

No One Like Jesus: Good Answer! Good Answer! Part I

By Jason Huff

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Psalm 2; Hebrews 2:1-11; Matthew 16:13-20

Our final Scripture reading for today is Matthew 16:13-20. This is the Word of the LORD. "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 Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. 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. 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 warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ."

Game shows cross the generations. I grew up watching **Jeopardy!** and **Wheel of Fortune**, and new episodes are still on every weeknight. Another one still going strong is **Family Feud**. Everybody knows that one, right? Two families pitted against each other trying to guess the top answers from a survey. And no matter how bad someone's idea is, the family is obligated to say what? "Good answer, good answer." You can't just say it once; you've got it say it twice. **Family Feud** proves that there are a lot of awful answers and only a few good ones.

But today's passage reminds me of **Family Feud** because up to this point, the disciples have been getting three strikes. They have seen Jesus perform dozens of miracles but are still surprised when He does one. They are as fearful of Jesus' power as they are encouraged by His presence. They fail to understand their teacher time and again. But finally, Peter gets the perfect answer. What we're going to look at today are the circumstances surrounding Peter's confession, the specifics of Peter's confession, and why the confession matters. Next week, we'll tackle Jesus' response to Peter. We're spending two weeks on it because Peter's confession is the beating heart of Christianity even today.

Jesus and the disciples are still traveling through Gentile lands. In this era, many Jews lived outside Israel – it was so common that they were called the *diaspora*, "the scattered ones." While the Gentiles see Jesus' work, He's still directing His primary ministry to the Jews living abroad. That's why they give Jewish answers to the question as to who Jesus is.

Those answers show there is major confusion about who Jesus is. Part of it is due to where they live. They are far away from the gossip and news of Jerusalem. They'd heard of John the Baptist but probably hadn't yet heard about his death. When Jesus comes with power, they assume that Jesus and John might be the same.

But there are even stranger assumptions. Some of them think Jesus is Elijah. That's based on the final prophecy found in the Old Testament book of Malachi. God promises that Elijah will return before the great day of the LORD when judgment comes on the nations and salvation comes to Israel.

Many Jews thought that Jesus was that promised return of Elijah – if not Elijah’s person, at least the spirit of Elijah, his power and prophetic presence. After all, Elijah’s prodigy Elisha asked for a double portion of Elijah’s spirit from God, and he received it, doing double the miracles Elijah did in his own ministry. Jesus definitely fit that possibility.

But nowhere in Scripture do we get the idea that a different prophet of old is going to return to earth before the judgment of God. However, the Jews of Jesus’ day did esteem the ancient prophets. When they heard about the miracles and saw the results of Jesus’ power, they recognized that He was either one of the ancient prophets or someone like them. They knew that Jesus was really *something* – they just didn’t know what that something was.

And that leads into an idea that explains a lot of our society’s problems: *confusion about who Jesus is leads to confusion about everything else*. The crowds knew of Jesus, but they didn’t know Jesus. Public opinion about Jesus was wishy-washy. He had to flee many times – sometimes because the crowds wanted to kill him for what they thought was blasphemy, other times because they wanted Him to become a rebel leader to take down Rome. Even those who benefited from Jesus’ miracles had little idea exactly who it was who had healed them. A lot of chaos in the first century world came from false understandings of Jesus.

We still have that confusion today. We had a good conversation after Bible study this week about the question of morality and politics. We recognized that everyone has a personal morality – from the most devout Christian to the fiercest atheist. We all vote based on what our morality tells us about the issues and candidates at hand. If you are confused about who Jesus is, it completely affects what you think of the Bible and how it says we should live. Unless you get the question of Jesus right, you don’t have a solid basis for ethics or morality.

Without Peter’s confession, morality becomes relative. You have Jesus; I have Buddha or science or some other basis for my ethical system. Unless we know Jesus and join in with Peter’s confession confidently, we have little reason to say anything about anybody else’s belief system. Confusion reigns supreme because everyone’s morality is just opinion. We won’t even agree on huge things like murder because there’s no absolute reason to say it’s wrong. If Jesus is just another prophet, His words hold no more weight than any other intelligent human being.

Many people who call themselves Christians live seriously compromised lives because they are confused about the identity of Jesus. We see it all around us. Some of *us* have lived in compromised ways because we, too, didn’t understand what Peter’s confession has to do with us. But it affects everything – how you talk, what you do, how you act, what you spend your money on, what you give to, who you choose as a spouse, the work you do. Knowing who Jesus is and acting on it – that’s the key to true life, both now and in eternity.

So what exactly is Peter’s confession? "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." It’s just ten words, but it is the heart of our faith. First, Jesus is the Christ. That’s our second focal point today: *Jesus is the Anointed One who is King of all creation and King of our lives*. *Christ* is the Greek term for the Hebrew *Messiah*. That word is found throughout the Old Testament, and it means “anointed one.”

When someone was anointed with oil, it meant God's special blessing was upon them, and they were set apart for godly service. Sacrificial altars were anointed for the same purpose: to make them holy and reserved for God's purposes. Moses anointed the tabernacle of God and its altar, and he anointed Aaron as the priest. All the priests were anointed in the same way.

But kings of Israel were a special case. They were known as "the anointed one." On one level, the word *Messiah* simply referred to the line of kings over Israel descended from David. But on another level, it was part of the continuing prophecy that there was a final, perfect anointed one to come, a king who would rule forever over all the nations. David wrote about the coming Messiah in the psalms many times; Daniel prophesied about the Messiah that would be the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham and to David.

Jesus is that anointed one, that Messiah, that Christ. When you call Jesus, "Christ," you are really saying in the simplest fashion, "Jesus is the promised King." It's not a last name or a title. It's a statement of His very being. He is the King through whom the universe was created. He is the King of everything and everyone. He is the supreme authority by which all other authorities are judged. He is the one absolute truth. What He says is right and perfect and the only standard.

The confession isn't a personal confession. It's not that Jesus is Peter's king. Jesus is King, period. It means that there is another reality above what we see. We *see* nations and authorities, presidents and prime ministers and heads of state. But Jesus is King over all of those things. His Kingdom is not *of* this world – that's what He tells Pontius Pilate when He stands trial. His Kingdom has authority *over* this world. The lynchpin for us is whether or not we will accept that He is our King and live accordingly or reject it and live how we want.

Many people say Jesus is their Savior and Lord. But it's not just our words that prove that Jesus is our King; it's our actions. Certain responsibilities come with true citizenship in God's Kingdom. As the king's subjects, we no longer have the final say in what we do and how we act. Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 says, "Don't you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."

Our King Jesus has given everything for us; we were purchased at the cost of His own blood shed on the cross to cover the debt of our sins. Royal subjects do what the King says. They don't endlessly debate and argue and second-guess the King or disregard His edicts. We aren't saved by works in any way. But those who God has really saved from eternal death will do what He commands because He has changed them from the inside so that they want to do what God does. We fail often, but our longing is to serve our King well.

That means some choices are out of our hands. We don't choose to be sexually immoral because it's fun or pleasurable or we're in love. We honor God with our bodies because God says that intimacy with Him requires us to follow His rules for intimacy with others. We don't steal, not because we don't need things but because we have a God who will provide for us, and stealing denies His lordship. We don't backstab, quarrel, or gossip because those things do not reflect the nature of a righteous, true, and holy God. We do what's right over what's convenient.

It sounds challenging, and it is. But there are incredible privileges to being Jesus-followers. Those who Jesus saves, who then in thanksgiving act as His subjects, have eternal life. We have peace knowing we will be with God beyond time, with the One who created us, loves us, and cares for us. But there's also a peace for the here and now. That peace is knowing we belong to another Kingdom – as Ephesians 2:19 puts it, we are no longer aliens and strangers to the Kingdom of God but fellow citizens of God's people and members of God's household.

That means that we are strangers and aliens *here*, on this earth. That doesn't sound terribly comforting, but in our trying times, it's a relief. I've heard many comments that if either Trump or Clinton is elected, it's the end of the world as we know it, or at least the end of America as we know it. And you know what? I'm not even going to say that's not true. I have no idea. It's quite possible. I know from Scripture that there will be a day when God judges the whole world, and I know God has been judging nations throughout history. This presidential election might be judgment come on America for her sins; it might not be.

What I can tell you is this: vote for whomever you can vote for without violating your conscience before God. If you can't vote in a certain race because of that, that's also an option. But once you've left the voting booth, go home and be at peace no matter who wins. Why? *Because you don't belong here.* And neither do I. And neither does any true Christian.

America is not our home. Neither is Canada or Mexico or somewhere in Europe or Asia. Our citizenship is written in the books of heaven, and no election is going to change that. We are here now because God has seen fit to put us in this place, in this time, to do the good things He made us specifically to do. We are thankful for the blessings that we have received as Americans. But those blessings ultimately come from God. And that's the great thing for believers. We know our King, who we can speak to at any time and place. We have a personal relationship with the one leader who's truly in charge. We know where we belong. And we know, as Romans 8:38-39 reminds us, that nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That brings us to the second part of the confession and our final point: *Jesus is the Son of the living God.* Jesus being the *Messiah* was a big deal, and this is even bigger. When Jesus defines Himself at the beginning of the passage, He calls Himself the "son of man," a title found primarily as in the book of Daniel. He used this term to obscure His full identity from the world, which wouldn't accept it if He called Himself the son of God. Peter, because of God's work in him, identifies the full truth about Jesus.

Jesus is not just a man. He cannot be. When rabbits have babies, those babies aren't skunks, right? When we have children, we know they aren't going to be bear cubs – even though they might act like it! Jesus is the Son of God, which makes Him deity. When God begets, He begets of the same type as Himself.

Now here's the key difference – when we have children, they are like us – they are human – but we don't have any true insight into our kids' thoughts beyond what they tell us. They are separate from us, and that's how it should be. But Jesus is of the same essence as the Father and the Holy Spirit. Jesus and the Holy Spirit have always been with the Father. They were not created. Everything in this universe is created, but they aren't, because they existed before the universe. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are in perfect eternal union with one another; they are three persons, but they are together the one true God. They relate perfectly with one another. When Jesus was born of Mary, God placed Him in her womb through the Holy Spirit. He had a human nature through Mary, but His divine nature never changed.

When we turn to Jesus as our King, we are turning to Him as the perfect Man and as the perfect God. He has it all within Himself. In His humanity, He relates to us and can pay for our sins; as divine, He bridges the gap between the Father and us. Because Jesus is perfectly both, He will never fail us as our King. He has the power and authority to speak to the Father on our behalf and to send the Holy Spirit to us as our counselor and friend.

This is confirmed for us because of the term Peter uses – the “living God.” Throughout Scripture, we see this phrase, “living God.” That's not only the truth but a promise. Our God is the only god who truly lives, who has life in and of himself. Angels, demons, humans, we're all created; we're all made; we only have life because God gave it to us. Idols don't have life. Statues and pagan deities don't have life. Only God does.

He is the living God, the God of Life. God calls Himself “I Am” because those words capture that He lives. We didn't exist until we were formed in our mothers' womb. We exist now, until we die. And then we won't exist, at least not as we are now. But God always has been, always is, and always will be. When God introduces Himself to Moses, He says, “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Not “I was.” Because God is the God of life, and He already has the patriarchs with Him in eternity.

That God lives means He is active in our lives. He is aware of our plight and engaged with us, working on our behalf. God does not fall asleep on the job. There is never going to be a dark night when God won't hear your prayers. And if our King is Jesus the Son, we can count on Him always being there for us, always interceding with the Father for our benefit and blessings, always living within us through the Holy Spirit. This confession tells us so much about who God is, but it also tells us that we can rest. We do not need to be anxious or disturbed. As God says over and over to His people when He appears, “do not be afraid!” No matter our circumstances, the living God is watching over us, sustaining us, and preparing us to live with Him forever.

You can count on God. As we come back and work through the rest of this passage next week, we'll see more implications of Peter's confession. But this week, rest assured that Jesus is King, the long-awaited Savior who lovingly directs us in His paths. Where you haven't been following Him, retrace your steps and get back on track. Don't fall for the world's confusion about Jesus, but honor Him as your King and live obediently as His servant, and you will find eternal life in Him.