

The Gospel of Matthew, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 19: Peter's Confession and the Cross

Matthew 16:1-28

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Matthew 16 is one of the most doctrinally important and most misused chapters in the Gospels, so teach it with both confidence and care. The center is the great confession: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. On this confessed truth Jesus promises to build His church, a church He owns ("my church") and that no power of death can defeat. Two errors must be gently and clearly avoided. First, do not present Peter as the first pope; the rock on which the church is built is the confessed Christ Himself, the only foundation (1 Corinthians 3:11; Ephesians 2:20), and Peter's own writings call Christ the cornerstone and all believers living stones (1 Peter 2:4-8). Second, do not read the keys of the kingdom as a grant of papal succession or as a promise of a future earthly political kingdom. The keys are seen at work in Acts, where Peter first preaches the gospel and opens the door of the kingdom to Jews at Pentecost (Acts 2) and to Gentiles at the house of Cornelius (Acts 10).

The chapter also presses the timing and nature of the kingdom. Jesus speaks of the kingdom as near, and He says some standing there would not die before they saw the Son of Man coming in His kingdom (v. 28). This points to the kingdom established with power when the church began at Pentecost, with Christ reigning now from the right hand of God (Daniel 2:44; Mark 9:1; Acts 2:30-36; Colossians 1:13). Guard against the idea of a future earthly thousand-year political reign; the kingdom is here, Christ is King now, and His church is its present expression.

Beyond the doctrine, this chapter aims at the heart. The same Peter who soars in confession crashes in resisting the cross, and Jesus turns the lesson on every disciple: deny yourself, take up your cross, follow Me, and find your life by losing it. Aim to send students home both clearer about the church and the kingdom and more willing to follow a crucified Christ on His terms rather than their own.

Question 1

Student Question:

When Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answers, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (v. 16). What is packed into that confession, and why does Jesus call it the truth on which He will build His church?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Set the scene. Caesarea Philippi was a center of pagan worship, with a temple to Caesar and shrines to other gods. Against that backdrop of false lords and kings, Peter declares the true

one. The title Christ means Anointed, the promised Messiah; Son of the living God declares His unique divine sonship. Peter is confessing both Jesus' messianic office and His deity.

Help students feel why Jesus treats this confession as foundational. Everything in the Christian faith stands or falls on the identity of Jesus. If He is merely a teacher or prophet, His death is a tragedy and His commands are optional. If He is the Christ, the Son of the living God, then His word is authority, His death is salvation, and His lordship is total.

This is the same confession the New Testament calls every believer to make. When the Ethiopian asked to be baptized, the confession was "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:37). Paul writes that confessing Jesus as Lord is part of coming to salvation (Romans 10:9–10). The good confession is not a one-time formula but the truth a disciple stakes his life on.

Note that Jesus builds His church on this confessed truth, not on a mere human leader. The next questions will unfold the rock and the keys, but plant the seed here: the church rests on who Jesus is.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus as the Christ, the promised Messiah, and the Son of the living God (v. 16)
- The deity and lordship of Christ as the foundation of the faith
- The good confession as central to becoming and being a Christian (Acts 8:37; Romans 10:9–10)
- The identity of Jesus as the hinge on which everything else turns

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to confess Jesus as both the Christ and the Son of God?
- How does your daily life show what you really believe about who Jesus is?
- Why does everything in the faith depend on getting the identity of Jesus right?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jesus says this confession was revealed to Peter by the Father, not by flesh and blood (v. 17). When did the truth that Jesus is the Christ move from something you had merely heard to something you truly believed, and how has it shaped you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus tells Peter that flesh and blood did not reveal this, but the Father in heaven (v. 17). The confession of Christ is not something we reason our way to by human cleverness alone; it comes as God opens our eyes through His word and His witness. This is the first of the self-examining questions, so make it personal.

Be careful here to avoid a Calvinistic reading. Jesus is not teaching that God arbitrarily reveals truth to some and withholds it from others apart from any human response. The gospel call is genuine and universal, and people can really respond (Acts 2:38–41; Revelation 22:17). What Jesus affirms is that saving truth comes from God's gracious self-revelation, supremely in His Son and in the inspired Scriptures, not from mere human opinion.

Invite students to remember their own journey. There is often a moment, or a season, when the truth that Jesus is the Christ stops being something we inherited or heard and becomes something we know and stake our lives on. Some came to it dramatically, others quietly over time.

Encourage gratitude. The fact that we believe at all is a gift of God's grace working through the gospel. That should produce humility, not pride, and a deep thankfulness to the Father who revealed His Son to us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Saving truth as God's gracious revelation through Christ and Scripture (v. 17)
- The genuine and universal nature of the gospel call (against Calvinistic election)
- The human responsibility to respond to revealed truth (Acts 2:38–41)
- Humility and gratitude as the fruit of God-given faith

Discussion Prompts

- When did the truth about Jesus move from secondhand to personal for you?
- How has God used His word and His people to open your eyes?
- How does remembering that faith is a gift keep you humble?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus warns the disciples about "the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (vv. 6, 12), meaning their teaching. Why is false or compromised teaching so dangerous, and how does a little of it spread like leaven through a life or a church?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

When Jesus warns about the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, the disciples first think He is talking about literal bread, and He patiently corrects them: He means their teaching (vv. 6–12). Leaven works invisibly and pervasively; a little spreads through the whole lump. So does false or compromised doctrine.

The Pharisees added human tradition to God's word; the Sadducees subtracted from it, denying the resurrection and the supernatural. Both distorted the truth, one by addition, one by subtraction. Error comes from both directions, and both are dangerous.

Apply this to the church today. We are called to guard the pattern of sound teaching (2 Timothy 1:13) and to test everything by the completed New Testament, our only authority now (2 Timothy 3:16–17). A church or a believer can be slowly leavened by teaching that sounds appealing but quietly departs from Scripture.

Make it personal too. We absorb a great deal of teaching from media, books, and voices around us. Ask students to consider what ideas may be quietly shaping their view of God, sin, salvation, or the church without being tested against the word.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of false teaching, which spreads like leaven (vv. 6–12)
- Error by addition (human tradition) and by subtraction (denying revealed truth)
- The completed New Testament as the church's authority and test (2 Timothy 3:16–17)
- The call to guard sound doctrine (2 Timothy 1:13; Titus 1:9)

Discussion Prompts

- What teaching are you currently absorbing without testing it against Scripture?
- How can a person tell the difference between sound teaching and appealing error?
- Why do small departures from the truth matter so much over time?

Question 4

Student Question:

The crowds had plenty of respectful but inadequate opinions about Jesus (v. 14). Where are you tempted to hold Jesus at the level of a good teacher or admired figure rather than bowing to Him as Lord and Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The crowds offered respectful but inadequate answers: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the prophets (v. 14). Every one of these is a compliment, and every one is wrong. It is possible to think highly of Jesus and still completely miss who He is.

This is exactly where many people stand today. They will gladly call Jesus a great teacher, a moral example, a wise man, a prophet. What they will not do is bow to Him as Lord and Christ, because that requires surrender. A respected teacher you can admire from a distance. A Lord you must obey.

Help students examine the subtle ways we do the same. We may affirm Jesus on Sunday and functionally keep Him at the level of advisor the rest of the week, consulting Him when convenient and overruling Him when His claims are inconvenient.

Drive toward the difference a true confession makes. To call Jesus Lord is to hand Him the keys to everything: our money, our relationships, our plans, our bodies, our future. Ask where that surrender is still partial.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The inadequacy of admiring Jesus without submitting to Him (v. 14)
- The difference between Jesus as teacher and Jesus as Lord
- Lordship as total claim over the whole of life (Luke 6:46)
- The cost and freedom of genuine surrender to Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to admire Jesus rather than obey Him?
- What part of your life have you not fully handed over to His lordship?
- What would change this week if Jesus were truly Lord of that area?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus says, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (v. 18). What is the church Jesus promised to build, who builds it, and what does it mean that hell cannot overcome it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question opens the doctrine of the church, so be clear and unhurried. Jesus says, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (v. 18). Three things stand out. The church is His (“my church”). He is the builder (“I will build”). And it is indestructible; not even the gates of death can overcome it.

Address the famous wordplay. Jesus says to Peter (Greek petros, a stone), “on this rock (petra, a large rock or bedrock) I will build my church.” The bedrock is not Peter as an individual ruler but the confessed truth Peter just spoke: that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Scripture is consistent on this. Paul says, “no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11). The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, “Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20). Peter himself points away from himself to Christ as the living stone and calls all believers living stones (1 Peter 2:4–8).

So gently but plainly set aside the idea that this verse makes Peter the first pope or establishes a line of supreme human authority over the church. Peter was a great apostle, honored with a leading role, but he was a fellow elder and a servant of Christ, not a sovereign over the others (1 Peter 5:1). The head of the church is Christ alone (Colossians 1:18).

Close with comfort and confidence. The church Jesus promised to build is His one body, made up of all the saved, established when the gospel went out at Pentecost. It has weathered every empire, persecution, and assault, and it still stands, because its life is the risen Christ. The gates of death itself could not hold Him, and they cannot hold His people.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The church as Christ's own, built by Him and belonging to Him (v. 18)
- The rock as the confessed Christ, the only foundation, not Peter as a ruler (1 Corinthians 3:11; Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:4-8)
- Christ alone as head of the church (Colossians 1:18); no papacy or supreme human office
- The indestructibility of the church grounded in the resurrection of Christ
- The one church as the body of all the saved, established at Pentecost (Acts 2:47)

Discussion Prompts

- Why does it matter that the church is built on the confessed Christ and not on a man?
- How does it encourage you that Jesus promised death itself cannot defeat His church?
- What does it mean for you to belong to a church that belongs to Christ?

Question 6

Student Question:

Peter confesses Christ rightly and then, moments later, rebukes Him for speaking of the cross and is called "Satan" (vv. 22-23). Where do you, like Peter, want to follow Jesus on your own terms and recoil from the path He actually walks?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The whiplash in this passage is breathtaking. One moment Peter is praised for a confession revealed by the Father; the next he is rebuked as Satan (vv. 22-23). When Jesus begins to teach that He must suffer, be killed, and be raised, Peter takes Him aside and says, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." Peter wanted a Messiah of triumph without a cross.

Jesus' response is severe because the stakes are eternal: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." Peter, without realizing it, was voicing the very temptation Jesus had faced in the wilderness, a crown without a cross.

Bring this home. We are most like Peter not when we deny Christ outright but when we want to follow Him on our own terms, embracing the parts that comfort us and recoiling from the parts that cost us. We want resurrection without crucifixion, blessing without surrender, a Savior without a Lord.

Be honest and gentle. The point is not to shame anyone but to expose the universal pull toward a cross-less Christianity, and to call us back to the Jesus who actually is, not the one we would prefer.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The necessity of the cross in God's plan of redemption (v. 21)
- The human temptation to want a Christ without suffering or surrender
- Setting our minds on the things of God rather than the things of man (v. 23)
- The danger of following Jesus on our own terms

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to want the benefits of Jesus without the cross He calls you to carry?
- What part of Jesus' teaching do you most want to take aside and soften?
- How can you set your mind on the things of God this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus gives Peter "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" and speaks of binding and loosing (v. 19). In light of how this unfolds in Acts, what are these keys, how were they used, and what do they tell us about how the kingdom was opened?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now address the keys directly, and let Acts interpret them. Jesus gives Peter "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" and says, "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (v. 19). Keys are for opening doors. The picture is of Peter being given the privilege of first opening the door of the kingdom by proclaiming the terms of entrance.

Watch this happen in Acts. On the day of Pentecost, Peter stands up, preaches the crucified and risen Christ, and when the crowd asks what they must do, he tells them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). The door of the kingdom swings open to the Jews. Later, at the house of Cornelius, Peter is the one God uses to open that same door to the Gentiles (Acts 10). That is the keys at work.

Explain binding and loosing. The grammar of the promise indicates that Peter and the apostles would declare on earth what had already been determined in heaven. They did not invent the terms of salvation; by inspiration they announced them. What they bound and loosed was bound and loosed because it was already settled in heaven and revealed to them by the Spirit (John 16:13).

Now draw the careful conclusions. This is not a grant of supreme personal power, and it is not passed down as papal succession. The same authority to bind and loose is extended to the apostles together in Matthew 18:18. The keys opened the kingdom once for all when the gospel was first preached; the terms Peter announced at Pentecost are the terms still. And note what the keys are not: they are not a promise of an earthly political kingdom to be set up later. The kingdom Peter unlocked is the reign of Christ entered through the gospel, the church, here and now.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The keys of the kingdom as the privilege of first proclaiming the terms of entrance (v. 19; Acts 2; Acts 10)
- Binding and loosing as declaring by inspiration what heaven had already determined (John 16:13)
- The same authority given to the apostles together (Matthew 18:18), not a unique transferable office
- The keys opening the kingdom through the preached gospel, not establishing a papacy or a future earthly kingdom
- The terms of entrance announced at Pentecost as still binding today (Acts 2:38)

Discussion Prompts

- How does the book of Acts help us understand what the keys of the kingdom are?
- Why is it important that the apostles announced the terms of salvation rather than inventing them?
- What does it mean that the same gospel Peter preached at Pentecost is the gospel we obey today?

Question 8

Student Question:

Jesus says that whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for His sake will find it (v. 25). What is one specific way you are clinging to your life that Jesus is asking you to surrender to Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus lays down the great paradox of discipleship: “whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (v. 25). The way up is down. The way to truly live is to die to self. This is the second self-examining question, so make it concrete and personal.

Help students see the many ways we try to save our own lives: clutching control, protecting our comfort, guarding our reputation, hoarding our resources, keeping our plans firmly in our own hands. Jesus says that grip is exactly what strangles the life we are trying to protect.

Then hold out the promise. To lose our life for His sake is not to throw it away; it is to find it. Surrender to Christ is the doorway to the only life that lasts. What we hand over to Him, He gives back transformed and eternal.

Ask for one specific surrender. Vague intentions to be more committed rarely change anything. A specific area named before God and the class, the savings account, the calendar, the relationship, the ambition, is where the paradox becomes real.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The paradox of finding life by losing it for Christ's sake (v. 25)
- Self-denial and surrender as the shape of discipleship (v. 24)
- The futility of trying to save our own lives on our own terms
- Eternal life as the reward of those who lose their lives for Christ (v. 27)

Discussion Prompts

- What is one specific way you are clinging to your own life right now?
- What would it look like to surrender that area to Christ this week?
- How have you experienced finding life by giving something up for Jesus?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus links His church and His kingdom closely together and tells the disciples that some standing there would not taste death before they saw the Son of Man coming in His kingdom (vv. 18–19, 28). How does Scripture show this kingdom arriving and being established, and why does it matter that Christ is reigning now rather than waiting to set up an earthly kingdom later?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal question of the lesson, drawing together the church, the kingdom, and their timing, so teach it carefully. Throughout this chapter Jesus speaks of the kingdom as near and on the verge of arriving. He gives the keys of the kingdom, He promises to build His church, and He says plainly, “there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (v. 28).

Take that last statement seriously. Jesus said some of those very listeners would still be alive when the kingdom came with power. This rules out the idea that the kingdom is entirely future. The parallel in Mark 9:1 says the kingdom would come “with power,” and Jesus later tells the apostles they would be clothed “with power” when the Spirit came (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8). That power came at Pentecost (Acts 2). The kingdom that Jesus said was at hand was established when the church began, the gospel was preached, and Christ was enthroned at God’s right hand.

Tie the church and the kingdom together. In this very chapter Jesus moves from “my church” (v. 18) to “the keys of the kingdom” (v. 19) almost in the same breath, because they are two ways of describing the same reality: the realm where Christ reigns and the saved are gathered. Peter unlocked it at Pentecost, and people have been entering it ever since through the gospel (Colossians 1:13).

Now guard against the major error. Many today expect a future earthly thousand-year political kingdom, with Christ reigning from an earthly throne in Jerusalem. But Daniel foretold a kingdom God would set up “in the days of those kings” that would never be destroyed (Daniel 2:44), and the New Testament announces that it has come. Christ is not waiting to become King; He is reigning now, at the right hand of the Father, until every enemy is put under His feet (Acts 2:30–36; 1 Corinthians 15:24–26). There is no secret rapture and no future earthly political reign to wait for. The King is on His throne now.

End with the practical weight of this truth. Because Christ is reigning now, His church is not a backup plan or a waiting room; it is the present expression of His kingdom. We do not pine for a kingdom postponed; we live as citizens of a kingdom already here, under a King already crowned, advancing a rule that death cannot defeat.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The kingdom as near in Jesus’ ministry and established with power at Pentecost (v. 28; Mark 9:1; Acts 2)
- The close identity of the church and the kingdom in this chapter (vv. 18–19; Colossians 1:13)
- Christ reigning now at the right hand of God, not awaiting a future coronation (Acts 2:30–36; 1 Corinthians 15:24–26)
- Daniel’s prophecy of an everlasting kingdom set up in the days of the Roman kings, now fulfilled (Daniel 2:44)
- Rejection of premillennialism: no future earthly thousand-year political reign and no secret rapture
- Living now as citizens of a present kingdom under a reigning King

Discussion Prompts

- How does Jesus’ statement in verse 28 help us understand when the kingdom would come?
- What difference does it make to believe that Christ is reigning as King right now?
- How should belonging to a present kingdom shape the way you live today?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back over the whole chapter, from the great confession to the call to take up the cross, name one specific way Jesus is asking you to confess Him more truly or follow Him more fully this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to gather the two great movements of the chapter: the confession of who Jesus is, and the call to follow Him to the cross. A true confession of Christ always leads to a cross-shaped life. You cannot rightly say “You are the Christ” and then refuse the path the Christ walks.

Invite students to consider both halves. Is there a way Jesus is calling you to confess Him more truly, to move Him from admired teacher to surrendered Lord, to stop holding secondhand opinions and stake your life on the truth? And is there a way He is calling you to follow Him more fully, to take up a specific cross you have been avoiding?

Press for one concrete step. The chapter is too important to leave at the level of agreement. Ask each person to name a single, specific response: a surrender to make, a fear to lay down, a part of life to bring fully under His lordship.

Close in worship. The Christ we confess is the crucified and risen Lord who is building an unconquerable church and reigning even now. To follow Him is not loss but the path to finding our lives. Lead your class to confess Him afresh and to take up the cross gladly.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The unity of confessing Christ and following Him to the cross
- Discipleship as the necessary outworking of a true confession
- Specific, concrete surrender as the fruit of genuine faith
- Worship of the crucified, risen, and reigning Christ

Discussion Prompts

- How is Jesus asking you to confess Him more truly this week?
- What specific cross is He asking you to take up?
- How can this class support and pray for you as you follow Him?