

## Matthew 16:13-20

August 27 & 28, 2023; Pentecost 13

When we spend our money, we tend to buy things that we believe will last a long time. We try to buy quality things. If we buy a new stove or a new refrigerator, we want to purchase something that will last a long time. If you are going to purchase a house, you want to buy something that you believe will last for years. If you are in the market for a new car, you will probably research several models. You will buy something that will last for some years to come. When we purchase the bigger items in life, we want to buy something that we believe will last.

Yet, in the back of our minds, we have that thought: *What if the car I buy is a lemon? What happens if I discover a major flaw in the house that I have just spent tens or hundreds of thousands to buy? What if the money that I have worked so hard for isn't enough to live a comfortable retirement? What if Social Security that I have been promised isn't there when I need it?* We are willing to spend our time doing things that we feel is important to us. Why would we waste our time on something that we know will be a complete failure? We are willing to even volunteer our time doing something that is important to us or to others. We will pour our heart into something that we believe will last.

Jesus wanted his disciples to see that he was building something that will last. He was building a Church that would last for eternity. For nearly three years, these disciples have followed him, listened to him, and believed in him. Yet, Jesus knew what soon was going to happen to him on the cross. He knew the challenges that the disciples would face when they would go out into this small part of the world without his physical presence. So, Jesus comes to his disciples with a couple of questions. **“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?”**

**Who do you say that I am?** It is a question that every human being must answer at some point. Who do you say Jesus of Nazareth is? Because either you believe that he is the Savior of the world, or he isn't. Either you believe that he gives you life that will last forever or you don't. That really is what Jesus is asking his disciples. That is the central message of God's Word. Jesus is Lord and Savior, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. If people proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior, they experience the love of God who is gracious and compassionate. We don't have to climb our way into heaven to find it. It is given to us by God himself. **Who do you say that I am?** It's a pretty easy question to answer now. But what happens when circumstances change? What answer do you give when you are surrounded by people who could care less about Jesus? Is it harder?

That's where the disciples find themselves in our text. Last week, we talked about Jesus and his disciples leaving Galilee. They had gone into the northeastern part of Israel. They were only about 25 miles north from the religious communities of Galilee. But this city religious practices were vastly different from those of nearby Jewish towns. It was a city dominated by immorality and pagan worship. Worship practices of God had been replaced with the practices of the Baal religions. A large cliff arose just outside that city. In that cliff, shrines and temples were built for the fertility God of Pan. At the base of this cliff, there is a huge cave. The pagans believed that it was a gate to the underworld – to Hades. This was where the pagan gods lived in the winter. Every spring they taught that these false gods would return to the shrines. It was then that the people engage in some pretty horrific practices.

When Jesus brought his disciples to the area, they must have been shocked. It is there that Jesus asks the question: **Who do you say that I am?** They tried to give a complimentary answer. **“Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”** The people on that list were some pretty good people. John the Baptist had already been killed. But maybe he came to back to life in Jesus. The great prophet of Elijah had never died and was taken physically to heaven in a flaming chariot. Maybe this Jesus is Elijah coming back to earth. Jeremiah was a great prophet in the Old Testament and respected by many. Yet, no one in that list is good enough to save the world from sin.

Then Peter steps up and answers that question with a confession of faith that only God could give him. **“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”** *You are the one set apart by God who was promised in the Scriptures. You are the promised one who would save us from our sins. You are the Son of the living God. You are the one who is the Way and the Truth and the Life.* That's the central message of the Bible. Jesus is the Messiah! It is that truth that Christian Church stands

upon. **“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.”** As Jesus’ disciples stood there at the *Gates of Hades* at the foot of that cliff, I think Jesus was teaching them a lesson. Not only does Jesus give us a perfect defense to stand up to Satan. He also gives us the weapons to advance against the forces of Satan. He’s given us **“the keys of the kingdom of heaven.”** There is power in those keys: **“whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”** Jesus presents a clear challenge to his disciples in Caesarea Philippi. He doesn’t just want his disciples to hide from evil behind gates. He wants his disciples to storm the gates.

Jesus knew that this would not be easy for them. In next week’s Gospel Lesson, we continue this account in Matthew. Jesus says to them: **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”** This would not be easy. So, he promises that they are not only. They can take on Satan because Jesus took him on in this world. He crushed the head of the serpent. There in a city filled with idols, Jesus tells his disciples that his whole mission was to restore life to this world. As they stand on Christ, they can storm the gates of Hades.

Peter may not have understood fully what Jesus was teaching that day in Caesarea Philippi. But he later would as he writes in his first letter as he wrote to Christians scattered who had been exiled across that ancient world: **“As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”** You are blessed. You have something more precious than anything that money can. You know the answer to Jesus’ question. May you answer with the same confidence of the Apostle Peter: **“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”** Amen.