



Defining Moments in the Life of Jesus: Identifying
Matthew 16:13-20
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I went to college to prepare for a career in medicine. I embarked on a pre-medical trajectory of studies, but I did so within the context of a liberal arts school, which meant that I had to devote my first two years of study to a wide-ranging course of studies that exposed me to a wide array of disciplines. I had to take classes in math and science, but I also had to take various courses in the humanities, foreign languages, and other essentially non-related fields. As a follower of Jesus, I was excited to get to take a couple of religious studies courses along the way. I was going to get college credit for studying about Jesus—it was going to be great!

My first religious studies course was taught by a man who had studied at Duke Divinity School and who had spent time as a pastor in the Methodist church. I was so excited. This man of God was going to teach me more about Jesus, so I thought. I was both right and wrong. As it turned out, my professor had left his pastoral position to enter academia, not because he wanted to teach college students how to trust and follow Jesus as Lord, but because he wanted to teach college students that Jesus was not who the Bible presented Him to be. He had come to a point at which he had chosen to jettison his former allegiance to Christ in favor of a religion of his own creation. He chose elements of various different world religions including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Baha'i, Zoroastrianism, and various others to construct his own conception of a deity whom he followed nebulously in a humanistic expression that aligned deeply with secular values. In other words, he just made something up and went with it.

What was so hard about that for me was that he basically presented Bible-believing Christ-followers as rubes who didn't have the mental capacity to understand that "the historical Jesus" was completely different from the heavily mythologized biblical Jesus that he believed never really existed. He believed that a man named Jesus of Nazareth once truly existed, but he mocked any conception that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, performed miraculous works, rose again from the dead, bodily ascended to Heaven, or would one day bodily return in glory to judge the world and gather His people to Himself.

His class became hard to bear, but it stretched me in some good ways. He forced me to come to terms with who I believed Jesus to be, and if I believed Jesus to be who the Bible presented Him to be, then what difference did that make in my life? If it didn't make a difference in my life, did I really believe it? Although I grieved deeply for my professor's lack of biblical faith, I thanked God for using that experience to grow my faith.

Today, we will see that once we understand who Jesus really is, we change how we approach Him, how we listen to Him, how we trust Him, and how we follow Him. We're going to see Jesus ask us to rightly identify Him, and once we do that, we can find our right identity in Him.

1. Jesus presses us to rightly identify Him (16:13-16).

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” (Matthew 16:13-16).

This moment is pivotal in the life of Jesus, in the spiritual formation of the disciples, and in the history of the church of Jesus Christ. To set the stage, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, who normally hated each other, had found a common enemy in Jesus. They had just demanded from Jesus that He provide a sign from Heaven to prove His identity, but Jesus refused to be baited by them into some sort of miraculous display of His glory. He told them that no sign would be given their evil and adulterous generation except the sign of Jonah—meaning that He would descend into the belly of the earth—the tomb—for 3 days before emerging victoriously to carry out the will of God. Jesus used the interaction as a teaching moment to help His disciples understand that they needed to be on guard against the false teachings of the religious leaders.

Jesus and the disciples then came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, which was a vitally important area 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. This region had formerly been named Paneas in honor of the Greek god Pan, and then its name had been changed to Caesarea Philippi to honor Caesar Augustus and the Philip the Tetrarch, who was one of Herod the Great’s sons. This district had been the center of the worship of Baal, then Pan, and now Caesar. At this time, it was mostly populated by Syrian and Greek pagans who were very open to spiritual things—but being open to spiritual things is not the goal Jesus has for people. Being spiritual and being saved are two different realities.

At this point, Jesus looks at His disciples and asks them an important question: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” In this spiritually-charged context, Jesus asked about the general public’s perception of Him. Of course people were talking about Him. People had always been talking about Him. His coming had been prophesied. The angels proclaimed His birth. Shepherds and wise men worshiped Him. Herod wanted to kill Him as a baby, because he was threatened by Him. An old man named Simeon was waiting on His birth so that Simeon could die. The religious teachers at the Temple marveled at Him when he was twelve years old. John the Baptist called Him the Lamb of God, and at His baptism, God the Father proclaimed that Jesus was His Son, whom He loved and with whom He was well pleased. He gained a reputation as a teacher, as a prophet, as a healer, and as a miracle worker. People were always talking about Jesus. At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks His disciples what the people were saying about Him.

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (Matthew 16:14). Why are these names significant? These were all men who were sent to prepare the way for the Lord. In the very last chapter of the Old Testament, in the very last words spoken by God before four centuries of silence, Malachi prophesied, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction” (Malachi 4:5-6). All of these men whom the people named as possible identities for Jesus were affiliated with God and used by God, but there was one glaring deficiency in these names—none of them were God’s Messiah. People thought Jesus was a good man, a powerful man, a man used greatly by Almighty God, but none of these people thought that Jesus was the Anointed One of God upon whom they and the world had been waiting.

Today, there remain no shortage of potential identities that people ascribe to Jesus. Some say that He is a good teacher, and others see Him as a great prophet of Almighty God. Some say that He is a magnificent miracle-worker, and others see Him as a mighty healer used powerfully by God. Some see Him as the founder of a worldwide religion, and others see Him as a historical figure who clearly impacted the world in measurable ways (e.g., the fact that it is 2021 *anno Domini*). People have a lot to say about Jesus and who He is, but like those about whom Jesus was asking His disciples so many years ago, people often miss the mark. They don't ascribe to Jesus His true identity. They may see Him as a good man, a powerful man, a man used greatly by Almighty God—but if they fail to see Him as God's Messiah, they miss their opportunity for salvation. There's a lot on the line when it comes to Jesus' identity.

Jesus then shifts the question to His disciples. He had asked them to report on what they had been hearing about Him, and they answered Him honestly. Without giving any commentary on what His disciples told Him others think about Him, He turns the question on them: "But who do *you* say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15).

If this were a movie, this is where the background music drops out. This is the moment to which the tension in the scene has been building. This is the moment where Jesus lays it all on the line with His disciples. They had obeyed His call to follow Him. They had left behind lives they had been building for years to go with Him. They had experienced an up-close-and-personal view of Him—not just in His public moments, and not just in His miraculous moments, but in all of His moments. They had been with Him in joyous times and difficult times. They had celebrated great things with Him, and they had slipped away from would-be assassins with Him. But now, in this moment, Jesus is asking them to tell Him who they think He is. The air is pregnant with anticipation as His question hangs before them.

Before we get to the disciples' answer, let's allow Jesus' question to hang before us for a moment. How do you answer it? You know what so many people think about Jesus. You've probably watched specials on the History Channel or the National Geographic Channel or the Discovery Channel. You've probably heard scholars give their interpretations of key events in Jesus' life and, if those moments really happened in their view, what their significance really was. You've probably heard your beloved family members and friends share their opinions about Jesus, and you've gone to the trouble to be part of church services and Bible studies and Jesus-focused experiences. You've taken the time to read this Bible study guide all the way to this point. What about you? How do you answer Jesus' question? Who do you say that Jesus is?

Here's the thing about this question: you have to answer it one way or another, and your answer will determine your relationship with Jesus now and forever. If you view Him as a good teacher, a great prophet, a man used mightily by God—and that's it—you'll seek to be near Him occasionally. You'll read His words like you might read a philosopher's writings, or a politician's speeches, or an influencer's Instagram posts. You'll take what you deem to be good and helpful, and you'll leave what you deem to be bad, irrelevant, behind the times, or on the wrong side of history. You'll see Jesus as another voice among many, and although you like much of what He has to say, you'll craft your relationship to Him to maintain enough distance so that you aren't affiliated with the elements of His life and teaching that don't suit your tastes in the moment. You'll join multitudes of marginally affiliated people who are acquainted with Jesus to some degree, and that'll be about it. There's a problem with that, though, because it won't change your life or save your soul. You'll pick up some good ideas and helpful nuggets that you can apply to your life and gain some sort of benefit, but you'll neglect what matters most—your own soul.

How do you answer Jesus' question? Who do you say that He is?

Peter breaks the silence: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Peter’s answer feels weighty, but what he says as he speaks on behalf of the other disciples carries a great deal of meaning. Let’s look at what Peter confessed in a bit of a different order:

“You are the Christ” – Christ is the English translation of the Greek Χριστος (*Christos*), which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew משיח (*Mashiach*), which means “anointed one.” By ascribing the title “Christ” to Jesus, Peter and the disciples were confessing that they believed Jesus to be the fulfillment of the more than 300 messianic prophecies in the Old Testament. He is God’s Messiah.

“of the living God” – In the context of Caesarea Philippi, which was full of pagan gods symbolized by wood or stone, Peter is confessing on behalf of the disciples that Jesus has come from the Living God—*Elohim Chayim*—which distinguishes Yahweh from all other conceptions of gods. Their God is alive and active among His people. Jesus is of the Living God.

“the Son” – In Psalm 2:7, which is a deeply prophetic psalm, the Anointed One of God says, “I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you.’” This is the language, not of creation, but of coronation and presentation. At Jesus’ baptism, God the Father speaks from Heaven, saying “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). God the Father is presenting God the Son, the anointed Messiah and chosen Servant in whom the Father delights (see Isaiah 42:1 – “Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations”). He would make a similar proclamation at Jesus’ transfiguration, saying “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him” (Matthew 17:5). Peter is confessing on behalf of the disciples that he believes Jesus to be the Son of God, who is “the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14 NKJV).

Now, recognizing the deep significance of Peter’s confession as the spokesman of the disciples, we understand the difference in the two replies to Jesus’ questions. Those about whom the disciples reported felt that Jesus was an important figure who was affiliated with Almighty God. They thought Jesus was a good man, a powerful man, a man used greatly by God.

But that’s not enough.

Peter confessed on behalf of the disciples that Jesus is the Anointed One of God, who is unique in the cosmos as the only begotten Son of the Father—the One who “is the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15), who “is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Hebrews 1:3).

How do you identify Jesus? Is He a good man worthy of your occasional attention, or is He God in flesh, worthy of your whole life? Peter and the disciples left everything to follow Jesus. They came to Him with open hands, open hearts, and open lives, and they gave themselves wholly to Him. They knew He was the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and they were all in to trust and follow Jesus. Are you? How does your life answer how you identify Jesus?

2. Jesus then mercifully redefines us (16:17-20).

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 (Matthew 16:17-20).

Once we rightly identify Jesus, we can find our right identity in Him. Notice how Jesus responds to Peter. He seems exuberant in Peter’s right recognition of His true identity, and He pronounces that Peter is blessed, because he has received supernatural revelation from Almighty God regarding the true identity of Jesus. Although Simon is the son of Jonah (which is what Bar-Jonah means), Jonah did not impart this revelation to him—God the Father did.

Jesus then gives Simon Bar-Jonah a new name and a new identity. He says, “I tell you, you are Peter” (Matthew 16:18). In the Greek, “Peter” is Πέτρος (*Petros*), which is a Greek name meaning “rock.” Notice how Jesus continues: “and on this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). The word “rock” here is πέτρα (*petra*), which is clearly very similar to the name Jesus imparts to Peter. What is Jesus saying?

The Catholic Church has interpreted this text to mean that Jesus is here making Peter the first pope. As good Protestants, we neither recognize the office nor authority of the pope (that’s another study for another day), but we must recognize that Jesus is speaking directly to Peter specifically here. What is He saying to him?

Peter, functioning as the spokesman for the disciples, rightly confesses that Jesus is the Messiah. Other apostles would make that same confession and thereby become the foundation upon which the church was built. In Ephesians 2:19-20, for example, we learn from Paul that “the household of God” is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.” Paul tells the church at Corinth, “According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:10-11). The church is built upon Jesus, but the proclamation of Jesus’ true identity by Peter, then the other apostles, and then by all of God’s people would be foundational in the building of God’s church.

More good news follows. Jesus will build His church, “and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). The term “gates of hell” or “gates of Hades” is a Jewish expression referencing the power of death. Jesus is saying that death will not have the final word in His church (Greek *ekklesia*), which is the collection of God’s called-out people. If you are part of God’s church, having believed the apostolic confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and having surrendered your life to Jesus’ lordship, death will not prevail against you. No matter how bad it looks, death will not, cannot, and shall not have the final word for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Jesus then tells Peter that he will be given the keys to the kingdom of Heaven, meaning that he will have the responsibility to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to all people and thereby open admittance to the Kingdom of God to them. Peter would use these keys in Acts 2 at Pentecost, when he would call everyone listening to “repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Unlike the religious leaders of the day, Peter and the

apostles would open the Kingdom of God to others, whereas the scribes and Pharisees would hear this woe from Jesus: “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in” (Matthew 23:13). In the Book of Acts, Peter is the first apostle to preach the gospel to the Jews (Acts 2), to the Samaritans (Acts 8), and to the Gentiles (Acts 10). The other apostles follow in this pattern, and Christ supernaturally builds His church by working through the obedience of all those who proclaim the Good News about Jesus.

Jesus also tells Peter that “whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19). Here Jesus is giving authority to Peter and the apostles to serve as under-shepherds of the church, exercising discipline concerning right and wrong conduct on those in the church. Christ has entrusted church leaders to “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Timothy 4:2). All of this must be done, not according to the authority of the servant, but according to the Word of God, for “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Jesus extended this calling to the church as a whole in Matthew 18, by saying the following:

Matthew 18:15-20 - ¹⁵ “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

Notice that all of this is based on the new name that Jesus gives to Peter. Simon, the son of Jonah, is now Peter, the rock. Elsewhere in the New Testament, Jesus gives Simon the name Cephas, which is the Greek equivalent of the Aramaic word for “rock” (see John 1:42 and 1 Corinthians 1:12). His new name is indicative of the new identity he receives as a follower of Jesus. He who was formerly a fisher of fish is now a fisher of men. He who formerly sought to build his business is now seeking to build the Kingdom of God by proclaiming the gospel message in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. He is a new creation in Christ. The old is gone; the new has come.

This is the reality for everyone who trusts and follows Jesus as Lord and Savior. Although we may not receive a new name from Jesus, we nevertheless receive a new identity. The Bible tells us that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Paul writes the churches at Galatia, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). Our submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ is the result of our regeneration—or new birth—in Jesus Christ. We who trust and follow Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, have been born again from above, and we are no longer who we used to be.

Once we rightly identify Jesus, we find our right identity in Him.

Final Challenge

Once we understand who Jesus really is, we change how we approach Him, how we listen to Him, how we trust Him, and how we follow Him. Jesus asks us to rightly identify Him, and once we do that, we can find our right identity in Him.

Who do you say Jesus is? Is He a good man worthy of your occasional attention, or is He God in flesh, worthy of your whole life? Peter and the disciples left everything to follow Jesus. They came to Him with open hands, open hearts, and open lives, and they gave themselves wholly to Him. They knew He was the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and they were all in to trust and follow Jesus. Are you? How does your life answer how you identify Jesus?

If you have rightly identified Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, are you embracing and living in the new identity He has given you? Are you living as a new creation in Christ, no longer who you used to be but becoming more like Christ every day? That's His desire for us. Let's walk in the newness of life Jesus gives this week, and let's be a blessing to the world as we do.