

On This Rock I Will Build My Church
Matt 16:13-20

Let us pray: Gracious God, open our hearts and minds to your Word today. Help us to see Jesus clearly and to know him more deeply. Speak to us through your Word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

There are moments in life when we struggle with questions of identity. For Christians, the question “*Who am I?*” can only be answered correctly in our relationship with God. Before we can understand who we are, we must first know who God is. When we know God accurately, we also come to understand why we belong to the church, what the church truly is, and our faith becomes deeply meaningful.

The disciples of Jesus had been called to follow him, yet they were still learning and often stumbling. They did not fully understand their own identity as disciples, nor did they clearly grasp the identity of their Teacher, Jesus.

Today's passage takes place only a few months before Jesus would face the suffering of the cross. At this critical moment, Jesus leads the twelve disciples away from the crowds to the distant city of Caesarea Philippi. He does this to strengthen their faith and to teach them more deeply about the truth of God's kingdom. In this place, Jesus asks them for a confession of faith, and for the first time in the Gospels, he declares that he will build his church.

Why did Jesus choose Caesarea Philippi for this moment? This region stood at the boundary between Jewish and Gentile territories. It was filled with Greek culture and idolatry, almost like a symbolic center of the world's spiritual confusion. Herod Philip had expanded the city and named it Caesarea Philippi, combining the emperor's title *Caesar* with his own name *Philip*. In other words, it was a city dedicated to the emperor. A temple for worshiping the emperor stood there, along with many shrines to various pagan gods. It was in such a place that Jesus chose to make a declaration reclaiming the true kingship over this world.

In that place filled with the sights and splendor of Greek culture, a place glittering with the things of the world, Jesus asked his disciples for a confession of faith. If the Lord were to ask you, “Who do you say I am?”, none of us would respond, “Lord, just a moment, let me look around first.” We are called to fix our eyes on the Lord even in the very center of the world.

In that region where faith and idolatry collided, Jesus asked his first question. “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” He was not asking because he did not know. It was an intentional and instructional question. Jesus wanted the disciples to speak with their own mouths the mistaken opinions people held, so that he could draw out from them a confession that clearly contrasted with those misunderstandings. Jesus had been walking alongside and teaching them for about two and a half years, and now, at the point of taking stock of everything, he is asking them the most decisive test questions of all.

Jesus referred to himself as “the Son of Man.” This title appears in Daniel 7:13 as a reference to the Messiah who would come. By using it, Jesus indirectly revealed that he is that promised Messiah. At the

same time, the title shows that although he is the very nature of God, he humbled himself and identified with us. He came as the Son of Man in order to serve humanity (Hebrews 2:6–8).

Think about this. If you have children or grandchildren, they are like an extension of your life. Spiritual children are the same. They give you hope and sometimes they serve you well. Jesus, as the Son of Man, is our new life and the one who serves us.

In response to Jesus' question, the disciples repeated what people were saying at the time. "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." People held Jesus in high regard, but they did not see him as the Messiah. They did not reach the essence. Such answers do not lead to salvation.

Jesus then asked his disciples, "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" In this question, there is an implied meaning: "What people say is not the answer. You must be able to speak the true answer. You have been living with me. You know me. So who do you say I am?" This is a question every human being must answer, and our eternal destiny rests upon that answer. This passage is therefore the center of the gospel, the core of the entire book of Matthew, and the most important truth testified throughout both the Old and New Testaments.

As he often did, Simon Peter stepped forward and answered on behalf of the disciples. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." In today's passage, Jesus is described as "the Son of Man," "the Messiah" (which is *Christ* in Greek), and "the Son of the living God." None of these titles is new in this Gospel. "Son of Man" appears frequently, "Christ" is introduced from the very first verse of Matthew 1, and earlier, after Jesus walked on the water, the disciples had confessed that he was the Son of God. However, this is the first time that all these titles appear together in one place.

The disciples had previously called Jesus the Son of God in a moment of emotional response after being saved from the storm. But Peter's confession here is the first deliberate and solemn moment in Matthew's Gospel where someone directly calls Jesus the Messiah. There is no higher title than this. Peter's words mean that the Lord is the one whom God has anointed and sent, the promised Savior, the prophet who was to come, the eternal King, and the everlasting High Priest.

The word *Christ* means "the Anointed One," and in the Old Testament, three kinds of people were anointed: prophets, kings, and priests. Jesus fulfilled all three roles. Like a prophet, yet perfectly in a way only he could, he revealed to people who God is. Like a king, yet perfectly in a way only he could, he exercised God's rule over God's people while being the only true servant of the Lord. And like a priest, yet perfectly in a way only he could, he brought people into fellowship with God.

Peter may not have fully understood the depth of what he said. The disciples did not yet grasp the idea of a suffering Messiah. But his confession was sincere, and the Lord received it, saying, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah." The greatest blessing in life is to know Jesus correctly. This blessing does not come from human ability. Why is Peter blessed? According to Jesus, "for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven."

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Why did Jesus call him by his original name, Simon son of Jonah? The name *Simon* can mean “the Lord has heard,” but it can also mean “a reed.” And like his name, Simon was often a wavering person. Simon, son of Jonah, represents the natural human being. By natural human wisdom and strength, no one can recognize that Jesus, the carpenter’s son, is the Christ. Only the revelation of the Father in heaven makes such faith possible. This blessing is grace. May this grace of revelation be given to us again and again as we grow in knowing God.

Jesus then said, “You are Peter,” calling him again by the new name he had officially received when he was appointed as one of the twelve in Mark 3:16. The name *Peter* means “rock.” The Lord’s words were prophetic, meaning that he would become a rock of faith.

Jesus went on to say that he would build his church on this rock. This is the first time the word *church* appears in the New Testament. It is more fitting to understand this rock not as Peter himself, but as the confession he made: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” The foundation of the church is this confession of faith. If someone asks what the core of the gospel is, we can answer simply, “Jesus is the Christ.”

Whose church is it? Jesus says, “my church,” which means he is the owner and Lord of the church. In today’s passage, we can see three things Jesus desires to accomplish through his church.

First, Jesus promises that the gates of Hades will not overcome his church. This means it will break the power of death. The only place that can shut the gates of hell is the church. This is the church’s primary mission. Everything we do—worship, learning Scripture, prayer, giving, serving—must ultimately lead to this purpose, that people would not go to hell.

Second, Jesus builds his church in order to open the kingdom of heaven. He says, “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.” The keys of heaven and the authority to bind and loose were not given to Peter as an individual. They were given to the twelve apostles whom Peter represents, and to the church that the apostles represent. Through the church, the door of heaven is opened or closed. For those who open their hearts to the gospel proclaimed by the church, the door of heaven opens. For those who do not, it remains closed.

The church Jesus speaks of is not a building but the community of people who believe in him. What matters is that the Messiah is always with his people. The life of faith is not meant to be lived in isolation. He is with his *ekklesia*, the assembly called out of the world to belong to him. The local church is the visible expression of that community.

Third, the Lord desires to make known through the church that Jesus is the Christ. Yet in today’s passage, he warns the disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah. Why would he say this? It is because the cross had not yet come. Only by going through the cross could Jesus deal with our sin and establish us as his church. After the church was born through the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts, the message “Jesus is the Christ” began to be proclaimed. You and I also came to know Jesus through the ministry of the church.

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We must never take the church lightly. The church is not merely a building or a gathering of people who share a religious hobby. Coming to church is not like joining a social club. The devil rejoices when the church is weakened or disappears. But when we stand firmly on the rock of faith that Jesus is the Christ, when we remember that we are the church that shuts the gates of Hades and holds the keys of heaven, and when we use the authority to bind and loose, the devil trembles.

In the late 1980s, a pastor named David Wilkerson was walking through Times Square in New York, a place marked by drugs, crime, and prostitution. As he looked at children crying in the streets and people trapped in addiction, he felt deep sorrow. "God, is there no answer for this dark city?" At that moment, the Holy Spirit spoke strongly to his heart: "David, you must build a church here." That is how Times Square Church was planted right in the middle of the bright lights of Broadway. The world had written off that place as a den of crime and entertainment, but God established there a church that would overcome the gates of Hades. May our church today also become that very church of life, breaking through the darkness of this world and bringing salvation to souls.

Let us apply the authority to bind and loose to the more personal life of a believer. In John 20:23, Jesus declares, "If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." When we share the gospel and people receive it with repentance and faith, we can confidently declare God's forgiveness to them. When they do not receive it, we know they remain in their sins.

In the name of Jesus, we can truly loose what has been bound. We can also bind and drive out evil spirits. For example, when someone has wronged you, if you refuse to forgive and bitterness grows, you become bound to that person. Through prayer of forgiveness, you can loose that bondage. You place that person's sin upon the cross, declare forgiveness, and speak blessing over them. As you continue praying until no bitter feeling remains, you break the bondage of unforgiveness that blocks "the righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit," which are the reality of heaven (Rom 14:17). If this is not loosed, the one who cannot forgive may even experience sickness. Salvation may not be blocked, but the enjoyment of heaven on earth becomes hindered.

Beloved, Jesus is the Christ, the one who brings salvation to every part of our lives. Through us, may the gates of hell be shut, the kingdom of heaven be opened with the keys he has given, and may the confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, be proclaimed day and night. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Strengthen our faith and help us to stand firmly on this truth. Build your church through us, and use us to shut the doors of hell and to open the way of salvation for many. In your holy name we pray. Amen.