

Jesus Builds His Church

Part 3 – Our Good Confession

Matthew 16:13-18

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ October 29, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



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 but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:13-18, NRSV)



What is public opinion these days concerning Jesus? If you asked people around our city, or even across our world, what they think and believe about Jesus, what sorts of answers do you think you might get?

This is essentially the question Jesus asks his disciples one day. “**Who do people say that the Son of Man is?**” To clarify, “Son of Man” was one of Jesus’ favorite titles for himself. It comes from a vision in Daniel 7:13: “**In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven.**”¹ In Jewish understanding the Son of Man came from heaven, but had come in human form. He had royal stature and, after a period of suffering, was to be given dominion and glory over all. By the 1st century, some Jews had come to see this as a messianic promise, that the Son of Man was the one who would come to save them. Jesus often used this title for himself as a cryptic way to hint at his coming suffering, vindication, and God-given authority.²

The point is, when Jesus used this term here, the disciples knew he was asking about himself. He wants to know what public opinion is saying about him. Who do people think I am? What are they saying about me? What’s the word on the street?

John the Baptist. Some people believe you are John the Baptist reincarnated. Other people say Elijah, the prophet who never died but was taken directly to heaven on chariot of fire.³ They think you’re him, come back to earth. Others are saying you are the great prophet, Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets. In other words, word on the street, Jesus, is that you are some sort of prophet sent as a forerunner to the messiah. They don’t think you’re *the man*, but they think you are the one sent to announce the *coming of the man*. Remember Ed McMahon on the Tonight Show. Some of you are old enough. What was Ed McMahon’s job? “Here’s Johnny!” Really, his only job was to introduce the star of the show, Johnny Carson. Apparently, that’s the role people were assigning to Jesus, the one coming to announce the real star of the show.

Surprisingly, things haven’t changed. There are nearly 2 billion Muslims in the world today. Almost none of them believe Jesus was God. In Islam, Jesus is only a prophet, a heavenly Ed McMahon. Many Jews respect Jesus as a worthy teacher, but certainly not the messiah or the Son of God. Mormons revere Jesus, even call him Savior, but believe he was created by God like the rest of us. Jehovah’s Witnesses also claim that Jesus was a created being, and not the eternal creator himself. Most Americans these days still acknowledge that Jesus was a historical figure, believe that he actually existed. However, recent polls indicate that only 52% of Americans believe that Jesus was God. A prominent teacher or prophet perhaps, but not divine.⁴

Commentator Fred Craddock points out that most people love the idea that a Messiah is coming. Who wouldn’t? Our world is a mess, and so we are eager to listen to the prophets who tell us that help is on the way. And we love to dream about what the world will be like when the Messiah does come. We imagine the possibilities are endless. But to believe that the Messiah has already come means that we can no longer speculate about him, or shape him to fit into our preferences. If he has come, he is what he is, and we are now the ones who need to adjust to him. As Craddock puts it, “There is enough misery in the world to make the message that

¹ New International Version (NIV).

² N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox, 2001), 317.

³ See 2nd Kings 2:11-12

⁴ <https://www.newsweek.com/52-percent-americans-say-jesus-isnt-not-god-was-great-teacher-survey-says-1528617>

a Messiah *will* come believable; there is enough misery in the world to make the message that a Messiah *has* come unbelievable.”⁵

If Jesus is the Messiah, then why are we still under the thumb of Rome, still oppressed by those who have no regard for our God. That was the complaint in those days. In our day people have similar questions. If Jesus really is the Messiah come into our world to save us, then why is the world still such a mess? Why is my life still such a mess? Is the salvation he is offering the salvation we were expecting? It’s said that the first job of a Messiah is to convince people to stop looking for a Messiah.⁶ Lots of people in our world are not convinced. They have seen Jesus and are still looking for a savior.

Jesus then makes the question personal. Acknowledging that lots of people have lots of different opinions about him, he asks, “**But who do you say that I am?**” In the original Greek, the question literally reads, “What about *you*, who do *you* say that I am?”⁷ The emphasis makes it personal. Jesus wants to know, “What about you?” So, what’s your take? If somebody asked you today who you believe Jesus to be, how would you answer? I might suggest that it’s the most important question you will ever be asked. I believe everything hinges on your answer to this question.

Often the spokesman for the group, Peter is the one who speaks up and answers Jesus’ question. What do you think of Peter’s answer? “**You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.**” That’s a pretty good answer, right? I think he might get full credit for that answer. For one, he rightly names Jesus as the Messiah. The word in the original Greek is *christos*, or *Christ*. Christ is not Jesus’ last name, but his title, his role. It literally means, “the anointed one.” In the Old Testament, three types of people were anointed: prophets, priests and kings. To be anointed was to be set aside by God for a special task. Kings in particular, kings like David, were anointed to deliver Israel from its enemies and lead the nation into a time of peace and prosperity. In time it became clear that the Lord was going to send a great king, the King of Kings, to come as the Anointed One to lead set the whole world right again. Peter believes Jesus is this long-awaited Anointed One.

He also recognizes Jesus is the Son of God. This had been confirmed at Jesus’ baptism, when the Father spoke from the clouds, “**You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.**”⁸ Understand, people

didn’t go around in those days calling themselves the Son of God, or the Daughter of God. To bestow this title on Jesus was saying something truly remarkable. And then to specify that he was the son of the *living* God, was not incidental. The implication is that all other gods are dead gods. In those days, just like in our day, there were lots of lots of different gods people believed existed. Peter is declaring here that all those other gods are all pretend gods, that there is only one God and that Jesus is his divine Son, the Savior of the world.

So what do you think of Peter’s answer? How does it compare to the answer you would give? Jesus liked his answer: “**Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven.**” In other words, the word on the street is incorrect. Jesus is no mere prophet or teacher. He is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. When it comes to the person and nature of Christ, Peter is spot on. As we’ll see next week, when it comes to the work of Christ he’s still got a lot to learn. But for now, so far so good.

Now, there are at least two critical things we learn here in Jesus’ response. First, we learn that anybody who comes to a right understand of the true identity of Jesus did not come to that understanding on his or her own. Sometimes I’m baffled by the inability or unwillingness of people in the Gospel accounts to believe in Jesus. This last week many of us read in the Gospel of John the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead after he’d been in the tomb for four days. This was a public event, a crowd had gathered outside the tomb and they watched Lazarus emerge. In other words, there was no question that Jesus had demonstrated power over death itself. And yet, in the very next chapter, the main religious leaders decide they must put Jesus to death.⁹ They have seen him raise the dead and yet they refuse to believe. It’s almost as if they are unable to believe.

In fact, that is the case. There is great mystery here, I know, but faith itself is a gift for which we can take no credit. If you believe the truth about Christ, it is God who has helped you to believe. The Lord cannot be discovered, only revealed. In John 1:12-13 we read, “**But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.**” This birth into God’s life, God’s family, is a gift from God alone. Ephesians 2:8-9 puts it this way: “**For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your**

⁵ Fred B. Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke* (John Knox Press, 1990), 127.

⁶ Craddock, 127.

⁷ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 2 (Eerdmans, 1990), 121.

⁸ Luke 3:23. Unless otherwise noted, this and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

⁹ See John 12:19

own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” All of it is a gift.

I’m so aware of this every time I preach. I can do my absolute best to stand up here and clearly and passionately explain the truths of the Christian gospel as I see them laid out in God’s Word, and yet I have absolutely no power to make you embrace the truth. Sometimes I can’t even keep people awake! You may notice that I never preach without first praying a prayer we call *The Prayer of Illumination*. I recognize that only God can illuminate ultimate truth in the human mind. Only God can use my words to lead you into a belief that actually changes your life. Not even you can make yourself believe.

This ought to humble us. It’s not our character, our religious sensitivity, our sincerity, our open-mindedness, our unique curiosity, or anything else in us that has led us to make a good confession about Jesus. As Jesus himself declared at one point, **“No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”**¹⁰ All this means that when we see people in the world who do not believe, who have not grasped the truth about Christ, we dare not look down on them in condescension. Since faith is a sheer gift, let us instead remain humble, praying that the gift would be given to others as undeserving as us.

The second thing we learn here in Jesus’ response to Peter is that we will be affirmed when we, like Peter, give an answer to this question that is equally unwavering. Notice that Peter does not answer, “Well, Jesus, I think that you might be the Messiah. That’s where I’m leaning.” Neither does he say, “I’m not sure about others, Jesus, but for us, you are the Messiah.”

Maybe you’ve heard about the notorious politician who was famous for saying, “Those are my convictions; if you don’t like them, I have others.” That’s not Peter. Not at all. He flatly declares, “You ARE the Messiah. You ARE the Son of the living God.” This is not an opinion or perspective. This is reality, whether or not others agree with it. It’s settled truth. And this is the same conviction that we must have, that the church must always have, regardless of public or popular opinion.

In response, Jesus goes on to tell Peter, **“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...”** Before this Peter’s name was Simon, his given name, a name that means “one who hears and obeys.” Jesus changes his name to Peter, a name that literally means “rock”. Remember that the title of this sermon series is

“Jesus Builds His Church.” Jesus, as you know, worked as a carpenter. That was the job of his father, Joseph, and Jewish boys followed in the footsteps of their fathers. We think of Jesus working with wood, hunched over a workbench crafting a table and chairs. But that’s probably not right. Likely he was more of a mason, working with rock and stone, as that was the material of choice in construction in those days. Jesus knew well, therefore, that any structure worth building must be built on a foundation of rock.

Scholars tell us that these verses we are looking at today constitute the single most discussed and debated passage in the Gospel of Matthew. This one phrase, where Jesus says he will build his church on the rock, is the most discussed and debated verse in the passage, and a great divide has occurred in the church over its meaning. I grew up always thinking that Jesus means here that Peter is the rock. That’s been a widely held view, especially in the Roman Catholic Church where it’s believed that Peter was the first pope and the beginning of the apostolic succession. In this view, the current pope, Pope Francis, along with the current bishops, are the rock, exercising Christ’s authority in teaching, ruling and sanctifying the church.¹¹

Respectfully, I disagree. And I’m not the only one. Yes, Peter is honored and foundational in the early church. He preaches the very first Christian sermon at Pentecost! But it’s not Peter upon which the church is built, *but the good confession which Peter makes here*. The rock here is the revelation of the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, that he truly is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. The church continues to be built today, long after Peter is gone. The church cannot be built, however, and certainly cannot stand, apart from this foundation of the true identity of Christ.

The Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, understood that the one way you can tell false teachers and false churches is to examine their view of Christ. Those who do not acknowledge him, with unwavering conviction, as the eternal and only Son of the only God, and the only Savior of the world, are not a part of God’s family, the church. Again, this declaration must always be made with humility, for it’s only by the grace of God that we have come to believe it, but it still must be made resolutely and uncompromisingly. As another reformer, John Calvin, put it, “Whoever gives themselves simply to Christ and does not try to mix anything from their own head with the Gospel, shall never lack sure light. But we have to be careful and vigilant in keeping firmly to Christ while the whole world slips away into its [own] interests.”¹²

¹⁰ Matthew 11:27

¹¹ Gregg R. Allison, “What Does ‘This Rock’ Refer to in Matthew 16:18?”, *The Gospel Coalition*, January 16, 2020. See

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-does-this-rock-refer-to-matthew-1618/>

¹² Cited by Bruner, 124.

It's actually quite remarkable that Peter makes this good confession. By the time Matthew writes his Gospel, he knows this is the truth. He opens the whole Gospel saying, **“An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”** As I mentioned earlier, this truth was also confirmed at his baptism by his Father. And even the demons along the way understand who Jesus is, acknowledging his true identity when everybody else is still in the dark. At one point when Jesus goes to cast out demons from two men, they cry out to him, **“What have you to do with us, Son of God?”**¹³ Ironically, it's often the devil and his associates who have the best theology in the Gospels. That makes Peter unique, at least among people. The answer he gives here is an amazing answer for a Jew in that day to give. It took the collective church centuries to come to this conclusion, which Peter receives right near the beginning.

Ever wonder why our creeds spend most of their words talking about Jesus. We recited the Apostle's Creed earlier today. There are a few words about the Father, and a brief mention of the Holy Spirit. But most of it is about Jesus. That's because when these early creeds were written beginning in the 4th century, they were the product of large church councils that came together to settle disagreements, often bloody disagreements, that were happening in the church around the true nature of Jesus. Who is he exactly? The creeds were written to boldly clarify the truth that Peter declared all those years before. We are still meant to declare it because there is still great confusion, certainly out in the world, but often in the church as well.

Years ago when I was serving as a youth pastor at another congregation I had the mother of one of our students call me one day with a concern. She told me that she was glad her daughter was a part of the youth group, and appreciated many of the things we offered, but she was concerned that we were overdoing it in one area. “There's too much Jesus.” That's the way she put it. Exposing her daughter to a little bit of Jesus was okay, but too much Jesus was not going to be good for her.

It might surprise you to hear that I appreciated her honesty. She was saying aloud what I think many people would like to say, but are too afraid to say. She knew something about Jesus that I wish everybody knew. She knew that if her daughter came to believe what we were teaching, that Jesus truly was the Savior of the World, the only hope we will ever have, and the Son of the living God, the one around whom all life revolves, then there was no taking Jesus lightly. And I think she was afraid that Jesus' plans and dreams for

her daughter's life weren't exactly in line with her plans and dreams for her daughter's life. Again, it's one thing to dream about what the Messiah might be like when he comes. It's quite another thing to confess that he's already come and that he is who he is, regardless of what we wanted him to be.

It's this good confession that is the rock upon which Jesus is building his church. That's why Peter's good confession must also be our good confession. Jesus is our Savior, the only hope we have in life and in death. Jesus is the Son of God, the eternal Creator who came to earth and became part of the human family so that we might be invited into the family of God. And there is no other. All other gods are false gods, created in the minds of humans. There is only one living God, and we know him and see him most clearly in Christ, the revelation of God to us in this world. In this church, it's not possible for there to be too much Jesus.

Of course, there are countless others around us, and perhaps some among us, who do not share in this good confession. Remember that at no time is it our place to look at them with even a hint of condescension. If we have come to believe this truth, it is only by the grace of God. And for most people – this certainly was the case for me – it's not a conviction that comes to us easily. It's worth noting that this revelation is not on the lips of the disciples until Matthew 16. Consider that by this point that they have been walking with Jesus probably for years, at least many, many months. How much of his teaching have they already heard? How many miracles have they already seen? How many people healed? How many demons cast out?

Here's my point. Jesus does not force feed us. He wants us to come to see him for who he truly is, but he is so patient in allowing us the time and space to get there. This is the first time that Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is. It's not until they have had considerable experience with him, and time to process what they have heard from him and seen in him, that they are asked to say what they ultimately believe about him.

Reflecting on this, commentator Dale Bruner challenges us this way, “If the first disciples were not asked to make their confession of Jesus until after considerable exposure to him, our friends should not have to make their decision about him either until they have been with us for a while.” Sometimes we are impatient with others who do not yet believe, wanting so badly for them to make a good confession about Christ. Sometimes the church has even manipulated people into making such a confession. But that doesn't seem to be Jesus' way. Yes, we are unwavering in what

¹³ Matthew 8:29

we believe about Christ, it is the rock upon which his church is built. But we can remain so while still allowing others the time and space to simply come and see. Come and listen to Jesus. Come and spend time with Jesus, at least with his people. Come with an open heart and mind to see who he really is. Lots of people are saying lots of things about him. But who is he really? It's worth coming to find out.

Jesus, of course, doesn't just want us to know about him. He wants us to *know* him. That takes time, and experience. The other day we offered some cornbread to my friend, Jim, from Kenya who was staying with us. He had never tried cornbread, and he was visibly suspicious, wanting to know about the ingredients of this strange food. It's not something you find in Kenya. I tried to describe the taste to him, but how effectively can you describe the taste of something to somebody who has never tasted it before. Try it sometime. It's nearly impossible. You can't just know *about* cornbread; you have to *know* cornbread. So in the end we convinced him to take a piece, cover it with a bit of honey, put it in his mouth, and experience the taste himself. Let's just say he was pleased with what he discovered. I know this because he promptly asked if he could take the leftovers with him on the plane back home. We have a cornbread convert in Kenya, maybe even a cornbread evangelist!

If we do not make a good confession about Christ, and humbly but unswervingly hold to our convictions about that confession in contrast to public opinion, we will have nothing to offer the world that the world does not already have. He is our Savior, and not just our savior but the savior of the world. He is the Lord, the only Lord. He is our only hope. And yet instead of hammering people with this truth, we must simply invite people to come and see themselves. Describing Jesus to somebody else can only get them so far. At some point they must taste for themselves that perhaps in time, they also might come to make the same good confession.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Matthew 16:13-18 again. What do you notice? What stands out?
2. What are people saying about Jesus today? If you asked the average person in America today who Jesus is, what sorts of answers would you get?

3. Imagine Jesus asks you this question: "What about you, who do you say that I am?" What is your response?
4. Jesus affirms Peter's answer, that he has spoken the truth about him, but then makes clear that this revelation has come from God. Is this the way you see it? What does it mean to you that faith itself is a gift from God, that we cannot believe without help?
5. Jesus declares that he will build his church on this "rock". What does the rock signify?
6. Would you say that Christ is the center of our church, the focus of all we do? How so? How would we know if he was no longer the center?
7. Are you/we willing to be as unwavering in our convictions about the identity of Jesus as Peter is here? Is Jesus the Messiah, the *only* hope for our world? Is he the Son of the living God, the *only* God in existence? These are very absolute statements which reject the claims of many others in our world.
8. What is it that Christ is teaching you here in this message?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



When people ask us who Jesus is, what should we tell them? What if they believe something different?