The Church's Builder

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Date: 08 September 2019

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[0:00] Good morning, everybody. Good morning. It's really nice to see you. If you're new to the church, you don't know me, my name is Aaron. Come and say hi afterwards.

I'd love to meet you. So we are starting out the fall term here, and we're going back to Matthew's gospel, which will stay in until Advent.
So a passage today, Matthew 16, 1 to 20. Okay, so these chapters coming up until Advent, these sort of four or five chapters, it's very dense.
It's mostly teaching. So basically, we're going to sort of work through it here this morning, the first 20 verses. And we can actually break the first 20 verses in half, the first ones being 1 to 12, and then 13 to 20.
So first, let's look at 1 to 12. And as you heard the passage read, you'd hear there are a lot of distracted minds in this passage, a lot of wrong-headed people.
[0:59] Let's get into it. Verse 1, Jesus is approached by Pharisees and Sadducees. And this is actually quite an unlikely alliance. Normally, these two groups didn't like each other, but they were united in their hatred of Jesus.

So they approached Jesus and they say, show us something. Do one of your things. Do one of your things that you do.
Perform for us. But look, Jesus knows that no matter what he would have done, they wouldn't have believed him, believed in him, or trusted him.
And we know this because Jesus had done a lot of really amazing miracles already. I mean, he had healed, he had exercised demons, he had come to storm, he had raised a little girl from the dead. That's a very solid lineup right there. And it hadn't moved these folks to faith. Now look at verses 2 and 3.
[2:00] Jesus says, what a tragic situation this is. What a sad situation is this. You guys can read the weather. You can read the signs of the weather, but you can't read the signs of something wonderful happening right now.

The kingdom of God is breaking into the world and you're missing it. And this was like the religious experts.
They were missing it. It's quite remarkable to think, isn't it, that Jesus' greatest human enemies were the religious elite.
They just refused to believe they needed what Jesus came to offer them. And they just want to play with them.
Show us a sign. Do one of your tricks. After this, the disciples turn up. And Jesus is still thinking about that interaction he had with the Pharisees and Sadducees.
[3:13] And in verse 6, Jesus says to them, the disciples, he says, guys, watch. Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

What does this mean? What's leaven? Leaven's like yeast, right? So it's this picture of something that invisibly produces great effects. It spreads. It grows. Like yeast and bread.
So an example as it relates to a person would be like in your office or classroom. Let's say you have somebody in that situation who has a really toxic personality.
And the leaven of that person just sort of produces this very unhealthy work culture. It just sort of spreads out and produces more unhealth and it changes the whole work culture.
I'm not talking about the St. John's office, by the way. In case you're wondering there. The leaven of the Pharisees, their sort of spreading thing that they did, it was their teaching and their attitude.
[4:12] And so Jesus says to the disciples, guys, you're listening. Beware of these guys. Beware what they're saying. Beware the leaven of the religious leaders.

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Then in verse 7, the disciples are like, yeah, leaven. Right, yeah. Bread. Bread. Lunch. Oh, we totally forgot lunch. We totally forgot lunch. Who was supposed to pick up lunch?
Who brought, did anyone bring masaka? I don't know what they eat, but who brought the masaka and the kebabs? No one? Ah. I mean, it's a comical situation. Jesus in verse 8 says, are you really talking about bread right now?
You just listen to what I said and your reaction is to worry about the food rations. And Jesus kind of pivots and he says, look, even if you did forget the food, even if you did forget lunch, I just, I literally just fed 5,000 people with one person's lunchbox.
Like some kid's lunchbox. I actually did it a couple of times. And then Jesus says in verse 11, I'm actually, I'm not even talking about bread though. This is the thing. I'm not talking about bread.
[5:25] It's a figure of speech. I'm talking about the religious leaders teaching. Beware of that.
Now, I don't know if Jesus ever did a facepalm. You're like, oh. But this was, if he did, it was right then.

So what's this got to do with me and you? Well, in this first little section, there's a lot of language about thinking. And it's going to come up more in the preceding verses. Jesus says to his disciples, he says, do you remember?
Do you perceive? Do you understand? And they kind of don't, right? And it's a tragedy. Until he has to explain to them really, really carefully. It's a tragedy. You can be with Jesus.
You can be with Jesus. And he's teaching you something really, really important. But because of a distracted mind, you miss it. You can miss stuff.
I think it's a great warning to us, isn't it? We can spend great chunks of our life missing stuff God has to teach us.
[6:29] Because our minds are set on trivial things. And I would love to say a lot more about that. But we're going to move on. Let's look at the next section, verses 13 to 20.

So Jesus then moves on. He goes on a trip with his disciples. They arrive at Philippi. And Jesus asks the big question of his disciples. Who do people say that the Son of Man is? He's talking about himself there.
Who do people say that I am? In verse 14, they say the disciples. Some say John the Baptist. Others say Elijah. Others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets. I mean, they're not terrible answers. So there was this growing consensus that Jesus was pretty special.
But the idea of him just being a prophet obviously falls pretty short. And he presses them. And in verse 15, he says, But who do you? Who do you say that I am?
And then we get Peter's iconic, amazing response. You are the Christ. The Son of the living God. In Christ, it means the one who rescues.
[7:39] The word in Hebrew, it's Messiah. Christ. Messiah. So Peter says, you're the Messiah. The one who's come to rescue us. Jesus responds. Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

I wonder how Peter thought he came to the conclusion about Jesus' identity. I wonder if he's thinking, oh yeah, I've nailed it. This is awesome. I'm a very clever chap. However, he thought he came to this idea.
Jesus makes it very clear to him. It was a gift. It was a revelation from God. And it's just a beautiful reminder that if you have faith, it is because God bent down to you.
And made himself known to you. And he placed something in your mind. The most important, most beautiful thing you can know.
That Jesus is the Messiah. It's a great reminder that when we come to faith, we must relinquish any sense of merit. Any sense of, I work this out. I'm quite clever.
[8:49] No, it's divine disclosure. Your faith is a gift to you. The passage keeps going. Verse 18. Jesus goes on. I tell you, you are Peter.

And on this rock, I will build my church. And the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Goodness. There's a lot there. There's a lot, lot, lot there. So first, I want to talk about the church in general. And its place in God's big story. So let's go to sort of 40,000 feet here. What does this verse tell us about the place of the church in God's big story?
So my guess is, is many Christians would say, church is great. It is great. Church is great. Fantastic. But many would say, yeah, it's great.

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It's, it's just a, it's a fantastic resource to help me with my personal relationship with Jesus. And that is not a terrible way to think. But it falls really short in terms of how the Bible thinks about church.
[10:03] So looking at this again, at like 40,000 feet, I want to remind you of a few things. From the very beginning of creation, the purpose of God was to make a people, a community, a people to be with, a people to share life with, starting with Adam and Eve.

Now, of course, sin entered that equation. Sin interrupted that. And what does sin do? It divides and separates. It separates people from God. It separated people from each other.
But God keeps reaffirming his big plan. So we get in Genesis 12, he makes a promise to Abraham and he says, I'll make you a great nation and you'll be my people.
Then in Exodus, God gathers his people at Sinai to hear his words and he starts to put more parameters around what it looks like to be his people. He starts to define that more.
And there's many more examples I can give. The point, though, is a people to dwell with has always been God's plan. Now, you could confirm this negatively.
[11:07] This is what I mean. In the Bible, scattering is always a sign of God's judgment. We see that Adam and Eve kicked out of the garden, Tower of Babel, etc.

Scattering, sign of judgment. Gathering, a sign of God's rescue. A reminder of God's great purpose for the world to gather a people. So the question, where does the church fit into God's redemptive story?
Is it over here? Good resource. Help me with my personal relationship with Jesus. No. Does it help you with your personal relationship with Jesus? Of course it does.
Where does the church fit into the big story, though? It fits right in the center. Because God's plan has always been about a people. A gathered people. A community. Look, if I said to you, Christianity is all about morality, you'd say that's a terrible attitude, Aaron.
That's reductionist. It's shallow. And it's incomplete. And you'd be right to say that. Well, when we say Christianity is all about just me and Jesus, that is also reductionist. It is a small view.
[12:12] And it's incomplete. Okay, that's big picture stuff. Let's dig in now to verse 18, because there's a lot to say here. Let's add some details.

So, verse 18. I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Jesus says three huge things. Actually, four huge things.
First, and this is sort of the controversial one. You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, et cetera. You are Peter, and on this rock.
Is Jesus saying he will build the church on Peter the person, i.e. the first bishop, the first great leader? Is he going to build his church on Peter? Or is he saying he will build his church on the confession of Jesus as the Messiah, Peter's confession?
Or is it he will build his church on Jesus? Right. It's probably a mix. Most likely the latter. The church is built on the foundation of Jesus.
[13:17] The king who's come to save his people. That's what that means. So there you go. That's 500 years of debate cleared up fairly snappily. You're welcome. You're welcome.

You are Peter on this rock. I will build my church is the next bit. Jesus will build his church. Goodness, what a relief. The church is not a human idea.
You know, it's not like after Jesus was ascended, the disciples got together and said, folks, we have got to get ourselves organized here. Let's start something that'll be helpful.
Jesus builds the church. This is Jesus thing. What we're doing here today. What people are doing all over the world. Which is why we never pray, God, Holy Spirit, you're welcome here today.
Or we never say, you know, we're at church and God really showed up. It sounds really nice. It's just the opposite, though, of what is actually going on. Jesus gathers us.
[14:27] We turn up to the thing that God is doing. We turn up to his thing. The church is not just this kind of helpful resource over here that we can take or leave.

It's actually an extension of the very nature of God, the very being of God. By starting the church, Jesus is calling us into a relationship that has existed eternally between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
It's just mind-blowing stuff, isn't it? So the church is not a human idea. It arises out of the very nature of God. It's part of who he is.
I don't know how you feel about church this morning, but this has certainly got some big implications here in terms of the time we give to church, the priority we make it in our lives.

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But I'll let you sit with that. Let's keep going. You are Peter on my rock, on this rock. I will build my church. And the gates of hell will not prevail against it.
[15:34] That's the next big chunk. The gates of hell will not prevail against it. Jesus builds the church, and he protects the church. This is great, isn't it? The gates of hell probably means death.

It's probably talking about death. So Jesus is saying, the worst thing the world can throw at you can't defeat the church. It is immortal. It is eternal. Nothing can destroy it.
And this should be a great comfort to us, a great reassurance to us, given what people say about the Christian faith, given the various attempts through the ages to destroy it, to wipe it away, given the fact that 100,000 Christians are martyred every year, despite the fact that church can feel weak and ordinary.
Christ will protect it. So Jesus will build the church. He will keep going and move forward. So Jesus will build the church.
He will keep the church. He will look after it. In verse 19 here, I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven.
[16:43] And whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Okay, this is very dense and sort of quite confusing. So let me just say a whole little random stuff and then pull it all together.

Okay. Firstly, it's kind of where we get the mythology of St. Peter sitting at the pearly gates, kind of unlocking the door and letting people in and out. Right. That's where the mythology comes from. This, this verse here, that's not quite right.
It's actually not completely off, but it's, but it's not, it's not quite right. We'll get there. So what does it mean? It's a bit tricky. So let me say a few things here. In general, what it's saying is that Jesus, the builder and head of the church, does this remarkable thing.
And he delegates some authority, his authority over the church, to the church, to the church leaders. So let me define a few things quickly here.
That'll help us understand that. What do keys do? The keys unlock and open. They shut and lock. That's saying the church can open the kingdom, proclaim it locked, proclaim it closed.
[17:43] We'll come back to that in a moment. The binding, loosing stuff. What does that mean? It seems to be saying that stuff we do here, the community of God does here, has, does something in heaven and vice versa.

Okay, there we go. So that's a few things. It's pull it all together. What does that verse mean? It's saying that the church is God's, agent. We interpret the Bible, we communicate the gospel.
So, someone in church this morning is not a Christian, say, and they confess their sins to the Lord and the confession at the start of the service.
And then the church proclaims, you are forgiven. Because of what Christ has done on the cross, you are forgiven. There is no record of your sin in heaven. You'll be welcomed into heaven when you die.
Why? Alternately, someone comes to church and they talk to me afterwards and they say, I do not believe any of this nonsense. And I say, if you spend your life rejecting God, when you die, God will reject you and you will spend eternity without him.
[18:48] Heaven will be closed to you. So the things we do here affect eternity. This is the binding and loosing language.

That's what that stuff's about. Okay, so where are we? Almost finished here. Jesus is the builder of the church, the foundation of the church. He is the keeper of the church.
He invites us into it. He delegates authority to us. And then in verse 20, Jesus says, don't tell anyone. By the way, don't tell anyone.
Verse 20, and he strictly charged the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. This is actually, it seems unusual. It's not an uncommon thing for Jesus to say. Basically, what's going on here is Jesus wants Peter's revelation to keep it on down low, Peter, because at this point in Christ's ministry, if Jesus, because Jesus knows the wide distribution of the idea of him being the Christ could foster some fairly unhelpful enthusiasm in the wrong direction.
He needs to fully demonstrate what it means to be the Messiah, to be the king, before he goes public with that. So until then, stay silent.
[20:03] All right. Let me finish here with a question. The question is, so what? You could talk, Aaron, all about the importance of the church. Sounds like you're just trying to keep a job.

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Yeah, so what? Like, this is, this is like, it's all good, you know, theology, right? What does it mean? How does it affect me? One of the greatest challenges to faith in a city like Vancouver, I believe, is individualism.
You live in a very individualistic city and we're so immersed in it, we kind of have, we have trouble seeing it. And it's a philosophy that can easily bleed away into the way we think about faith and church.
And I said at the start, individualism says to you, Christian, what's just about me and Jesus. I don't have to get involved in all this messy relationship stuff, all this opening up my heart and being vulnerable in prayer groups.
I don't have to be involved in that because it's just me and Jesus. And all that sermon stuff, I can fulfill that with podcasts or tweets from noteworthy Christians, you know. And if I'm feeling pretty good in my faith, I can actually skip church.
[21:12] I don't actually have to go, really, because it's just a resource in the end, because it's just about me and Jesus and that's it. That's what individualism whispers into our ear and the Bible says, no, the church is at the very center of what God is doing in the world.

So let me finish with this and I'll say it as plainly as possible. If Jesus was all about building the church, the church eternal, then it must be a priority for us as well. We must make it a priority in our life.
Even when it would be so much easier to retreat from the demands of community. when it would be so much easier to retreat from the messiness of it, the inconvenience of it, the challenge of being the people of God together.
No, we must make it a priority, because it's not just a good idea and it's not just a really helpful resource to us. Its existence comes from Christ's agenda.
It's Christ's agenda and it comes out of the very being of who God is. There you go. Amen.

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