

# “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God”

Matthew 16:1-20

Key Verse: 16:16

**“Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’”**

Throughout history, “who Jesus is” has been the central question. Some people believe that Jesus is God. Others say that even though Jesus was a great prophet or a great man, he was just a human being. Knowing “who Jesus is” is not knowing information about Jesus; it is knowing Jesus personally. Almost everyone has heard about Jesus. But not as many truly know Jesus, even in Christian churches. Knowing “who Jesus is” is not a small matter. Knowing “who Jesus is” is essential for the salvation of anyone; it is a matter of life and death. John 17:3 says, **“Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”** Those who know God and Jesus Christ have eternal life.

To this point in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus has revealed himself in many ways. His disciples have gotten to know him personally. Now, he asks them to confess what they believe about him. It is like the final exam of the first semester. Over the last five months of Matthew’s gospel study, the Holy Spirit has revealed Jesus to us by his words. Now, like the disciples, it is time for us to confess what we really believe about Jesus. Let’s answer Jesus’ question, **“Who do you say I am?”** and learn what this means to us.

## **I. “Be on your guard” (1-12)**

Look at verse 1. In Jesus’ time, the Pharisees and Sadducees were adversaries. The Sadducees said that there is no resurrection, no angels and no spirits. But the Pharisees acknowledged them all (Ac 23:8). So they usually engaged in doctrinal conflicts. But this time they joined forces; it was to oppose Jesus. Both parties felt their security was threatened by Jesus’ popularity and teaching. So they came to him, demanding a sign, implying that without giving one he had no credibility. In fact, Jesus had already given many signs that he was the Messiah: healing the blind, driving out demons, raising the dead, feeding multitudes, and more. However, the Pharisees and Sadducees ignored these miracles in order to accuse and condemn Jesus.

Look at verses 2-3. In response, Jesus pointed out that they were very good at interpreting the appearance of the sky but very poor at interpreting the signs of

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the times. Jewish leaders paid close attention to the weather forecast in order to avoid catching a cold and to plan their vacations. But they could not see what God was doing in their times. The Messiah had come. But they suppressed the truth and did not believe. They were not concerned about God or their suffering people. They were greatly concerned about themselves. Jesus rebuked their wickedness and would not give them a sign, except the sign of Jonah - which referred to his resurrection (4).

Here we see that spiritual leaders must have insight to see the signs of their times. Then they can know what to do, and how to lead people. What are the signs of our times? As the prophet Daniel predicted, our pace of life is rapidly accelerating and knowledge is exploding (Dan 12:4). Someone said that living in these times makes him feel that he is riding an angry bull heading toward Lake Michigan to drown. This bull is going so fast that he cannot get off. So he just tries to stay on the bull - that is his direction. Maybe many people feel this way. Yet Jesus foretold in Matthew 24:14, **“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”** Now missionaries are going from everywhere to everywhere and the number of unreached people groups in the world is diminishing. Recently Wycliffe Bible translators changed their target date for Bible translation into every language from the year 2050 to 2025. As he promised, Jesus will come soon in power and great glory. When we know this, we can live with hope even in troubled times. We can devote ourselves to the word of God and prayer, and to preaching the gospel. At last, we will shine like the stars in the heavens (Dan 12:3).

In verses 5-12, Jesus turned his attention to his disciples. As they went across the lake, they forgot to take bread. This became a source of great anxiety to the poor disciples. At this moment, Jesus said to them, **“Be careful. Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees”** (6). Jesus wanted to protect his disciples from the bad influence of the religious leaders. But the disciples misunderstood. When they heard the word “yeast,” they thought about bread and concluded that Jesus was rebuking them for forgetting the bread. They were spiritually dull. Usually, Jesus encouraged them. But this time he rebuked their unbelieving chatter: "You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread. Do you still not understand?" (8). To restore their faith, Jesus reminded them of what he had done: "Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? How is it you don't understand I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (9-11). Then

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they understood what Jesus meant (12). Here we learn that we do not need to worry about bread, for Jesus is with us. Jesus is our Security. However, we should be on guard against bad influence that darkens our faith in Jesus.

In verses 6 and 11, "yeast" refers to bad influence. Even a tiny bit of yeast shapes an entire batch of dough. The teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees had power to corrupt the disciples and make them spiritually sick. So we must be on guard against bad influence. This includes hypocrisy, legalism, worldly desires, and selfishness. These can distort the way we see Jesus. How can we guard our hearts and minds? Should we flee the world? No. Instead, Jesus teaches us to remember what he has done. When we do so, our faith becomes healthy and our hearts can be right with God. Especially in this Thanksgiving week, we need to remember what God has done for us, for our families, and for our nation, and give thanks to him.

### II. "Who do you say I am?" (13-20)

Jesus traveled a lot during this part of his ministry. Let's briefly recap his travels. After feeding the five thousand and walking on water, Jesus went to Gennesaret (14:34); then he went to Tyre and Sidon (15:21); he went along the Sea of Galilee (15:29); then he went to the vicinity of Magadan (15:39); he crossed the lake again (16:5); finally he traveled north to the region of Caesarea Philippi (13a). Jesus wanted to spend quiet time with his disciples to teach them something very important.

Suddenly, without notice, Jesus gave his disciples a final exam. It was made of two short questions which dealt with who Jesus is. Jesus did not test his disciples in regards to his teachings, his miracles, or his ministry, but in regards to his person. Why? It is because the core of Christian life is to know Jesus personally. Many think of Christian life in terms of activities: meetings, rituals, ceremonies, works of ministry, and so on. But the heart of Christian life is to know Jesus and have a personal relationship with him. Knowing Jesus is not like learning a math formula, which we eventually master. No, it is to know the person Christ and live in a relationship with him. This leads us to grow spiritually in his image. St. Paul grew in his personal relationship with Christ for many years. But as a mature Christian he said, "I want to know Christ--yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow to attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Php 3:10-11). Knowing Christ is a lifelong process. No one can say they have mastered knowing Christ. Rather, we can grow endlessly and continually in the knowledge of Christ.

Now let's look at Jesus' first question and the disciples' answer. Jesus asked, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist;

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others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (13b-14). John the Baptist was most respected by the people at that time. Elijah was greatly admired for challenging idol worship with courage and zeal. Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet, for he shed many tears over the poor spiritual condition of his people. The people of his generation saw Jesus as a great prophet from God, even though the religious leaders had slandered him. However, the people didn't truly understand who Jesus was. Jesus is more than a great prophet.

Jesus expected a better understanding from his disciples. So he asked, "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter was inspired, and stepping forward as the spokesman said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (16). What does this mean? The Messiah was the unique, central figure in God's redemptive history who had been promised by God and prophesied. The Israelites had awaited him for more than two millennia. Peter realized that the long-awaited Messiah had come. Peter called Jesus "the Son of the living God." This meant that Jesus was more than a man; he was God in the flesh. Jesus had both humanity and deity. Isaiah had prophesied that he would be a human child who was also the Mighty God (Isa 9:6). The Messiah was both in order to be our mediator. Paul said, in 1 Timothy 2:5, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus." As a man, Jesus understands human beings in our weaknesses and temptation (Heb 4:15). As the holy God, he has the power to save us from our sins and death (Heb 2:14-15). Christian faith is to believe in Jesus as both the perfect man, and perfect God. He must be both in order to bring about our salvation. To deny either Jesus' humanity, or his deity has a serious result. Such belief deviates from orthodox Christianity; it even becomes antichristian (1 Jn 4:2-3). We can embrace many kinds of differences in the name of missional ecumenism. But in regards to "who Jesus is," we must hold fast that he is both the perfect man and perfect God.

What enabled Peter to make the first historic confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God? Look at verse 17. "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven." Peter did not gain his understanding through human reason or effort; it was revealed to him by the Father. Indeed, it was the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul prayed for the church at Ephesus, "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better" (Eph 1:17). 1 Corinthians 12:3 says, "...no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit." When anyone confesses that Jesus is Lord from their hearts it is the work of the Holy Spirit; God has made them his children.

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What is the significance of Peter's confession? First of all, it brings salvation. Romans 10:9 says, "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Salvation does not come from our effort, but from a confession of faith in what Jesus has done for us. All other religions emphasize doing good works to compensate for our misdeeds. But when we understand how offensive our sins are to the holy God, we know that there is nothing we can do to compensate for them. Our works are like dirty rags in God's sight (Isa 64:6). Many people think that if they have money they can do everything. But we cannot buy salvation with money. God's salvation comes only through Jesus Christ to those who believe in him. This faith is expressed through a confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Lord. Jesus saves us, by his grace. Thank you, Jesus!

Secondly, Peter's confession was a commitment to Jesus. Jesus is the Son of the living God. He is the author of life and the source of life. Jesus is the true vine and we are like branches (Jn 15:5). Commitment to Jesus is just like a branch being grafted into a vine. Just as a branch cannot survive without the vine, no one can receive God's life without commitment to Jesus. Most people want to grow and be full of life, but they don't like to make a commitment. But without making a commitment to Jesus, we cannot even begin to grow. Commitment to Jesus is the beginning point of spiritual life and the way to continually grow spiritually. Colossians 2:6-7 say, "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness." I first accepted Jesus as my Messiah and Lord through writing a testimony on this Bible passage at the 1981 Niagara Falls Summer Bible Conference. At that time, I was wounded and weak in many ways and had some nasty bad habits. I thought I would never survive in UBF, for all the people around me looked like spiritual giants and I felt like the dirtiest and ugliest sinner of all. Yet, by the Holy Spirit's help, I confessed Jesus as my Lord and made a commitment to him. Since then, Jesus has been faithful to me. He helped me to overcome myself, hardships and challenges, and to grow as a man of God. It is solely by Jesus' grace and faithfulness. Thank you, Jesus!

Thirdly, based on Peter's confession, Jesus builds his church. Look at verse 18. "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." Here, "this rock" refers to Peter in his role of confessing Jesus as the Messiah, and it implies that the other disciples would share in that role as they made a similar confession. Jesus is the foundation of the church (1 Cor 3:11). The apostles and prophets of the early church confirmed that Jesus is the Messiah through their testimony and teaching (Eph 2:20). Through those who testify to the Messiah, Jesus builds his church. The church is not a building or a

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human organization; it is people who confess that Jesus is the Messiah. Sometimes it seems to be weak and pitiful--filled with wounded, foolish, lowly, and despised people (1 Cor 1:27-28). But the gates of Hades cannot overcome it. Here, "the gates of Hades" refers to the power of death, which the devil holds (Heb 2:14). The power of death seems to swallow everything: the rich, the famous, the strong, the intelligent, and the educated. Even Alexander the Great, who conquered the whole world, knelt down before the power of death at age 33. Through the power of death, the devil enslaves people with fear (Heb 2:15). But the church of Jesus Christ triumphs over the power of death and the devil. Romans 8:36-37 say, "As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." Recently, Pastor Mark Vucekovich's father passed away. He was a devout Christian and a loving father and husband. His funeral ceremony was not gloomy and dark. Rather, it was a celebration of his life of faith and of his entry into the presence of the Lord as a victor who receives the crown of righteousness (2 Ti 4:8). Thank you, Jesus, for giving us great victory!

Fourthly, Jesus gives the keys of the kingdom of heaven to those who confess him as the Messiah. Look at verse 19. "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." This refers to the authority to admit entrance to the kingdom through the preaching of the gospel. When we preach the gospel, those who accept it can enter the kingdom of heaven. When we do not preach the gospel, nothing happens. In that sense we who confess Jesus as the Messiah hold the power of life and death. We are not ordinary people, but people with great authority. This authority comes only from Jesus. Jesus ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah because the gospel was not yet accomplished through his death and resurrection (20).

In this passage we have learned that confessing Jesus as the Messiah is a very significant event. It brings salvation to one's soul and leads us to a vine and branch relationship with Jesus through which we can grow spiritually. Through it, Jesus builds his church and opens entrance to the kingdom of heaven. Let's confess that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, from our hearts.