

Matthew 16:13-18 - Who Do Men Say That I Am?

Has this ever happened to you? You're in the middle of a busy day, maybe it's a busy week. When you started the day there were fifteen things on your list. You've done four and there are eleven left. It's about 2:30 in the afternoon. You're hot ... and tired ... and you are going just as fast as you can to get through everything before the day is over. And suddenly you stop and say to yourself, "Now why am I doing this?"

Has that happened to you? I think it happens to me about once a week. I think it has happened to me several times this week. It's a good question to ask yourself from time to time—"Why in the world am I doing this?"

I was thinking about that this week as I began to get settled down. Maybe you've seen that sign that says, "If you don't know what you're doing, do it neatly." Or the other one that says, "If you don't know what you're doing, act like you do. Most people won't know the difference."

From time to time it's good for us to stop and ask that question— "What is it that we are trying to do here?" It's good for all churches to ask that question occasionally.

What are we doing here?

And so this morning we are going back to the beginning, back to the words of our founder, Jesus Christ. Back to the gospels. Back, in fact, to the very first gospel. Back to the very first mention of the church in all the Bible.

Our text is Matthew 16. Jesus only mentioned the church twice in the gospels: once in Matthew 16 and once in Matthew 18. That's all. We have no other recorded statements from our Lord on this subject. Matthew 16 is the first. Therefore it is exceedingly important.

Two Crucial Questions 13-16 - Matthew 16 is a critical turning point in the ministry of Jesus Christ. By this time he has been preaching for many months. He is well-known to the nation of Israel. His fame has spread far and wide. The common people have embraced him. They have seen his miracles and heard his teaching.

And the word has spread from village to village, "Have you heard about this man Jesus?" And along the dusty roads of Galilee men discussed him and wondered who he really was.

Most importantly the religious leaders have heard about Jesus and they don't like what they have heard. He is a threat to their vested interests. Earlier there had been a bitter confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees. They had accused him of doing miracles by the power of Beelzebub, prince of the demons. In essence they say, "You have come straight from hell."

When we come to Matthew 16 it is clear that Jesus has been rejected by his own people, his fate is sealed. The shadow of the cross looms overhead. And even though the common people heard him gladly, they did not know who he was. They liked him, but they did not worship him. To them he was a great teacher and a great miracle-worker, nothing more.

So Jesus, in the midst of growing opposition and surrounded by crowds of people who liked him but did not understand him, in the rising turmoil that would lead eventually to Golgotha, did an unusual thing. He took his disciples and left the nation of Israel. He went north out of Israel into Gentile territory, to a place called Caesarea Philippi.

What happened there would change the course of history. Jesus knows that before long he will hang on a cross. It is inevitable because the nation has rejected him. Therefore his time is limited and his strategy must change. He must form a new society to carry on in his name after he is gone.

But before he can do that, he must know where his men stand. He must bring them out in the open. Are they with him? Do they know who he really is? If you want to think of it in school terms, Matthew 16 is the disciples' final exam.

He has never before put them on the spot. He has never before directly asked them this question. But he does in Matthew 16. In fact, Jesus actually asked his disciples two questions. One was the warm-up; the other was the real thing.

The First Question 13-14 - The first question is in verse 13. "When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?'" Or, in the words of the King James Version, "Whom do men say that I the Son of Man am?"

This was the first Gallup Poll. Jesus already knew the answer. He wanted his disciples to acknowledge what other people were saying. So they gave him the four most popular answers about who Jesus is. "Some say John the Baptist (that was Herod's answer); others say Elijah (that was very popular because the Jews expected Elijah to return); and still others, Jeremiah (he was the greatest of the later prophets) or one of the prophets (that is, he was a spokesman for God)."

I'm sure that when we read a passage like this we tend to downplay those answers because we already know the right answer to the question. And we think, "Those fools, they didn't know the answers." But those answers were meant to be flattering.

It would be as if someone came in and said, "Who do you think I am?", and people said, "Well, I think you're Gandhi" or "I think you're the Queen ." If they really meant it, that would be a great compliment even if they were wrong.

Even if they were wrong, you have to give them credit. At least they were wrong on the right side. At least they knew that Jesus wasn't a bad man. One commentator said that when the common people gave these answers they were like "a moth hovering around the light." They were fascinated by what they could not understand.

There are two points to note here: First, the common people loved Jesus even though they did not fully understand him. Second, it is quite possible even with a very sincere heart to misunderstand who Jesus is. It is possible for a person to be very sympathetic to spiritual truth and still not understand who our Lord is. That is, it is possible to misunderstand with the best of intentions.

This is quite typical of our country today. There are many people who like the Lord Jesus but do not worship him. They think he's a

good man, even a great man, even a man who had a special relationship to God. But they do not believe he is the Son of God from heaven.

Many of you are familiar with C. S. Lewis. In his book *Mere Christianity*, Lewis spoke to the issue of people who like Jesus and respect him but do not worship him. This is what Lewis said:

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to." (pp. 52-53)

To be almost right about Jesus is to be totally wrong. Why? Because we are not saved by good opinions about Jesus. We are not saved because we have a good feeling about Jesus. We are not saved because we like his moral teaching. That is not enough.

To come close is not enough. The truth about Jesus Christ must be:

Personally understood

Personally grasped

Personally experienced

Personally possessed

Close is not enough!!!!

That is why the Lord having asked the first question, now asks a second one. "Who do you say that I am?" (15) In the Greek text, that

word 'you' has an enormous stress. In fact, the you really goes at the first of the sentence. It is as if Jesus is saying, "But you who have followed me and have known me from the beginning, who do you say that I am?" It is the greatest question in all the universe and it is one which every PERSON must eventually answer.

You will notice that Peter answers for all the disciples. That's because he was the D.L.—the Designated Loudmouth. Whenever there was a question, Peter would always be the first one to answer. And when Peter answers here, he is not speaking simply for himself, but for all the disciples.

His answer is very, very specific. "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." The word "the" is repeated three times (four times if you read Greek). You could translate it this way: "You are the Christ, the Son of the God, the Living One. Peter was saying, "I know who you are. You are the Messiah sent to save us and you are the Son of God from heaven." It is short and simple. Everything necessary for salvation is included in that statement.

I think some people would read that statement and say, "Well, that's no big deal. I would say that, too." Sure, everybody here would probably stand up and say, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." But Peter was the first person in human history ever to say it out loud. And he said it when few were with Jesus and many were against him. He deserves all the credit, for without his confession there would be no Christian church. In that sense, there is a direct line between Caesarea Philippi and St Paul's. Without Peter's confession, we wouldn't be here today.

Two Great Results 17-18 - The Blessing - There are two other things we should notice here. Peter said, "You are the Christ." Not "I say you are the Christ" or "People say you are the Christ" or even "We got together and took a vote and we think you are the Christ." It is a declarative statement—"You are the Christ." Nobody can say that except by the work of the Holy Spirit because no one can discover that truth on his/her own.

That is why Jesus in verse 17 gives Peter a blessing. "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man,

but by my father in heaven." It's almost as if Jesus is saying, "It's a remarkable thing, Peter, that a mere man discovered this." Flesh and blood have not revealed this to you. That is, you didn't go to seminary to figure this out. And you didn't get this because you had a Ph.D. This came because God in heaven revealed it to you.

There's a principle in verse 17 worth thinking about. The truth about Jesus Christ can only be revealed to those to whom the Father chooses to reveal it. That is, the truth about Jesus is divinely revealed. If a man does not see this, we are not to despise him or to argue with him, but we are to pray for him. If a man is blind, you don't curse his blindness. You pray God to open his eyes.

The Promise 18 - Finally, notice that in verse 18 that Jesus calls him "Peter," not "Simon" or "Simon Peter." In verse 17 he is called Simon. In verse 18 he is called Peter which means "rock." Same man, different name. From Simon to Peter in just one verse. What caused the change? The change was caused by the confession Peter made. What changed Peter? He didn't change. What changed him was that he made a confession of faith.

Which leads me at last to the great truth for today. What are we doing here? And what is this church all about? The church is made up of men and women who confess one revolutionary truth—that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of the living God.

That is the fundamental principle of the church. It is our fundamental organizing principle. It is the thing which makes us forever different from every other organization, guild, club and fraternal order. We are joined here today as men and women who believe one thing—that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of the Living God. We have staked our lives upon that fact.

And until you believe that, and confess that, you cannot be called a Christian. It matters not that you may have positive feelings about Jesus Christ, or that you think he was a very good man. You are not a Christian until you confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

I am saying in short that we believe something special about someone special.

—We believe that a man once walked this earth who was like no other man who ever lived.

—He said things no other man has ever said.

—He did things no other man has ever done.

—He made claims for himself which, if they are not true, brand him as history's greatest fraud.

—He gathered around himself a group of men who believed his claims.

—He predicted his own death ... and then he predicted his own resurrection.

—He made good on all his claims.

—After He left, his followers took his message and spread it around the earth.

—And for 2,000 years countless men and women have believed that this man was indeed the Son of the living God. And they have staked their lives upon it.

—That man is Jesus of Nazareth.

—That is what Christians believe.

—That is what this church is all about.

Now, where do you stand? Where do you stand this morning? No, you can't leave until you answer. You don't have to answer out loud, but you've got to answer.

Who is he? A good man? A great teacher? One of the finest humans who ever walked the face of this earth? Or is he the Christ, the Son of the Living God?

Some say ...

We say ...

What do you say?

Who is Jesus Christ?

What is your answer?

Let's pray