

## **Matthew 16:13-20**

Pentecost 12 + Proper 16A + August 23, 2020  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho  
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Who Jesus Is

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 16:15-19:

[Jesus] said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 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. 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. 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.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

"Who do people say the Son of Man is?" When Jesus asks the question, the disciples report a lot of different answers: "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Everybody's got an opinion. The most curious one to me is that people think He's John the Baptist, because they've been seen together. Elijah kind of makes sense as a guess. Jeremiah and the other prophets make less sense to me, but ... eh, why not?

All sorts of people have opinions. No doubt, they're sincere; and no doubt, they're making their best arguments. But all of them are wrong. I want to point that out for a second because a lot of people will make religious arguments based on the fact that they sincerely believe their opinion to be true, and so they will look you in the eye and say something like, "I know this is true because I *feel* it." But it's entirely possible to be sincere and wrong at the same time. Nobody in Matthew 16 said, "I'm saying that this Jesus is Elijah, but I also know that I have no idea what I'm talking about."

It's Peter who gets it right when he says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." There's a lot in those simple words. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah: He is the one who is chosen and anointed by God to do the work of saving the world. But more than that, He's the Son of the living God: He's not a mere mortal like Jeremiah or one of the prophets, but He is God Himself – begotten of the Father from eternity, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary.

Where does Peter get this – how does he know? Jesus says, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven." Peter knows this because God has told him. If God doesn't reveal this, then Peter will be like all the others, making his best guess about who Jesus is – and guessing wrong.

Let's stop here a moment, though, and ask how the Father has revealed this to Peter. Did God the Father take Peter aside in a dream one day and say, "Simon, I've got a little secret that I want to share to push you to the head of the class"? There's no hint of that in the Bible. What you do have in the Bible is Hebrews 1:1-2: "In many and various ways, God spoke to His people of old by the prophets; but now in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son." Every time Jesus has taught the disciples, the Father has taught the disciples too, because the Father and the Son always say the same thing, and the Father makes Himself known through the Son. When Jesus says, "My Father who is in heaven has revealed this to you, Peter," He is saying that Peter believes what He, Jesus, has taught him.

Jesus goes on to say, "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." Peter is not the foundation of the Church: the Church is built on Jesus, on "Christ, the Son of the living God." He, not Peter, is the Messiah. Jesus is the One who goes to the cross and dies for the sins of the world. He is the One who rises again from the dead. He is the One who defeats sin, death and devil, which is why the gates of hell cannot prevail against Him.

Because the gates of hell can't prevail against Him, He opens heaven and shuts hell for His people. And because sin cannot prevail against Him, He opens heaven for His people by taking their sins away.

Of course, Jesus is going to ascend into heaven after He rises from the dead, so how will people get their sins forgiven once He sits at God's right hand? Jesus says to Peter, "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."

"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven," says Jesus: the One who unlocks the gates of heaven by His cross, hands the keys to Peter. He'll hand them out to others too; but in Matthew 16, it's Peter who gets Jesus right, so it's Peter who gets the keys.

Peter gets Jesus right and gets the keys because it's Peter who is getting his doctrine from the Word: that's why he knows that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. The keys of the kingdom are all about the Word of God. Whose sins is Peter to loose and release? The sins of those who repent of their sin and believe in Jesus. Whose sins is Peter to bind to sinners? Those who don't repent of their sin and don't believe in Jesus. How will anyone know what is sinful and who Jesus is? By the Word of God that Peter believes and confesses.

As I said, it's not just Peter. When Jesus first appears to the disciples after His resurrection, He breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld" (John 20:22-23 ESV).

The Office of the Keys – the keys of the kingdom – is all about proclaiming His Word. It's saying what Jesus says. It's not just restricted to pastors: anyone can speak God's Word to another, although it's pastors who do it publicly as Jesus' called and ordained servants. So if someone is repentant, you tell them they're forgiven and their sins are loosed from them. If someone is not repentant, you tell them they're not forgiven and their sins are still bound to them. All you're doing is saying what Jesus says, because you want them to repent and be saved.

In this little 8-verse reading, you really get a wonderful snapshot of the New Testament Church. If you try to figure out who Jesus is apart from the Word, you'll get Him wrong. If you hear who Jesus is from the Word of God, you'll get Him right. If, by the grace of God who is at work in the Word, you believe in Jesus – the Christ, the Son of the living God, then your sins are loosed – released – and heaven is yours. In Christ – for you – sin, death and devil are defeated. All of this Good News is certain, and all of it is as near to you as His Word. Good stuff.

You, then, are well prepared to say the same thing as Peter: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

The temptation for you is that you don't just listen to the Word. Devil, world and sinful flesh are all defeated, but defeated enemies still murmur, moan and whisper to try to get you on their side.

There are plenty who say they teach about Jesus, but deny that Scripture is the Word of God; and so you'll find churches nearby that say that Jesus was just a human being and a good teacher, but nothing more; and that in His goodness, Jesus just happened to approve of every sinful appetite that

mankind has. They'll make their reasonable arguments and they're totally sincere; but because they deny the Word of God, they are sincerely wrong.

You will always be tempted to change who Jesus is, into who you want Him to be. There are things that Jesus says that you'll wish He didn't say, things that Jesus does that you'll wish He didn't do. Honestly, I've got a list of Jesus' teachings that I'm not a big fan of. I'm not really happy with the doctrine of hell for unbelievers. I'm not all that thrilled that when He tells us that suffering will be a part of this life, or that marriage will not be part of the life to come. I could certainly do without Him teaching that, on the Last Day, we pastors have to give an account for the souls entrusted to our care. But whether or not I like these teachings, Jesus teaches them in His Word; and He's the Christ, the Son of the living God. What sort of arrogance would it take to say, "Jesus is wrong because I don't like what He says"? Faith instead trusts that Jesus is right and speaks the truth, even when faith faces tough teachings and the truth is difficult to hear. Faith bows and says, "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

When people try to worm out of difficult teachings of Scripture, they make up alternatives instead and talk about what Jesus must have meant instead of what He plainly says. When they do this, they commit themselves to false teaching – they bind false teachings to themselves, and – says Jesus – that false teaching is bound to them before God in heaven too. This, by the way, is how most heresies get started. Not many wake up in the morning and say, "Today I want to defy God and invite His wrath!" No, they wake up and say, "I know that God must agree with me, despite what He says in His Word."

As for you, the devil doesn't play fair. He perhaps might introduce you to a sin that you think you can't live without. Worse, he'll cause a loved one to stray away from the faith into sin and unbelief, so that you're left with the choice of remaining faithful to God's Word when it means a broken heart, or compromising God's Word to convince yourself that your loved one is still okay before God. That's when you want to say, "When Jesus addressed this situation, He didn't really mean what He said, or else He's changed His mind since." When you do that, there are two great assaults on your faith. For one, by adopting a false teaching you are binding sin to yourself, and so you are closing the gates of heaven from the outside. For another, by changing Jesus' teaching, you're losing the Jesus that Scripture proclaims. You're losing the Christ, the Son of the living God, and there is no one else who can deliver you from sin, death and hell.

Courage friends: you've got the Christ, the Son of the living God! He's conquered sin, death and hell for you! And rather than make you spend your life earning heaven, He's already opened the gates at your baptism. He sustains you on the way by His Word and Supper. He strengthens your faith against temptation, trial and suffering. And where you are confronted with heartbreak when the Lord's Word seems difficult, you know that the One who has conquered all things is still merciful and at work for your good – and for the good of your loved ones about whom you worry.

There are all sorts of ways to get Jesus wrong. But if you stay with the Word of God and submit to what the Lord declares, you have the Christ, the Son of the living God. And if you have Him, you have forgiveness, life and salvation both now and forevermore.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen