying to appease him by their worship. From the worship of Pan, we get our English word – ‘*Panic*’.

- You see, there was nothing enjoyable or satisfying about worshipping here. It just set you up for Panic and Hysteria!
- In 20 B.C. Herod the Great built and dedicated a temple to Augustus Caesar in this area. After Herod’s death, his son Philip enlarged the temple and named the area Caesarea. It was then named Caesarea Philippi to distinguish it from the prominent seacoast city of Caesarea Maritima on the Mediterranean coast.

But Jesus comes in now and confronts these idols and false gods. He’s at ground zero where we have a showdown of supernatural proportions taking place.

Jesus comes with a completely different purpose and mission, and He wants His disciples to clearly see how different and greater He is than other so-called gods.

So Jesus starts by asking His disciples: **“Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?”** (vs. 13).

And the disciples play it real safe with their answer. They just simply repeat the things they’ve already heard.

“Some say You’re John the Baptist, some think Elijah, others say You’re Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” (vs. 14).

They’re pretty safe answering this, and it’s requiring no real accountability on their part. They’re just giving the facts.

But then the bombshell drops...

16:15 - He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Oh man, now they’re getting confronted head on, this just got personal!!

I can just see everyone taking a couple steps backwards, perhaps a few disciples are shouting the name ‘Peter’ under their breath. Now he’s sticking out looking around and realizing, it’s all on him now. So, he goes for it.

Now, this is a very important question that everyone of us needs to come to terms with. Our eternity is riding on it.

- Jesus is either going to be **legend**, **liar**, **lunatic**, or **Lord** to you. You can't sit in a neutral corner. And only one response leads to salvation and everlasting life!

Now, I can just imagine the reaction of the disciples whenever Jesus asked a question like this. They probably all started looking around like they didn't hear Him. Because they're beginning to know by now that there's usually a deeper truth to anything that Jesus asks them.

And Jesus is looking to draw His disciples into an understanding of who He is not because of some emotional experience, or miraculous encounter.

- They've had times where they've seen that Jesus is indeed different. They were astonished at the feeding of the 5000. They were drawn to worship Him as the Son of God at the calming of the storm.
- But this answer of who He is isn't connected to some miracle or emotional experience. He wants these guys knowing who He is because they've grown to know Him and have their faith strengthened in Him in an unwavering resolute way.

So, getting back to Peter, he goes for it. He steps up and nails it with his answer! **16:16-17 - *Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* ¹⁷ *Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.***

Peter declares what none of the disciples have declared yet. To claim someone to be God had serious consequences of blasphemy. Punishable by death. Being Jewish, these disciples have been careful to play the Messiah card. But Peter has seen enough and he's ready to stand up and proclaim what he now knows to be true.

And he speaks this in an emphatic way. In the Greek, it's written: You are **THE** Christ, **THE** Son of **THE** God, **THE** living One.

To say that Jesus is ***the Christ*** is to declare that Jesus is the Messiah. He's the Promised One of God, the One that will fulfill all the promises and prophecies of God. He's come as the Deliverer for Israel and the Saviour for all humanity.

And if He's the awaited Deliverer, then He must be fully God. That's what Peter proclaims in saying that He is ***the Son of the living God***. It declares the deity of Jesus. And it declares that we can have a living relationship with Him!

Who is Jesus to you? Don't gather your views or opinions from the crowd. As we see in this text, they can be off. Do you have a living, vibrant relationship with Jesus? Are you growing in Him and learning of Him day by day?

- You see, Jesus isn't interested in what you've heard, He's interested in what you know! And more so, what you know Him to be. He wants you to have a personal relationship with Him.
- Who do you say that Jesus is?

So finally, Peter gets something right! A monumental occasion. He's doing cartwheels around here; high fiving the other disciples, maybe trash talking a bit because they were too afraid to answer.

And Jesus let's Peter know that this was not understanding he received through His own wisdom. It's not just by his own experiences he's come to this conclusion, it's by direct revelation from the Father. God has revealed this to him supernaturally. Our understanding of Jesus and coming to Him for salvation is always a supernatural work.

16:18 - *And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.*

Here we have a little word play that Jesus uses and it's created a very misunderstood or confusing verse. Jesus said, ***you are Peter***. It's reflective of how Peter said, *You are the Christ*.

Peter is the Greek word *petros* and it means 'a stone' or 'a rock'. It's a small stone; one that can easily be moved. But when Jesus says ***on this rock I will build My church***, He uses a word *petra*, which means a large rock; a cliff or bedrock.

Now, many people (ie. the Catholic Church) have believed that Jesus meant He will build the church upon Peter. That He's the first in a long line of Popes.

- They tie in the next verse referencing the keys of the kingdom being given to Peter and conclude this is the authority of the papal office.

But then others swing pretty far the other side and say the *petra* that Jesus referred to has nothing to do with Peter. But this has something to do with Peter.

What seems to fit best is that Jesus is proclaiming that the church is going to be built upon the statement that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

- “It is reasonable to understand Jesus’ statement to mean that Peter was one rock among a rock quarry (the disciples). It was upon this quarry of disciples (cf. “living stones,” 1 Pet. 2:5) and their understanding of Peter’s confession that Jesus would build his church.”¹

This is the first time that the Church was mentioned. It’s the Greek word *ekklesia* and it means an assembly, or called out one’s. It spoke of those called out to come together. And their coming together would not be built upon Peter alone. It would be built upon this truth. It would be built upon Jesus Christ, and confession of Him that He is the Son of God. The only way to the Father!

- It is Jesus’ church, and He is the builder, the concrete foundation, and the Head of the church.

and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

Now like we said, this place had a heavy idolatry base to it. There were some crazy pagan practices that happened here centred in the worship of Pan.

- It possibly included human sacrifice and definitely included animal sacrifice.
- The entrance to the shrine of Pan at the base of the rocky area was called “the gates of Hades”. Pagan worshippers viewed this at the entrance to the underworld. [show picture]
- Therefore, when Jesus told Peter and the disciples that *the gates of Hades will not prevail against* the church, He very possibly was pointing to, or at least alluding to, the satanic pagan god and all the evil it represented. There are a host of Bible verses which speak of Christ’s defeat of satanic forces and the disciple’s power in Christ over these forces (Romans 16:20; Hebrews 2:14-15; 1 John 3:8; 4:4)

Gates were a symbol of authority and power (think city hall). Essentially, we're seeing that all the organized power of Satan and his followers will have no power over Jesus and the church. Jesus has defeated sin, the grave, and the devil, all through His death. Satan now has no control, no hold over the church.

¹ Weber, S. K. (2000). *Matthew* (Vol. 1, pp. 250–251). Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Maybe there's been areas in your life where you have felt like there's just nothing that can be done. That the enemy has a lock on that piece of real estate in your life.

But you need to know today that in Jesus we have life. We can come to Him and experience His help and strength. He's the Son of the living God who has secured our victory.

16:19 - *And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*"

This has been another head scratching verse.

What Jesus is speaking of here is that Peter and the disciples have the keys to open the way to salvation and entrance into heaven. As they share this truth that Jesus is the Messiah, the Saviour who alone saves, they are giving people the way into the kingdom. They can boldly claim this with the authority of heaven behind them.

- A similar verse is **John 20:23**, *"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."*
- It's not that the disciples have the authority to forgive sins on their own, they however have the privilege of announcing the way to be forgiven. They can announce that with boldness and assurance. In the same way, they can announce that judgment awaits those who do not repent of their sins.
- This is about recognizing that as we live out God's Word on earth, and conduct ourselves according to it, we can believe that we are walking in accordance with what has already been decided in heaven.

16:20 - *Then He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ.*

There was still more work to be done. If this news got to the wrong people, they could accuse Jesus of blasphemy and move more rapidly to kill Him.

It's not that Jesus is trying to avoid this. He knows it's His mission, but He's operating on a divine timetable. Here we see that Jesus makes this mission known to the disciples.

16:21 - *From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.*

Jesus makes it very clear to His disciples that the cross must come before the kingdom. Just because He's the Christ, it doesn't negate that His mission is one of sacrifice.

- It was a cold windy day to be riding a motorcycle, so the rider put his jacket on backwards to cut the wind. Tragically, he was in an accident. A rookie policeman was first on the scene and tried to save the biker's life. When his superior arrived, the rookie policeman said, 'I did everything I could to save him, but by the time I got his head straightened around he was already dead.'
- This encounter with His disciples is Jesus' attempt to turn some heads in a new direction. The disciples have figured out who Jesus is – *the Christ*. But they have the wrong idea as to where He's headed... they think He'll be king. From this point onward, Jesus tries to explain He's headed to a *crucifixion*, not a *coronation*.

First up on the head turning list is Peter.

16:22-23 - *Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!"²³ But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."*

Peter is feeling like pretty big stuff for a change. He's received direct revelation from God and finally got a question right. He's listening to Jesus and thinking, 'Why are you being such a downer? You're the Christ, nothing is going to happen to you.' In fact, Peter is rebuking Jesus over this.

- Listen, I may not be the wisest person around, but I know it's never a good idea to rebuke God. If you're having to rebuke God, it's not Him that's in the wrong.
- Again, Peter, as did many, had a mindset of the Messiah being a political leader. It's time to bring victory, not suffer the agony of defeat. This doesn't make sense to Peter.
- And yet, how often do we take a similar position of rebuking God when our plans aren't unfolding as we'd like. Do we question God when He seems to be working in a way contrary to our plans?
- We're going to get quickly upset and frustrated if we're trying to accomplish our plan when it is in contradiction to His plan.

And Jesus returns the rebuke to Peter and says, ***Get behind Me, Satan!***

Now I'm sure we've all experienced some low points in our lives. Some pretty big failures or falls. Well, this was a fall of epic proportions. One minute Peter is tapping into heavens hotline, and now he's being called Satan. That's gotta hurt!

And it's not that Peter is possessed of the devil right now, but rather Peter is unwittingly carrying out the devil's purpose here; to prevent Jesus from saving the world.

- He only had in mind the things of men. Things that made sense in the physical, fleshly realm. But God is seeking to bring us out of these things and on to His program.
- This is connected to Jesus' earlier warning for the disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees (Matthew 16:11). Stop having your focus on self, or the things of the world. Look to God and follow His Word!
- The Bible has a lot to say about this:
- **Romans 8:5–8**, *"For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. ⁶ For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. ⁷ Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. ⁸ So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God."*
- **Colossians 3:1–2**, *"If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. ² Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth."*
- **James 3:15–17**, *"This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. ¹⁷ But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy."*

Peter exercised a worldly wisdom and completely ignored what Jesus said, that He *'must suffer many things... and be killed.'* Peter didn't even attempt to ponder these words. He just went right into fleshly mode.

- "The suffering and death of Jesus was a **must** because of two great facts: the *man's sin* and *God's love*. While His death was the ultimate example of man's sin against God, it was also the supreme expression of God's love to man." ²

² Guzik, D. (2013). *Matthew* (Mt 16:21). David Guzik.

- Jesus had a better way, a greater purpose in mind. And we need to rest in His Word and His way even when we don't understand.
- Peter is an example of how a person can follow his own reasoning, and do so with all sincerity, yet end in disaster because it was not in alignment with God's will.

God's will is to believe in His Son. That He is the Christ, the Son of the Living God and that by faith in Him we are saved and forgiven of our sin. Live by faith in Him and experience His life for you.