

Who is Jesus and What in the World is He Doing?

Matthew 16:13-20

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13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” 14 And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” 15 He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16 Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” 17 And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” 20 Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

This morning we are dealing with one of the most significant portions of Matthew. Pastor Mark has entitled this section of Matthew as the section of “enigma.” We have seen the enigma that is Jesus—he is perplexing, ambiguous and mysterious as he speaks in parables and figures of speech. The passage for today starts to relieve some of the mystery of Jesus for the reader as a clear statement of the reality of who he is comes to the front. Even with some clear statements in this passage, there has been much controversy over the meaning of the word pictures throughout church history.

Jesus uses at least 3 significant word pictures in this text that are important handles to grasp the reality of Jesus and his work. The words are “rock”, “gate”, and “keys”. This morning we will look at the story from the life of Jesus and think of it in terms of The Rock, Gate and Keys. We will look at 2 questions about Jesus that are answered in this text and then conclude with some “take away” points of application for us. The 2 questions are simply—“Who is Jesus?” and “What in the world is He doing?”

I. Who is Jesus? (Matt. 16:13-15)

Last week Nate set the stage well for the passage before us. If you have not heard his sermon, I strongly recommend that you get it and listen. He dealt with the Pharisees and Sadducees who demanded another sign before believing in Jesus. The bottom line was that they had no faith and no sign would convince them. The disciples also were of little faith and wondered where they would get food even though Jesus had fed 5,000 and 4,000 people on separate occasions. The section ends with Jesus warning them to beware of the leaven that could

destroy them. The kingdom of Jesus seemed in great jeopardy as even Jesus' closest followers were confused as to whom they were following. Matthew relieves some tension for the reader by recording this magnificent paragraph concerning the reality of who Jesus is.

A. A good person (vs. 13-14)

In verse 13, we find Jesus in the most northern part of Israel in the area of Caesarea Philippi. This city was about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. It was named in honor of Caesar Augustus by Phillip and given to Herod. It was known for pagan worship of both Cananite origin (Baal) and Greek mythology (Parieas-god of fertility). Far away from the center of Jewish worship in Jerusalem, Jesus engages his followers in a most important discussion. At the border of the historic people of God and the territory of the pagan God-haters, Jesus asks the greatest question of the universe. In verse, he asks—"who do people say that I am"

The answers come to him in a very positive note. Some say John the Baptist—who had recently been beheaded and even the reigning Herod was afraid that John may come back to life. Others say Elijah who was one of the greatest if not the greatest prophet of Israel, who never really died and was thought to come again sometime to usher in the Messiah of Israel. Others said Jeremiah, the first of the major writing prophets, or perhaps another prophet of unknown background. All those answers were heroes in Israel, all had tough lives, all were unquestionably committed to Yahweh and were the greatest of the legacy of Israelites. Surprisingly, there were not Pharisee-type answers like—he is the devil or Beelzebub. The reputation of Jesus was good among the common, regular people of Israel.

Polls have been taken to determine what people think of Jesus today. There are some who think he never existed or that he was a subversive evil person, but most think of him as a kind, loving example to follow in treating others well. He is great to think about as long as he does not demand too much but allows us to live our lives and use him as a giver of good gifts and maybe a non intrusive example of good principles of life.

B. A God/man person (vs. 15)

I love this next section. This question is introduced by a but as Jesus wants to get a contrast between the pagans and his followers. Jesus quickly moves to the real question—"But, who do you say that I am?" The construction here is clear—YOU!! Yes You!!—Who do YOU say that I am? It is a question of personal belief and for them to answer for themselves. Peter, the first to speak, seems to speak for the group. He says in no uncertain terms—"YOU(emphatic) are the Christ, the Son of the Living God". In a section entitled the enigmatic Jesus, this is very clear. Not much doubt of what Peter is saying. It is as if he points his finger at Jesus and says—You and you alone are the Christ. For a Jew, the term Christ was very important. It is the Greek word for Messiah. The theme of the Messiah fills the Old Testament as there was a promised Son of David who would come and rule Israel as her final and triumphant king and

bring Israel to her place as the citizens of His kingdom which has no end. To solidify the Christ claim even more solidly, Peter adds the "son of the living God" The term "living" God contrasts Him with the false and non-living gods of the pagans (Idols). Jesus is the Son (sharing in character) of the true and living God and is thereby also the true and living God.

What a wonderful statement. As it looked like everyone in Israel was missing and hating Jesus, we hear this heartwarming recognition of the reality of who Jesus is. Now Peter still would have struggles as in the very next paragraph, he missed the reality of the need for Jesus to suffer on the cross, but he did recognize the core reality of the person of Jesus. He is the promised Messiah, savior, deliverer, and none other than God in the flesh! Bruner, a commentator, says it like this: "Jesus is the answer, the point, the last word, the Son of the living God who gives life."

C. What is the difference?

The common people saw Jesus as another common man—though bigger, stronger, kinder and better than most. Peter saw Jesus as the true God who had the right to be Lord of our lives. The difference is radical and cannot be missed. Either Jesus is God and that determines how we treat him or he is not. Everyone must wrestle with that difference. Some of you here this morning may be ones who respect the idea of Jesus but he is not reality for you. Some may call yourselves Christians but Christ is not the Son of the living God. Think about it.

Here is the greatest question on earth—Who do YOU say that Jesus is? Do not skirt the personal reality of this question.

II. What in the world is Jesus doing? (Matt. 16:17-20)

A. He is being revealed in this world and He will build his church of disciples

Jesus now jumps on the statement of Peter and has several very important things to say. First he commends Peter using the term "blessed" which is the same word used in Matthew's record of the sermon on the mount where Jesus describes in the beatitudes how one is blessed by God. Peter is one of the blessed of God. In a beautiful movement of thought, Jesus says that the source of the blessing is that the Father revealed Jesus to Peter. Peter did not learn it from his parents, his religious tradition, his own genius mind—but it was revealed to him by the Father himself. God is building His church to be in his Kingdom and he will succeed and he will bring it to pass.

This past week our family met in Myrtle Beach South Carolina as our tradition has been since I was in high school. I was in the ocean with my son and he was telling me of a friend who was an atheist. This friend said to Joey that normally he does not talk to people like him because he thought it was childish to talk about Jesus. He did not even think Jesus ever existed and

certainly was not a special, divine person. Joey tried to talk to him in a gentle way about the proofs of Jesus etc. He made no headway in convincing him. I said that this man was not willing to think beyond the physical realm and did not believe in spiritual reality. He did not need proofs; he would not believe them anyway. He needed to trust in Jesus. He needed Jesus. I said that Joey had spread some seeds and God could bring the harvest in the future. Joey agreed but said in a sobering way—that the other man thinks similarly of Joey. He thinks that someday, Joey will see that his Christianity stuff is childish nonsense and will come over to the side of the intelligent God-deniers

B. How is he building his church?

Now the 3 word pictures come into play. As Jesus describes his work in the world he uses the “rock, gates, and keys” to describe this work. As I said before, there is much controversy here, but the overarching picture is clear:

1. Rock—foundation of the church—Jesus as proclaimed by his people—greatest Power

Jesus says clearly to Peter (as Peter had been clear to him). He said, you are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church. This is a fascinating statement. The Greek terms for “Peter—petros’ and “rock-petra” are very similar. Some have said that the term for Peter is a stone while the term for rock is a bigger rock. That is probably not the point of the statement. The reality is that Jesus was probably doing a play on words that could be contemporized like this—“you are Rocky and upon this rock...” If you want to read the debates about how Peter and rock are connected I recommend D.A. Carson’s commentary on Matthew. I agree with Carson and think that Jesus was speaking of both Peter and his confession. Peter was the spokesperson who realized who Jesus was in reality. Jesus was the ultimate foundation and builder of his church, but he would use Peter (and the other apostles among whom Peter was the first) to be the people who proclaimed the reality of Jesus and therefore were the foundation (humanly speaking) of His church. Peter was not the first pope, but he was the first real spokesperson for the church as we see in Acts. His sermons and writings were always exalting Jesus. In the end of the day—the Rock is Jesus who is the foundation of the church and is proclaimed by the apostles (Peter first) and is now the New Testament.

2. Gates—opponent of Jesus—gates of death—cannot withstand—greatest Foe

Jesus adds the statement and word picture that the “Gates of Hades would not prevail against it”. This is a real statement of victory, but I think it is often misunderstood or simply overlooked. Gates are a frequent nuance in the Bible. Gates are considered in some cases to be the seat of the government and power of the cities. Most commonly, however, gates are designed to keep people out or to keep people in. For cities, gates keep bad people out, but in a prison, gates keep people in. The picture here is a prison gate, where hades (the word for

the place of the dead) keeps people captive and will never give them up. Death is the final and ultimate foe of all humanity and does not give up its victims.

Here however, we see the victory of God and the rock which defeats and smashes the gates of death. Jesus will not be defeated but will defeat all foes. It reminds me of a gate I saw in Germany when I visited a concentration camp in Dachau. It was one of the most sobering experiences of my life. I went through that gate on a tour of this prisoner camp. Some of the barracks were reconstructed and I saw pictures of prisoners at the gate unable and not desirous of getting out. They were hopelessly in captivity. What a sad state of life. I have often compared that to one dead in their sins and captive to Hades. God promises that his church will be empowered by him to overcome the gates of hell and deliver the dead from the captivity of death. In Christ's death and resurrection, the church experiences life and victory.

3. **Keys**—authority vested in the church by the Lord of the church

This next statement of Jesus is a wild one for sure. He says to Peter that He is giving to him (and I think the other apostles) the keys to the kingdom and what they bind will have been bound and what they loose will have been loosed. I cannot fully resolve all this statement (Jesus still maintains a degree of enigma), but here are 3 helpful comments:

- a. A better translation of this text is that what is looked *shall **have been** loosed and what is bound shall **have been** bound*. The idea is not that heaven responds to the church on earth, but the church recognizes what is done in heaven and then acts. Loosing and binding has already happened in heaven and the church is the agent of God to do likewise on earth.
- b. The church has authority in **doctrinal** binding and loosing—preserving and rejecting truth that is revealed from heaven. The church must preserve the beauty of what God reveals concerning himself, his will and our responsibility. The Scripture is the current way to hear from the apostles as to how to use the keys and authority in doctrinal issues. We must cling to the true word of God spoken through the apostles.
- c. The church also has the authority to affirm what is sealed in heaven concerning the ones who are truly in the faith. Matthew 18 will continue this theme in church **discipline** and uses the same “binding and loosing verbiage” The church is to protect its members from wolves and to strive for a pure membership of those who are truly His.

This text can be used to create a power-hungry group of church elites who would lord it over others. The intent is to say that God has chosen to loan the keys to the kingdom to his church and we are to represent him well in his mission to build his kingdom. We are to have his same character of holiness and gentleness as we fight for the integrity of his church. Praise God he has given us a job in his kingdom and we must be as serious about it as he is.

Conclusion: Take-aways—so what do we do with this?

Let me suggest at least 4 truths we all need to wrestle with from this most important text this morning.

1. Who do YOU say that Jesus is?

This is a personal question that you must honestly ask today. Do you see Jesus as your genie, who grants your wishes? Do you see him as your physician who heals all your pain? Do you see him as a really nice guy who you want to be like? Do you see him as a ticket to heaven and an escape from hell? Be honest. Who do you say he is? If you have not trusted in Jesus as your Savior—today is the day of salvation. Come to him.

When Cathy and I talk I know that she understands relationships better than I do. Bottom line, she does not want me to see her as others see her—as a nice lady, a great teacher, a kind person, a good musician, a fun person etc. She wants me to love her for being her—because of who she is, not because of what she has done! In like manner, Jesus wants his people to love him for who he is—The Promised Son of the living God and therefore to trust in him and commit ourselves to him as our Savior and therefore our Lord. Do you?????

2. Rock: The greatest power there is

Jesus says in no uncertain terms that he is building his church. This should give us confidence and security. God is at work and if we believe he is who he says he is—we should be excited for his work in his church. He guarantees the success of the church. I remember Mohammed Ali would guarantee his boxing victories. He was a bit obnoxious but grew old and frail like all of us and can guarantee nothing now. Jesus is the Son of God and when he says he will build his church he will do it.

3. Gates: Greatest foe of our souls

The worst problem we have in this world is death. It is closer than we think. There are 2 funerals of church people happening this coming week. I presided at a funeral a couple of weeks ago of a church member who went home to be with the Lord. Funerals are sobering as the deceased never talks. It seems final. It seems like when the coffin is closed the gates are closed and the story is over. The Bible offers great hope. Christ has conquered the greatest enemy—death. HE has won the victory both physically and spiritually. Are you in bondage to sin? Lean on Christ who had torn down the gates of death and offers us life. Do you fear, fret, get angry, steal, gossip, do immoral acts, etc. Do you feel enslaved to them? Cling to Jesus who has the power to defeat death. The road to freedom starts with Jesus.

4. Keys: Serious responsibility

Church business is serious. God allows us to share in his church. It is not just a social group. We are given the responsibility and the keys of his kingdom. Let us be diligent whatever our role is to support Christ's church and to do on earth what is approved in heaven.

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