

The Most Important Question (16:13-28)

Good morning! My name is Jeff and I am the Groups & Discipleship pastor here in our church family. The nature of my job means I do more stuff in the background of our church family so they rarely let me out to play on Sunday mornings in the sanctuary. I want to start our teaching today with a question: what is the single most important question we'll ever answer as followers of Jesus. Because I would say Our passage today is one I would say lays the foundation for each of us who claim to follow after Jesus. Not only for us individually, it also lays the foundation for us as a collective, as a church family as well. And the entire foundation is centered around just one question that Jesus asks in the passage. We've got a fun passage this morning so I want to dive right into it.

Let's start in verse 13.

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

Caesarea Phillipi is a city 25 miles north of the sea of Galilee, where Jesus has spent most of his ministry up to this point. Caesarea Philippi is famous for religious worship of the Greek god Pan and pagan god Baal. Today you can actually go and visit these temples and caves dedicated to these gods. And it's not just religious worship, it's also filled with political worship as well. Caesarea Philippi was renamed by the Roman emperor Philip II after himself and Caesar Augustus. This is a power move if I've ever seen one. Usually other people name something after you if you're a big deal. This guy just said "I'm gonna name this mountain after me. Henceforth and forevermore, this is Jeff Mountain. Deal with it. 😎. So Caesarea Philippi is a city that is filled with religious worship as well as idolization of the political leaders of its day. And it is in this setting and surrounding, Jesus asks the question: "Who do people say I am?" In a cultural space where there are so many competing elements of who is god and who should have all of our love, affections, and loyalty. Is it one of the gods Baal or Pan? Is it Caesar Augustus or emperor Philip II? In the midst of all this, Jesus asks who do people say I am? This would be like Jesus taking his disciples to the middle of Washington DC and asking this question.

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?"

So the disciples answered, John the Baptist, whom the prophet Isaiah said will prepare the way for the coming Messiah. Another answer was Elijah, the prophet who performed amazing miracles and actually prayed and made it rain. And Elijah literally made it rain with water from the sky, not like the way Lil Wayne makes it rain. And still others say Jesus was Jeremiah, who was known as the weeping prophet because he constantly wept over the rebellion of God's people against God. All of these were people that have great esteem in the Jewish culture. But then Jesus turns the question around and I believe it is most important that each of us also need to ask ourselves: "Who do *you* say I am?"

Who do *you* think Jesus is? Jesus asked his disciples this question, not what do *other* people think of me. Not what your friends think of me. Not who your family, your mom, your dad say I am. The question is: Who do *you* say I am? Because this question digs at the very core of whether each of us believe Jesus is who he says he is. Or. He is not. There is no middle ground here. Is Jesus the son of God as he claims he is? Or He is a pathological liar and a fraud. The very nature of Jesus' claim of who he is means he can only be one of those two. There is actually nothing in between those two claims. The answer can not be Jesus was just a nice guy, a wise teacher or rabbi, or Jesus is someone we should go to when we feel like we need him. He is either God of the universe or he isn't and he pulled off the largest scam in human history.

Jesus asks a question that is profoundly important and cuts to the core of where we stand with him. Let's keep going. v. 16

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.

Look at Peter go! Even a broken clock is right twice a day. Peter proclaims that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah. In the Jewish culture, the Messiah has been foretold hundreds of years before Jesus' birth. That Israel will one day get a king again. And this king would come and free the Israelites from hundreds of years of oppression and enslavement from foreign rulers. The savior the people of Israelites have been praying and begging God for hundreds of years so they will no longer need to suffer, no longer need to be in pain, and to be finally free. Jesus is the hope of the Israelites. This is a massive deal. This is the first time in Matthew Jesus has explicitly confirmed that he is indeed the long awaited Messiah. And Jesus affirms Peter in this, stating that this good news came from His Heavenly Father. The truth Peter declared (though Peter does not quite fully understand what it really means) did not come from Peter himself but from God in heaven. Look at v.18

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.”

Okay so we need to pause here for a bit. Because these couple verses have been the topic of a good bit of confusion and debate within the Church over the past couple thousand years. Different Christians and Christian traditions have come away from these verses with very different ideas about what they're intending to communicate.

But to put it as succinctly as I can, here, Jesus is saying that Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah is the foundation on which the Church—the people of God—will be built. In other words, how you and I answer the question 'who is Jesus?' doesn't just have individual implications; it has communal implications. It's not just the most important question you'll ever answer. It's the most important question **we** will ever answer together.

If Jesus is the son of the living God, that is the foundation to which we are the church. That is the foundation we are united as God's people. **That means when we come together either in LifeGroups or here on Sundays, that is the truth we are proclaiming together, that is the foundation that binds us together, makes us who we are. That means if we agree that Jesus is the son of the living God, that would transcend anything that could divide us: our interests, our stage of life, socioeconomic status, political leanings, our passions or hobbies, our ethnicities.**

If some of us think Jesus is the lord of our life and some of us just think he gives good advice when we feel like following it, there's no common foundation there. If some of us think Jesus is worth everything we have and some of us just think He is worth following only insofar as he is the patron saint of our particular social or political ideology, that's not a common foundation. If some of us here are saying church is the place and the people where we worship the Messiah, while some of us are just saying church is a fun hobby that makes me feel better about myself, that's not a common foundation. When we gather together as the family of God each Sunday, we are saying Jesus is Lord and King and all of us are under his good and perfect reign, that is our common foundation to which we all stand on.

That is the foundation of the church. And in v.19 Jesus makes some pretty big statements about the type of authority and responsibility he's given to the church that will be established: this idea of binding and loosing, and giving them the keys to the kingdom of heaven It's an idea that actually comes up in the next couple chapters of

Matthew, and we'll look at it in a lot more detail then. But suffice it to say for now, Jesus bestows a lot of responsibility onto his people, based on their confession that he is the Messiah.

Let's keep going v.20

20 Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

After this massive, ground-breaking moment where Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah, why would Jesus tell them not to tell anybody? Simply put, because it's not time for people to know he's the Messiah yet. Now, us reading this passage today, it IS time for people to know. So just in case you were hesitant because of that, this restriction from Jesus no longer applies to us. So you can now tell as many people as you'd like that Jesus is the Messiah. But then, it wasn't time yet.

And Peter's next comment is about to reveal one of the reasons it wasn't time yet: Because they didn't fully understand what it MEANT that Jesus was the Messiah. And that helps color what happens next:

Take a look with me at v.21:

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, the chief priests and the 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 concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

This part has always just made me chuckle, imagining myself in Peter's shoes. I can not imagine the emotional upswing and then proceeding to be soul crushed by Jesus all in one conversation.

The disciples, not just Peter, all had in their head that Jesus will be this conquering king that will once again establish the nation of Israel again, where they will prosper once more. But Jesus is not interested in establishing an earthly kingdom and what He has in mind is much better than any of the disciples could dream of, they just don't know it yet. So when Jesus says he's going to be handed over and killed, and Peter understandable bristles at that

You see this is actually a major turning point for Jesus' ministry. Jesus spent most of his ministry up to this point performing miracles and teaching to the crowds around the sea of Galilee. But from here on out, Jesus has set his sight on going to Jerusalem where eventually he will be killed. Starting here, Jesus' focus now is helping his disciples understand while He is indeed the Messiah but they have the wrong idea of what type of a Messiah He is. This will be the first of 4 times Jesus will explain to his disciples He will be killed. The image of who Jesus is in the minds of the disciple is actually not who Jesus actually is.

Peter goes as far as to rebuke Jesus. While it's incredibly easy to give Peter a hard time because that mug just does not know when to stop talking, remember the context where Peter is coming from. Here stands before him, the long awaited Messiah, the deliverer of the Israelites, and this Messiah is now saying he is going to die. All the hope Peter had seems to be dashed by Jesus saying he is going to die. How can this conquering king deliver God's people from the tyranny of the Roman regime if he is going to die? How can freedom be obtained through Jesus dying? No one in human history has ever been declared a king by means of them dying. Victory is only secured through the vanquish and death of your enemies, not yourself.

When we start to see things from Peter's perspective, it actually makes sense his response is "Never, Lord!" This can not happen to you. It is your enemy that will die, not you. It is you who will be victorious while your enemies are vanquished. We need you to be alive to free us, do you remember? Your people that've been waiting for you for generations.

And Jesus responded probably none of us would ever want to hear from him. "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." Jesus rebukes Peter. In fact calls him Satan. Jesus knew what was before him, what would happen to him. He knows his purpose in coming to planet Earth. He knows he is going to the cross. He is indeed the long awaited Messiah. He will indeed free his people from oppression and tyranny. He will create a kingdom. He will indeed be the conquering king that vanquishes his enemies. He is indeed the hope of God's people.

But you see, all of who Jesus is and what it means, is so so so much more than what Peter or any of the disciples or any of the Israelites can ever hope or dream of. He is going to free his people from oppression and tyranny, not just once from the Roman regime, He is going to free them once and for all from the enslavement of sin and death. His people are no longer just the Israelites, it is now available to every nation and every

tongue who will confess Jesus is lord. Everyone can now be a part of His kingdom. And unlike any kingdom of this world, his kingdom will have no end.

Jesus is far different than the image that Peter has in his mind. But the difference is not that Jesus is a bad or a lesser version of the Messiah. It is in fact the opposite, this Messiah is better than anyone could ever dare dream. This Messiah is too good to be true. This Messiah is not coming to kill those who oppose him, he came to die for them, to redeem them, to free them. This Messiah is going to vanquish death, an enemy that all of us are hopeless to defeat. This Messiah came to give us life, life to the fullest. And this Messiah one day will put an end to pain and suffering. What a beautiful Messiah this is.

While it is the best news for us in this room that Peter got it wrong in thinking what type of Messiah Jesus will be. But I can't help to think as a pastor of our church, is that also happening in our own church family. Do we have the wrong image of Jesus in our own minds? As we follow after Jesus, we will come across things we disagree with how He says life ought to work. In those moments, do we assume we are in the wrong or do we rebuke Jesus like Peter did. Or maybe we are not so bold to rebuke Jesus, do we start to redact, or change who we think Jesus is into a version that is a more palatable, more acceptable, more friendly, more safe version in our own eyes. Did we make Jesus into our own image?

Here is my fear for our church family: If since following Jesus, how you live out your sexuality, how you handle your money and finances, how you approach your interpersonal relationships, how you think about social issues, justice issues, if He has never challenged your assumptions or ideas in those arenas, there's a good chance you've made up a version of Jesus. There is no way for us to follow after Jesus and not come across something that challenges us, that we come across something that we differ on with Jesus says how life ought to be. And in these moments, if Jesus is God, he does see the world differently than we do, and the difference lies in which he is right and we are not.

Another way to tell if we have made Jesus into our own image is, if Jesus did not give everything you want, is He still Lord? Is He still worth following? Maybe not everything, is there something in your life, desire, wish, something you deeply want outside of Jesus, if he doesn't fulfill that, is Jesus still who he says he is? Is he still worth following? Is he still good? Is he still your hope? Or Jesus is only as good as it benefits you and you get your heart's desire. Do you see Jesus as worthy and beautiful on his own or He is only beautiful or worthy to which he satisfies you?

Some of us may have begun following Jesus because we have a different version of Jesus in our mind than who he is. Some of us started pursuing Jesus because we are hoping he will give us a spouse or children. And Jesus may not give you that but he is giving you himself. In Deuteronomy 31:6 God promised he will never leave you nor forsake you. In Romans 8 Jesus promised nothing, in all of creation, nothing, nor angels or demons, nothing, can separate us from his love. And not only He's given you himself, you are now part of His family. And this family is forever. Yes it is different than your hope that Jesus will give you a spouse or children, but it's much much better: You get God himself and a family that will be forever.

Some of us started pursuing Jesus because we are hoping he will give us the things we need and the stability and safety we desire. And Jesus may not give you that. But He has done all the work needed for you to be eternally secured for the coming of new Heavens and new earth. Where there will no longer be any need, where there will no longer be any suffering or painful surprises that blindsides us. Jesus going to the cross, dying for you, and then resurrecting on the 3rd day means this future is certain, secured, and it is coming. It is different from your hope for a safe, comfortable, stable life here right now but what He is offering is much better: an eternal life with Him where there will be no more needs or brokenness.

Let's keep going v.24

24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. 26 What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"

Jesus then goes on to say, if you say I am the Messiah, here is what it looks like to live out what you believe. Here is the implication to the most important question of "who do you say I am": Deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow after him. If that's the type of thing the Messiah does, that's also the type of thing that the *followers* of the Messiah do. To deny yourself. To deny the things you want to do. To say no to (some of) your own passions. To say no to some things that you believe will make you happy. To say no things you think are what you need. To say no to your own hopes and dreams. To give up all of those and follow after this Messiah.

And don't miss this: Jesus says whoever wants to be my disciple, this is what it looks like. This calling to deny yourself is not exclusively for overseas missionaries. It's not for those who are called to do full time ministry. It's not a calling for pastors. It's not a calling

to those people who take Jesus more seriously. This is a calling for ALL people who claim to follow after him.

And this right here is another the communal implication to Jesus' question: "who do you say I am?". As a gathered people of followers of Jesus, this is what we are called to remind one another of. That we are in this 'following after Jesus' together, leaving everything behind, and we are following the same Messiah. That we claim Jesus is all we have and all we need. This is what we all agreed to as being part of Jesus' church, and when our lives don't align up with it, we have a responsibility to remind one another, to help one another spot the blindspots, to encourage one another to repent, to turn away and realign your life under Jesus' good rule and reign.

Jesus goes on to say what good is it for someone to gain the whole world yet forfeit their soul. Jesus is saying what He is offering you, is better than anything this whole world can offer you. Look, even if you're Jeff Bezos who owns Amazon which, let's be honest, that mug pretty much owns about half of planet Earth, I mean he literally shot himself into space just because. Even if you have what Jeff Bezos has, Jesus is still saying, my offer to you: an eternal life with me in my Kingdom is far better than what you have.

I don't know if we realize this or not. But what Jesus is claiming here, what He is calling us to do, is incredibly difficult for us specifically as 21st century Americans. This concept of denying yourself, this call to come and die to your desires, to give up everything is one that goes against a belief we deeply hold onto as Americans. As Americans we deeply believe in the concept that pursuit of happiness is one of the, if not, the most important thing. In fact it is in the Declaration of Independence. *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

This calling probably goes against something we deeply believe, more than we ever realize. But it's going to be worth it. Look at v.27:

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 they have done.

One day will come, where we will come face to face with Jesus and finally see him fully for who he is. We will truly understand just how good he is. Just how beautiful he is. How worthy he is, just how wonderful, just, compassionate, glorious he is. And everything we have laid down, everything we have given up, everything we have done to deny ourselves, with tears in our eyes we will see him and sing worthy, worthy, worthy is the

lamb of God, who died for my sins, bore my shame, and I am finally home to be with my savior. He is our king and we are his people. And his kingdom is everlasting and will never end.

In Revelation 21 this kingdom is described as:

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

5 He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

6 He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. 7 Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

A kingdom that will not have tears, mourning, crying, pain, or death. A kingdom that is new. A place where we were all meant to be from the very beginning. A place we have searched our whole lives. Home. That is the kingdom of God.

So on that note, look at our last verse, v. 28:

[28] “Truly I tell you (this is Jesus speaking here), some who are standing here (as in, some of the disciples) will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Now, let’s pause here briefly, because this to a lot of people is a pretty puzzling statement. Jesus just said that one day he will return in glory with angels and reward each person for what they have done. And then *here*, he says that some of the people standing there that day (i.e. the *disciples*) won’t die before they see his kingdom arrive. That’s a little weird, right? Because Jesus’ kingdom doesn’t seem like it has arrived in

that way even *now*, and yet best we can tell, every one of the disciples are dead. Like *real* dead. As dead as dead people can be. So what's up with this v. 28?

And the truth is that different commentators on Matthew say different things. But I think most likely, Jesus is drawing on a connection that his disciples don't yet fully understand: the idea of the *already-and-not-yet* kingdom. That in a way, the kingdom of God will not come fully until the day Jesus returns to make all things new. But also in a way, the arrival of Jesus to earth and specifically his death and resurrection kick-started his kingdom in the here and now. The gospel of John mentions a couple times how becoming "born again" enables you to see the "kingdom of God." As in, present tense. So, to be sure, none of the disciples will get to see the *fullness* of the kingdom arrive before they taste death—but they all will witness Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection before they test death. Some of them "will not taste death until before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

But in light of all that, let's go back to Jesus' original question: "Who do you say I am?" The answer to this question has tremendous implications to you personally, to us communally, and how you live your life. So I want us to spend some time today wrestling with this question. If you find yourself answering other than Jesus is Lord, don't be discouraged. He is inviting you into his kingdom today, right now. There is nothing magical you need to do. Just a simple prayer for acknowledging Jesus is indeed who He is and asking for the Holy Spirit to help you to live into that reality.

For those of us do claim to follow after Jesus and proclaim He is Lord. I want to give us some time for reflection and ask the Holy Spirit to help us fully grasp the implications of Jesus is indeed lord.

- **Who do you say Jesus is?** Have you personally arrived at the conclusion that Jesus is who he says he is, and that he has the authority he says that he has in your life? Where *isn't* that functionally the case in your life?
- **Who do we say Jesus is?** Are our relationships with each other at City Church—specifically those in our LifeGroup—built on the foundation that Jesus is who he says he is? Do our relationships and interactions reflect the reality that Jesus is the authority of our lives?
- **What are the implications of Jesus being who he says he is?** If Jesus is who he says he is, what should that mean for my life? Is there anything you haven't functionally submitted to the lordship of Jesus? What does repentance look like in that area of your life?