

FIRST THOUGHTS

Imagine taking a walk in a park and asking random people, “Who was Jesus?” You probably would get any number of interesting responses. Some folks might ignore you completely. Others might say Jesus was a prophet or a good teacher. A few might question if He ever really existed, while others might say He was a man who was greatly misunderstood. The question of Jesus’s identity is an important one for each adult to answer for themselves. But the question that really needs answering is not “Who is Jesus to me?” but “Who is Jesus?” Individual takes on Jesus will vary from person to person. But who Jesus actually is, no matter what anyone thinks about Him, is crucial to understand. This lesson presents Jesus as “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). As you prepare to lead this session from Matthew 16, examine your heart. Take time to reflect on what it means for Jesus to be who He said He is—and how that applies to your life. Seek God’s wisdom for ways to guide adults toward acknowledging and committing themselves to Jesus by denying themselves, taking up their cross, and following Him. The world is made up of leaders and followers. The majority of us are followers. As followers, it is critically important who we follow. History is replete with people who followed others to destruction and death. Leaders like Jim Jones of the Jonestown massacre, cult leader Charles Manson of the murderous Manson family, or David Koresh of the Branch Davidian tragedy, all led their followers to disaster. Each of us must choose leaders wisely. Follow those who lead to life and not to death. You’ll be glad you did!

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

Following His confrontation with the Pharisees and scribes (Matt. 15:1–20), Jesus and His disciples traveled to the region of Tyre and Sidon. (15:21). This move into modern-day Lebanon was Jesus’s second withdrawal toward the end of His Galilean ministry. Shortly after arriving in this Gentile area, a Canaanite woman, a descendant of the people Israel drove out of the land more than a millennium earlier, pleaded with Jesus to heal her daughter who was possessed by a demon. Jesus clearly told her that His mission focused on “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24). When she continued to beg for help, Jesus replied with a seemingly harsh rejection. In response, the woman humbly acknowledged her place in a way that reflected her faith. Based on that great faith, Jesus healed the woman’s daughter (15:26–28). Nothing else is recorded about this brief time in Syrophenicia, but we read that Jesus moved on from there, avoiding the territory of Herod Antipas coming to the region of the Decapolis on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee (15:29). This was the third of Jesus’s withdrawals from Galilee. The Decapolis, mentioned specifically in Mark’s parallel account (Mark 7:31), originally was a federation of ten Gentile towns east of the Jordan River. Early in Jesus’s ministry residents of the Decapolis were part of the crowds that followed Him (Matt. 4:25), but the people asked Him to leave the area after He drove a legion of demons out of a local man (Mark 5:1–20). Now, large crowds again came, bringing all kinds of people in need. Jesus’s healing ministry lasted for three days (Matt. 15:29–32), leading Him to feed more than four thousand people with seven small loaves and a few small fish (15:32–38). From there, Jesus went to Magadan (or Magdala, 15:39) on the west side of the sea. This brought Jesus back into Jewish territory. As soon as He arrived, He was accosted by the Pharisees and their rival Jewish sect, the Sadducees. Jesus had just fed a multitude with only a small amount of bread and fish, but these religious leaders asked Jesus to “show them a sign from heaven” (16:1). Jesus used the occasion to rebuke them and to warn His disciples about their teaching (16:1–12). Crossing the lake again (16:5), Jesus began His fourth withdrawal. The area around Caesarea Philippi (16:13) once again took Jesus out of the realm of Herod Antipas and deep into the Gentile region ruled by Herod Philip. Jesus had not gone into this sparsely populated area before, but He stayed there a few months. Whether Jesus actually went into Caesarea Philippi itself is not clear. Matthew refers to the “region of Caesarea Philippi” (16:13), while Mark wrote of the “villages of Caesarea Philippi” (Mark 8:27).

KNOW THE MESSIAH (Matt. 16:13–20)

• **We cannot follow Jesus fully until we know and accept His true identity.**

(vv. 13-14) • **Caesarea Philippi** was located 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee near the base of Mount Hermon. In the third century BC, it was called Paneas because a shrine there was dedicated to the worship of the half-man, half-goat Greek god Pan. Sometime around 20 BC Herod the Great built a white marble temple there and dedicated it to Caesar Augustus. After Herod’s death, the city came under the jurisdiction of his son Philip, who renamed it Caesarea Philippi, honoring both Augustus and himself. **Son of Man** was Jesus’s favorite title for Himself. The people He was asking about refers to the general public, and they had several opinions related to Jesus’s identity. Although **John the Baptist** was dead, even Herod Antipas, the man who had ordered his execution, wondered if John had come back to life (14:1–2). Some thought Jesus was **Elijah** because Malachi had prophesied Elijah would return before the Messiah came (Mal. 3:1; 4:5–6). Only Matthew included the name of **Jeremiah**. Those who were not prepared to identify Jesus specifically still grouped Him positively as **one of the prophets**.

(vv. 15-17) But calls for a contrast and the you is plural and emphatic. **Peter** gave a double answer. **Messiah** referred to the “Anointed One” whom God had promised to send. **The Son of the living God** was an Old Testament designation that also distinguished Jesus from all the pagan idolatry in the area of Caesarea Philippi. **Blessed are you** represents a divine blessing (see Matt. 5:3–10). Jesus also emphasized that Peter’s understanding did not come from **flesh and blood**, meaning from human insight. Rather, it was a revelation from **my Father in heaven**. In saying this, Jesus highlighted His unique relationship with God. According to John’s Gospel, Jews once tried to kill Jesus for using this expression and “making himself equal to God” (John 5:17–18).

(vv. 18-19) Jesus’s pronouncement has been the source of controversy. Roman Catholics contend **this rock** means Peter himself, but most Protestants reject this understanding. Instead, they focus either on the confession Peter made in verse 16 or believe Jesus was pointing to Himself and His teachings as the rock of our faith. What is clear is that Jesus promised to establish His **church**, pointing to Pentecost in Acts 2. And, while Satan might attack God’s people, **the gates of Hades** would never be strong enough to **overpower** His church. Scholars also wonder about the **keys** Jesus offered Peter. Here the keys are said to **bind** and to **loose**. Jesus’s language indicates that He had Isaiah 22:20–22 in mind. The Greek wording suggests that whatever decisions Peter would make already had been made in heaven, thereby enabling Peter to carry out God’s purpose. We see Peter

demonstrating this type of binding and loosing when he supported Gentiles at the church council in Acts 15:7–11. Jesus further expanded this privilege to all His disciples in Matthew 18:18 and John 20:23.

(v. 20) **Gave . . . orders** is a strong term for stating a command to be followed in no uncertain terms. Jesus recognized the political and nationalistic misunderstandings related **to the Messiah**. Even the disciples had not yet grasped the true nature of Jesus's messiahship, as the next verses make clear. So, Jesus did not want them to speak out until they understood things more clearly.

EMBRACE HIS MISSION (Matt. 16:21–23) • **We cannot follow Jesus fully until we accept His mission as Messiah and Savior.**

(v. 21) From then on points back to Peter's confession in verse 16. The words indicate an ongoing new activity. **Began to point out** implies that Jesus would not lay out His future comprehensively, but gradually. **Necessary . . . to go** indicates a divine imperative regarding **Jerusalem**. He announced that in the capital city He would **suffer many things**. Suffer indicates anguish, pain, or agony. Many things covers a wide variety of particulars. Jesus also identified three groups that would cause His suffering. **The elders** were the heads of aristocratic families. **The chief priests** included the high priest and the heads of the priestly orders. Many of them were Sadducees. The **scribes** were experts in the law of Moses, and many of them were Pharisees. The only other time these three groups are mentioned together is in Matthew 27:41 when they mocked Jesus while He was on the cross. When Jesus named these three groups, He used only one definite article, suggesting that they actually constituted one group: the Jewish governing body known as the Sanhedrin. The outcome of Jesus's suffering at the hands of the Jewish leaders would mean that He would **be killed**. Probably overwhelmed by this shocking announcement, Jesus's additional words **and be raised the third day** must have gone right by the disciples. The phrase be raised is a divine passive, alluding to God's approval and action. The third day includes Friday evening to Sunday morning.

(v. 22) After Jesus's revelation, **Peter took him aside**. The Greek wording suggests that the disciple tried to speak privately with Jesus in a friendly manner, rather than making a more forceful move. However, **rebuke** is a strong word that highlights the supposed superiority of the speaker. While He addressed Jesus as **Lord**, he included a negative tone in **oh no**. He then told Jesus that He was wrong and repudiated what his "Lord" had just said: **This will never happen to you!** For Peter, what Jesus just announced was unthinkable.

(v. 23) Apparently Jesus had not been looking directly at Peter. Now, though, **Jesus turned** toward him and forcibly said, **Get behind me, Satan!** Jesus's reprimand was intended to place Peter (and his words) in a submissive position behind Jesus's back. The words clearly recall those spoken directly to Satan in Matthew 4:10. With these words, Jesus was not equating Peter as Satan or saying he was possessed by demons. Rather, He was indicating that any attempt to thwart Jesus's divine mission (no matter how well-intentioned) made Peter "an adversary" (the literal meaning of satan). **Hindrance** translates the Greek word scandalon, a word that may be rendered as "a stumbling block" (see Isa. 8:14). Ironically, the man Jesus called a "rock" had become a stumbling stone in Jesus's path toward fulfilling God's will. The Greek wording reflects present tense and refers to Peter's ongoing state of mind. He was failing to focus on **God's concerns**. In contrast, his thinking was dominated by **human concerns**. That is, he was leaning into natural human patterns of thinking (see Isa. 55:8–9).

Key Doctrine: God the Son - In His substitutionary death on the cross Christ made provision for the redemption of men from sin. (See Isaiah 53:5–6; 2 Corinthians 5:21.)

BECOME HIS DISCIPLE (Matt. 16:24–26) • **We cannot follow Jesus fully until we sacrifice our personal agendas to Him.**

(v. 24) **Jesus** now addressed all of his disciples. His pronouncement concerned **anyone** who **wants to** (a choice of the will) **follow after me** (a present ongoing decision that affects the rest of one's life). Anyone with this desire must do three things. **Deny himself** refers to leaving behind all self-interest and everything related to natural human tendencies. To **take up his cross** referred to the Roman practice of crucifixion in which a condemned person carried the horizontal bar of the cross to the place of execution. From there, it was attached to the upright stake already in place. The implication is not about denying our desires. It means dying to our desires. **Follow me** uses a different word for "follow" than the idea of "coming" found earlier in the verse. This word (akoloutheito) is a present imperative and suggests one who keeps on following Jesus. It reflects a whole life of discipleship. Discipleship is not merely a matter of correctly confessing Jesus (Matt. 16:16). It requires total commitment of a person's life to following Him.

(v. 25) Jesus followed these demands of discipleship with three statements containing incentives for making such a commitment. The first reason in verse 25 is a paradox: Anyone trying to **save their life** by living for themselves will **lose it**. But anyone who **loses his life** for the sake of Jesus **will find it**. Jesus's words are similar to what He said in Matthew 10:39 and in John 12:25. But He always emphasized that this was a matter of choice: **whoever wants to**.

(v. 26) As in verse 25, **for** identifies another reason why discipleship is worth the sacrifice. Focusing on the folly of accumulating extreme wealth in this world, Jesus used two rhetorical questions related to the world of commerce. His first question focused on what **benefit** comes if someone **gains the whole world yet loses his life**. The world here refers to the riches of this life, and the whole emphasizes the extent of those riches. Of course, the proper answer is "Nothing." The writer of Ecclesiastes wrestled with this same question and came to the same conclusion (Eccl. 1:3; 2:4–11). Gaining the whole world also reflects the offer Satan made to Jesus in exchange for worship (Matt. 4:8–9). The Greek word life in verses 25–26 is psyche, meaning both "life" and "soul." Those who pursue such foolish goals and distorted values will lose not only their present life, but also their souls for eternity. To **give in exchange** is another example of commercial language, referring to a trade or purchase. Jesus noted that those who have lost their life/soul (v. 26a) will never be able to buy it back again. This is what Psalm 49:6–7 emphasizes: "They trust in their wealth and boast of their abundant riches. Yet these cannot redeem a person or pay his ransom to God." Jesus also may have been warning His followers that nothing in this temporal world compares to one's soul. The final motivation Jesus named can be found in verse 27 and relates to Jesus's return. When He comes back in glory with His angels, He will reward His faithful followers. Paul grasped the significance of this incentive for a life of discipleship as he testified in Romans 8:18.