

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

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2 Chronicles 6:40-42; Psalm 28:6-9; Matthew 16:13-20

Today's passage is Matthew 16:13-20. Listen now to God's Word. "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."

"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." That was the center of our conversation last week. We learned that the word *Christ* meant that Jesus was the Anointed One, the King, promised back in the days of ancient Israel. Peter didn't call Jesus "*my king*"; it was a statement of fact – Jesus is the King over all creation. We recognized our rights and responsibilities as members of Jesus' Kingdom. We then discovered what it meant for Jesus to be the Son of the Living God – that Jesus, as part of the Triune God, has always been living and active and at work in our world. He is trustworthy and reliable. And what's more, it means that only He can save us from our sins. It was so much material that we have to return this week to get the rest.

Peter's response reminded me of **Family Feud** – he'd truly given a good answer! And today, if you will, it's the part of the show where we see what prizes you've won. But the ramifications of Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God are far greater than winning a new car or a trip to the Caribbean. In fact, they are so significant that they go well beyond Peter himself. That's what we're going to look at today – Jesus' response to Peter. Peter's confession established once and for all who Jesus is, and Jesus' response tells us what we can know and count on because He is our King.

Our first main thought today is this: *Jesus' kingship is a revelation to us, not something found through natural insight but a true blessing from God.* Jesus doesn't compliment Peter for figuring everything out. Instead, He calls Peter blessed – God has shown Peter favor. Peter's ability to make his statement means God's hand is on him. God revealed that truth to Peter. He didn't come up with it himself. In next week's passage, Peter speaks on his own instead of with the wisdom of God behind him, and it's not pretty.

You've heard me say it before, but it needs to be said regularly and often: God chooses. God saves. God reveals. And we receive the benefits. If God has acted on our behalf, we can believe and know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. If God has chosen us, we can learn to respond in thanksgiving by acting like citizens of God's Kingdom. If God has saved us, we will become His disciples, trusting in Him for eternal life.

Are we actively engaged? Yes! We must believe. We must choose to follow Jesus. We must take our thoughts captive and turn every part of ourselves over to Jesus' lordship. We are on the front lines in spiritual battle for the Kingdom of God. But the power to do all of that comes from God Himself. Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:8-9, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -- not by works, so that no one can boast." The faith we have is God's gift, God's blessing, on us. We do not deserve salvation because of what we do. And we certainly don't know it because we happen to know the words of Peter's confession.

But Paul doesn't stop there. In verse 10, he writes, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." We were made in such a way that we participate. We do the things that God asks because then, we fulfill our reason for being. We were not made first and foremost to be pastors or accountants or repairmen or teachers. We were made to do good works that glorify God. We might do those good works through our profession, but the good work of following Jesus comes first.

Jesus' words explain a lot about the situation of our world. Peter's confession is right there in Scripture; it's down on paper. You would think that we would learn the words and be saved, but that's not the case. The facts of the matter were revealed to Peter by God, but the revelation continued for him beyond the words alone. The revelation for Peter was not just words, but knowing that what he was saying was utterly and totally true. Through all of the mistakes he'll make – and there are doozies to come – he would never give up on his confession.

This explains why many people read the Bible or hear the truth about Jesus and still want nothing to do with Him. Sometimes we are partially at fault – we present Jesus incorrectly or harshly, we force Him on others, or we don't take enough time to get to know people so we can present Jesus in a winsome way to them. But even arguing for Jesus logically, with historical proof and convincing evidence, doesn't necessarily turn someone's heart to the Lord.

Jesus' response to Peter explains it. Our logic, as fantastic and truthful as it is, only convinces others when God gets involved. Peter's confession only makes sense when God opens hearts and minds. And so, today, if you truly believe Peter's confession and are living it out – acting like Jesus is your true King – then you are blessed too. God has put His hand on your life. Don't get discouraged if you don't feel blessed in other ways. In the most important way, the only way that really matters, God has you in His hand and will not let you go.

With that in mind, let's move on to our second thought. *God's church is built upon two rocks: the rock of its confession of Jesus Christ as King and the rock of leadership that guides her.* Jesus gives Simon a new name, Peter. It's the first of several double meanings from Jesus. Peter means "rock." On the basis of his confession, Jesus calls Simon "Peter" – a boulder, a reliable foundation. Peter takes a long time to grow into that role, but he eventually earns his nickname of "Rocky."

Here's the next double meaning: Jesus says, "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." Jesus is referring to two things by the term rock. First, He's referring to Simon Peter's leadership. Second, He's referring to Simon Peter's confession. They support one another.

The word "church" in Greek means "the gathered" or "the assembled." It's all the faithful believers who gather to worship the true King. Without the core confession of our faith, there is no church to lead. If Jesus is not king, there's no reason to assemble, to worship, to risk anything for Him. But the church's leadership protects and sustains the confession. Without leaders, the truth drifts off center. It's happened many times in church history, yet the true leaders in the church have kept the church's confession safe.

We need both a firm confession and firm leadership in the modern church. This was not just for the first century. While we don't believe that Peter's leadership role was passed down through the papacy like the Catholic church does, we do believe that leadership in the church is essential. That's why, even in a small church like ours, elders make decisions and watch out for the hearts, minds, and souls of our congregation. The reason our church exists is, in part, to preserve the confession of Jesus as King against those who no longer believe it.

With those things in place, the church becomes the front line for saving people from eternal death. We read the "gates of Hades will not overcome it," the church. The term here is "Hades," the Greek idea of the underworld where every soul goes after death. It's not hell – the place of eternal punishment for those who reject God. It's very similar to the older Hebrew concept of Sheol, the land of the dead.

The confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God breaks apart the resting place of the dead and brings all who confess God as Savior into His Kingdom. Death has no hold on anyone who believes and trusts in the confession of the church. The church is God's means to bring Christ's salvation to the world. We, the people, the gathered, the church – we break down the gates of death with Christ when we share with others the faith and God leads them to Himself. It is not that hell is trying to overcome the Kingdom of God. It's that the church is on the front lines, leading the charge against the gates of death, and those gates will not prove more powerful than the church and her confession of Jesus as Savior, Lord, and King.

No matter who we are or where we live, we need to be part of a church, a gathering of believers. It is Christ's body on earth, were read in Ephesians 5:23. We need to be in a church that faithfully protects the confession of faith and guards it carefully so that there's no "mission drift." It's easy to get caught up in doing good things and having fun fellowship and forgetting that we are here to proclaim Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God. We need to be part of a church that has faithful leadership willing to work for her, pray for her, and guide her so she says on task. To be a Christian is to be a part of the gathered people of God. It's that simple.

So let's move on to the third thing that Jesus addresses with Peter: *the loving discipline of the church is a necessity to keep the church the church*. Jesus says, "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." That's hard to make heads or tails out of it at first. But it's all about church discipline.

When Jesus gives Peter the keys to the kingdom, it's the power to protect it. If I lock my door at night, I'm protecting my home against robbers and thieves. I'm also protecting my family members who have the right to be there. I have the right to let in whomever I choose because I own my house. That decision lies with me and my family.

Jesus gives that authority to Peter. He had the authority in the early church to determine who belonged. Peter doesn't play bouncer at the gates of heaven OR at the gates of the church. But Peter – and those called into church leadership in its stead – have the serious responsibility to guard God's people like a shepherd watching over his sheep. To not let wolves in who want a free meal. And to make sure that those who are a part of the gathering are disciplined, even when it's hard, so that they remain in God's fold.

Nobody likes discipline, being told, "No, you can't do that." But in 1 Corinthians 5, Paul describes sexual immorality in the church. He says not to judge people outside the church; God will do that. But the leaders in the church are to discern the hearts and minds of those inside the church. Paul is blunt about it: expel the immoral person from among you. Put him out of your fellowship until he repents and turns back to God!

Why does the church have the keys to the Kingdom? Why is it our responsibility to discipline? It's precisely because we have been entrusted with the confession. Nobody else in the entire world has the privilege of saying, "Jesus is the King." And if we fail to maintain discipline, if we let sin slide once we know about it, then the confession dies. It has no meaning. We cannot say, "Jesus is our king," one minute, and then turn around and forget that He has giving us marching orders. Without discipline, the confession is worthless. If Jesus is King but His Lordship makes no difference in your life or mine, why bother?

But with discipline, the church is given the power to truly save souls from darkness. The church is given spiritual authority from Jesus Himself. However, that power is not intended to be a sword that destroys. Sometimes the church has used it that way, to her great shame. But instead, that power is supposed to be like pruning shears. As the church, we walk together, we grow together, and as we go, sinful habits and dispositions are pruned away.

Discipline gives us the ability to maintain boundaries that are there for our own safety, boundaries given to us by God. And in Presbyterian churches like ours, leadership is shared amongst several members. No one elder has the power to singlehandedly diagnose a problem and go off sword in hand. Instead, in church discipline, the elders together learn of something sinful and act intentionally to restore a member to full fellowship. It's important that discipline exists for the very reason Jesus says. How we discipline makes a spiritual and eternal difference. Be glad that we have church discipline in place, because it is a mark of God's true church.

Finally, we come to the last idea this passage throws at us, and I'll define it this way: *God's timing is not our own*. Jesus says all this great stuff about Peter and the church and the confession and His Kingdom. All these fantastic things are dropped in their laps. And then Jesus says, "You're not to tell *anybody* about it." No going around proclaiming Jesus is the Messiah, at least not for some time. No letting the secret out. Why *was* it such a secret? We know that Peter's confession was a revelation that not everyone would understand, that God had to make people believe the reality of it, but why *not* let that happen now? Doesn't this seem like the perfect time?

Yet God's timing is perfect. In God's perfect plan, Jesus would take the place of the Passover lamb when He died on the cross. It was God's plan for Jesus to change the Passover meal so that now, it includes Him as the Savior of His people. No one knows exactly what would have happened if the disciples had rushed to tell everyone that Jesus was the Messiah. Maybe there would have been rebellion and revolt against Rome. Maybe the religious leaders would have worked more quickly to silence Him. We don't know. But nothing good would have come of it because it wasn't God's timing.

We do not have a God's eye view on things, so we grow impatient. We want all our family and friends and loved ones to be saved and brought into the Kingdom of God – right now. We want judgment on the world and for Jesus to take His throne – right now. We want for things to be perfect and enter into God's perfect rest – right now. But God doesn't work on our timelines. And why should He? He is the only One who knows what the perfect timeframe is.

Have you ever been the victim of bad timing? Maybe a friend offers you a ride right after you've paid your bus fare. Maybe that same friend offers to take you out to dinner just as you're pushing away from the table. Sometimes, our best laid plans fall apart because the timing just isn't right. And that's true with people and their knowledge of God. Have you ever said the right thing about Jesus at the wrong time and unintentionally driven someone further away? That's painful. But God knows what He is doing. He does not have to rush anything. And while it is very important for us to be aware of what God is doing and paying attention to His hand, we do not have to be in a rush either. We do not need to be run by the rat race.

Now notice that Jesus doesn't say, "Act like I'm not the Christ." *Don't tell* is not the same thing as *don't witness*. Jesus wanted people to come to faith in Him based on what they saw, not on what they were told. That's true for us today as well. Tell people that Jesus is God and they scoff at you. Let them see how He's changed you, let them experience His goodness for themselves and recognize it's from Him, and then attitudes change. So always act like people of the cross, followers of Jesus ready to put aside your lives for Him. Share your faith directly whenever God leads you to do so. And in God's proper timing, He will bring more and more people to Himself.

As we close today, let's think about our confession one more time: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Say it with me: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Never forget that confession. Never give up the hope that comes from knowing that Jesus is our King, who will one day return to bring us into His glory. Always remember that you serve the Son of the Living God. And know that He not only calls you His disciple, He calls you His friend.