

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor
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Matthew 16:13-20 “Opinions & Truth about Jesus”

Intro. So far in my series through Matthew, we have covered the first three years of the ministry of Jesus Christ. We come now to a new section of the Gospel of Matthew, where the King is rejected. He is now facing the public opposition by the nation’s religious leaders led by the Pharisees of Jerusalem. They not only refused to acknowledge that Jesus was the Messiah, but they even refused to acknowledge that He was a prophet. They even attributed His miraculous powers to the devil. In v.1 of this chapter, once again we see the religious leaders asking Jesus for a sign from heaven to prove Himself. Their unbelief was very persistent. As for the people of Israel, they were uncommitted, largely out of fear of their religious leaders (John 7:13; 19:38). The Kingdom of God had been offered to Israel, but as we shall see, they had rejected Jesus as their Messiah.

Now Christ knew that it was time to begin the path that would lead to the Cross. But first, He withdrew from the crowds to be alone with His disciples. Christ wanted to prepare them for the events that were about to take place during the next 6 months. So they went to Caesarea Philippi, which was about 25 miles north of Galilee. It was an important Greco-Roman city. This was largely Gentile territory. As they traveled, they could see in the distance Mount Hermon with its twin snow-clad peaks. They could have gone to the very place where the Jordan River begins. There the river bursts out from the side of a mountain with clear, refreshing water. My tour of Israel included a stop at that very place. And it was there that the Lord bluntly announced to His disciples the impending events of His death, burial, and resurrection. He had to correct their expectation of a speedy manifestation of an earthly kingdom.

Now for 3 years Jesus had been teaching in Galilee and Judea. For 3 years He had been performing miracles of healing, and other miracles. Jesus was still on everyone’s mind. Who is this teacher from Galilee? Who is this One who has such authority in His word and healing power to His touch? Who is this One who claimed to be the bread of life, the light of the world, and the One who can give rest to a burdened soul? Who is this man who could walk on water and calm the storm? Everybody was wanting to know the answer to those questions. Everybody was talking about Jesus.

Well this morning I want to help you answer for yourself two simple but profound questions, “Who is Jesus,” and “What did Jesus come to do?” Some may ask, “Why does it matter?” Well, I believe your eternal destiny will be determined by what you believe about Jesus. So the first question we have to answer is this:

I. WHO IS JESUS?

Jesus asked the disciples a question which wasn’t hard to answer, “Who do men say that I, the Son of man, am?”

This question of Jesus is being forced upon the world today from 3 sides. The Bible forces it upon us. Who is this One who makes such great claims for Himself? Conscience forces it upon us. This man, whose words still stab us like the sword of God, who is He? The history of the church demands an answer concerning who the founder was of such a great, perpetual movement. So great

an effect must have an equally great cause. We cannot afford the luxury of avoiding this important issue. Let's consider the answers that are given:

A. What the People Say – On every side men were saying things about Jesus. Generally, most admitted that Jesus was a prophet, for notice how Peter answered the question of Jesus in v.14, “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” All of the men mentioned were prophets. The power of His miracles and the authority of His teaching were convincing proofs that Jesus was at least a great prophet. So let's look specifically at the possibilities the people cited:

1. John the Baptist Risen from the Dead – About 6 months to a year before they made this statement, John the Baptist had been executed by Herod after being in prison for perhaps a year (cf. 4:12; 11:2; 14:1-12; John 3:23-24). So Herod Antipas was not the only man who felt that John the Baptist was so great a figure that it might well be that he had come back from the dead in the person of Jesus (14:1-2).

2. Elijah - According to Old Testament prophecy, Elijah would return to be the forerunner of the Messiah (Mal. 4:5). Also, Elijah was one of the greatest of the prophets. Many of the people were willing to say this about Jesus.

3. Jeremiah or One of the Prophets - According to legend, Jeremiah hid the golden altar and Ark of the Covenant before the temple was destroyed in 586 B.C. They may have hoped that Jesus was Jeremiah coming back to reveal where he had hid the Ark of the Covenant, and restore the temple completely. Moses had predicted that God would raise up a great prophet like himself (Deut. 18:15).

But notice that most of the people would *not* confess that Jesus was the Messiah, because He was not the type of Messiah they were hoping for. Thus, in spite of three years of powerful teaching and miracles, the people of Israel would not openly confess Jesus as their Messiah. They had rejected Jesus. How sad!

4. What People Say Today - Many today are agreed that among the heroes and saints of all time, Jesus stands supreme. They agree that He was a great prophet, a great teacher. Islam believes this as well. But again, many today will stop short of saying that He is the Son of God. A 2015 Barna poll found that only 48% of Millennials believe Jesus is the divine Son of God.¹ One thing is clear: We can never arrive at spiritual truth by taking a poll of the people.

Now in order for you to answer this question for yourself, let's also consider:

B. What the Apostles Say² – The testimony of the apostles was very important. They were the ones who knew Jesus the best. At this point they had been with Jesus about 3 years and witnessed more miracles than anyone. So in v.15 Jesus asked, “But who do you say that I am?” “You” is emphatic in Greek, “Who do *you* say that I am?” Notice that Jesus asked for a personal confession. He asked this question even though, as we saw in our last message, the disciples had already exclaimed, “Truly You are the Son of God” (Mt. 14:33). After all, this could have been a momentary reaction to a mighty miracle, which passed with time. But had it become settled conviction?

¹ <https://www.barna.com/research/what-do-americans-believe-about-jesus-5-popular-beliefs/>

² We should certainly value the testimony of these men. They saw more miracles than anyone. They gained more insight into his teaching than anyone. They were around Him day and night. If Jesus had ever sinned, they would have been the ones to see His faults. Who knows you better than your marriage partner, or your children? Well these men lived with Jesus for 3 years!

Now after Jesus asked the question, there may have been silence for a moment, while the disciples looked at one another. But suddenly Peter rose to the occasion. He rose above all the poor, half-believing answers of men and rang out his own startling, tremendous answer in v.16, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Right answer! His answer must have caused the heart of Jesus to rejoice.

Peter’s answer was marvelous in its conciseness and comprehensiveness. Let’s look at it closely. First, he confessed that:

1. Jesus Is the Messiah - He was the first person to make this confession in the gospel of Matthew. The word “Christ” is a transliteration of *Christos*, a Greek word meaning “anointed one.” That’s what the Hebrew word “Messiah” means. In other words, Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promises to His people to send to them a Messiah, a Savior. The first promise of a Messiah is found in Gen. 3:15. Adam and Eve had just plunged the human race into sin, sorrow, and death, but God promised that someday He would reverse the curse. And that promise is found throughout the Old Testament, as demonstrated by the many examples of Jewish expectancy in the gospels. Jesus is the only hope to solve the curse of sin. So first of all, Peter confessed that Jesus is the Savior, the Messiah, that God promised to send.

Do you believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Savior of the world? It is so important that you believe that.

Even more amazing is the second part of Peter’s confession:

2. Jesus Is the Son of God – He was saying that Jesus is the Son of God in a unique sense. Jesus is, always was, and always will be the Son of God. And notice that Peter called Him the “Son of the *living* God.” Caesarea Philippi was the home of the worship of false gods. The God of Israel was the true, living God, and Jesus is His unique Son.

Now this was a startling statement. You see, for a Jew to call any man “Son of God” was unprecedented. And to make such a statement meant that the evidence of the deity of Christ had to be absolutely overwhelming to Peter! You recall in our last message that after Jesus walked on the water and calmed the storm all the disciples confessed that He was the Son of God, and worshiped him (14:33).

So by saying, “You are the Christ,” Peter put Him on the throne of Israel as the Lord’s anointed Prophet, Priest, and King. By saying, “You are ... the Son of the living God,” Peter put Him on the throne of the universe.

Now if it is true that Jesus is God’s anointed Savior, we must trust in Him. If He is the Son of God, then we must obey Him. Are you living in obedience to Jesus Christ? True faith is followed by obedience, including a public confession of faith in him.

So Peter, speaking for the others as well, confessed that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God. So if the disciples who knew him best say He is the Son of God, then we should believe their eyewitness testimony. But if you are not yet convinced, consider also:

C. What God the Father Says – This is the most important testimony of all. John said in 1 John 5:9, “If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater....” Now God the Father bore witness:

1. At Jesus’ Baptism – Back in Mt. 3:17 God spoke from heaven at the baptism of Jesus saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

2. By His Spirit through the Apostles– Jesus told Peter in v.17, “flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.” Peter’s knowledge of Jesus’ deity did not come through human reasoning or investigation, but from the inward revelation of God.

Likewise, in 11:25 Jesus said, “I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes.”³ God had hidden these things from the proud Pharisees and Sadducees and revealed them to “babes,” the humble disciples.

So to discover spiritual truth, you need to pray and ask God to reveal His truth to you, and seek truth from His Word.

Another testimony of God the Father took place:

3. At the Transfiguration – Six days after this event (17:1), Jesus took Peter, James, and John to a nearby high mountain. There, Jesus was transfigured before their very eyes. The radiance of His deity was no longer veiled. And then once again a voice spoke of heaven saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!” (17:5).

4. At Jesus’ Resurrection (cf. 16:4) - Though men called Jesus an impostor and blasphemer as He died upon the cross, God raised Jesus from the dead. Rom. 1:4 says Jesus was “declared to be the Son of God with power ... by the resurrection from the dead.”

So in the final analysis, it’s not what man says, but what God says that’s most important. As Paul said on another occasion, “Let God be true, and every man a liar.”

D. What Do *You* Say? [Application] This passage teaches us that our discovery of Jesus Christ must be a personal discovery. Again, the emphasis that is found in the original Greek is, “But who do *you* say that I am?” You see, you must make your own faith decision regarding Jesus Christ. No one can make it for you. Your parents can’t make it for you. Your spouse can’t make it for you.

So what do you say? Do you believe that Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, who became flesh, as John 1:14 says? If you believe it, say “Amen!” The apostle John said in 1 Jn. 5:10, “...he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son.”

Now almost everyone here today said “Amen” when I asked if you believe in Jesus as the Savior, the Son of God. But does your faith demonstrate itself? Have you, like Peter, made a public confession of your faith in Jesus as the Son of God? We too are to confess Jesus with our mouths. Rom. 10:9 says, “that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Let me tell you one of the reasons why you should believe in Jesus, and openly confess Him as Savior and Lord. When Peter made such a confession, Jesus said in v.17, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah...” (cf. 10:32). If you believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord, you will be blessed with eternal life, and life more abundant. To believe in Jesus is the most important decision you will ever make.

So together with Peter, we have answered the question, “Who is Jesus?” Now let’s answer the other main question of our text?

II. WHAT DID JESUS COME TO DO?

Why did God send His Son? What in the world is He up to? Well, in this text of Scripture we see one of the great works of Jesus Christ. He said in v.18, “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church...” Here Jesus made a surprising announcement: Israel had rejected Him, so He would not yet establish His earthly kingdom, but instead He would

³ A person cannot truly know Jesus apart from God revealing Himself to that individual (1 Cor. 2:11).

build His church. The word “church” (*ekklesia*) refers to a called-out assembly of people. The Lord used *ecclesia* to denote His own assembly in this world, gathered to worship Him, obey Him, and serve Him. Since Israel had rejected Jesus as their Messiah, Jesus was going to raise up a new people, not on the basis of a particular nationality or race, but on the basis of the kind of faith that Peter expressed. Christ would call out a people for His name from *all* nations. And note the emphasis on *My* church. Any true church belongs to Jesus, not to any man or group of men.

Now I want to share with you 4 truths about this important work of Christ:

A. The Goal of Jesus Regarding His Church - When Christ says, “I will build,” there is an implicit promise of growth, progress, and vitality. We were founded not to be a static institution but a continually expanding people of God.

We have all built things in our lives. I remember building sand castles on vacation. I remember building forts and huts in the woods where I played as a child. Our church has had three major building projects. And when you build, you picture in your mind what you want to build, and then you add a little here, and a little there. Even so, Jesus is currently building His Church, and we are to help Him.

So I have 2 questions for you. First, “Are you part of this church that Jesus established?” Secondly, “Are you helping to build up the Church of the Lord Jesus in this world?” But we have a problem here in America. While most people still claim to have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ, far less actually attend and support a local church. But if we truly believe in Jesus, we must be committed to His church. After all, He came to build the Church! We must attend His church, join His church, support His church, and work to build His church! We should have the same goal as Jesus, to build up the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. That doesn’t mean that we have to become a mega-church. We can also grow by starting new churches.

But how are we to help build the Church? Well to build up the church, we must understand:

B. The Foundation of His Church - There is a play on words here, though we can’t make too much of it since Jesus probably spoke Aramaic. “Peter” is *petros* in Greek. “Rock” is *petra*.⁴ The word *petra* refers to a strata of rock, the kind of rock that one would use as a foundation for building. It does not refer to a small stone (*lithos*). Now the question is, “What did Jesus mean when He said He would build His church upon ‘*this rock (petra)*’?” Now even though Jesus Himself is the ultimate foundation of the church (1 Cor. 3; Ps. 118:22; Isa. 28:16; Matt. 21:42; Acts 4:10-12), I believe that Jesus must be referring to something in relationship with Peter due to the play on words. Thus Peter would play a foundational role in the establishment of the church. Yet so with the other apostles, for we know in Eph. 2:20 that Peter and the other apostles are called the foundation of the church. Revelation 21:14 speaks of the twelve foundation stones with the names of the apostles on them. You see, Peter and the other apostles⁵ were foundational to the church in expressing faith, and proclaiming the true Gospel. Peter was the first to openly declare his faith in Jesus. Soon the other apostles followed. And everyone who makes the same discovery as Peter is another stone added into the edifice of the Church of Christ. The point of Jesus’ declaration was His intention of building a community on the foundation of the apostles and consequently, their apostolic witness to Him.

⁴ The rocky Edomite stronghold of Seir is called Petra to this day.

⁵ Now Peter certainly was not Lord it over the others as a Pope (see Mt. 20:25-28; Lk. 22:24-30; I Pet. 5:3). The authority which in v.19 is entrusted to Peter is in 18:18 given to all the Twelve.

We must not build God's church in any other way than by the faithful proclamation of the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ. Too many churches are being built with entertainment, feel-good pop psychology, with social opportunities, and with fancy marketing. It is the gospel that saves people and it is the Word of God that builds us up in our faith and transforms lives.

Now this interpretation is more clear in light of v.19, where we read of:

C. The Function of His Church – The building metaphor that Jesus used naturally leads to a discussion of keys. In v.19 Jesus said, “And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven,⁶ and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Jesus is not saying that Peter was given the keys to the gates of heaven, and when you die Peter will be at the gate to determine if you should be allowed in. Among the Hebrews the symbol of keys did not refer to the priests; it referred to the scribes, the teachers of the law whose duty it was to unlock the truth of God. So the keys referred to here are probably the keys of knowledge from God's Word, which tells us how to enter the Kingdom of God and live the victorious Christian life. The scribes had failed miserably in their office. Jesus said in Luke 11:52, “Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered.” So Jesus took the keys away from them and committed them to Peter and to the other apostles. They were to proclaim the truths of the kingdom, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Certainly, at Pentecost Peter opened the door to 3,000 souls to be saved. He opened the door to the Gentile Cornelius, by preaching the gospel to him.

Again, in the last part of v.19 He says, “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” That statement is difficult to interpret.⁷ But what is a key for? It locks and unlocks. What is clear is that fact that the positive result of the proper use of the keys will be to set people free from the penalty of sin, and from the bondage of sin. Jesus said in Jn. 8:32, “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” But on the other hand, if we fail in doing this, we will leave people in spiritual bondage.

D. L. Moody told the story of a man crossing the Atlantic by ship. One night, as he was confined to his cabin due to seasickness, he heard the cry, “Man overboard!” He felt that there was nothing he could do to help, but said to himself, “I can at least put my lantern in the porthole.” He struggled to his feet and hung the light so it would shine out into the darkness.

The next day he learned that the person had been rescued and had told others, “I was going down in the dark night for the last time when someone put a light in a porthole. As it shone on my hand, a sailor in a lifeboat saw it, grabbed it, and pulled me in.” Oh friend, you may not feel that you can do much, but if you will do something to shine the light of the Gospel in this dark world, people will be saved, and the church built up.

Peter and the apostles have long since passed on. They have passed on the keys to us. So we need to believe in the power of the Gospel. Paul said in Romans 1:16, “I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes....” And if we truly believe in the power of the Gospel, we will be active in declaring the good news. Evangelism must penetrate all we do in the life of the church. We must work to build God's Church until Jesus

⁶ Notice that Jesus continued to use the concept of a “kingdom” in association with His Church. The Church is a kingdom in the sense that Jesus is Lord & King of the Church.

⁷ The Greek verbs in Matthew 16:19 are most important. The Greek reads: “And whatever you shall bind on earth, shall have been already bound [perfect tense]. . . in heaven; and whatever you shall loose on earth, shall have already been loosed [perfect tense] in heaven.” Jesus did not say that God would obey what they did on earth, but that they should do on earth whatever God had already willed. The church does not get man's will done in heaven; it obeys God's will on earth.

comes! But if you do not believe the gospel of Jesus Christ, then you will remain bound in your sin and condemned by your sin, and you will never gain access to heaven.

Finally, I want to tell you why I am optimistic about the future of the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. For in this text we also see:

D. The Future of His Church – At times I get discouraged about the condition of the Church today. But I should not be. For in v.18 Jesus said regarding His Church, “...and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” The gates of a city or village was the traditional place of government and authority (Genesis 19:1; Ruth 4:1). So the “gates of Hades” can refer to the powers and authorities of Hades, where Satan and his fallen angels take counsel against the church. At Caesarea Philippi there was a cave in the side of the nearby mountain that could have been called the “gates of Hades.” A pagan temple was located there. Jesus knew that there would be many forces at work to destroy the church He established. The devil is out to destroy the church, and he uses many different means. Governments have joined him in this attempt down through the centuries. He will attempt to bring in false doctrine into the church (cf. Acts 20:28-30, Jude 3). He will bring in divisiveness from various sources (cf. Rom. 16:17, 20). He will also try to destroy the witness of the church by tempting the leaders and members to sin. I hope you are not doing anything that would help the devil destroy the church.

On the other hand, Hades is the realm of the dead, and the gates perhaps symbolize the entrance to that realm. In fact, “gates of Hades” and similar expressions in other biblical references (Job 17:16; 38:17 “gates of death”; Ps. 9:13 “gates of death”; 107:18 “gates of death”; and Isa. 38:10 “gates of Sheol”) refer to “death and dying.” The Lord was declaring that death will not triumph over His church. Or to say it in another way, the church will not die, but endures to the end of the age. In fact, this community will last forever. When you trust in Christ as Savior and join His church you are on a winning team!

Those things that we do in the context of the church last forever. This puts a new light on changing diapers in the nursery, working on a committee, or teaching in Sunday School. Our service here has eternal significance. It further tells us that friendships established here are eternal. Being a part of a church is a great thing!

And why is the Church indestructible? It is because Jesus is indestructible! The church is called the body of Christ, and He is the head. The only way the church can be destroyed is for our Head to be destroyed. Even death could not conquer Jesus, the Son of God. In Acts 2:24 the apostle Peter said of Him, “whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it.” Then he quoted from the prophecy that said of the Messiah, “You will not leave my soul in Hades, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption” (Acts 2:27). Hades had no power over the Son of God. Furthermore, we read the triumphant shout of Jesus in Revelation 1:18: “I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death.” And thus death will have no power over His church. Many have sought to destroy the church with the threat of death, but such threats have no power. Because of Jesus we can say, “Oh death, where is thy sting?” Jesus said, “Because I live, you shall live also.”

Consider how true this prophecy has become. Jesus only had 12 apostles. He only had 120 committed followers in Jerusalem when the church began its public ministry. Yet, in spite of the opposition of Israel’s leaders, in spite of ruthless deadly persecution by the Roman government, the church spread into all countries of the Roman Empire, and the numbers swelled to over 1 million in a few hundred years. Today the Church has over 1 billion followers of Jesus Christ! Indeed, Jesus

was right when He said, “I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” Isn’t that wonderful?

Conclusion: [Appeal especially for people to follow Peter’s example in confessing their faith in Jesus. Then appeal for people to join the church, and work to build up the church].

Sources: William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: Matthew* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975); Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2020; Ken Hemphill, *The Official Rule Book for the New Church Game* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 27-37; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture, Vol 6* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House); G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986); John Phillips, *Exploring The Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [Ver. 5:30]* (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, reprint, Christian Publishing Co.; James S. Stewart, *The Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, no date); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Loyal: Matthew* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1980); Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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