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Sermon Series: *Jesus: Provocateur, No. 6*

The Christ

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Matthew 16:13-20 (NIV)

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 Messiah, the Son of the living God."

¹⁷ Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, 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 ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

We're in the book of Matthew today, Matthew 16:13-20. This passage, it seems to me, has three distinct parts, two of which have gotten lots of play in books and sermons through the ages and have also caused lots of discussion and debate and, frankly, disagreement.

Let me mention them in, what I realize are ridiculously simplistic terms.

One is verse 18, where Jesus tells Peter, "*on this rock I will build my church.*" The controversy there is what Jesus means by "rock."

Our Catholic brothers and sisters say the "rock" Jesus is talking about is *Peter himself*, which then establishes the papacy in its apostolic succession.

Protestants would say that the "rock" is not Peter personally, but either Peter's confession of faith here, or, since Peter is speaking on behalf of the apostles, the *company of the faithful apostles*; neither of which, of course, support the papacy or papal apostolic succession.

Of course, that argument goes on to this day. That's verse 18.

The second controversial, but popular, part of this passage is verse 19, where Jesus gives the keys of the Kingdom. This event has also raised lots of questions and fueled lots of discussion through the ages, including: "What does that really mean? Who, really, has this authority? How extensive is the authority Jesus grants? What are the keys? Whose is it to proclaim a person forgiven?" – and on and on.

So, when most people grab hold of this passage, one of those two verses and issues almost always becomes the discussion *du jour*.

Today, though, I want us to look at what is, I believe, an even greater issue – *the* issue, in fact, that both of those other issues flow out of – and that is Peter's response to Jesus' question there in verse 16.

These last few weeks, we've seen how Jesus has provoked:

- *trust* in Mary, His mother
- *humility* in the Centurion
- *confidence* in Jesus' fishermen/disciples

- *hard-heartedness* in the Jewish religious leaders, and
- *perseverance* in the paralyzed man and his friends.

Today, we see in verse 16 Jesus provoking, in Peter, this sure, confident and specific *confession*. Call it a statement, a creed, a conclusion, an admission, a determination, an affirmation – whatever you choose, but it is unmistakably an accurate confession of faith.

And Jesus was looking for it. There's no doubt about that.

What Jesus was fishing for here (if you'll pardon the expression), and what Matthew wants us to see by including this event in his gospel, is the sort of confession – the sort of realization and admission – that it takes for someone to be, in fact, *in Christ*; that is, for someone to be a *true* and *real* follower of Jesus.

Jesus did what He did here, asking the questions He asked, in order to drive them – and anyone reading this Scripture today – to a clear declaration of where He stands with them.

"Who am I to you?"

Who is Jesus to a person? How a person answers that makes all the difference in the world, you see?

Did you ever work with a person – maybe you have an acquaintance or maybe there's someone in your family – and you never really know where you stand with them? You never are sure, really, what they think of you?

Sometimes they treat you as though you're their best friend, and at other times they walk right by you as if they don't even know you.

If so, I don't have to tell you that working or living in that sort of ambiguity is really hard, because there's always this shadow of doubt and wonder about what they're thinking that takes away your confidence to be honest or transparent – to simply be yourself, so you're on guard all the time, and it's exhausting.

It's often like that when you're dating someone. When two people are dating, there's a period of time when you're both wondering, "Is he into me as much as I'm into him? Does she really like me, or is she just killing time?"

Those sorts of questions arise within us when communication either isn't *clear* or isn't *ripe*. Ripeness is important. We have to wonder those things sometimes so as not to get ahead of ourselves in relationships.

But after a while, those sorts of things have to be declared, in order for the relationship to either move *forward* or to *end*, depending on how people are thinking.

Eventually, someone may have to just say, "You know, we've been dating for a while now – so tell me, what are you thinking? Do you like me? Do you love

me? Are you committed to me? Are you with me or against me? We can't just keep bouncing along like this. We need to declare our intentions – declare who we are to each other.”

That's sort of what Jesus was doing here; *however*, the difference with Jesus in this is that He wasn't asking these questions out of any sort of *personal insecurity about Himself*. Jesus' identity or personal confidence or worth *did not depend* on what *others* thought of Him.

I mean, of course He cared what people were thinking about Him – about who He was, but His concern in those ways was not motivated by His own self-image or personal confidence, as our concern about those kinds of things often is.

The reason Jesus asked these questions was for the good of the *others* – for the good of His *disciples*.

He asked these questions in order to drive two truths deep into His disciples' hearts.

The *first* was the fact that there is a big difference between being – as Kyle Idleman put it a few years ago – a *fan* of Jesus and being a *follower* of Jesus. There's a big difference between being a part of the Jesus *crowd* and being in the Jesus *circle*. Jesus has always had *fans* – lots of *fans*, but a *fan* and a *follower* are not the same. That's the first thing He wanted those guys to understand.

And then the *second*, I think, was to explain to them that being a *fan* isn't enough. Jesus works *in* and *through* the lives of *followers*, and being a follower requires a much deeper and more substantial realization of just who Jesus is.

You see, Jesus didn't determine success by the size of the crowd that came to watch Him do cool things.

Jesus determined success by those who realized who He really was, to the point that they would leave their own agenda – they would leave their own pursuits behind – to give themselves to Him, for Him to guide and use as He saw fit.

Because, after all, that's the only *reasonable response* when you encounter God in the flesh, isn't it?

Scripture tells us over and over again that the crowds that came around Jesus – who watched Him heal and listened to Him teach – marveled at what He did. They were astonished and amazed! People were wondering if he was John the Baptist come to life again. Even King Herod wondered that.¹

Some thought he may have been Elijah, who the prophet Malachi predicted would come before the day of the Lord.²

Others wondered if He was Jeremiah, based on how He spoke against the religious establishment of His day.

And you see, all those views of Jesus were *positive* – not negative. They held Jesus in high regard. They *admired* Him!

But you see, *admiration* is not *enough*.

Holding Jesus in high regard is not enough.

Believing He's a *good guy*, a good *teacher*, a worker of *miracles*, a good *example* for our kids, even a *messenger* or *prophet* from *God*...is *not enough*.

And, neither is coming to *no* conclusion enough. Talking on and on about who He might be and debating with ourselves and with others about whether Jesus is this or that: the world's been doing that for ages. Crowds have gathered around Jesus for over 2000 years – enjoying the show He puts on, taking what they can get from Him, and endlessly wondering who He really is.

And the greater part of humanity is still right there today.

But you see, *none* of that is enough.

There is a *step* that must be taken that moves a person from *admiration* to *commitment*, and that is the step that opens up the real power of God to work both *in* and *through* a person.

That's where Jesus was trying to lead all the disciples there. Most scholars think that Jesus was really asking *all* of them, but it's just Peter – as you'd expect – who answers for them.

Jesus was asking:

“So guys, where are we – you and me? You've said who others think I am. But who am I to you? What is our relationship here – and where is it going?”

“Are you just hanging out with me because I feed you and entertain you – show you a good time?”

“Are you just hanging out with me because it's cool to be one of my entourage – it's cool to be seen with the guy who heals people and puts those arrogant Pharisees in their place every now and then? Is that all I am to you?”

“Or am I more? Can we get serious yet? Can we take some serious steps and have some serious conversations about our relationship, because you see, I have a lot that I want to do. I have plans – I have plans for me, for you, for the future.”

“The fact is, I want to build this community of people who will be changed, themselves, by the power of My Spirit living within them, into people who think like Me and who have My priorities.”

“I'm going to call it the 'church,' and they will be totally committed to each other. Oh, they'll be different – they'll have different gifts and abilities, but they'll work together and do what my Spirit tells them to do, and as they do, they will accomplish my purposes – they'll actually exponentially multiply the work that I'm able to do here on earth personally. And as they do, I will use them to transform the world!”

“Now I know that may sound crazy, but that's how I'm going to save this world, you see?”

“But I can't use mere *fans* to get those kinds of plans accomplished. I can't use people who are just with me in a short-sighted way for their own benefit – just for what they can get from me. I can't use people who are with me one day and then disappear on me the next, or when they don't get from me exactly what

¹ Matthew 14:2 ² Malachi 4:5

they want, or when times get hard, or when it begins to cost them something – maybe even their lives.

“To do something this big requires a deeper commitment than that.

“So, what about it, guys? I need to know – who am I to you? Are you all just fans too – or are you going to be *followers*?”

You know why the apostles accomplished so much in their lifetimes? They believed that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

Did they struggle living that out for a while? Yes, they did, until Jesus sent the Spirit to empower that belief – that confession.

But once that *confession* of theirs – that *faith* – was empowered by Christ’s Spirit at Pentecost – *bang!* It was like flame to fuel, and after that, nothing stopped them, nothing frightened them, nothing intimidated them, nothing slowed them down.

Once they had both the *confession* and the *power*, they lived out Jesus’ plans for His people. The book of Acts tells us all about it.

So, why do we not do and see, in our day, what the apostles did and saw?

I have to believe that we lack either the commitment of the confession – or the power of the Spirit in our lives.

You’ve heard the account of Thomas Aquinas coming into the presence of Pope Innocent II, who happened to have a large sum of money on a desk before him. The Pope said to Aquinas, “You see, Thomas, the Church can no longer say, ‘Silver and gold have I none.’”

“That is true, Holy Father,” replied Aquinas, “yet neither can she any longer say, ‘Rise up and walk.’”²

Why is this? Because we lack either the confession or the power of the Spirit in our lives – or maybe both.

I wonder how many who sit in churches today really believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I mean, if we did, wouldn’t we want to know what He thinks more than we do? Wouldn’t Bibles be read and used and worn, instead of sitting clean and pretty on shelves?

If so-called Christian people today really believed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, wouldn’t there be more people interested in and attending His worship than there are people interested in and attending sports games and parties?

If those who claim to be Christians really believed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, wouldn’t our priorities look different than those of the world around us?

Wouldn’t our families look different than the world’s families?

Wouldn’t our neighborhoods look different?

Wouldn’t our cities and states look different?

Wouldn’t the truth be told instead of lies?

Wouldn’t people of all races be valued?

Wouldn’t all human life be considered sacred?

Wouldn’t violence be subdued?

Wouldn’t the orphan and widow and foreigner be cared for?

Wouldn’t we care about the kind of earth we leave to those who come after us?

Wouldn’t love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control prevail?

In short, wouldn’t Jesus’ will be being done and God’s Kingdom arriving if those who claimed Christ really believed that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God?

And isn’t this why the church is, in so many ways, powerless and influence-less in our day – in our nation especially? Because so many of those within its walls are really more Jesus fans than Jesus followers?

They will come when the show is good and when Jesus’ purposes fit their plans and schedules.

But they disappear when the going gets tough – when Jesus asks for sacrifice.

That’s why our nation is in the mess that it’s in: we have presumed to be a Christian nation, but we have not acted Christianly toward one another.

We have sought our own good instead of the good of our neighbors.

We have hit back instead of turning the other cheek.

We have demanded freedom, and then used it for our own ends.

We have called on Jesus when in need, but have ignored Him otherwise.

The truth is, we have fallen right in the line of Israel: mistakenly presuming that we are God’s favorites, that because God appears so often in our founding and history that somehow we have Him on a string.

But that is not, and has never been, the way God works – with Israel or anyone else.

For years and years, we have been a nation of fans of Jesus, and because of that, we are no longer even that.

That’s why Jesus asks us today – He asks us individually, He asks us as the church here in Wilmore, He asks us as the church in America, and He’s asking us as a nation: “So what is it that we’re doing here – you and Me? Who am I going to be to you?”

“Who do you say that I am?”

And friends, although this election is important, the fact is that *far more* important than whoever is elected president is how we answer Jesus’ question, both individually and together. That is what will really determine our future.

Who is Jesus to you, really?

If He’s truly the Christ, the Son of the Living God, then what does that mean for the way we live, the priorities we set, the way we invest our time, the way we worship, the way we think, the way we pray?

² Fernando, Ajith. *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts 3:2-8*

If Jesus really is to us the Christ, the Son of the Living God, then He must get all of us, top to bottom, inside and out. That's when He'll have us, and that's when He'll use us to bring in His Kingdom and to change this world.

Even, even today, as Jesus ask you, would you answer Him honestly: are you part of the crowd or part of the circle? Are you a fan or a follower?

Who is Jesus to you? And who does He need to become?

Closing Song: *I Have Decided to Follow Jesus*

Benediction:

May everyone within the sound of my voice— everyone who hears this question of Jesus'— be able to confess along with Peter that Jesus really is—to me, to you, to us— the Christ, the Son of the Living God. May we continue to be, or become even today, real followers— people Jesus can freely use to bring His Kingdom to transform our world.

Until that day—the day His Kingdom comes in fullness and His will really is done on earth as it is in Heaven, may He bless, guard, keep and protect you— and me—and all who are His own. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, amen.