

Matthew 16:13-28 – Knowing Jesus

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

¹⁴ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

¹⁵ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

¹⁷ Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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.” ²⁰ Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

²¹ From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”

²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. ²⁸ I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Matthew 16:13-28 (NIV)

Who do you think Jesus is? What question can be more important than this one? It is *the key* question when it comes to understanding the Bible. It is the key question when it comes to knowing God.

Jesus' Question

Jesus asks his disciples what people are saying about him. They will have picked up the rumours on the streets. Crowds of people had listened to Jesus' teaching. Many had witnessed the wonderful things he did. What conclusions were they coming to? Who were people saying he was?

Some think that he is John the Baptist come back from the dead. Others think that he is the prophet Elijah who did not die but was carried off bodily to heaven: now he's back again! Others think he is Jeremiah or another of the prophets. There are many different opinions but they all have one thing in common, the people think Jesus is someone special, someone sent from God.

Jesus then puts his disciples on the spot – he does so still today. What matters is who we think he is. So he asks them, "What do you think?"

Peter Recognises Jesus as the Christ

It is Peter who answers, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Peter had recognised that Jesus is the long promised Messiah: David's greater son; the one who will sit on David's throne; the King who will reign over all the earth; the one through whom the covenant promises made to Abraham will be fulfilled; the one through whom all nations will be blessed.

Peter had recognised who Jesus is and Jesus says that this is God's doing. It was not simply a matter of human intelligence or good theology that had enabled Peter to come to this conclusion; God had opened his eyes to this tremendous truth – to recognise that Jesus is the Christ.

And Jesus says that this confession – that Jesus is the Christ, the Lord of over all – is foundational to the life of the church, the life of God's people. It is this confession that unlocks the power of the kingdom and defeats the powers of darkness, for it is the faith that lays hold of Jesus Christ, the one who possesses the power of the kingdom and defeats the powers of darkness.

Peter's eyes have been opened by God so that he sees that Jesus is the Christ, the one through whom God will establish his kingdom.

Peter does not know who Jesus is

But at the same time, Peter does not know who Jesus is! For as Jesus goes on to explain what is about to happen to him – how he will be rejected by the Jewish leaders, will suffer at their hands, will be delivered over to a cruel and shameful death ... Peter cries out, "Never, Lord!"

Peter does not understand who Jesus is. He has an entirely wrong model of who Jesus is, thinking him to be the Christ who will conquer by earthly power: the one who will be the military leader of Israel and will defeat and drive out the Romans. Peter does *not* know who Jesus is and his cry of "Never, Lord!" is a *denial* of who Jesus is – hence Jesus' response in verse 23, "Out of my sight, Satan!"

Who do we think Jesus is?

This is a vital question, not just that we might have a right view of what it means that Jesus is the Christ, but also that we might have a right understanding of what it means to follow him.

See what Jesus says in verses 24-26. Jesus calls his disciples to follow him – to follow *this* Jesus; *this* Jesus who establishes his kingdom at great cost to himself, bearing in himself the opposition, spite, guilt and sin of his enemies. He calls his disciples to follow in the same path: the path of uncomplaining servanthood; bringing in the kingdom at cost to *themselves* – at cost to *ourselves* – though always with the hope of glory in view.

Confused Disciples

The disciples are slow to understand who Jesus is and, as a result, they fail to understand what it means to follow him. What a paradox! Those who knew Jesus so well – who had shared his life for three years – did not know him at all.

Turn a page to the beginning of Matthew 18 where we find that they are keen to know who will be the greatest in the kingdom. Turn on another page to Matthew 20:20f where the mother of James and John seeks to ensure that they get the best places in the kingdom. Even at the Last Supper the disciples are still jostling for position, arguing about who will be the greatest (Lk 22:24) – even as Jesus is among them as one who serves, washing their

feet! And after his death they still do not understand, as we read the complaint of the two disciples on the Emmaus road, "We *had hoped* that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel." (Lk 24:21). Even after the risen Christ had spent many days in teaching them they are still asking in Acts 1:6, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Those who knew Jesus best had an entirely wrong view of Jesus and so they had a wrong view of what it means to follow Jesus.

Who do we think Jesus is?

Our view of Jesus, of what it means that he is the Christ, will shape our own understanding of what it means to follow him – of what he is calling us to be and to do.

Look at Matthew 16:28. I want you to see the paradox contained in this glorious promise. How is it that Jesus establishes his kingdom? It is by way of the cross. How is it that his disciples are to see the kingdom coming? It is as they follow Jesus in the way of the cross – as Jesus has indicated in vv. 24-25. This is how the kingdom comes.

A case study – The apostle Paul

Saul the Pharisee did not understand who Jesus was – he thought Jesus a charlatan and deceiver of the people. But that all changed when he was confronted by the risen Saviour on the Damascus road – "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" His eyes were opened to see that Jesus is the Messiah: the one who establishes his kingdom through his own Suffering Service, and who extends his kingdom through a suffering people in whom and through whom he is at work.

And so Paul becomes a follower of *this* Jesus and knows that his calling is to work for the extension of the kingdom through suffering service.

Later he is to write in frustration to the Corinthians who have not understood what it means to follow Christ. They are arguing about status – who is the greatest? By way of contrast Paul describes the character of his own ministry in 2 Corinthians 6:1-10

¹ As God's fellow-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. ² For he says, "In the time of my favour I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation.

³ We put no stumbling-block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. ⁴ Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; ⁵ in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; ⁶ in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; ⁷ in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; ⁸ through glory and dishonour, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; ⁹ known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Paul had heard the call to follow in the footsteps of the Suffering Servant. This is what it means to follow Jesus in the work of the kingdom. Listen to Paul again in Colossians 1:24-25.

²⁴ Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. ²⁵ I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fulness ...

Paul has turned from being a persecutor of the church to become part of the suffering body of Christ through which the gospel is spread – spending his life in the cause of the kingdom that others might live.

And let me take you last of all to Philippians 1:21 where Paul declares, "For me to live is Christ, to die is gain." What does it mean, "For me to live is Christ"? It meant this for the apostle Paul: he had understood that the Mission of God to a lost world finds its focus and centre in Jesus the Christ, the Messiah who will bring blessing to all nations on earth through his work as the Suffering Servant. Paul says, "For me to live is Christ." It means this; that he, in following Christ, has taken on this same mission – to bring the blessings of the gospel to the ends of the earth through his gospel labours as a suffering servant. "For me to live is Christ" he says. His life is cross shaped and therefore "to die is gain" for it is in hope of resurrection – look at how he puts it in Philippians 3:10-11.

¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Who do we think Jesus is?

Our answer to who we think Jesus is and what we believe he came to do will shape our view of what it means to follow him.

I can only say that, for myself, I am left with serious questions that I have to wrestle with – Have I created a comfortable Christ so that I may enjoy a comfortable discipleship? If we are to recognise that Jesus is the Christ, the one through whose suffering service God purposes to bring blessing to the ends of the earth, what does this imply for those of us who would follow him? How shall we confront the world with the transforming power of his kingdom?

Who is Jesus? What did he come to do? What does it mean for *us* to follow him?

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