

Bible Study Guide: Week of 8-17-2020

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Matthew 16:13-20

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." 20 Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

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Caesarea Philippi was an important city about 20 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. It was a site of worship for many people and cultures throughout history. There was a shrine to Ba'al, the Canaanite god, at the site in ancient times. The city of Baal Gad, mentioned in Joshua chapters 11-13, may refer to what would later become Caesarea Philippi. Later, the Greeks erected a shrine to the god Pan in the region and named the city Panaes. Herod the Great renamed the city Caesarea Panaes after Caesar Augustus and built a temple to Caesar in the city. Herod's son Philip renamed it after both himself and Tiberius, hence the name Caesarea Philippi. The point in all this is that this was by no means a "neutral" site for this scene to take place. Indeed, the disciples were quite literally surrounded by various religious ghosts of the past in that city. It is in this context that Jesus asks them, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

The fact that others identify Jesus with dead revered and prophetic figures shows that many indeed spoke well of Jesus, even if they did not speak entirely accurately. The irony is that once Jesus is raised from the dead, many who lauded him as the second coming of John or Elijah or Jeremiah or another prophet refuse to accept the truth of his resurrection from the dead.

15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Here, Jesus' question anticipates a contrast between the popular opinions about Jesus and his disciples' belief about him. Simon Peter, as the preeminent and representative disciple answers on behalf of the other 11 disciples. His answer speaks a truth about Jesus that ironically transcends Peter's ability to fully understand. He says the right thing; he speaks the truth, but does not yet fully grasp all that these words will mean for him and for the world.

Peter's confession of faith is interesting in light of the setting of Caesarea Philippi—amidst various shrines and temples to numerous gods (including a couple of Roman Emperors who liked to style themselves as “sons of God”), Peter speaks the truth that Jesus indeed is the true Son of the living God. Messiah (*Christos* in Greek) means “anointed one,” signifying one chosen by God and set apart for God's saving purposes.

17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

Jesus blesses Simon, not because he has achieved special knowledge or wisdom, but rather because he has come to know a hidden truth about Jesus that will soon be made known to all. The emphasis here is not on how great Simon Peter is, but rather the focus is on Jesus and his kingdom message.

18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

“Peter” is the English transliteration of the Greek word “*petros*” meaning “rock.” Jesus is making a play on words here. In addition to giving Simon a nickname that stuck, he is saying that Simon will be the very foundation for the community which Jesus will establish. While our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters read this passage as a validation that Peter, first bishop of Rome, was the true foundation of the Christian church, Lutherans have tended to read this passage more figuratively. To many, it is Peter's confession of Christ as Messiah and Son of God that is the foundation of the church. Historically speaking, it would be difficult to overstate Peter's importance to the development of the early church, so Jesus' words seem to have been validated by experience. The most hopeful note here is that the very gates of Hades (sometimes translated “hell”) will not overpower or outmatch the church which Christ founded. Hades was the realm of the dead—our term “hell” connotes a place of punishment; Hades, by contrast, was not thought of as a place of punishment, but rather as the realm for all those who died—righteous and unrighteous alike. The implication here is that not even death—the most powerful enemy—will be able to win the day in the end over God and God's chosen people. Even if we are beset by hellish challenges, we will not be conquered in the end.

19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

The “you” here is singular, referring most naturally to Peter—perhaps, by extension, to the whole church in some sense. This verse, unfortunately, is chiefly responsible for the popular image of St. Peter as heavenly gatekeeper. The keeper of the keys, however, is not concerned with heavenly duties, but rather with earthly duties. Jesus is bestowing on Peter (and to some extent the other apostles and the church itself and the church's leaders) the duty of teaching what the kingdom of Heaven is like. The image of “binding and loosing” was used in rabbinic literature for authoritative teaching and interpretation. Peter is entrusted here as the first one after Jesus with authority to preach and teach in Jesus' name and to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven on earth through the church. Just as “flesh and blood” did not reveal the truth about Jesus to Peter, so we know it was only by the Spirit's work through Peter after the resurrection of Jesus that allowed him to complete the work God had in store for him. He was not left to do the work by himself or by his own strength.

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

This knowledge that has been revealed to Peter that Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” is not yet common knowledge to the world. Once again, the setting in Caesarea Philippi underscores the politically subversive nature of the claim that Jesus is “the Son of God.” Such a confession would have been scandalous to many Jews, but also to the Romans, for whom “Son of God” meant the emperor himself. Indeed, we see this scandal play out in Jesus' trial and execution (see Matthew 27:37-44 where the sign above Jesus proclaims the charge against him is that he claimed to be a King—in contrast to the Emperor, the “true” king, as well as the conversation among the bandits crucified with Jesus who mock him for claiming to be the “Son of God.”

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. Who do people in the world say Jesus is today? How does this compare and contrast with what we in the church claim about who Jesus is?**
- 2. What does it mean to you that Jesus promises that “the gates of Hades will not overcome” the church he came to build?**
- 3. In this passage, Simon Peter is blessed, given a name, and given work of ministry to do in the kingdom of Heaven. What events in your life can you think of that were times when God blessed you, named you, and sent you to do ministry?**