



Session 4: Matthew

16:13-17:27

for the week of October 10th

The Community of the King: Our Confession

These passages detail an important transition in the gospel of Matthew. We read of Peter's confession about the identity of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God and Jesus' foretelling of his death and resurrection. From here on out, we see Jesus set his attention towards Jerusalem and the mission he has to accomplish there through his death and resurrection.

Jesus' probing questions in 16:13-15 once again mark the distinction between the crowds and the disciples. Many people were willing to recognize that Jesus was a messenger sent by God; his supernatural works attested to this fact. Given the common belief at the time that a resurrected prophet like Isaiah or Elijah would appear before the arrival of the Messiah, many people assumed that Jesus was fulfilling this role. Yet Peter, and probably the rest of the disciples, came to the realization that Jesus was not a prophet preparing the way for the Messiah, he was indeed the Messiah himself.¹

It is difficult to say how much Peter clearly understood in this moment about Jesus' divine identity and mission, especially given his response to Jesus foretelling his death in 16:22. Nonetheless, Peter was at least affirming an understanding that Jesus is the promised one of God who came to fulfill all of Israel's Messianic expectations and to usher in the reign of God. Jesus says this revelation is a divine blessing, a realization only possible because of the work of God in Peter's life, not Peter's own human understanding.²

Jesus goes on to make a promise that he will build his church (literally "assembly," the same Greek word used in the LXX used to refer to the assembly of Israel) "on this rock."³ The Greek for "rock" and for "Peter" share the same root word. So, the foundation on which Jesus is building the church has something to do with Peter. However, the impersonal nature of Jesus' statement suggests this rock is more than just Peter himself but is also a reference to the confession that Peter has just made. In other words, Jesus is promising to build his church on the foundation of Peter and others like him who confess that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God. It is, of course, Peter and the other disciples whom God uses to build the church as recorded in the book of Acts, and God continues to build his church today through those who make this same confession.

Jesus also affirms the apostolic authority of Peter, and probably the other disciples here as Peter is representing them.⁴ The language surrounding the "keys of the kingdom" has roots in Isaiah 22:22 which prophesies about a stewardship being given to Eliakim over the people of Jerusalem. The imagery of binding and loosing reflects terms that were used by rabbis of the time to describe their authority to enact religious rules or offer exemption from rules. Mounce argues then: "The keys that Peter is to receive represent the authority to determine what kind of conduct is worthy of those who live under the rule of God and what kind of conduct is not."⁵ Peter and the other disciples carry out this Apostolic authority both in their founding of the early church and in their writing of the New Testament.

Another important scene in these passages that further confirms Jesus' deity and Messianic identity to the disciples is the transfiguration of Jesus in 17:1-13. In this scene, Jesus takes his closest three disciples (Peter, James, and John) to a mountain where they witness Jesus in a glorified state. Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus probably representing the

¹ Matthew 16:16. "Christ" here, from the Greek, means the same as "Messiah," which is drawn from the Hebrew, meaning the "Anointed One" of God.

² Matthew 16:17.

³ Matthew 16:18.

⁴ Matthew 16:19.

⁵ Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, NIBC (London: Paternoster Press, 1995), 163.

revelation of God in the Law and the Prophets respectively. Jesus as the Son of God is the fullest revelation of God to humanity and the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. Notice that Peter wants to make a dwelling for all three person, yet God the Father's voice from heaven highlights Jesus as his Beloved Son, the one who has fulfilled the roles of the other two and is thus now to be listened to as authoritative and the fullest expression of God's intentions.

These passages force every reader to come to grips with the same question Jesus asked of his disciples: "Who do you say that I am?" The identity and redemptive work of Jesus is essential to the Christian story. The new community Jesus is building is based on the confession of his identity and faith in his work. There is no participation in this new community apart from such a confession and there's no true Christian community where the person and work of Christ are not the center.

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Discussion⁶

- 1) How does Matthew 16:18 explain the continual existence of the church, its value, and our hope for the future? How do you see the church undervalued today?
- 2) Peter said more than he knew when he confessed Jesus to be the Christ (the Messiah). Read Matthew 16:21–23 and identify what Peter missed. How does Jesus' mission clash with the widespread expectation that the coming Christ would immediately assert his kingdom with force and overthrow the rule of the Romans?
- 3) How does resistance to the work of Jesus and his eventual crucifixion fill out our understanding of Jesus' call to discipleship in Matthew 16:24–26?
- 4) The transfiguration account is rich with allusions to the time when Moses went up a mountain to meet with God. Read Exodus 24:12–18 closely and note any parallels you see with Matthew 17:1–8. After noting the connections, consider what this teaches about Jesus.
- 5) The disciples weren't able to cast out a demon. According to Jesus, they should have been able to do so. Indeed, they should be able to "move mountains," a metaphor for doing the seemingly impossible (see 1 Cor. 13:2). What did they lack? What does this teach us about the importance of trusting God's ability to accomplish his purposes through us?
- 6) Charles Erdman writes: "*The two fundamental and supreme doctrines of Christianity are the truths concerning the divine person and the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Other truths are vital; others are inseparably related to these; but these doctrines are absolutely essential; without them Christianity would cease to be a distinct religion, if it continued to be a religion at all.*"⁷ Why are these doctrines so foundational to Christianity? How can we seek to be centered on these doctrines in our faith and practice as a church community?

Prayer

Spend some time in prayer together, praying for each other's needs and that the Spirit will grant us a deeper understanding of the goodness and authority of Christ and empower us for living as representative of his kingdom in this world.

⁶ Some questions adapted from *Knowing the Bible: Matthew* by Drew Hunter.

⁷ Charles R. Erdman, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1966), 151.