“YOU ARE THE MESSIAH”

Matthew 16:13–20

Key Verse: 16:16

“Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’”

“What do *you* think?” We live in a culture that values personal stories. Sometimes that can be a bad thing, because often, all we get are people’s opinions, not truth. But in another sense, personal stories are most real. And at the heart of Christianity is having a personal experience. Today’s passage marks a climax in Jesus’ ministry. In this study we want to learn what Peter’s confession “You are the Messiah” means, how anyone can have such a confession in their hearts, and what Jesus promises those who do. May God speak to us through his word today.

1. A personal confession (13–16)

Look at verse 13. It’s a rare occasion that Jesus is alone with his disciples, away from the crowds. This town of Caesarea Philippi was 25 miles north of Galilee, in Gentile territory. Wherever he went, Jesus was always ministering to people, with great compassion. But he’d been focusing on his disciples, trying to help them learn his compassion, and faith in God to serve others. But in helping them he had another goal in mind. Through life together he wanted them to realize who he really was. Now he finally talks about it.

He asks, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” Here Jesus describes himself as “the Son of Man.” Jesus often used this term “Son of Man” to refer to himself (8:20; 9:6; 12:8,32,40; 13:37,41). What did it mean? At the time, nobody really knew. It wasn’t a special title anyone was familiar with. It certainly didn’t mean the promised One everyone was waiting for. Jesus likely took this title from the prophecy of Ezekiel. In that book God repeatedly addressed Ezekiel as “son of man.” With this expression God was emphasizing Ezekiel’s humanity, in contrast to God’s own great majesty. “Son of man” had the nuance of “suffering servant.” With this term Jesus was saying he was nothing but a suffering servant—a nobody. It fit his human background. Humanly Jesus had nothing to brag about. He was only a carpenter’s son, from the humble town of Nazareth. Though he could do miracles and his teaching had such authority, Jesus thought of himself as nothing but “the son of man,” a suffering servant.

Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” Of course he knew the religious leaders didn’t like him. He knew they saw him as a lawbreaker, someone who didn’t keep their traditions, someone who associated with the wrong kinds of people. But Jesus also knew that the crowds loved him. They came to him in droves. They were so eager to hear him and to experience his healing. The disciples were especially interested in Jesus’ popularity. But Jesus wasn’t interested in that. He wanted his disciples to have spiritual eyes to discern the truth. What do people say about Jesus today? Many try to say he never even existed. Others say the real Jesus is not the superstar people later made him out to be. Some say he was a political revolutionary, or a great moral teacher, but no more. Many young people today would say Jesus was cool, a counter-cultural person who sided with the poor and alienated.

How did the disciples answer? Read verse 14. They mention the most popular prophets in Israel’s history: John the Baptist was the most recent, Elijah was the most famous, Jeremiah may have been the most heart-moving. These men all were well-known for challenging their people to repent. People of that time saw Jesus as just like them, one of the greatest, most powerful servants of God who ever lived. But even this fell short of the truth about him.

Read verse 15. Here, the word “you” is emphasized. Jesus expected his disciples to be different. Why? Because they’d actually lived with him for the past three years. They’d been with him closely. They’d seen his life first-hand. They heard everything he said, including his private explanations to them. Nothing was hidden from them. For anyone afraid of controversy, it might have been hard to speak up and take a side. What happened? Read verse 16. Simon Peter didn’t hesitate; he spoke from his heart. He says two important things about Jesus.

**First**, the Messiah. In Hebrew this word means “the Anointed One.” In the Old Testament, a prophet would anoint a man to be king of Israel. So by saying Jesus was the Messiah, Peter was saying he was more than a prophet; he was King. And because it’s capitalized, it means even more. This Anointed One was the King God promised to send through David’s line (2Sa7:13), who would rule over his kingdom forever. While the Jews were living under Roman occupation, several men claimed to be the Messiah, but their movements turned out to be nothing (Ac5:36,37). Jesus, however, Peter is saying, is the real deal—the true Messiah everyone had been waiting for, their true hope. At the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel, Matthew repeatedly tells us that Jesus is the Messiah (1:1,16,17,18; 2:4; cf. 11:2). But this is the first time during Jesus’ ministry that anyone actually confesses it. It tells us Jesus didn’t go around claiming to be the Messiah; he wanted people to realize it on their own, by observing him and his ministry.

**Second**, the Son of the living God. Probably Peter added the word “living” because they were in Gentile territory, where there were many idols and many kinds of gods, who were actually not real. By saying “the living God,” Peter also was making his confession to be like a solemnly sworn oath. But what does “Son of the living God” mean? In a sense, we’re all sons and daughters of God, because God is our Father and we’re his creation. In Old Testament prophecies, the Messiah would have a special Father-Son relationship with God (2Sa7:14; Ps2:7). But the capital S on the word Son tells us it means much more. Right after Jesus walked on water, the disciples worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God” (14:33). No human could walk on water; it was something only God could do (Ps77:16–19). As the Son of God, Jesus had supernatural powers no human does. Because he’s the divine Son of God, Jesus is to be worshiped.

When he asked, “Who do you say I am?” Jesus was not just asking for a correct answer that comes from intellectual knowledge; he was asking for a personal confession. Anyone can come to know the correct, Biblical view of Jesus with their minds. But to confess him as the Messiah, the Son of the living God, we have to experience Jesus in a personal way. A good example is the Samaritan woman in John 4. She experienced Jesus as the one who knew everything about her, the one who, in the end, was her true husband. Matthew the tax collector experienced Jesus as his spiritual healer and true friend, “God with us.”

The word “Messiah” summarizes so many truths about who Jesus is. So Isaiah 9:6 describes the Messiah as “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Jesus the Messiah is the only one who not only understands us best, but also meets our deepest needs. To the troubled, he’s a Wonderful Counselor. To the fearful, he’s Mighty God. To the insecure, he’s Everlasting Father. To the anxious, he’s Prince of Peace. And it’s only the most general description of how Jesus can help each individual person, with his or her own unique inner struggles. To have a personal confession of faith in him, we need to open ourselves up to him and let him minister to our souls. To confess him as my Messiah means he’s my King and Lord, my true hope, and everything to me.

This personal confession of faith became the foundation of Peter’s spiritual life. Of course, he would soon fail, denying him three times when Jesus was on trial. But it was a confession Peter could always come back to, and it would remind him of the unfailing grace and love of Jesus in his life. In the same way, making a personal confession of faith in Jesus isn’t just something we do at the beginning of our Christian lives; it’s a confession we need to renew from our hearts every day. It’s a confession of faith, but more than that, it’s a confession of love (Jn21:15; Eph6:24). To confess Jesus as my Messiah, we have to repent of any idols or false hopes that creep into our hearts.

1. Jesus’ promises (17–20)

How did Jesus respond to Peter’s confession? Read verse 17. Jesus blesses him for making this personal confession of faith in him. He also says Peter could have this experience of Jesus only through God’s revelation (cf. 11:25–27; 1Co12:3). Only God working in our hearts through the Holy Spirit can help us make a genuine confession of faith in Jesus. We all need to be praying for ourselves, as well as for others, to have the spirit of wisdom and revelation so that we can know Jesus better (Eph1:17).

Read verse 18. Through this personal confession of faith Peter became like a rock and foundation on which Jesus could build his church. The church is an important teaching in Matthew’s Gospel. The church is not a building but a place where people confess Jesus as their Messiah, by the work of the Holy Spirit. And even one person who makes such a confession of faith becomes a foundation stone for Jesus’ church to grow. If we really want God’s work to grow, we need to help people grow in a personal confession of faith in Jesus.

Jesus also promises in this verse that the gates of Hades will not overcome his church. At that time, opposition to Jesus was growing. Jesus knew his disciples also would be persecuted. The devil himself would try to defeat and crush Peter and the others. But this confession of faith in their hearts would be like a spiritual weapon to give them victory. They looked too small and weak to have any impact on the world. But in fact, through their personal faith in Jesus the church grew and has transformed much of the world. Once we’ve made a personal confession of faith in Jesus, even all the powers of hell cannot win over us (Ro8:37–39).

Read verse 19. The keys of the kingdom are what let people in. What lets us into God’s kingdom? It’s the grace of forgiveness of sins that only Jesus can give us. When we give people the gospel of forgiveness and they accept it, no matter who they are, they can enter into God’s kingdom.

Today we thought about the importance of having a confession of faith in Jesus in our hearts. May God grant each of us this personal confession that Jesus is my Messiah. May he renew this confession in our hearts and help us believe Jesus’ promises so that he can build his church through us.