

Matthew 16:13-20
 Confessing the King
 Tampa Covenant Church
 08 March 2026

Proposition: As disciples of Jesus Christ, we boldly confess him as the Messiah, the Son of the living God, and rest in his unfailing promise to build and preserve his church.

FCF: The tendency to relegate Christ's identity to popular opinion and personal expectation rather than divine revelation.

RHF: Through his death, burial and resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah and the Son of the Living God who is the builder, sustainer and preserver of his church.

(#1) Introduction:

Imagine you're overhearing a conversation. Maybe your neighbors are chatting at a get together, coworkers over lunch or just catching up with friends. The topic concerns Jesus and there's no arguing or debate, just an exchange of ideas concerning his identity. Then suddenly you get pulled in, "What are your thoughts?" On the surface, it's an "easy day" but in reality, it's probably the most important question you'll ever answer in your life. Because if you're a Christ follower...it's the kind of question that leaves no room to hide behind popular opinions or personal expectations. Rather, it's an opportunity to declare who Jesus is and the significance of his person and work.

In our passage, Jesus presses his disciples with the question of his identity, and it marks a decisive moment in his earthly ministry. The question is straightforward and it's one every disciple must ultimately answer. And our response reveals whether we simply admire Jesus from a distance or genuinely confess him as king and rest in his unfailing promise to build and preserve his church. So, this morning we'll explore this text under three headings: The Question, the Confession and the Promise.

The Question of Jesus' Identity: *Who do people say that the Son of Man is? (vv.13-14)*

At this point in his earthly ministry, Jesus had been teaching, preaching, healing, and confronting opposition, and many opinions were circulating on his identity and mission. (#2) In v.1 of our text, Matthew tells us Jesus came to the district of Caesarea Philippi, about thirty miles north of the Sea of Galilee; approximately fourteen hours by foot.¹ That's like us gathering in the parking lot after church and deciding to walk to Springhill, FL. If we left at 1pm, we'd arrive around 5am tomorrow morning. So, this isn't some Sunday stroll; it's a real journey. Caesarea Philippi was a district heavily influenced by rulers such as Herod the Great and later his son Philip the Tetrarch, who rebuilt and renamed the city after Caesar and himself.² So, we ask, "why would Jesus deliberately lead his disciples away from the familiar rhythms of Galilee to a spiritually dark place, surrounded by shrines of false worship, marked by rebellion against God? He's seeking to uncover what lies at the core of their hearts concerning his identity and the nature of their discipleship. And so, he throws (#3) out the first pebble...

"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" Son of Man is the term Jesus used to describe himself most; at least eighty times in the gospels.³ This was a lofty OT title for the one who shared the universal reign with the Ancient of Days (Dan 7:13-14). In this instance, he's using the title to gather feedback from his disciples; what's the word on the street, what are they saying about me in the synagogues, marketplaces

and in the villages.⁴ (#4) They respond, “well, some say John the Baptist others Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Although the crowd’s opinions were positive; even echoing Israel’s hope that God would one day raise up a great prophet; every answer ultimately fell short. Because they were more so based on human assumption rather than the truth of Jesus’ person and work.⁵

And this tendency wasn’t unique to the first century. Throughout history, people have fashioned versions of Jesus that align more with preference and popular opinion rather than God’s divine revelation. Ask ten people who Jesus is, and you’re likely to hear ten (#5) different answers. Thomas Jefferson was well known for his selectivity concerning Jesus’ person and work. He literally cut out the parts of the gospels he agreed with (Jesus’ moral teachings) and pasted them in his own Jesus storybook. In doing so, he passed over everything supernatural: virgin birth, miracles and most notably the resurrection.⁶ The Jesus that emerged was nothing more than a wise, ethical teacher; not a risen king. And the same rings true in our (#6 Blank) modern world. Many still adopt a cut and paste view of Jesus. For some, he’s a great moral teacher who tells us how to behave. For others, he’s a social justice reformer who confronts oppression. And maybe for others, he’s a life coach who provides encouragement in boosting self-esteem. Each of these perspectives captures something true, but none is sufficient on its own.

When we cling to the aspects of Jesus we prefer at the expense of the whole, we distort the truth of his person and work. Instead of beholding him in all his fullness, we hold to a truncated view of Jesus and that never works. Because Jesus the teacher doesn’t remove guilt, Jesus the social justice warrior doesn’t die for sin and Jesus the life coach never confronts rebellion against God. Years ago, C. S. Lewis pushed back against this kind of thinking. He argued that Jesus doesn’t leave us the option of calling him other than what he claimed to be. He’s either the Son of God, or something far worse.⁷ So, how we respond to the question of who Jesus is truly matters. This brings us to the confession.

The Confession of Jesus’ Identity: *You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God (vv.16-17)*

After hearing from the disciples, Jesus hits them with a pop quiz of sorts... the kind (#7) that determines the final grade, “*But who do you say that I am?*” Jesus wasn’t asking, “*hey what about me appeals to you most?*” No, he’s calling for a definitive, objective answer concerning his identity. And it’s Peter who opens his mouth on behalf of (#8) the others and confesses, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*” This confession completely railed against everything the people of Caesarea Philippi believed about their false gods. Matthew is pointing us back to the opening lines of his gospel: “*The book of genealogy of Jesus Christ.*” Meaning Jesus is the “Anointed one” who came to fulfill God’s plan of redemption in a special way. He’s helping us to recall the Father’s words at Jesus’ baptism, “*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.*” Meaning, Jesus is the eternal Son of THE living God, not of a lifeless, pagan gods whose likenesses littered the district of Caesarea Philippi. He’s the one to whom every prophet in redemptive history pointed to. The one who came to fulfill Israel’s calling as a light to the nations. Therefore, he’s greater than John the Baptist, greater than Elijah and greater than Jeremiah. He’s the one and only begotten Son who knew the will of the Father.⁸

(#9) In response to this confession, Jesus says, “*Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.*” This blessing wasn’t about temporary happiness or luck; it was a declaration of the deep joy and delight of God’s favor.⁹ Jesus called Peter by his full name, “*Simon son of Jonah*” and pronounced him blessed because he didn’t utter this confession out of sheer

brilliance or intuition. Rather this kind of insight was a gracious gift from the Father, making its way into his heart and springing forth from his lips. Obviously, Peter is singled out as the spokesman; meaning he's not speaking for himself; rather he's representing the view of the group.¹⁰ And notice how Jesus accepted Peter's use of the title "*Messiah*," one he often shied away from in public but here in this intimate moment with his disciples, he readily embraces it as he affirms everything Peter's confession with absolute joy.¹¹

(#10 Blank) When we look at scripture, we see that biblical confession involves two interconnected dimensions: Confession of sin and confession of faith. Corporately, we've already confessed our sin to God and received an assurance of pardon through Christ's atoning work. And we participated in the second dimension by publicly confessing our faith in the presence of our Savior. This dimension of confession is not merely a private matter. The early church understood this very well: Confession was required as evidence of genuine conversion and served as a prerequisite for baptism. And throughout church history, the church's confession of faith has clarified and preserved the truth of Christ's person and work in the face of opposition.

When we confess our faith; we're not just saying the right words; we're also declaring the very nature of our discipleship; a life of absolute allegiance to our King. **(#11) Benard of Clairvaux**, the 12th-century monk and reformer was famously known for confessing, "*I have no other king than Christ.*"¹² And that's a confession we need to keep on our lips every single day of our lives. Because rival kings rise up daily to claim the throne of our hearts: pride, sloth, greed, fear, anger, hatred and indifference. All of them demanding our allegiance. But we don't lose heart, instead we anchor ourselves in the truth of our confession, Jesus Christ our Lord. And we cry out against every rival king, "*we have no other king than Christ.*" So, Peter confessed what the Father revealed, and Jesus pronounced him blessed. But Jesus doesn't stop with the blessing, he continues with a promise; speaking about Peter and about what he himself will do.

The Promise of Christ's Victorious Church: *The Gates of hell will not prevail (vv.18-19)*

(#12) Jesus responds to Peter, "*You are Peter (Petros), and on this rock (Petra) I will build my church.*" Notice the wordplay taking place in this verse, Jesus is literally saying to Peter, "*you are rock and, on this rock, I will build my church.*"¹³ Jesus is identifying Peter as one who will play a foundational role in the establishment of the early church, a role that unfolds clearly in the book of Acts. But Peter is not the builder of the church; Christ is! Peter is not the head of the church; Christ is! Scripture clearly teaches that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. **(#13) And because Christ** is the builder, the promise is sure: "*the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*" Meaning, the church's future doesn't rest on the power of its leaders or the faithfulness of its members, but on the power and faithfulness of Christ himself.

Next, Jesus says, "*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*" Again, Peter is addressed as the spokesman. So, Jesus may be speaking to him but not him alone. The apostles as a whole have been entrusted with the keys of the kingdom. **(#14 Blank) And as** the foundational leaders of the church, their role was to authoritatively proclaim the truth Peter just confessed: that *Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God*. And those who heard this message and confessed Christ would be received into the church, and through the church, into the kingdom itself. However, those who rejected this message would find the

door locked and their entrance forbidden.¹⁴ This tells us that the door into the kingdom of heaven doesn't open through heritage, moral effort, or spiritual curiosity. The apostle Paul tells the church in Rome, *"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."* This is how the door of the kingdom opens, by confessing Jesus as king and trusting in the good news of his saving grace. And it's not a one-time affair; it's an everyday disposition in the Christian life; toward our growth in grace.

After granting the apostles the keys of the kingdom. The narrative takes a sharp turn as Jesus says something pretty surprising concerning the nature of his messiahship. He reveals that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer many things from the religious leaders and be killed, and on the third day be raised. What? Peter is undone! And so, he pulls Jesus aside and started (#15) to rebuke him, *"Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you."* And in turn, Jesus issued a rebuke of his own, *"Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."* See, Peter's confession was spot on but there was more work to be done. He didn't understand how Jesus would accomplish his mission in building and preserving his church.

(#16 Blank) It wouldn't be through military might, force or conquest but through the humiliation of suffering and sacrifice on the cross. Because Jesus' head was the sacred head that was wounded and weighed down with grief and shame. He's the one who rightly wore the crown of heaven but allowed himself to be scornfully surrounded with thorns as his only crown. In other words, Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, exchanged the crown of glory for the agony of a crown of thorns, bearing the guilt of sin and shame so that his promises to build and preserve his church would stand secure. And because of his glorious resurrection from the dead, the gates of hell will never prevail against his church. If we revisit the ancient district of Caesarea and Philippi today, we won't find an empire; rather we'll find rubble. The temples have collapsed the shrines are gone and the once imperial power is but a footnote. But the church; founded on a sure confession and sacrifice of our king, continues its faithful witness throughout the world to the glory of God. Because our king lives and through the power of the Holy Spirit; he's leading, guiding and directing us according to his perfect will for his church.

Conclusion:

So, we as Christ's church are called to set our minds on the things of God, in light of Christ's person and work. Understanding that entrance into this glorious kingdom as well as its advancement comes through the faithful confession of our king and the declaration and demonstration of his gospel in this broken world. And we do it with confidence because the same King we confess is the same King who promises one day to return in receiving us as his very own. And in that day, the glorious realities of the kingdom will be fully realized. And as we await that day, surrounded by spiritual darkness, shrines of false worship marked by rebellion against God. May the question from Caesarea Philippi continue to reverberate in our hearts: *Who do you say that I am?* And with the apostles, and all the saints who've gone before us, we confess with one voice, one heart and one mind: *"You are the Christ; the Son of the living God for we have no other King but Christ."* And May God grant us grace to live out this truth all to the praise of his glorious name.

¹ G. V, *Journey Through the Bible* (Oxford, England: Lion Books, 2021), 258.

² In 20 B.C. the Romans under Augustus, who then controlled the area, gave the territory to Herod the Great. After Herod's death, it passed to his son Philip who ruled there from 4 B.C. until his death in A.D. 34. Philip rebuilt the city into a beautiful place and renamed it Caesarea Philippi in honor of Tiberias Caesar and himself. W. T. Edwards Jr., "Caesarea Philippi," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Chad Brand et al. (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 247–249.

³ Greg Lanier, *Old Made New, A Guide to the New Testament us of the Old Testament*, (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2022), 92-93.

⁴ See Matt: 16:27–28; 17:9–12; 19:28; 20:18, 28; 24:27, 30, 37, 39, 44; 25:31; 26:2, 24, 45, 64), Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), 557.

⁵ *Ibid*, 557.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jefferson_Bible (accessed 16 February 2026).

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, PDF version, pg. 28.

⁸ R. V. G. Tasker, "Peter's Confession," *Christianity Today* (Washington, D.C.: Christianity Today, 1957), 7.

⁹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 421–422.

¹⁰ Wilkins, 561.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 422.

¹² Jonathan Gibson, *Be Thou My Vision: A Liturgy for Daily Worship* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 124–125, prayer of intercession adapted from Bernard of Clairvaux.

¹³ "In Aramaic, almost certainly the language Jesus spoke on this occasion, the same word (*kepha*) would have been used for both "Peter" and "rock." Translating it into Greek, Matthew would naturally use the feminine noun *petra* for "rock," since it is the most common and closest equivalent to *kepha*. But when it came to recording the wordplay in Greek, Matthew had to use the less common masculine noun (*petros*) in the first half of the wordplay, for he would not refer to Peter with a feminine noun." Wilkins, 562.

¹⁴ David Turner and Darrell L. Bock, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol 11: Matthew and Mark* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 223.