

Who Do You Say That Jesus Is?

Scripture: Matthew 16:13-20

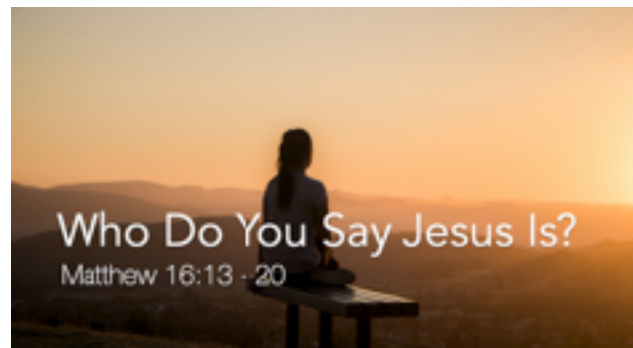
Sermon Series: *Matthew*

Topic: Jesus, Messiah, Church, Peter, Gospel

Introduction

The focal point of this portion of Scripture is the identity of Jesus. The question that cries out to be answered is, "*Who do you say Jesus is?*"

Jesus asks this question twice. First, about whom people say he is and second, who do the disciples say Jesus is. This is the most important question any and every human being must ask, *Who do you say Jesus is?*



This paragraph contains several sentences that some have been called "the most controversial in all of Scripture"¹ and which have "caused endless controversy in the church's history."² It would not be wrong to say that differences over the interpretation and application of what Jesus says here about Peter and the church are among the leading causes of division between Catholics and Protestants. This portion of Scripture raises many questions.

- Who is Jesus?
- Is it possible to understand Jesus' true identity without the help of divine revelation?
- Is Peter here given some exclusive, abiding, and superior authority over all the other apostles?
- What is "the church?" And is Jesus declaring that he owns "the church?"

¹ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, vol. 2, International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 623.

² Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 422.

- Did Jesus build his church upon the foundation of Peter or upon the foundation of the confession about Jesus that Peter made (i.e. that Jesus is God's Messiah and Son) or is it in some sense both?
- What did Jesus mean by "the gates of hell?"
- What are "the keys of the kingdom of heaven?" Does Peter alone have them?
- What does this binding and loosing on earth and heaven mean? Does it refer to principles and precepts or to people? Or all of the above?



ESV Study Bible

Answering these questions rightly will only be accomplished by the help of the Lord. Thus, it seems right to me that begin by seeking the Lord's help.

Two Topics

There are two primary subject matters. The first is the identity of Jesus and the second, is the nature of the church.

The Identity of Jesus

The first focus is upon the identity of Jesus.

Matthew 16:13-17 (ESV) 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."

The district of Caesarea Philippi (v.13). As Matthew so often does, he locates the scene. Last week we found Jesus being confronted by the Pharisees and Sadducees and they were demanding from him "a sign from heaven" (16:1). Jesus knew they were setting a trap rather than seeking the truth, so "he departed and left them" (16:4).

Jesus departed Galilee (from Bethsaida³) and went 25 miles north east into the northern most boundary of Israel, to the city of Caesarea Philippi, which is located at the base of Mt. Hermon.

³ See Mark 8:22, 27.

This is Jesus doing deeper into a majority Gentile region. In OT times this region was the center of the Baal worship and then after being conquered by the Greeks it became a site dedicated the worship of the god Pan. It formerly had been named Paneas, but when it fell under the rule of Philip the Tetrarch, he dedicated the city to Caesar Augustus, calling it Caesarea, and then added his own name to the end (in order promote himself) and to distinguish it from the other Caesarea located further south, along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

In this region, there is a cave at the base of a very large rock formation from which used to issue a spring that serves as one of head waters of the Jordan River. This cave was called "Paneion."⁴ In it was built a shrine to the god Pan.



The spring overflowed from a deep pool in the back of the cave, the bottom of which was unable to be seen. The pool was believed to be a portal into the realm of the dead and thus was called the "gate to hell." Though none of gospel authors give the exact location of where Jesus was when he asked this question of his disciples, some think it was near the sight of this cave and served as a backdrop to Jesus comments on this occasion.

This region would be a place that is far away from the throngs of Jewish crowds, and further away from all the evil plotting of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Perhaps here Jesus was able to find the retreat he'd been seeking after learning of the death of John the Baptist, but had apparently not been able to find.⁵

"Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (v.13). Jesus asked the disciples for a report of the latest opinion polls of the people about who he is. The **"Son of Man"** was Jesus' favorite self-designation. In Matthew, Jesus used this phrase to describe himself 30 times.

The disciples responded with the top three answers; 1) **John the Baptist**, 2) **Elijah**, and 3) **Jeremiah**—or another prophet. By this time, you will recall that John the Baptist was already dead, having been executed by King Herod. However, even king Herod wondered if Jesus was actually John resurrected from the dead (Mt 14:2). Elijah was expected to return before the arrival of Messiah, as was spoken of by the prophet Malachi (3:1; 4:5). To this day, in observance of Passover, a chair is left empty at the table being left open for Elijah, who comes

⁴ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 419.

⁵ Matthew 14:13; Mark 6:30.

before Messiah. That some thought of Jesus as “Jeremiah or one of the other prophets,” points to the general uncertainty regarding Jesus’ identity. They knew he was a man whom God was with, but exactly who he was was not clear to most people. They knew he did extraordinary things, thus, he must be a prophet, but if he was more than that, on that point the crowds were unclear. All three of these answers refer to those who *come before* messiah, but none of these answers point to Jesus *as* messiah.

Who do you say that I am?” (v.15). Jesus now turns the question to his disciples saying literally (‘you’ is emphatic and plural), if Jesus had been from Philadelphia, “What about you, who do you say I am?” Jesus is addressing all of the disciples.

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. (v.16) Peter answers on behalf of them all. Peter declares Jesus to be “*the Christ.*” Christ is not Jesus’ last name. Christ is the Greek equivalent⁶ of the Hebrew word for ‘messiah.’ Christ is a title. The title refers to the one whom God has anointed. In the minds of the Jews of Jesus’ day it hearing that word would evoke thoughts of “a coming king of the line of David, whom God would send to restore his people to national independence and to their rightful pre-eminence as the people of God.”⁷ Thus, Peter is professing a belief that Jesus is God’s messiah, the redeemer of Israel.

This is the first time in Matthew’s gospel that he reports anyone saying that Jesus is Messiah. We have seen this title used of Jesus six⁸ times, but each time they have been from Mathew’s own editorial comments about Jesus. This is the first time anyone has ascribed this title to Jesus by way of a public statement.

However, Peter did not stop there. He kept going. Peter also said that Jesus is “*the Son of the living God.*” The “*living God*” is the one true God. All other god’s are not real. They have eyes by the canon see, ears but they cannot hear, mouths but they cannot speak. They have temples but if they are to go to their own temple, then someone must carry them. Jesus is the Son of the living God, not like the false gods that were worshiped at the temple of Pan.

Jesus is not only the Christ, man’s messiah, but he is also *the Son of God.* Jesus had a special and unique relationship with God. How many times did Peter heard Jesus refer to God the Father as, “My Father?”⁹ Jesus called God “my Father” more times than any other person. And this way of talking was blasphemous. In fact, they will soon pick up stones to kill him for talking this way (Jn 8:59; 10:31). In Jewish thinking, the son carried the same authority as the father. God had declared Jesus to be his Son at his baptism (Mt 3:17) and the disciples had concluded this after seeing him walk across the Sea of Galilee (Mt 14:33). But here Peter combines two unshakable truths together for the first time. Jesus is both *Messiah* of God *and* *Son* of God.

⁶ R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 45.

⁷ France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, 45.

⁸ Matthew 1:1, 16, 17, 18; 2:4; 11:2.

⁹ Matthew 7:21; 10:32, 33; 11:27; 12:50.

Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! (v.17). "*Simon Bar-Jonah*," simply means 'Simon, Son of Jonah.' Jesus points out how '*blessed*' Peter is. The emphasis is on the blessing, for Jesus begins the sentence with this word. The first word Jesus says to Peter, after Peter states who he believes Jesus to be, is the word "*blessed*." Peter is blessed because of the revelation he has been granted. The word refers to "godly felicity...and holy joy... not worldly happiness."¹⁰

Peter is blessed, "*For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven*." Peter did not examine the evidence and come to the conclusion that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God." He did not add up all the healings, all the demons cast out, nor all the people fed and then say, "Hmph, no one could do this but Messiah." After being with Jesus for a few months, he did not get away to secluded mountain monastery and spend a month in solitude and then come out saying, "While I was away I prayed, I fasted, and I read the OT and I've concluded that Jesus is the Messiah." No, that did not happen. What happened is God the Father *revealed* to Peter the truth about who Jesus is.

The word translated 'revealed' is the Greek word *apokalyptō* (ἀποκαλύπτω), which means,

"'to uncover, to take out of hiding,' to cause something to be fully known—to reveal, to disclose, to make fully known, revelation.'"¹¹

Essentially it means *to presently reveal what was formerly concealed*.

God the Father has presently revealed to Peter what was formerly concealed from Peter, namely who Jesus truly is. However, God the Father has now graciously revealed the true identity of Jesus to Peter. Paul says God did the same thing to him (see Gal 1:15-16). The implication of this truth is that Peter (nor Paul nor you or me) would never have seen Jesus for who he truly is without the help of God the Father.

Matthew 11:27 (ESV) "All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

Because God has so blessed Peter with this understanding, Jesus wants Peter to understand from where this blessing has come. Happy is Peter for God has chosen to be gracious to him. Blessed is Peter for he now knows the full identity of Jesus of Nazareth; he is the Christ, the Son of the living God!

¹⁰ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 421.

¹¹ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 338.

The Church of Jesus

After telling Peter of how wonderful is his present blessing, he then turns his attention to future blessing and Peter's relationship to the church. These verses are where the intense controversy begins between Catholics and Protestants. Lord Jesus help us walk in truth.

Matthew 16:18-20 (ESV) 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.

"You are Peter" (v.18). Jesus had just now referred to Peter by his full family name (Simon, Bar-Jonah). Peter was always called Simon until he met Jesus. After meeting Jesus, Simon was called Peter,¹² which is the name the Jesus gave him on the day he first called Peter to follow him.¹³ He probably does this because of what he is about to say.

"On this rock" (v.18). Peter is *Petros* in Greek (Πέτρος), and it means 'rock, stone.' Jesus says to Peter, *"On this rock I will build my church."* To what is Jesus referring when he says, *"on this rock?"* We must ask the question because, though we do not see this in English, Jesus uses two different Greek words. He says,

"You are Petros and on this petra I will build my church."

The word '*petra*' means, "bedrock."¹⁴ It's the same word used by Jesus when he said, *"Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock."* (Matthew 7:24). Jesus means, 'the wise man builds his house upon **bedrock,**' not upon an a large detached stone or pile of rocks. (Note: the bedrock about which he is speaking is "hearing and doing these words of mine.") '*Petros*' means 'a rock or a stone,' while '*petra*' means 'bedrock.' Jesus is saying to Peter, *"You are a rock, on bedrock I will build my church."*

Catholic theologians will say that this means that Jesus will build his church upon Peter himself and upon all of his authorized successors, thus they see here the establishment of the papacy and papal succession. Protestant theologians have reacted so strongly against this notion that they have argued that this does not apply to Peter at all but rather only to the confession Peter has just made.

However, the wordplay (of *Petros* and *petra*) forces us to focus our attention on Peter himself and Jesus is focusing on Peter. He is praising Peter, yes, for the right confession that he

¹² Matthew 10:2.

¹³ See John 1:42.

¹⁴ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 22.

has just made, but Jesus is also pointing to a future building project in which Peter will play a prominent role.

So what is “this rock” upon which Jesus will build his church? It seems to me that it is both Peter and his proclamation that Jesus is Messiah and Son of God. Peter became the most prominent preacher and leader of the early church.

“*I will build my church*” (v.18). Jesus claims ownership of the church he promises to build. He says that the church is “*my church*.” Jesus has future plans for a church he claims to own and promises to build. He said, “*I will build...*” **Jesus** would build the church. Jesus began this great work of building *through Peter*, whom he filled with his Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

1. First, **Jesus built his church among the Jews through Peter**. On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached Jesus as the resurrected Lord and Christ of God.¹⁵ On that day, about 3,000 people were added to the church (Acts 2:41).
2. Second, **Jesus built his church among the Gentiles through Peter**. Through Peter Jesus brought the Gentiles into his church. It was while Peter was preaching to the Roman Centurion, Cornelius and his family, that Jesus poured out his Holy Spirit upon those Gentiles gathered there and they too were added to the church (Acts 10).
3. Third, **Jesus built his church among the Samaritans through Peter**, as he laid his hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit after Philip preached to them the gospel of Jesus crucified and resurrected to be Christ and Lord.

Jesus did indeed begin to build the church through Peter and Peter’s bold proclamation that Jesus is God’s Messiah and Son. However, he did not do this **exclusively** through Peter. Peter preached often, but so did Philip and John and Barnabas and Silas and eventually Saul who later was called Paul and many others. **Peter was prominent in the early church, but he was not a Pope**. At the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), James had the final word. And later at Antioch, when Peter was acting hypocritical, Paul publicly corrected him.

Jesus is the Master Builder and he built **his** church through many preachers who all preached one rock-solid message, “Jesus is the Christ and the resurrected Son of the living God.”

This is the first time we see the word ‘**church**’ in Matthew’s gospel. It only appears one other time in all four gospels (Mt 18:17). The word refers to a “gathered assembly.” In the NT, after the gospels, the word refers to the gathered assembly of followers of Jesus. The word church never refers to a physical building, but rather always refers to people. Jesus did not build his church using brick and mortar. Jesus builds his church of people.

“**The gates of hell shall not prevail against it**” (v. 18). The gates of a city represent its defensive strength and power. Gates prevented outside invasion and kept out those who would plunder a city. Hell here is “hades,” which is the realm of the dead. The phrase is “essentially

¹⁵ Acts 2:32-36.

synonymous with 'gates of death' (as in Job 38:17; Pss 9:13; 107:18)."¹⁶ Jesus is saying that the strongest power of hell, which is death, will not overcome his church. The church—the people of Jesus—will be victorious over death. The life of Jesus, which he will give to his people, will one day overpower the strength of death. This Messiah and Son of God has decreed that his church will fight against death, and win!

"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (v.19). Having the keys to something speaks to the power and authority over a thing. Jesus has *"the keys to death and hades,"*¹⁷ thus he has power and authority over death and hell. With keys one has the power and authority to open or to close, to admit or to deny admittance.

Certainly this relates to the confession Peter has just given (that Jesus is the Christ and Son of the living God). The confession is the key to the kingdom, not Peter himself. Those who join Peter in confessing that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah and the Son of the living God, will find the kingdom of heaven opened to them, while those who refuse to confess Jesus as Christ and Son of God will find the kingdom closed to them. Jesus said to the Pharisees and religious lawyers,

Luke 11:52 (ESV) "Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering."

The church is the people who proclaim the gospel message of who Jesus is. Since Peter will become it's first and most prominent preacher, in one very real sense, he holds the keys to the kingdom of heaven. When Peter preaches the gospel of Jesus (i.e. expounding his true identity) and the gospel is believed and Jesus is confessed, the kingdom of heaven is opened. However, when the gospel of Jesus is rejected, the kingdom of heaven remains closed.

"Whatever you bind or loose on earth shall be bound or loosed in heaven" (v.19). This is not easy to understand. Binding and loosing were "technical terms for the pronouncements of Rabbis on what was or was not permitted (to *bind* was to forbid, to *loose* to permit)."¹⁸ However, when you are confused about a passage of Scripture, look to see if it is referenced elsewhere in Scripture. Let Scripture interpret Scripture. Jesus uses the exact same language in Mt 18:18. In this case, the context is the gathered church called together to address and unrepentant sinner. Jesus instructs the church to remove the man from their number and to treat him like an unbeliever. Then he immediately says the exact same words that he says here. Thus, this must be referring to the church's ability and authority to determine what is right and godly conduct and what is wrong and ungodly conduct. *The church, not only Peter, has the authority to determine the application of the teaching of Jesus to specific situations and thereby either admit or deny entrance into the church based upon whether a person submits*

¹⁶ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, vol. 33B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1995), 471.

¹⁷ Revelation 1:18.

¹⁸ R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 259.

to or reject that teaching. In this sense, the church has the keys to the kingdom. Jesus did not limit this authority to Peter alone, but rather delegates it to his church as a gathered assembly. And when the people of God are gathered together to make such serious judgments, the Spirit of Jesus is present among them (Mt 18:20) to ensure that they are in agreement with heaven.

Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ (v.20). Despite the bold declaration of Peter, there was still so much more to learn. Neither Peter nor the other disciples fully realized the implications of Jesus' identity and God's plan (as we will see in the next paragraph). So Jesus commanded them to keep quiet for the time being and let him do the talking.

Conclusion

Jesus is not merely a prophet, or a powerful preacher, or a mighty miracle-working man. He is God's only Messiah and Son. He is mankind's only savior. To think that Jesus is a prophet does not honor him, because it misses entirely who he truly is. Jesus is not a mere holy man or a hopeful teacher. He is God's only Messiah and Son and mankind's only Savior.

Seeing him for who he truly is *requires revelation from God the Father*. You cannot cherish Jesus for who he truly is without the help of the Holy Spirit. If you don't see Jesus as your most cherished relationship, then rightly now turn your eyes to heaven and pray to God the Father that he would reveal to you, truly and clearly, the glory of Jesus.

Jesus is building his church and nothing can stop him. Death did not stop him. Nothing, therefore, has the power to prevent him from accomplishing his will to build his people and to present to himself a bride, spotless and pure, one day in the presence of his heavenly kingdom with great glory.

The **key** to entering that great kingdom and being welcomed at that great wedding celebration, is joyfully confessing and whole-heartedly believing that *Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God*.

The key to entering into the kingdom of heaven entails rightly understanding Jesus and knowing and doing his teaching. The apostles are the authoritative teachers and expositors of the teaching of Jesus. Thus, the church is bound to obey the teaching of Jesus. *Those who reject Jesus are bound to remain under the condemnation of death, however, those who receive Jesus are loosed from the condemnation of death.*

If someone asked you, "Who do you say Jesus is?" How would you answer?

Discussion Questions

1. Why did some people think Jesus was John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or another prophet?
2. What does the title 'Christ' mean?
3. Why does Jesus tell Peter that his understanding and confession of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God did not come from his own thinking, but rather from divine revelation? What are the implications of this truth.
4. Do you believe it is possible to truly know and understand who Jesus is without "a revelation from the Father in heaven?" Why or why not?
5. How would you define the word 'church?' What does it mean?
6. What is the "rock" upon which Jesus' church is built?
7. To what does the phrase "gates of hell" refer?
8. What are the "keys to the kingdom?"
9. Explain what Jesus meant by saying, "Whatever you bind or loose on earth will be bound or loosed in heaven."
10. What does this passage teach about the authority of the church?
11. What is one thing that you learned from this portion of Scripture?