

Jesus Builds His Church

Part 4 – From Revelation to Responsibility

Matthew 16:18-20

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ November 5, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



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. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. (Matthew 16:18-20, NRSV)



Revelation carries with it responsibility.

Simple example. Imagine you discover one day that the water in the city you lived in is contaminated. Though the contamination is impossible to detect through taste, if people keep drinking the water they will become sick. That revelation carries with it responsibility. Agreed? It would not be enough for you to go out and buy bottled water for you and your family so that you would remain safe. You would have a responsibility beyond your household, a responsibility to inform others so that the problem could be fixed for everybody.

This is even more true when the revelation we receive comes from God. When God reveals himself through a burning bush in the wilderness to Moses, the revelation is not given only for Moses' sake.¹ Moses is to be sent to Egypt for the sake of all of Israel, that they might be delivered from slavery. Isaiah receives that brilliant revelation from God in Isaiah 6, so brilliant that Isaiah is filled with dread. Immediately the Lord asks aloud, **“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”**² The Lord knows exactly who he is about to send. That's why Isaiah received the vision. And after the resurrection, when it has been revealed to the disciples that Jesus truly is the Son of God, he then makes clear that this revelation wasn't given just for them, but that they are now sent out into the world to make disciples of all nations.³ Revelation, especially revelation from God, always carries with it responsibility, often dangerous responsibility.

Last week we explored the revelation that God gave to Peter, and subsequently to all disciples right down to us, the revelation that Jesus truly is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. This revelation became Peter's good confession. It's become the good confession of the church, the rock upon which Jesus is building the church. When a person comes to the knowledge of the one, true God, and understands that the Lord desires to share blessing and life with all who would receive it, that revelation is not meant to be kept secret. We are blessed not only for our own sakes, *but always to become a blessing to others.*⁴

In the verses we are exploring today, Christ makes clear what it means for us to carry out the responsibility that comes with this revelation. In his words, **“The gates of Hades will not prevail against it [i.e. the church with this good confession].”** That's the first thing Jesus says here about our responsibility. This is war language, by the way. In those days cities were fortified and secured by gates that allowed friendly residents to enter, and kept hostile enemies out. When a battle took place, that battle generally happened out in the open on the battlefield. When one side lost, the survivors on the losing side would concede defeat by running back to their city and hiding behind closed gates. If you were the victors, and your defeated enemies still had some of your people held captive in their city, you then went and broke down the gates to set those captives free.⁵

You see, gates don't go on the offensive. Gates don't attack. They only fortify. They hold their ground, that's all. And so Jesus is teaching us here that evil in this world, hell if you will, is no longer on the offensive against the Kingdom of God. In Christ, the war has already been won at the cross and at the empty tomb, where sin and death have been defeated forever. Colossians 2:15 declares that when Christ went to the cross, **“He disarmed the rulers and authorities [of evil] and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.”** The gates are no longer a threat.

¹ See Exodus 3

² Isaiah 6:8. This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

³ See Matthew 28:18-20. In John 20:21, Jesus puts it this way to his disciples, **“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”**

⁴ See Genesis 12:1-3

⁵ I'm indebted to my friend, Mamusha Fanta, for this insight here from his teaching at the Angaza Torchbearers Bible School in May, 2023.

That phrase “gates of Hades” is an unfamiliar phrase to modern ears. Hades was a Greek god whose name literally means “The Unseen”. He was the god of the underworld, the abode of the dead. In ancient Israel the phrase came to mean “the realm of the dead.” In Job 38:17 God declares, **“Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?”** So in Jesus’ day, these gates represented the passage from this life into death. The common fear, of course, was that a soul could never come back out again.⁶

In light of this, think again about Peter’s good confession. Christ is the Messiah, the Anointed One of God sent to deliver us from our enemies and lead us into a life of peace and prosperity. When he died on the cross, the sin which once condemned us all was forgiven. And when he rose from the grave, the death which was our destiny because of our sin was also overcome. You might even think about the stone that covered Christ’s tomb as a gate which was rolled away forever on Easter morning, the realm of the dead defeated once and for all.

Do you see what this means? If you are in Christ, death no longer has any power over you. Outside of Lazarus’ tomb, just before he raised him from the dead, Jesus declared, **“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”**⁷ So what about you? Do you believe this? If you faced your own death today, would you be able to face it without fear, in complete confidence that death will not have the last word over you, that as death comes to you life will swallow it up for good? And if you don’t fear death, and don’t fear the condemnation of God but know his eternal favor, what in the world do you fear? Nothing!

But again, this revelation is not given to us just for our own sake. With revelation comes... (say it with me)...responsibility. I believe that the gift of God through Christ is not just for us, but for all people, that total forgiveness and the promise of abundant and eternal life are extended to every person on the planet. The problem is that there are many who have never heard this good news, and many more who have heard it but have not yet come to believe it. The war is over, victory secured, and yet there are many who are still held captive by the enemy, held captive behind the gates of death. But those gates are not formidable. Jesus is telling us here that they are vulnerable to those who

come with the authority of the one who has already conquered.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the first book in the *Chronicles of Narnia* series by C.S. Lewis, Aslan the lion is the Christ. At one point he is executed by the White Witch, the great enemy of the land of Narnia, the embodiment of evil. But then to everybody’s surprise, Aslan rises from the dead. In doing so, the spell of evil over Narnia is finally undone by his sacrifice, the White Witch and her minions vanquished. One of the first things that Aslan does after his resurrection is to go to the White Witch’s castle where many of the faithful Narnians have been turned to stone by her evil powers and kept locked up behind her gates. Aslan goes from one frozen and lifeless statue to the next, breathing on them the breath of life. This is how Lewis describes the scene,

Everywhere the statues were coming to life. The courtyard looked no longer like a museum; it looked more like a zoo. Creatures were running after Aslan and dancing round him till he was almost hidden in the crowd. Instead of all that deadly white, the courtyard was now a blaze of colors; glossy chestnut sides of centaurs, indigo horns of unicorns, dazzling plumage of birds, reddy-brown of foxes, dogs and satyrs, yellow stockings and crimson hoods of dwarfs; and the birch-girls in silver, and the beech-girls in fresh, transparent green, and the larch-girls in green so bright that it was almost yellow. And instead of the deadly silence the whole place rang with the sound of happy roarings, brayings, yelpings, barkings, squealings, cooings, neighings, stampings, shouts, hurrahs, songs, and laughter.⁸

A place frozen by death is transformed into a place brimming with life, and done so without a hint of resistance. I think of that brilliant quote by the Dutch theologian, Abraham Kuyper, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!”⁹ There are no armies of hell on the offensive any longer. Creation now belongs again to Christ. How does Jesus put it in the Great Commission? **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”**¹⁰

What this means is that the way is free for people to come back to God and the life God has for all people. The temple curtain has been torn from top to bottom, making clear that the barrier which once separated us from God’s presence and blessing has been removed.¹¹

⁶ I’m indebted here to Kevin DeYoung, “A Closer Look at the Gates of Hell”, *The Gospel Coalition*, November 222, 2011.

⁷ John 11:25-26

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Harper, 1950), 185.

⁹ Source unknown.

¹⁰ Matthew 18:18

¹¹ See Mark 15:38-39

The Father is standing on the front porch waiting for the wayward younger brother to come home. He's also out pleading with the older brother, practically begging him to set aside his pride and come in and share in the feast. The only power the enemy has left is to deceive people that these things are not true, which unfortunately he has quite a bit of success in doing. As I've heard it put, hell will one day be full of forgiven sinners, souls set free but still imagining they are in bondage, even choosing to remain so.¹²

This is where we come in, where revelation leads us to responsibility. We have been given the truth which has the power to set people free. I love how Paul puts it in Romans 1:16, **“For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is God’s saving power for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.”** In other words, for *all people!* We must not be ashamed of this good news, in the same way I imagine we would not be ashamed to spread the news to people that there is clean water available to drink that won't make you sick.

I think this is partly what Jesus is getting at here in verse 19 when he says, **“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”** Let me acknowledge that this is a complicated verse, and that there are a number of different thoughtful interpretations which should be considered. It would be good if you spent some time studying this passage yourself, interpreting this scripture primarily through the lens of the rest of scripture.

As I do so, one of the connections I cannot help but make here is the connection between gates and keys. How do you get through a locked gate? If you come to my house and the door is locked, how do you get in? I can think of three options. You can knock and hope that I open the door and invite you in. You can bust down the door, an option I hope you will not choose. Or, you can use a key I have given you that fits in the door and let yourself in. If we knock on the gates of hell, the current occupants are likely not going to let us in once they know our motives are to empty the place out. Busting down the gates is an option, but there is no need to do so if we have the keys. We assume that the lock on the gates of hell is on the inside. But what if it's on the outside, that it is the Lord who has kept us locked out of the kingdom. Doesn't that square with what happens at the fall in Genesis 3, when humanity is locked out of paradise?¹³ But now through Christ the

locks are undone, the way is clear for us to enter back in and come back home.

But keys are not battering rams. The fact that Jesus gives his church keys and sends them out to unlock previous locked gates fits in line with other images Jesus gives us about the role of his disciples in the world. In his teaching on this passage, my friend, Mamusha Fanta, points out that all the metaphors Christ uses for the church in the world are *influencing* metaphors, not *dominating* metaphors.¹⁴ The church does not come with a battering ram, but with keys in hand. The church is salt, sprinkled into the world to season and preserve.¹⁵ The church is a lamp, not fire that burns but light which illuminates.¹⁶ The kingdom of God, which the church represents on earth, is a mustard seed, small when it is planted, but eventually growing into a tree so large all the birds of the air can nest in its branches. It is also yeast, which slowly, almost imperceptibly, transforms.¹⁷ All these are metaphors of influence, not metaphors of dominance.

One of my favorite examples of this is the one Paul uses in 2nd Corinthians. He writes, **“For we [i.e. the church] are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.”**¹⁸ Too often the church is more like an odor. An odor is generally an unpleasant smell. Rotten eggs. Raw sewage. The spray of a skunk. That strange smell coming out of your teenager son's bedroom. Nobody is attracted to these smells. And yet, how often do we see people representing Christ out into the world who are so noisy, so arrogant, so antagonistic, so offensive. Social media is full of people like this. Maybe at times I have been a person like this. Too often the church in our day aims for forceful dominance rather than gracious influence.

At the end of this passage Jesus tells his disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah. Certainly this was not a longstanding command, because it won't be long before he commands them to do the opposite, to share this news with the whole world. Maybe part of the reason he wants them to keep quiet for now is because they don't yet have an accurate understanding of what messiahship actually means, and so what they would share now would be offensive. In fact, in the very next verses, which we will look at next week¹⁹, Peter demonstrates that his view of messiahship, though christocentric, is power-christocentric instead of cross-christocentric. So for now, Peter and the others need to shut up. There are many in our world today trying to represent Christ who also need to shut up.

¹² See Luke 15:11-32

¹³ See Genesis 3:22-24

¹⁴ Shared at the Angaza Torchbearers Bible School in Kenya in May, 2023.

¹⁵ Matthew 5:13

¹⁶ Matthew 5:14-16

¹⁷ Luke 13:18-21

¹⁸ 2nd Corinthians 2:15

¹⁹ See Matthew 16:21-23

We are not to be an odor, but an aroma. An aroma is a pleasant smell which attracts, rather than repels, people. What's your favorite smell? Coffee brewing in the morning? The smell of baking bread or chocolate chip cookies? Popcorn with butter? Bacon? Freshly cut grass? The smell of a real Christmas tree when you bring it into the house? These kinds of aromas are hard, if not impossible, to contain. You can't fence in a smell. But they are not noisy or disruptive, but subtle and inviting. Yes, the revelation we have received from God concerning Christ comes with great responsibility as we are sent out into the world, but we are to go not to dominate but to influence, with bold conviction, yes, but conviction seasoned with grace and gentleness.

The good confession we have received is a good confession to which we must now bear witness. Again, there are so many in our world who are still living in the darkness of deception, unaware that a life of unmerited, unending, and unlimited peace, joy, love, and purpose is available to them in Christ. The keys we have been given are the message of this good news. As the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli put it, "The keys are nothing else than this: the preaching of the pure, unfalsified Word of the gospel. Whoever believes this [gospel] will be free of his sins and be saved."²⁰

By the way, these keys are not just given to Peter. Even in our day we mistakenly have this image of Peter as the one solely in possession of the keys, even the one sitting at the gates of heaven like a bouncer controlling who comes in and who stays out. But that's not right. When Jesus says, "**I will give you the keys...**", the "you" is plural, not singular.²¹ As a disciple of Jesus, you too are in possession of these keys, the blessed recipient of a revelation which brings with it great responsibility.

Now, does all this mean that the salvation of others in this world depends upon our handling of these keys? Not at all. A close examination of the second half of verse 19 makes this clear. What is lost in translation is the verb tense. In the original Greek, the text literally reads, "...**whatever you bind on earth will have been tied up in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven.**"²² This changes the sequence of action. This is not us taking action and then heaven following our lead. Instead, as we go out into the world with the message of the gospel to those still deceived, we will find that the results of our faithful witness will reflect actions already taken in heaven. As one commentator puts it, this is not a promise of divine endorsement, God telling us he'll get behind our

actions, but a promise of divine guidance, enabling us to decide and act in accordance with God's *already-determined* actions.²³

We are not the ones saving people. Only God, in Christ, saves people. But for whatever reason, God has chosen to use us towards this end. What a privilege! What an honor! What a responsibility! Christ wants to use your life, your witness, the aroma of Christ in and around you, to draw others to himself. I love how reformer John Calvin saw this: "It is wonderful consolation to godly souls that they know that the news of salvation brought to them by some little mortal man is ratified before God."²⁴ As Jesus himself put it in Matthew 10:40, "**Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.**"

Let's end where we started this morning. If you are somebody who shares in the good confession of Peter, that Jesus truly is the Messiah, the Savior of the world, and the Son of the living God, our only hope in life and in death, then this revelation, given to you by God, comes with great responsibility. The church, and you as a part of it, have been blessed to now turn and be a blessing to others in this world who do not yet believe. This is a war. That's the imagery Jesus invokes here when he speaks about the "gates of Hades". But remember that the victory is already won. The gates are vulnerable. Now the captives must be released. Our battle is not with people, but with the spiritual enemies of God. As Paul puts it clearly in Ephesians 6:12, "**For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.**" Again, these forces of evil have already been vanquished, and are now only trying to hold their ground through deception.

You may remember that Paul follows up this verse in Ephesians 6 by describing for the church what he calls the "armor of God" which we need to put on to be equipped for this struggle.²⁵ There is a whole other sermon here, but briefly let me remind you that this armor God has given us to carry out our responsibility includes the belt of truth, that we go into the world with a message that is reliable and trustworthy. The breastplate of righteousness reminds us that our lives are to represent Christ. We have shoes which move us and make us ready to go and proclaim to others this good news about God's peace offered to all people. A shield of faith protects us from the deceptions of evil

²⁰ Cited by Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1990), 134.

²¹ He affirms this in Matthew 18:15-20, where clearly he is referring to all the disciples and not only Peter.

²² R.T. France *The New Testament International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, 207), 627.

²³ France, 627.

²⁴ Cited by Bruner, 133.

²⁵ See Ephesians 6:14-18

which will be launched to try to mislead us and weaken our message. The helmet of salvation protects our minds with the assurance that we belong to God no matter what. The sword of the Spirit, which is the Bible, helps us cut through the deceptions we will face. And prayer, of course, is essential to it all, as we continue to pray for those in the world who do not yet know the grace and love of Christ, that our witness would be effective in helping them believe and be saved.

In a few moments we are going to celebrate the Lord's Supper together. I want to remind you of something about the Lord's Table. There are lots of empty seats around this table, seats which Jesus intends to fill. Remember that Jesus spent a lot of his time on this earth eating. Read the Gospels and it seems like Jesus is either headed to a feast, enjoying a feast, or on his way from a feast. And he would eat with anybody. It's one of the things which got him in trouble with the seriously religious. He welcomes anybody to his table. There is no gate which shuts people out or keeps people away. Only an unwillingness to come, or an ignorance to the fact that an invitation has been made, keeps somebody away from the feast.

As we come in faith to share this meal together this morning, let us come with grateful humility, recognizing the sheer gift of grace it is that we have been included around this table. Let us also come aware that this revelation of our inclusion carries with it great responsibility to then return from this table into the world bearing witness to anybody who will listen that they too have been invited to come and join the feast.

Amen.

✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠

The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Matthew 16:18-20. What stands out to you here?
2. Jesus says, 'the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.' What is "it". What do you think Jesus means by the "gates of Hades"? Why will they not be able to prevail?
3. What does this teach us about the place and power of evil in our world today?
4. What do think Jesus means by "the keys of the kingdom of heaven." Keys are meant to lock or unlock something. What are these keys locking or unlocking?

5. If you have received the revelation that Christ is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, what responsibility does this revelation carry with it in your life? How are you handling that responsibility right now?
6. Jeff pointed to biblical metaphors for the church such as salt, light and aroma and pointed out that these are *influencing* metaphors rather than *dominating* metaphors. How does this help inform the role of the church as we go out to engage with the world? How does the church sometimes make the mistake of trying to dominate?
7. How would you describe our role (i.e. that role of the church) in leading people to a saving knowledge of Christ? According to what Jesus is teaching us here, what part do we/you play in that?
8. What is the main thing that Jesus is teaching you here? How are you called to live or think differently in response?

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



Why is it important that we find ways to share the good news of God's love with other people in the world? How do we go about doing that?