

The Gospel of Matthew

Lesson 19: Peter's Confession and the Cross -- Matthew 16:1-28

There comes a moment in every relationship when the polite, surface conversation has to give way to the real question. Jesus brings His disciples all the way north to Caesarea Philippi, a place dotted with pagan temples and a shrine to Caesar, and there, surrounded by the monuments of every rival god and king, He asks the question that decides everything. First the easy one: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" The answers come quickly, secondhand and safe. John the Baptist. Elijah. Jeremiah. One of the prophets.

Then He turns it personal. "But who do you say that I am?" The air must have gone still. And Simon Peter, so often the one who blurts and stumbles, says the truest words of his life: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." It is the great confession, the bedrock truth on which everything else in the New Testament stands. And Jesus tells him this did not come from flesh and blood; the Father in heaven revealed it.

What Jesus says next has been treasured and fought over for centuries. He speaks of building His church, of a rock that the gates of Hades will not overcome, of the keys of the kingdom. This is the first time the word church appears on Jesus' lips, and He says it belongs to Him: "I will build my church." Something new and unconquerable is coming, and it is coming soon.

But there is a shock waiting. The moment the disciples confess Him as Christ, Jesus begins to tell them He must suffer and be killed and on the third day be raised. Peter, who got the confession so gloriously right, gets the cross so badly wrong, and earns the sharpest rebuke in the Gospels. Then Jesus turns to all of us with words that still cut: if anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross. The Christ we confess is a crucified Christ, and the life He offers runs straight through a cross of our own.

Group Discussion: Jesus asks two questions: what others say about Him, and what His disciples themselves say. Why do you think Jesus pressed His followers to move from secondhand opinions to a personal confession, and where do people today still settle for secondhand answers about who Jesus is?

Personal Reflection: Right after the high point of the great confession, Jesus says that following Him means denying yourself and taking up a cross. Where in your life is the call to take up your cross most costly right now, and how are you tempted to want a Christ without one?

Read Matthew 16:1-28

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?

8. 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?

9. 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?

10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Acts 2:14–47, Peter using the keys as the kingdom opens and the church begins at Pentecost; Daniel 2:44, God setting up an everlasting kingdom that will never be destroyed; Ephesians 2:19–22, the church built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ as the cornerstone; Colossians 1:13–18, Christ reigning now as head of the body, the church; 1 Corinthians 3:11, no other foundation than Jesus Christ.