

The Body of Christ

Lesson 1: The Church Christ Built -- Matthew 16:13-19

There is a place far to the north of Galilee where the rock face rises up out of the ground like a wall, and at its base a spring of cold water once poured out of a deep cave. The Greeks had built a shrine there to the god Pan. Herod's son had raised a gleaming temple to Caesar nearby and named the whole town for him: Caesarea Philippi. Carved into the cliff were niches for the idols, little shadowed pockets where the gods of the nations stared out over the water. It was a strange place to talk about who God really is. And it was exactly there that Jesus chose to ask the most important question a person can ever answer.

He had brought His disciples a long way to get there, out past the edges of familiar territory, into a region thick with the religion of the world. Picture them standing in the shadow of that rock wall, the temples and shrines all around them, the noise of the spring at their backs. And Jesus turns to them and asks, almost casually, what people are saying about Him. Who do the crowds think the Son of Man is? The answers come easily, because secondhand opinions always do. John the Baptist. Elijah. Jeremiah. One of the prophets. People had plenty of admiring things to say.

Then the question turns, and the whole sky seems to lean in. But who do you say that I am? Not the crowds. You. And Simon Peter, who so often spoke too soon and too loudly, this time says the truest words a human mouth had ever formed. You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. In front of all those dead idols staring blankly from the rock, one fisherman names the living God's living Son. And Jesus tells him that flesh and blood did not reveal this to him. The Father did.

What Jesus says next is the reason for this entire study. On the strength of that confession He makes a promise: I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. Not a building. Not a denomination. Not a club we join because we like the music or the people. A people. His people. Built by Him, on the truth of who He is, against which death itself cannot win. That is where this study begins, with the breathtaking claim that Jesus has built a church, that it is His, and that He means for you to find your place inside it.

Group Discussion: When someone today says the word "church," what picture usually comes to mind first, a building, an event, an organization, or a people? Where do you think most of us got that picture, and how might it shape the way we think about belonging to the church Jesus promised to build?

Personal Reflection: Jesus once asked His closest followers, "Who do you say that I am?" If you set aside the answers you have heard others give, the answers from sermons and songs and childhood, how would you honestly answer Him today, and what in your life would change if you really believed your own answer?

Read Matthew 16:13–19

Study Questions

1. Jesus asks His disciples this question in the shadow of Caesarea Philippi, a place crowded with the temples and idols of the nations. Why do you think Jesus chose this setting to ask “Who do you say that I am?”, and what does it tell us that the answer to that question is the foundation everything else in this passage rests on?
2. Jesus pressed past secondhand opinions and asked His own followers directly, “But who do you say that I am?” Where in your own life are you still living on borrowed answers about Jesus, the answers of your parents or your church or your culture, and what would it look like this week to answer Him for yourself?
3. Peter confesses, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” and Jesus says this truth came not from flesh and blood but from the Father (vv. 16–17). What does Peter’s confession claim about who Jesus actually is, and why does the whole identity of the church depend on the deity and lordship of Christ being true?
4. Peter spoke his confession out loud, in the open, surrounded by the idols of his day. In what ordinary settings of your week are you most tempted to keep your confession of Christ quiet, and what would change if you let the truth of who Jesus is shape how you speak and act there?
5. Jesus responds, “On this rock I will build my church” (v. 18). Considering the confession Peter has just made, what is the “rock” on which Christ builds, and why does it matter that Jesus says He will build the church, rather than leaving it to us to build for Him?

6. Jesus calls it “my church,” claiming it as His own possession, bought and built by Him. Do you tend to think of the church as something Christ owns and is building, or as an organization you choose to attend? How would seeing it as His change the way you give yourself to it?
7. Jesus speaks of building one church, not many competing bodies, and the New Testament knows nothing of rival denominations (v. 18). What does it mean that Christ promised to build a single church on the confession of His name, and how does that promise stand against the idea that one church is as good as another?
8. Many people today treat membership in the Lord’s church as optional, a nice addition to a private faith. After hearing Jesus speak so personally about “my church,” where do you sense Him challenging any quiet assumption that you could follow Him while holding His church at arm’s length?
9. Jesus promises, “The gates of Hades shall not prevail against it,” and gives “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (vv. 18–19). What is Christ claiming here about the permanence, the authority, and the real existence of His church, and why do these words rule out the idea that the church is merely an invisible or optional thing with no concrete life in the world?
10. Look back across Matthew 16:13–19 as a whole. Having seen the church as the people Jesus Himself promised to build on the confession of His name, name one specific way Jesus is calling you to take your place in His church, and what is the first step He is asking of you?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Matthew 16:18, Christ's promise to build His church upon the confession of His deity; Ephesians 1:22-23, the church as the body of Christ and He as its head over all things; Colossians 1:18, Christ the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning and firstborn from the dead; Acts 20:28, the church of God which He purchased with His own blood; Romans 16:16, the churches of Christ greet you.