

“WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?”

Matthew 16:13-26

Key Verse: 16:15,16

“‘But what about you?’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’”

Today’s passage can be thought of as a mid-term exam for the disciples. They have followed Jesus for quite a long time, living together, mostly observing his life and ministry. Though Jesus taught them many things, there is one essential truth they need to know and confess. Jesus asks them, “Who do you say I am?” Peter confessed, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” It is the right answer—the key point the disciples must grasp. As we study this passage let’s prayerfully listen to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say I am?” May the Holy Spirit help us to answer Jesus personally, honestly, and correctly from our hearts.

First, Peter confesses, “You are the Christ” (13-16).

Jesus and his disciples traveled north to Caesarea Philippi. This was Gentile territory and beyond the jurisdiction of Herod. There Jesus wanted to have an intimate conversation with his disciples. They had seen him perform many miracles, such as healing a paralytic, driving out demons, and even raising the dead. They had witnessed Jesus’ divine compassion upon multitudes, and his tender mercy toward a single helpless person. They had seen his dauntless courage in times of great stress and danger. They had tasted his spiritual power during fieldwork training. Now, it was time for them to summarize what they had learned about Jesus and to make a proper confession to Jesus.

To open their hearts, Jesus began with a general question, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” Jesus’ ministry had made a great impact on society. Almost everyone in Israel had an opinion about Jesus. The disciples could answer easily: “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (14). People were impressed by Jesus’ spiritual power. They were sure that Jesus was sent by God, like one of the prophets. Down through the generations, many have called Jesus a prophet, including both the Muslim and Hindu religions. Thomas Jefferson liked Jesus’ excellent morality and spirituality. But Jefferson denied many supernatural elements of Jesus’ life and ministry. In 1820 he wrote his own Bible, describing an “Enlightenment Jesus.” Patton thought of Jesus as a great general. Many have called Jesus a great teacher.

Look at verse 15. “‘But what about you?’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’” Jesus began with the word “But.” It means that the crowd’s answer fell short of the truth; it did not satisfy Jesus. Jesus expected something more from his disciples. Jesus also emphasized the word “you.” Jesus wanted his disciples to make a personal confession of faith that came from their hearts. Jesus spoke to them in this way to really impress on them the truth about who he was.

At that moment, each of the disciples stood before Jesus with his question echoing in their minds. They might have felt like Shepherd Alan Wolff when he defended his Ph.D. thesis last month. At the moment, Simon Peter stepped forward and answered. Look at verse 16. “Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’” This had a very definite meaning to the people of Israel.

The word “Christ” is a Greek word that literally means “Anointed.” It means to receive the power of God to fulfill God’s calling and mission. In the Old Testament, this anointing had been given to kings, priests and prophets. This anointing set them apart as holy and enabled them to provide spiritual leadership according to God’s will. Anyone who feared God had great respect for those anointed by God. Yet “the Christ” was not just one of the anointed ones. The Christ was the Anointed One. Psalm 2 describes him as the Anointed One who would reign as God’s king and subdue the nations with his power. 2 Samuel 7:16 says that he would reign on David’s throne forever, restoring God’s righteous rule and turn the world into a paradise. Isaiah 9:6 describes him poetically and intimately as “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” He would solve everyone’s real problems of life. The promise of Christ’s coming had sustained the people of Israel through the dark night of captivity in Babylon. It was the consolation of Israel for Simeon and Anna, who waited prayerfully and expectantly. Peter was convinced that Jesus was the Christ, the Savior King for his people.

Peter's answer went still further. Peter called Jesus "the Son of the living God." Peter saw God in Jesus. Jesus was not just anointed by God, but Jesus was God. All of the apostles came to this same conclusion. John testified, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14). Jesus is in very nature God. Jesus is holy and sinless in his character. Jesus is unfailing in his love and wisdom and strength. The more Peter came to know Jesus, the more he was awed by the presence of God in Jesus. Usually, the better we know a person, the more clearly we see their faults. But the more Peter knew Jesus, the more Jesus' divinity was revealed. Finally, Peter confessed, "You are the Son of the living God."

When Peter made this confession, he was taking a risk. If Jesus was not God, Peter was committing blasphemy. But Peter was sure. Peter was convinced beyond a doubt that Jesus was God. To Peter, Jesus was not just a prophet, or one of the possible ways to God, but Jesus was God. Peter's confession was virtually a life commitment to Jesus. Peter's confession expressed his loyalty and love for Jesus. This is precisely the confession that Jesus wanted from Peter.

In the same way, Jesus asks each of us, "Who do you say I am?" Jesus wants us to answer from our hearts, according to our faith. We don't see Jesus in the flesh as Peter did. But we can meet Jesus by the work of the Holy Spirit as we study the word of God, and through his people, the church. When we meet God in Jesus we must make a response. We must confess, "Jesus, you are the Christ, my Savior and the Son of God." Making this confession is the point of our Bible study and worship service. Who do you say Jesus is?

How did Jesus respond to Peter? Look at verse 17. "Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.'" Jesus was pleased with Peter's confession. Jesus blessed Peter with an A+ on his exam. How did Peter do so well on the test? It was not the result of his fisherman's wisdom or his intellect. Peter's good confession was the revelation of the Father God to Peter. It was the work of the Holy Spirit in Peter. Without the work of the Holy Spirit, men are mere flesh, like Simon son of Jonah. But the Holy Spirit enlightens us to see God in Jesus. When the Holy Spirit works, any mundane man can confess that Jesus is the Christ.

Look at verse 18. "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." When Jesus blessed Peter's confession, it was not just for Peter's personal happiness. Jesus said that he would build his church on Peter's confession of faith. The church is the gathering of those who confess Jesus as their Savior, and worship him as God. The church is not a building, but people who gather together in the name of Jesus. Peter was the first one to enter Jesus' church. Peter showed us the way to enter; it is through a personal confession of faith in Jesus. Since Peter, innumerable people have entered into the church of Jesus.

Jesus continued. Look at verse 19. "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Here, the word "keys" is plural. There is not only one key exclusively for Peter. There are many keys. These keys have been given to the church, including Peter, the apostles, and many saints in history. These keys have been given to Jesus' church of UBF. When we preach the gospel and the Holy Spirit works, the doors of the kingdom of heaven open and sinners can enter God's presence for forgiveness and cleansing.

Here we learn that Jesus builds his church on those who confess him to be the Christ, their Savior and God. Anyone who makes this confession can be used greatly in the worldwide work of God. I never intended to be a pastor. My major was business administration. I wanted to be a CEO, make big money, and enjoy the American Dream. However, I fell into the power of sin through my young man's desire. My life became a romantic tragedy and I despaired. When I began Bible study with Dr. Abraham Kim, I often sighed wholeheartedly, even during his Sunday message. But through the 1981 Summer Bible Conference at Niagara Falls, the Holy Spirit worked in my heart through this very passage. I confessed Jesus as my Savior and God. That confession has remained in my heart for the last 25 years, through many ups and downs in life and ministry. Now I see that God has used me, in spite of my faults and weaknesses, as a Bible messenger, pastor, and prayer servant for world mission. Many friends around the world listen to my message and pray for me wholeheartedly. This is the amazing grace of Jesus through one confession of faith. May several young people confess Jesus as their Savior and God through the upcoming summer conferences.

The last part of verse 18 contains Jesus' promise, "...and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." The power of Jesus' church is spiritual and it is irresistible. Jesus' church triumphs over sin, death and the devil. It is built by Jesus Christ, who has all authority in heaven and on earth. Jesus is the head of the church. Jesus uses human vessels in his work. But the foundation of the church is Jesus Christ himself. Therefore, the church can never fall because Jesus is Almighty God.

Peter's confession of Christ was right. But there was a problem. Many expected the Christ to restore David's throne literally. If they heard that Jesus was the Christ, they might want to make Jesus king by force. So Jesus warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ (20). The disciples first needed a right concept of the work of the Christ.

Second, Jesus teaches the work of the Christ (21).

Look at verse 21. "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." The work of the Christ was to suffer, die and rise again. This was precisely the will of God for the Christ. Isaiah 53:10 says, "Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and to cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand." God sent Jesus to die on the cross for our sins. It was the only way for God to solve our sin problem. Paul summarized the work of the Christ in 1 Corinthians 15:3,4, "...that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."

Third, Jesus teaches the way to follow him (22-28).

When Jesus seemed to praise him, Peter thought he was the greatest disciple, and most spiritual. He thought he was the unique one who really understood Jesus among them all. He became proud. Then when Jesus' teaching about the Christ did not match his expectation, Peter actually took Jesus aside and rebuked him, "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!" Peter could not endure the thought of Jesus suffering and dying. He thought it was the worst thing that could happen to Jesus. He thought Jesus must live. He thought Jesus must live a long and happy life with his good friends forever.

Look at verse 23. "Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.'" A few minutes earlier, Peter was inspired by the Holy Spirit. But now, the same mouth that confessed Jesus as the Christ suddenly rebuked Jesus. Jesus said that he was inspired by Satan. Through Peter, Satan tempted Jesus to view the cross from a human point of view and avoid it. Jesus' heart must have been broken as he saw his top disciple stumble. Jesus helped Peter repent for human thinking and to think from God's point of view.

Jesus taught his disciples God's truth about the way to follow him. Look at verse 24. "Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'" There is only one way to follow Jesus. It is to deny oneself and take up one's cross and to follow Jesus. Jesus suffered and died for our sins. To follow this Jesus, we must be willing to suffer through self-denial and by taking our own cross. Nowadays many nominal believers do not want to take a cross. They want to hear something uplifting and positive and humorous all the time. They want to follow Jesus in an easier, fun way. But this is not Jesus' teaching. The only way to follow Jesus is to deny oneself, take one's cross and follow Jesus. To identify as a Christian is to take his cross. Shepherd Tim Fitch works for a company that blocks Christian web-sites from employee computer access, as if they were bad. Christian activity is prohibited. But Tim boldly declared that he is a Bible teacher. Then three fellow workers asked him to teach them the Bible. He may be despised for the name of Christ, but God is working in several people as Tim takes up his cross.

To help the disciples take up the cross, Jesus taught them an eternal value system and perspective. Let's read verses 25-26. "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Of what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Jesus further helped his disciples have hope in his coming again. Look at verse 27. "For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done."

When Jesus came the first time he was a humble shepherd and Savior. His glory was veiled with human flesh. But when he comes again he will come as the King of kings and Lord of lords. Every knee will bow before him. He will decide the eternal destiny of each person. Those who lived for Jesus and the gospel will be rewarded with eternal life in the kingdom of heaven and a crown of righteousness. With this hope we can take up our cross and follow Jesus every day. We may think that Jesus' coming again will happen far in the future. But look at verse 28. "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

In this passage we heard Jesus ask, "Who do you say I am?" Jesus wants each of us to confess our faith in him. May God bless you to confess, "Jesus, you are the Christ, my Savior, the Son of God."