

I Will Build My Church

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's scripture reading comes from the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 16, verses 13 through 28, as printed in your liturgy.

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, Who do people say the Son of Man is? They replied, Some say John the Baptist.

Others say Elijah, and still others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. But what about you? He asked. Who do you say I am? Simon Peter answered, You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Jesus replied, Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I would build my church.

[1 : 19] And the gates of Hades will not overcome it. 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.

Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. From that time on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law.

And he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. Never, Lord, he said. This shall never happen to you. Jesus turned and said to Peter, Get behind me, Satan.

You are a stumbling block to me. You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns. Then Jesus said to his disciples, Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

[2 : 30] For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done. Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ. Good morning, Christ Church. Today I want to talk with you about one of my greatest loves.

And this is not a sermon about Catherine, although I do love her so much. It's not a sermon about my children, Constance, Scott, or Walter, though I love them so much.

It's not a sermon about running. It's not a sermon about smoothies. It's not a sermon about books or barbecue or bourbon. Love all those things. Love them all. But my greatest love is the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And my second greatest love is the thing that he loves the most. And what is that? It's the church. It's the people of God. It's the family of God.

[3 : 35] It's the disciples of Jesus Christ. I want to talk to you today about why Christ Church is worthy of our love. And there's a promise over the last 17 years of my time here at Christ Church and all our starts and stops, ups and downs.

You know, the challenges and opportunities that we face together. There's a promise that's just really carried me through the last 17 years.

And I think and I hope that it will continue to carry us through no matter what God has prepared for us in the season ahead. And it's this promise in verse 18 where Jesus says, I will build my church and the gates of Hades or the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

Now, this is one of the most discussed passages in all the New Testament. That's one of the most discussed verses in all the New Testament. And Jesus makes two promises here.

He says, I'm going to build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. That is, I will be the constructor of my church and I will be the protector of my church.

[4 : 43] And what this tells us is that Jesus did not come to merely save individual people, individual sinners. What he did, what he came to do is to build a community of salvation.

Right? He's the good shepherd who came not only to find lost sheep, but he came to form a healthy and reproducing flock. And the goal of his whole ministry is to form, to build this church.

All right, Ephesians 5 says Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. And you can see that from the very beginning of the gospel. Jesus goes in Matthew 4 and he calls his first disciples.

He says, come follow me and I'll send you out to fish for people. That is, he calls them as a community and he sends them out to form a community. And in the middle of this gospel in Matthew 12, Jesus' family, they come.

They're seeking to talk to Jesus. And Jesus turns and he says, well, who's my mother and who are my brothers? And pointing to his disciples, he says, whoever does the will of my Father in heaven, you are my brothers and my sisters and my mother.

[5 : 56] And so using that language of family, Jesus says, this is my doctrine of the church. I've come to build a new family. I've come to shed my blood and to die to bring this new family into existence.

A family that would have first claim above all other claims in your life. And what do we see when we turn to the Acts of the Apostles, the letters of the New Testament?

We see this new kind of heavenly community where the powers of God are at work. Where Christian people are bound together as brothers and sisters with ties of grace that are thicker even than ties of blood.

Where life is being lived as it's meant to be lived. And where people are carrying out all those beautiful commands of the New Testament to love one another. Forgive one another.

Confess sin to one another. Pray for one another. Serve one another. Encourage one another. Et cetera, et cetera. And that family of love we see is, you know, over that first three centuries after Christ's resurrection, it grew and grew and grew until eventually it became, you know, half of the Roman Empire was Jesus' family of love precisely because he promised that he would be the builder and the protector of his church.

[7 : 17] And so the question for us today is what kind of church? What's the mission of this church? What's Jesus' vision and his values for this church? What are his priorities?

And what are his emphases in the church? And to answer that question, you pretty much have to read the entire New Testament. But today in this text, what we learn is that Jesus builds a Christ-centered, cross-focused, disciple-making church.

Jesus builds a Christ-centered, cross-centered, disciple-making church. First of all, Jesus builds a Christ-centered church. Verse 13 says that when Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, who do the people say the Son of Man is?

And this is a turning point in Jesus' training of the Gospels. And he's testing them to see how deep his teaching has sunk into their hearts and their minds.

And so he says, well, what do you think about my person, about who I am? But before you answer, first I want you to put your finger on the pulse of the culture and popular opinion.

[8 : 28] And I want you to tell me, what do the masses of people say that the Son of Man is? And what we hear are four representative viewpoints among the crowds about who Jesus is.

In verse 14, they replied, some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Now, these are all heroes that people respected.

It was a high compliment to have your name named among the ranks of these servants of God. And yet, each view fails to recognize the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

That yes, he is like John the Baptist and Elijah and Jeremiah and the prophets, but he's far greater than any of them. He's not just a teacher. He's not just an example.

He's in a class all by himself. And what this teaches us is that it's possible to have good thoughts about Jesus, but just not the right ones. Right?

[9 : 28] It's possible for us to have high opinions of Jesus, but for those opinions to not be high enough. And that's why Jesus turns to his disciples and he says, well, what about you, plural?

Who do y'all say that I am? What do you guys say, depending on where you're from? What do you say that I am? And Jesus' one goal is that he wants to confirm in their hearts and their minds of his disciples what he's taught them about his person, about who he is.

And he wants to separate them from the opinions and the perspectives of the crowds. And he says, look, I want every single one of you to be absolutely convicted and completely committed.

I want to know right now, what are you prepared to tell other people about me? And Peter, as a representative of the group, he steps forward with great clarity of mind and conviction of heart and concision of speech.

And he says in verse 16, you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Now, Jesus, I mean, Peter does not say, I personally think that you are the Christ, as if that's a subjective opinion and not an objective fact.

[10 : 46] He doesn't say, well, for us, you are the Christ, as if it's a relative perspective and not an absolute universal truth. No, this is a firm, foundational, decisive, and emphatic confession that you, Jesus, are the Christ.

You are God's only chosen king. You are the Messiah, the deliverer, the Savior and the rescuer who's come to usher in the kingdom of God.

Now, that's only the first truth of Peter's confession. And there's a second truth, right? He says, you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God. The God who is life and the God who gives life.

You are uniquely his Son in a way that applies to no other being in the universe. You're not just another in a long line of prophets from Moses to John the Baptist.

And you're not just another little deity among the pantheon of deities among the nations. No, you are the divine Son of the living one.

[11 : 56] You are the God-man. You're the mediator between God and humanity, and there's no one else like you. What Peter's saying is that, Jesus, you're not a prophet who's come to help us find God.

You are God who's come to find us. And Jesus agrees that no lesser estimation of him will do. And that's why he says in 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.

If any of us have faith today, and I hope at least a few of us do, it's not because you've figured that out on your own. If any of us have faith, it's not because you're smarter, you're more intuitive, you're more capable than other people.

If you have faith today, it's because God has opened your eyes. It's because God has enlightened your heart. It's because God himself has revealed to you from heaven above who Jesus is.

And that's what he's saying to Peter. It's God's truth. And God gives us the grace to see the truth. And then God gives us the faith to cling to that truth with all of our soul and all of our life.

[13 : 17] And so the truth, the grace, the faith, it's all a gift from God. And it's all an undeserved gift that doesn't come from any of us. And having settled that, Jesus says in verse 18, And I tell you, this is now his colossal cosmic promise, And I tell you that you are Peter, you are Petras, And on this rock, on this Petra, I will build my church, And the gates of Hades or the gates of hell will not overcome it.

The rock, the foundation of the church is this Christ-centered confession of faith. Jesus builds his church on the rock of this truth.

1 Corinthians chapter 3, the apostle Paul says, No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

And then he says in Ephesians 2, The household of God is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets With Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. And what this means is that this Christ-centered, Christ-confessing Peter Peter is honored to be the first stone that's chosen to be built into and upon the rock of Jesus Christ.

But he's not the first stone. Well, he is the first stone, but he's not the last stone. There will be many, many more stones. Which is why when Peter eventually writes his first epistle, This is what he says in 1 Peter 2.

[14 : 51] He says, That is, If you take your stand with Peter and say that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, You too will be built into this great spiritual house that Jesus is building.

Stone upon stone. One Christ-centered person upon another Christ-centered person. And Jesus is going to keep doing that. He's been doing that for 2,000 years.

He's going to keep doing it until the last stone is put into that great edifice. And Jesus says, I'm building this church where?

Opposite the gates of hell. Now, that's not where I'd plant a church, but that's where Jesus decides to plant a church. And the gate in the ancient world, the gate of the city is City Hall, right?

It's where all the plans are made. It's where all the authority rests. And what Jesus is saying about the gates of hell is that there's this opposing kingdom with an organized strategy to destroy the purposes of God.

[16 : 17] And Jesus says, My church is going to be under attack from day one, from Good Friday onwards. My church is going to be under the fire of the gates of hell.

And it was unleashed, right, on Good Friday, undoubtedly. But if you read the Acts of the Apostles, that kingdom of darkness, the gates of hell that Jesus is talking about, keeps coming against the church in many different forms.

Physical persecution, moral subversion, organizational distraction. That's just like the first few chapters of the book of Acts. And those are all the strategies that the gates of hell continues to bring against the church today.

But Jesus' promise is that the gates of hell are not going to prevail against my church. They didn't prevail then. And they're not going to prevail now.

Because the church is immortal. The church is indestructible. The church is an anvil that has worn out many hammers.

[17 : 27] And it will continue to wear out many, many hammers. Because even death cannot prevail against the church. And that's so important for us to know that Christ-centered, Christ-confessing believers who have departed from us by death are not lost to the Christian church.

Because the church does not exist only here on the earth. Indeed, a far greater part of our membership has been glorified in heaven.

So that we have the church militant on earth and the church triumphant in heaven. And all of those Christ-centered, confessing believers in these two different companies constitute one church.

And Jesus says, that's what I'm building. That's what I'm protecting. And nothing can destroy it. Do you believe that?

Do you believe that Jesus is God's only chosen king? And that he is the one mediator between the living God and dying humanity?

[18 : 37] Because that is the bedrock truth upon which Jesus is building his church. And the gates of hell are never, ever going to prevail against that truth.

That's what keeps me going as a pastor. Jesus is building a Christ-centered church. But more than that, he's building a cross-focused church. You see, he wants his disciples to have a clear, concise conviction about his person and who he is, but also about his work and what he's come to do and come to achieve.

And that's why he goes on in verse 21. He says, from that time on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Jesus, from this point on, now that they know who he is, he wants them to know what he's come to do. And he's explicitly, insistently explaining the necessity of his death.

Because they might assume that his death is an accident. That his death is plan B. That it's something that Jesus is not actually prepared for.

[19 : 52] And Jesus says, no, no, no, no, no. My death is part of the eternal covenant of redemption. It's why God the Father sent me. It's why I, God the Son, was born.

And for Peter, this news is blowing his mind, right? He's surprised by it. He's troubled by it. He's disturbed by it. And that's why he says in verse 22, Peter took him aside and he began to rebuke Jesus.

Never, Lord, he said, this shall never happen to you. You see, Peter shares the popular opinion that Jerusalem is to be the center where the Messiah will set up his earthly rule and where he'll drive all the Romans and all the unbelievers out of the promised land.

And he'll set up this amazing house of worship to God and establish righteousness and justice according to the holy word of God. And for Peter, all this talk about the death of the Messiah and the death of God's king, that's going to ruin this revolution.

Jesus, are you saying that Jerusalem, the place where God's king should rule, is the place where he's actually going to be opposed? Jesus, are you saying that the people who should most want to honor and worship God's only king are actually going to torture him and kill him?

[21 : 19] Never. Never, Lord. Now, how does Jesus respond to Peter's rebuke? Jesus basically says, Peter, you're being anti-God, right?

Verse 23, Jesus turned to Peter and said, Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me. You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.

See, it's possible to be sincere, well-meaning, Christ-centered people, but that does not mean that we are fully aligned with Jesus Christ.

And what's the problem here? The problem is that, Peter, you're supposed to be behind me. Peter, you're supposed to be under me. Peter, you're supposed to be following me, but somehow you've gotten before me.

Somehow you've gotten ahead of me. Somehow you've elevated yourself above me so that you're now advising me and correcting me. When your role is to listen to me and submit to me and obey me.

[22 : 30] And what's the problem here? What's the root of the problem? The problem beneath the problem, Jesus says, is your mind. It's the way you're thinking. What has Peter set his mind upon?

He set his mind upon human things, upon earthly things. But what has Jesus set his mind upon? He set his mind upon God and upon the things of heaven.

And that's the question for us. When we start our day, what are we setting our minds upon? What's the pattern of thinking that we take on when we begin each new day?

Because the Apostle Paul says in Romans 12, do not conform to the pattern of this world and its way of thinking, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

He says in Colossians 3, since then you've been raised with Christ. Set your hearts on things above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God, and set your minds on things above, not on earthly things, for you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

[23 : 39] You see, Peter and me and maybe you, we need to have our neural pathways rewired. And we need to develop the mind of Jesus Christ and not correct his word, but submit to his word and learn to think his thoughts after him.

It's not enough to be a church-going, Christ-centered person. Because Peter here obviously takes this orthodox truth that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, and he pours into that truth some very unbiblical ideas that somehow he could be an unsuffering Christ, a Christ without a cross.

You see, it's possible to be right about the person of Jesus and who he is, but to be completely wrong about the work of Jesus and what he's come to do. And why does Jesus rebuke Peter's rebuke here?

Because without the death of Jesus on the cross, all people, including Peter, would be eternally lost.

Without the death of Jesus on his cross, all people would be without God and without salvation and without hope in this world.

[25 : 03] You see, Jesus' cross is the final revelation of our human condition. It shows us that we are far more flawed than we ever dared to believe.

And that we're living under the curse of our sins, that we are living, we have the wrath and the judgment of God upon our souls without that cross. But the cross also reveals to us the final revelation of divine grace, that we're far more loved and accepted than we ever dared to imagine.

The cross says to us that God sent his Son as the mediator to die in the place of sinners, to absorb our sins into his very self, and to bear that wrath and to bear that judgment of God that we deserved so that he might remove from us the curse and the stain of sin and to give us all that mercy and all that peace and all that blessedness and all that life that none of us deserved.

And you know what so deeply moves me about this? is that Jesus not only mercifully corrects Peter, and Peter is so very wrong and needs to be corrected, but Jesus also mercifully dies for Peter.

Peter's supposed to be the rock for building the church, but he becomes a stone for stumbling. Peter is supposed to be the servant to Jesus, but somehow he became the Satan and the adversary of Jesus.

[26 : 43] You see, Peter had said, I'll be loyal to you, Jesus, until I die with you. But then Peter denied Jesus three times and swore up and down.

He never knew Jesus. But you know what? Jesus dies for the likes of Peter. And Jesus dies for the likes of me and the likes of you, people who are total failures, utterly unworthy.

And he says, you know what? I'm going to build my church on these people, people who are poor in spirit, people who say to themselves and say to God, nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.

That's the kind of church Jesus wants to build, a Christ-centered church and a cross-focused church. And finally, a disciple-making church.

Are you guys still with me? I'm a little medicated this morning, and I can barely even hear myself preach. So you've got to just give me a little something like Presbyterians, you can just blink your eyes.

[27 : 50] Let me know. Let me know you're still here. He wants His disciples to have a clear, concise conviction, not only of His person and who He is and His work and what He's come to do, but He wants us to know how to be and how to make disciples in response to His person and His work.

And that's why He says in verse 24, whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me. He does not say, I will save you if you deny yourself.

I will love you if you deny yourself. No, the idea here is because I've set my heart on you, because I've saved you by my grace, because I've united you to me by my blood shed on the cross, because I've put the Holy Spirit in you and put my new life inside of you, therefore, you should deny yourself.

Christianity is a religion of self-renunciation. And that is the exact opposite of everything everyone around you is telling you to do.

Be yourself. Right? Hallelujah. You're the captain of your soul. You're the master of your fate.

[29 : 10] You do you. And Jesus is saying, no, no. Say farewell to all those old and tired, self-centered, self-interested, self-preserving ways of living.

Renounce power. Renounce your desire to have honor and glory and the approval of other people. When Jesus says, deny yourself, He's saying, do what I did.

I emptied myself, I lowered myself, and I said over and over again, not my will, Father, but your will be done, because there's something far greater than the self to live for.

The kingdom of God is so great. It's so worth denying yourself even good things, even legitimate things. The kingdom of God is so worth trading in all of your comfort and all of your security for a cross of self-sacrifice.

And friends, the church exists to make disciples like that. People who look like, smell like, think like, talk like, act like. Jesus, who denied Himself and took up His cross.

[30 : 24] And that's why He says, come follow me. Come get behind me. Come live under me. He says in verse 25, whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.

If you turned in on yourself and you're looking out only for your own interests, your own advancement, your own reputation, your ease, your comfort, your popularity, your beauty, your prestige, your success, your power, and your influence, Jesus is telling you right here, right now, you are going to lose real life because it cannot be found in any of those things.

Real life can only be found in a loving, living, saving relationship with me. So get behind me and follow me.

Verse 26, what good will it be for you to gain the whole world yet forfeit your soul? Or what can you give in exchange for your soul? There's no temporal or material gain that can make up for the loss of your soul.

Jesus says, do the math. Right? If you seek temporal trinkets and material comforts and earthly rewards, but you end up with eternal condemnation, that's a bad deal.

[31 : 44] That's just a bad deal. People who seek first their own interests will never find their satisfaction even in this life, much less the life to come. And Jesus is saying, look, those who do not deny themselves temporally are in fact denying themselves eternally.

glory. And so he says in verse 27, the Son of Man is going to come in His Father's glory with His angels and then He will reward everyone according to what they have done.

Following me, following my desires, following my concerns, following my cares, following my agenda, being caught up in something that's far bigger and better than yourself, will be rewarded in my kingdom beyond what you could possibly imagine now.

And Jesus is saying, look, that's why my church, my church exists, to make disciples who value Jesus' future reward more than we value anything anyone can give us in this life.

life. The church exists for this very purpose, to make disciples who can say what many, many people have said, that He is no fool, to give what He cannot keep in order to gain what He cannot lose.

[33 : 13] And if you live that way, oh my goodness, the world will be set on fire. friends, the church belongs to Jesus Christ.

It doesn't belong to me, it doesn't belong to you, it belongs to Jesus Christ. He planned it, He announced His intention to build it, He died to purchase it with His blood and the resurrected living Christ is now building it, He's animating it, He's directing it, He's protecting it, He's making disciples within it and Jesus is going to come again as He says to receive it and to present it to Himself as a perfect church, a radiant church without spot, without wrinkle, without blemish, pure and whole and undefiled and I gotta say, I don't wanna live for anything else than Jesus' vision for His church.

So let's love what Jesus loves and let's give our lives for what Jesus gave His life for, a Christ-centered, cross-focused, disciple-making church.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.