

The ultimate question

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 May 2023

Preacher: Dave Bott

[0 : 00] We're reading from Matthew 16, verse 13 to 23. Now, when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked the disciples, Who do people say that the Son of Man is?

And they said, Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. He said to them, But who do you say that I am?

Simon Peter said, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered him, Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven.

and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. And he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

[1 : 18] And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, Far be it from you, Lord. This shall never happen to you. But he turned and said to Peter, Get behind me, Satan.

You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man. Well, good morning. My name is Dave.

I'm one of the pastors, if I haven't met you before. Why don't we pray as we come to God's word?

Yeah, Father, as we just sung, let me echo that, the prayer of that song, that we need you to speak to us.

Lord, if whatever storms are raging in our life, we need to be preoccupied and set our eyes on the Lord Jesus, because it is in him that we have hope and life and blessing.

So please reveal your son to each one of us through your word. In his name I pray. Amen. Well, I've had a few important questions that have shaped my life to this point.

[2 : 35] I've had to sign a contract with the bank about where I'm going to live, and there was a lot of conditions there that I had to agree to.

I've had to sign a contract with this place of work about the things I'm going to do, and I made public promises about the things I'm going to do. I had to answer a bunch of questions. And perhaps more fundamental again is when Martin Shadwick married Emma and I, he asked, do you take...

Oh, wait, what did he ask? What's the question? I forgot the wording of it. Oh, how awful. Yeah, anyway, I gave consent.

I promise I did. Pete did a video. I can play it. I can prove it. Now, these things have really shaped my life. And there's probably other questions too that are important in your life.

But we're coming to a passage that is confronting us and telling us there is one ultimate question that defines who you are and your future.

[3 : 49] It defines whether you have hope, whether you have blessing, whether you have life.

There is one ultimate question. And that question has nothing to do with you or me.

It's got nothing to do with what you do and what you're agreeing to. Jesus is asking each one of us through the words of Matthew here, who do you say that I am?

I think this question, we wrestle with it because, or I wrestle with it precisely because it's got nothing to do with me and what I can do.

The Word of God says that based on the answer to this question, our eternity weighs in the balance, whether we are right with God, whether we have blessing forever in his kingdom or not.

Romans 10, 9 and 10 says, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

[5 : 05] That's it. You will be saved. Based on the answer to this question. So this passage, it marks a climax and a turning point in Matthew's account of the life of Jesus so far.

His purpose hasn't been to give us a whole bunch of isolated stories like a children's book, which we can pick and choose our favourite and just get spiritual lessons from them, like they're fables or something.

His purpose from the very first sentence is to paint a picture of the Jesus that people met. He's assembling the evidence. He could have put way more in here, but he's chosen this and he's brought us to this point and he's basically telling us, the reader, you've seen enough.

It's time to decide. You need to start deciding. At the passage just prior, the Pharisees had already come to their conclusion.

They demand an irrefutable sign that he is sent from heaven, which sounds very godly, as if they're going to respond based on the evidence, but what are they actually doing?

[6 : 18] What they're doing is dismissing everything they've heard and seen. It is not godly at all. So what about us? After all we have heard and seen, are we going to demand more and bring our own questions, demands for Jesus to answer?

He doesn't dance to their tune. He won't answer according to their criteria. He won't answer according to ours. He's asking us to look at him and what he has said and done.

In verse 13, we are told that Jesus and the Twelve are far north of Galilee.

They're far away from Jerusalem, in the heart of Gentile territory. It's almost a visual representation, I think, that he's taken his disciples away from the religious leaders, away from this religious thinking, for them to come up with their conclusion about who he is.

And just before this, we have a warning. Beware of the teaching of these religious leaders. Beware of this kind of teaching. Just a little bit of it can spread through the whole.

[7 : 38] If you think like this, it will blind you to who I am and God's salvation. Human criteria, religious criteria, will keep us blind to God's salvation.

What I mean by religious criteria is anything that presumes that God blesses or curses based on what you do or don't do. So, we have three groups of people and three responses to Jesus.

The first group is the religious leaders. We know their conclusion already. They're determined to destroy Jesus. They want nothing to do with him.

They want him out of their lives. They've concluded he can't be from God. He's not religious enough. How about that?

Jesus isn't religious enough. His lineage is of no account. He defiles himself by being a friend of sinners and tax collectors and Gentiles.

[8 : 55] He doesn't keep the traditions of the elders of the law. He claims authority above the law, breaking the Sabbath. He makes himself equal with God, claiming to be able to forgive sins.

Like, this guy, we've got to get rid of him. He's not religious enough and he's arrogant. Their conclusion, he's a fraud.

Then we've got the crowds. What about the crowds? Well, the crowds have a much higher view of Jesus, don't they?

Which probably isn't surprising since they've seen so many miracles and wonders, all the healing of their family members and their community.

They've got a higher view of Jesus. And their responses are really thoughtful. They're respectful. They're believing he does have divine authority.

[9 : 54] John the Baptist, like the prophets of old, he spoke with the authority of God, urging repentance from sin, willing to oppose kings for their ungodliness.

Maybe they saw a bit of that in Jesus. Maybe they saw something like Elijah who demonstrated a faithfulness to God when the whole nation wasn't faithful.

Or the working wonders and miracles that Elijah did, raising the dead and cleansing lepers. But now it's just on a, it's just been amplified the amount of miracles Jesus does.

Or maybe they saw something of the suffering of the prophet Jeremiah and Jesus. The confrontation with the religious leaders. Maybe they saw something of his suffering.

These are all the very thoughtful answers, respectful answers. But Matthew has showed us a picture of Jesus that yes, he occupies the category of prophet, a messenger from God, but there's

just something about him that breaks that box.

[11:12] There's words and deeds that he is creating a whole new category for himself. So the Pharisees, they are so far away from the truth and the crowds are so much closer to the truth.

But the problem is whether you are drowning 100 kilometres out to sea or drowning 100 metres from the shore, you are still in grave danger.

The context suggests a reason for these dangerous conclusions which is Jesus' warning of beware of the religious teaching.

Anything that presumes that God blesses or doesn't bless based on what you do. I think that explains the crowd's conclusion of the prophet.

See, a prophet tells you who God is and what he wants from you. We need more than a prophet. We need more than someone saying this is true and this is what you should do.

[12:29] He's not just a good teacher and example to follow. If that's the case, that's just religious thinking. Beware of that.

I'm going to give a modern example of it because to hopefully help us grasp this for us today. I'm not sure if you've heard of this guy or if you listen to him or not.

I know a few people have read some of his books. Jordan Peterson, he does a lot of podcasts and speaks a lot. I've heard him say incredible statements.

He reads the Gospels and he finds it hard to believe that it was just humans who wrote this because Jesus is too clever is basically his point.

That's a profound statement. He often refers to Christ as the ultimate example of virtue, of goodness, of beauty, who we should be imitating.

[13:30] him. They're incredible statements. But that's the problem. He stops there. Yes, Jesus might be someone to imitate but he never says that he is king to whom we must give our lives.

He never says he is saviour because I'm a sinner in great need. That's the danger of it. It can sound so respectful, so close to the truth and yet so far away.

Because of our sin, because of the curse of living in a broken world that we're wrestling with every day, because death is the wages of sin and hangs over all of us like a dark cloud, we need a saviour.

We don't just need a prophet, we need a saviour. We need a king. So to see Christ for who he is, we need to be emptied of this religious thinking.

And we need to come to the gospel portrait of Jesus that Matthew has showed us and let him define himself. So that brings us to the third group, the disciples.

[14:53] disciples. So verse 15, the question here, but who do you say that I am? It's important we know that the you there is plural.

We don't really have a way of saying that in English. Who do you say that I am? Who do y'all say that I am? It's plural. So we can take Peter's response here as representing the 12.

You are the Christ, the king, the son of the living God. Now all the gospels agree with slight variations on this conclusion.

So Mark says you are the Christ. Luke, the Christ of God. John's gospel, the Christ, the son of God. This confession, this expression of belief is what qualifies you to be a Christian, to belong to Jesus and be saved.

Full stop. We want to add to that because I think we're so prone to that religious thinking. Full stop. If this is your confession, you are saved.

[16:15] there's no more to it. Jesus' declaration to Peter belongs to you as well. Blessed are you.

You are blessed. You may not feel blessed with things going on in your life. You are blessed if you can make this confession salvation. Because all God's promises of heaven, of relationship with him are yours because you have the son.

But it's the father who reveals the son to us. We can't work this out in our own intelligence, our own wisdom. The father reveals the son.

The one who created the son to shine brightly also needs to give eyes so that we can see that light. Same too spiritually. The father has revealed the son for all the world to see.

We have the Bible. We have teachers across the world in all different churches teaching this gospel. It's been revealed. But the father must also give you eyes spiritually speaking to see.

[17:36] We are all in darkness in our natural state, in our religious assumptions. actions. So if you can see Jesus' light, don't credit your own knowledge.

Don't credit your own wisdom for working it out. Don't even credit your own humility for accepting that you need a saviour. There's only one reason you can see and that's because the father has shared his view of his son to you, he's opened your eyes.

It's purely grace. Not even this confession is your doing. He created it. If you are struggling to see Jesus, then the answer is ask God to open your eyes.

He's only too ready to answer that kind of prayer. So understanding what it means for Jesus to be the Christ, we must also understand what content to put in that and what he came to do, his mission.

And we're told that in the next verse, his mission is to build the church. The church, not just the institution, talking the people, his people.

[19:09] He came to build his people. And notice Christ himself is the builder. I will build my church. We might think it's the Christian's job.

Yes, we've got a role to play in that. But no, it's Christ who builds the church. Now, surprisingly, he says, now for you who like puns, and I'm thinking of you, Joel Kelsey, Peter, Greek Petros, can both mean a rock and is a male name.

So, there's the pun. You, Peter, on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Now, these verses are hotly debated and so I'm going to use the excuse of time to just do a pretty cursory summary of the options and I'll share what I think that I encourage you to talk more over morning tea.

So, assuming that Jesus isn't just cracking a joke, a pun, he wants to make a point here. What is the rock? What is the bedrock of the foundation of the church?

[20:32] Well, the Catholic view, this verse is critical to the Catholic view of having a Pope, having a representative of Christ on earth, a successor to Peter, linking that with verse 19.

I'm going to give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. But, there's nothing mentioned here about a successor to Peter. While Acts and the epistles show that Peter is something, along with James and John, something of a first among equals of the early church, he's never painted as having exclusive authority.

There's no circumstance where his final judgment is the authority on the matter. An example there is Acts 15, where they had the council in Jerusalem.

Peter doesn't give the final verdict. I think you would expect that if Peter was the head of the church in a pope sense. Nor is Peter infallible, like we see that in the very next paragraph.

And Paul had to rebuke Peter publicly because he was acting in a way that undermined the gospel. So he's not infallible either. So there's a whole bunch of reasons why that Catholic view of a successor, head of the church, a pope view, doesn't stand the weight of scripture.

[22:01] So what are the other options? Broadly taken, maybe Peter here is representing all believers. So he's just the first stone laid as Jesus builds his church, person by person.

Or some other significance of the fact that Peter is addressed personally, so maybe just the leader of the early church. Or is he representing the twelve apostles?

Or another option is that it's not Peter who's the rock, but it's the confession Peter makes. You are the Christ. That is the rock of the church.

Okay, there's the options. I'm not going to go into it too much more. You guys can debate it over morning tea. I'm just going to show you where I'm up to. If Peter is the representative of the twelve when he makes that confession, you are the Christ.

He's speaking on behalf of the twelve. Then maybe he's also representing the twelve when Jesus speaks to him here. So it's the apostles who are the rock, the foundation of the church.

[23:11] Now I like that in my current thinking because that aligns with other pictures of God. Like Ephesians 2, the apostles are the foundation of the temple or Revelation 22.

They are the foundation of the city of God that we're hoping for. To me I think this fits because your confession, if you're a believer, your confession of Jesus, what is it based on?

It's not based on other Christians primarily telling you the gospel. It's based on what the apostles have told us, their eyewitness testimony in their confession.

So that's why I'm saying I think the rock represents the twelve. Our confession is based on this first confession of the twelve.

So I'll leave that with you. Then we have a wonderful promise. The gates of hell shall not prevail against the church.

[24 : 23] Now gates here can mean fortifications, so the full forces, the full army of hell or Hades, the place of the dead.

So I think RSV translation can help us. the powers of death shall not prevail against it. And I think this is incredible because let's face it, death prevails against everything.

Doesn't it? Isn't that why life is so painful? Death prevails against everyone and everything. But death is not just the natural life cycle, it's the wages of sin.

This is crucial to know how Jesus builds his church. He must take the curse on sin that we deserve. Death won't prevail against his church because death didn't prevail against him.

He took that curse, paid it in full and raised from the dead. There's nothing, there's no wages to pay anymore. It didn't prevail against him, so all who are united him, it won't prevail.

[25 : 52] Nothing is able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. God, what a wonderful hope we have.

And if you don't yet know this kind of hope, then I would urge you to keep wrestling with this ultimate question because that's where you'll find hope. Who do you say that I am?

Well, so far we've been focusing on what Christ does. He will build the church, he will make sure death doesn't prevail.

Then we get a surprising role given to the apostles and to the church. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Now, I don't know about you, but my reaction to that is, hang on, don't do that, not a good idea.

Jesus, are you sure you want to put that kind of authority in people's hands? Because the keys is a picture representing like you can unlock the door and let people in to the kingdom of heaven or you can shut it.

[27 : 06] And there's a guarantee given, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

I think what helps us to understand these keys is to look at a negative example of the keys in Luke 11 52 and then Matthew 23, 13.

So let me read. say, Jesus saying to the teachers of the law, woe to you lawyers, for you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves and you hindered those who were entering.

And then the Matthew equivalent of that verse, woe to you scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites, for you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces, for you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.

Now how did they have the keys? They had the keys because they were teachers. And what they were teaching wasn't true knowledge. It was religious, focused on self, not focused on trust in what God can do.

[28 : 18] And so they were shutting the door of heaven for people. That's the negative example. So I think that helps us understand what Jesus is saying here.

Based on this confession, apostles and church, you can open the door to heaven for people by professing this gospel that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

In as much as we can get that across, we are opening a door for people to come in. What an incredible privilege.

Again, it's Christ who builds his church, but he's going to do it through this confession that every Christian has. I'm not talking evangelism here. I'm saying if you're a Christian, you confess Christ. That's what it is to be a Christian. And as much as your life and your words can show that, we have the privilege of having the keys of the kingdom.

[29 : 20] We have the gospel to share. So how exciting this moment must have been for the apostles.

Here they have this special relationship with the king of the world, promising that they are blessed, they are part of his people, that they have the father as well.

Simply on the basis of seeing and confessing who he is, that they have hope that death will not prevail, and they've given such a privileged role in proclaiming this confession of faith to others

also.

Now it's precisely because of their conviction that Jesus is the Christ that when he started to lay out his plan for ascending the throne, that's what brings about this reaction, or part of it at least.

Okay, we're going to go to Jerusalem. Fantastic. That's where we should go. I'm going to suffer.

Okay, not so good, but I suppose we shouldn't have expected it to be easy.

[30 : 31] At the hands of elders and chief priests and scribes. I was expecting Roman army there, but I don't know why you'd submit to those guys and be killed.

Hang on. They probably barely heard the next part about being raised. Peter, on the one hand, the first part of the passage, he is thinking God's thoughts about the Christ because the Father had revealed it to him, and here he now arrogantly presumes that he knows God's plan, God's will, better than the Christ.

that's not the plan. As if he's just saying to the Christ he's confessed, hang on, I'm not sure you understand what Lord means.

It doesn't mean that. I don't know about you, but don't we have the same reaction? Most days, I'm spilling over into next week's passage, but Jesus told his disciples, if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

I can relate to Peter's reaction here when discipleship means following the path of suffering. That's not the plan.

[31 : 58] Don't you understand, Lord, what it means to be Lord? But anyway, we'll come to that next week. We need to first be gripped by what Jesus does on our behalf before we look at what it means to follow him.

Peter thinks he can contribute something, that he has a better way, that maybe he could fight for the king. But this rock's contribution just becomes a stumbling block.

book. It's only after the resurrection that Peter really understands the full picture of who Christ is. It's genuine belief here, but it's partial. He doesn't fully get it. And Jesus sees the same temptation he received after his baptism and the same temptation he's going to face in the garden of Gethsemane.

He sees that same temptation through the words of Peter. You can be king without going to the cross. Now here's the beautiful thing.

[33 : 11] Look at the king we have. He doesn't for a moment entertain that temptation. He is determined to be trusting his father and trusting his father's plan to take the path of suffering, to take the death for our sake, for our salvation.

Peter contributes nothing to this plan. If anything, he's an obstacle to it. You and I contribute nothing to our salvation. We don't even need a complete understanding of Jesus.

Yes, you need to understand he died for sins and was raised, but can we really have a complete understanding of that? You don't even need a consistent trust in Jesus.

Even if you're a Christian, if you declare faith, even that has been given to you by the Father opening your eyes, we contribute nothing to our salvation.

It's his faith to his father. It's his faithfulness to his father's plan that saves us. this king is so full of grace.

[34 : 46] All he wants is for us to stop thinking in terms of what we do. Stop looking at that. Look to him, who he is, what he has done.

That all the death, the curse of sin for our unfaithfulness that you and I do deserve, he takes it. All of heaven's blessings because of his faithfulness that you and I don't deserve, he gives it.

We contribute nothing. Which makes this question the only ultimate question in life. Because it's not about what you can contribute, it's about who he is and what he has done.

Can I urge you, don't rest until you can answer it. Rejoice if you can and give glory to the father's grace in giving you eyes to see.

Keep coming back to it when your perspective turns in on yourself again and again. Keep coming back to it. And realise the privilege and calling we have that we have the keys to open up heaven for people.

[36 : 00] Inasmuch as we profess that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God in whom is hope and blessing in life. Let me pray.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for sending your son and Lord Jesus, thank you for coming and choosing to go to the cross.

Not because you had to but because you delighted to trust your father and obey your father. Thank you, Holy Spirit, for opening our eyes so that we can confess Jesus as Lord and be saved. And Lord, I pray that you would be continuing to build your church. Lord, if there's anyone here today who doesn't know you, use my weak words to do powerful things in their heart. And Lord, for all of us, please help us to keep coming back again and again to who you are and what you have done and not ourselves. In Jesus' name, amen.