

■ LIFE OF JESUS

June 20, 2021 | Peter Declares That Jesus Is the Messiah

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

- In your own words, write an answer to Jesus's question in this passage—Who is Jesus?
- Read Matthew 16:13–20.
- Pray that God would help you receive the tremendous authority given to His followers in this passage.

THIS WEEK

■ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

The Christian confession centers on the identity of Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

■ THEOLOGY APPLIED

The most important thing anyone can do is to understand who Jesus Christ is.

■ MEDITATE

“Simon Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’” (Matthew 16:16).

GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to prepare your heart to encounter Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Q: *How would you describe what it means to be a Christian?*

Q: *What distinguishes your beliefs from an atheist, a Mormon, or a Catholic?*

Matthew 16:13–20 has been one of the most pivotal biblical passages in all of Christian history and for different reasons at different times. It addresses two central topics in Christianity, the identity of Jesus Christ and the nature of His church.

What is a Christian? This is one of the most fundamental questions for anyone to ask and answer. Answers vary widely, even among people who claim to be Christians, and discerning Christians must recognize that many answers fail to correctly identify what Christianity is. For example, a US senator, who claims to be a Christian, tweeted on Easter 2021, “The meaning of Easter is more transcendent than the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Whether you are Christian or not, through a commitment to helping others we are able to save ourselves.” While many Christians were celebrating what they considered to be a non-negotiable fundamental of their faith, aligning with Christians over two millennia, this senator claimed the resurrection was a minor part of what Christians should be celebrating on Easter. His statement provides an example of the radically opposing views over the nature of Christianity. And not everyone can be right. In this instance, the senator expressed a view that is outside of true Christianity. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for our sin is a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith. Any denial or even decentralizing of this doctrine falls outside the bounds of what can be defined as Christian.

Q: *Is everyone who claims to be a Christian actually a Christian?*

Q: *How can we determine when differences in doctrine put people outside of the Christian faith versus when differences in doctrine are allowable within the Christian faith? (Primary, foundational issues versus secondary or tertiary issues, in which grace should be extended.)*

APPLICATION POINT – One of the main goals of this lesson is to encourage us to be critical of professions of Christianity. Not everyone who identifies as a Christian is actually a Christian. Part of the role of faithful

Christians is to affirm the teachings of Christianity and discern whether someone's confession of faith falls inside or outside of those teachings.

We do, however, have to allow for differences of opinion and interpretation within Christianity. It is important for us to determine what beliefs are primary versus what beliefs are secondary. Primary beliefs, such as substitutionary atonement and the Trinity determine the limits of Christianity. One cannot believe differently on primary doctrines and still be considered a Christian. Secondary doctrines, such as the method and timing of baptism and the organization of the church, may be a reason to attend one church or denomination over another, but differences of opinion on these matters does not put one outside the faith. There can even be a third level of doctrines for which even members of the same church would hold different views. Second and third level doctrines are important, but differences among Christians on these doctrines would not put a person outside of the Christian faith as is the case for denial of a primary doctrine. Our responsibility as faithful Christians is to differentiate between these levels of doctrine and know what we believe.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Jesus confirmed Peter's confession and established the authority of true confessors to evaluate the confessions of others.

1. THE CONFESSION

2. JESUS'S RESPONSE

GOING DEEPER

+This section will investigate Matthew 16:13–20 to understand its implications for identifying true believers and organizing authority within Jesus's church.

1. THE CONFESSION

■ MATTHEW 16:13–16

Q: *Who did the disciples mention as popular suggestions for the identity of Jesus Christ?*

Q: *Why were these popular suggestions?*

When asked who the people believed Jesus to be, the disciples responded with a “who’s who” list of major figures from Israel’s past. The question, “Who do the people say I am” may be confusing to us. Didn’t the people think Jesus was Jesus? Why would He need to ask this question? In the Jewish mindset, the people would have expected major figures to come in the spirit and thus follow the example of previous significant figures. Think of a young basketball star modeling his game after a superstar of another era or a performer copying the style of a major performer from the past. Saying Jesus was following the pattern of Elijah, Jeremiah, or John the Baptist would have been a significant claim. But there is a problem. While the people may have recognized Jesus’s giftedness and ministry, to them He was just another in a long line of prophets. Their confession of Him was insufficient because they had not fully understood who He was. This failure to fully understand Him kept them from the blessing of a new life in Christ.

Q: *What are some modern insufficient confessions of Jesus Christ you have heard?*

Q: *How do you respond when you encounter insufficient confessions?*

APPLICATION POINT – One of the things that brings me the most sorrow is insufficient confessions of Jesus Christ. If you are serious about your faith, you pick up on these all the time. “Jesus just wanted us to love others.” “I just want to follow Jesus to be a better person.” “Jesus’s main concern was helping the poor.” These confessions all distort the truth of who Jesus is and what He came to do, and they are all insufficient to make one a true follower of Christ. When you encounter insufficient confessions of Jesus (anything short of what Peter confesses), be prepared to challenge the person offering it with the truths of Scripture. Confrontation over religious and spiritual matters is often uncomfortable, but the alternative is leaving people unaware of what Jesus came to do and what marks a true confession in Him.

Q: *How was Peter's confession different from the peoples'?*

Q: *What does the word "Christ" mean?*

The word "Christ" comes from the Greek word *christos*, which is used to refer to the Hebrew term "messiah" or "anointed one." Beginning with Genesis 3:15, the Old Testament develops a messianic hope that centers on a key eschatological figure who will usher in the next age in which God's people would live under His blessing and rule. Israel's hope for the future centered on this figure even though they did not fully understand the nature of His mission. By acknowledging Jesus as the Christ, Peter was confessing his belief that Jesus was Israel's messiah.

There is more. Peter also confessed Jesus to be "the Son of the living God." This is an unbelievable statement coming from the mouth of a first-century Jew. They had been exiled from their land because of idolatry. They were determined to guard God's identity with absolute resolve. They would not put up with anything—or anybody—being given equal footing with God. Yet, Peter, in a moment of Spirit-filled clarity, recognized Jesus as God's Son. What would be seen as blasphemous to the culture and society around him became the central confession of his belief.

Q: *Why are Israel's beliefs about the Messiah important for you?*

Q: *Why is it important for Jesus to be the Son of God?*

APPLICATION POINT – The New Testament shows Israel's messiah to be the Savior of the whole world. Jesus became our savior by creating a means of forgiving sin through His death on the cross that paid the price for our sin. Since sin is fundamentally against God, it carries an eternal weight no one but Jesus, who is Himself God, could carry. This is the most wonderful news imaginable for those who confess Christ as their Savior. We do not bear the burden of our own sin. If your heart is burdened by your sin against God, learn to rejoice in the

forgiveness offered by Jesus. You do not have to make up for or account for your own sin. You couldn't anyway, but Christ accepted that burden for everyone who believes in Him.

2. JESUS'S RESPONSE

■ MATTHEW 16:17-20

Q: *What did Jesus attribute Peter's confession to?*

Q: *How did Jesus describe Peter because of his confession?*

Jesus attributed Peter's confession to God. If a school child answered a question, only to have the teacher tell him he did not figure out the answer on his own but that someone else had given it to him, we might think the teacher was challenging the child or degrading him in some fashion. But this is not the case for Peter's confession. By attributing his confession to the revelation of God, Jesus showed that Peter was responsive to God's revealed truth. This is a far greater compliment than Peter having reached this conclusion on his own.

Jesus called Peter blessed because of his confession. We can easily misunderstand the meaning of "blessed" today. We often use "blessed" to refer to material gain or some sort of generic prosperity. In the Bible, "blessed" can include these things but not necessarily. We would hardly say Peter became wealthy and lived an easy life because of his confession. Quite the opposite! The basic idea behind the word "blessed" is finding favor with God. God's favor does not always result in personal gain or a life of ease. What it does offer is satisfaction in the work God is doing in the world and our role in His work.

Q: *Are you open to revealed truth?*

Q: *How does God reveal Himself to us today?*

APPLICATION – The key to your flourishing is being open to revealed truth like Peter was. We cannot be certain how God revealed this to Peter, but the focal point, the full and final disclosure of God’s revelation today is the Bible. The key to finding God’s favor is identifying biblical truths and applying them to yourself. The goal of these lessons, the sermons you hear on Sundays, and the rest of the teaching sessions you encounter on a weekly basis is to identify biblical truths and apply them to your life. If you want to find God’s favor, you need to prioritize the times when you can be taught God’s Word. There is not a rule to follow when doing this. There is no magic number of teaching times you must attend every week or a certain percentage of Sundays you must attend every year. Hebrews 10:25 simply commands us to not neglect meeting with the body of Christ. The question is, how often do you want to allow God’s favor to find you?

Q: *What was the rock Jesus is referring to?*

Q: *Why did Jesus tell Peter his own name?*

Verse 18 may appear disjointed in the English text because Jesus was using a play on words in Greek. The Greek word *petros* means “rock.” Jesus was identifying Peter as the foundation of His church. The implication of this verse turned out to be one of the most critical and disputed matters within Christianity. The major dispute is between Catholic and Protestant theology.

Catholic interpretation of this verse emphasizes the role of Peter as the foundation of the church. From this verse, Catholic theology developed the idea of succession of leadership after Peter, which led to the establishment of the papacy. In Catholic theology, the role of Peter as the foundation of the church has been passed down from one pope to the next, from Peter all the way to Pope Francis, the Catholic Church’s current pope. The Pope, in this tradition, is the head authority for the church and Christianity. He has been given the keys to the kingdom of heaven and has universal and supreme jurisdiction over the church.

Protestant interpretation of Matthew 16:18 denies that the rock Jesus referred to was Peter. Instead, they say it is Peter’s confession that is the foundation of the church, thus doing away with the entire idea of a papacy.

Both interpretations miss part of the truth. Protestant interpretation has ignored the obvious word play in the original Greek that connects Peter with the rock. Catholic interpretation has essentially ignored the importance of Peter’s confession. Understanding this verse requires us to hold the confession and the confessor together. It is Peter as a true confessor of Jesus Christ that is the foundation of Jesus’s church. As more and more true confessors are recognized, they are added to this metaphorical foundation, and the church continues to be built. The true confessors of Jesus—who Jesus is and what He came to do—are the ones who have been entrusted with the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

Q: *Why is it better for Christianity to be founded upon true confessors of Christ than upon a single individual?*

Q: *How can Protestant and Catholics responsibly engage with one another while maintaining their commitment to the gospel?*

APPLICATION POINT – Discipleship takes place within the church. If the church is made up of true confessors of Jesus Christ, then it is the church that can help you understand your confession of Him. This is the initial step in becoming a believer in Jesus Christ. The church can also help you understand the implications of your faith in Christ for every area of your life. Trying to do this on your own inevitably leads to poor or even non-existent growth in your faith. Even though this is the case, many professing Christians question the need for church involvement and church membership. Such a stance will only stagnate their growth in Christ if they refuse to join the congregation of like-minded confessors.

Q: *What does “the gates of hell” mean?*

Q: *What is the purpose of a city gate?*

After announcing Peter as a true confessor, Jesus declared that the gates of hell would not prevail against His church. This means the influence of Satan and sin will not be able to keep the church from identifying true confessors of Jesus Christ. This is wonderful news! We never have to wonder whether the church will be victorious. Furthermore, notice that it is the gates of hell that will not prevail. During armed conflicts in the ancient world, gates were a defensive weapon. It is important not to push His metaphor too far, but the way Jesus phrased this claim indicates that the church should be on the offensive. We are raiding the city of man to find true confessors of Jesus Christ, and nothing can stop us.

Q: *How should this claim motivate us for mission?*

Q: *Are you ever afraid to share your faith?*

APPLICATION – Jesus’s statement reveals that conflict between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of hell is inevitable, but it also reveals that we have nothing to fear. Jesus’s church will prevail. There could be no greater motivation for Christian mission. People who will become true confessors of Jesus are currently part of the kingdom of hell. Nothing can stop us from reaching them and converting them with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Who have you been timid about sharing the gospel with lately? Commit to sharing your faith with them boldly.

Q: *What is meant by binding and loosing?*

Q: *What is the significance of the keys of the kingdom?*

The keys of the kingdom represent authority to preach and share the gospel. Since it is true confessors of Jesus Christ who hold the keys to the kingdom, every Christian is able to evaluate the confession of others and determine if they truly believe in the Lord Jesus. If a person claims to be a Christian or if an organization identifies itself as Christian, we cannot take them at their word. We have to evaluate their beliefs. We have to examine their actions.

Some people, even committed Christians, may scoff at this idea as judgmental, but judgment is a reality of God’s plan for His creation. Those who do not confess Jesus as Lord and Savior will endure God’s eternal judgment. We cannot sit idly by while people deceive themselves and others into thinking they will find God’s favor by any means other than truly confessing Jesus Christ.

Q: *Can you describe a time when you used the authority Christ has given you to challenge the claims of unbelievers?*

Q: *What are some of the difficulties in enacting the authority Christ has given us?*

APPLICATION POINT – One implication of the authority Jesus has invested us with is to protect the faith. We cannot allow non-Christians to promote false doctrine without challenging their authenticity. To allow this would risk the propagation of a false gospel and endanger the integrity of the Christian faith. We must protect the faith by challenging the message of those who claim to be of Christ but are not.

For example, there is a religious group in the United States known as the Christian Science Church. This name sounds somewhat ambivalent, if not positive. Who would be opposed to scientists confessing their faith in Jesus and using their skills as scientists to advance the gospel? The problem is, even a cursory glance at their confession reveals that they are far from orthodox Christianity. (Most scientists would say they are also far from science!) Remaining silent on their confession of the gospel is both dangerous to our witness as well as an abdication of the responsibility given to us by Christ. How can you pick up the role Christ has given you to protect the faith? To do this will demand a firm grasp of what it means to confess Christ and a critical evaluation of the claims of others. Challenge yourself to begin this two-step process.

NEXT STEPS

Discipleship is another implication of the authority given to every true confessor of Jesus Christ. We have to reinforce the confession of those who profess Christ. We also have to encourage one another to live in a manner consistent with our confession. Discipleship sometimes happens formally and at other times informally. Whatever the case, commit to exercising the authority Christ has given you as a true confessor of Jesus Christ by practicing discipleship within and outside of your local church body and by sharing the gospel with others.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

Lord Jesus, help me to exercise the authority you have given me as a true confessor.

God, help me to go on the offensive against the gates of hell.

Father, give me discernment to identify insufficient confessions.

Jesus, help me find blessing in you.