

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL ID (Matthew 16:13-28)

10.31.21

Description: *Peter identifies Jesus for who He truly is. Jesus identifies “Christ” for what that truly means — for Him and for His followers.*

INTRODUCTION

I’m a sports head, as I think you all pretty much know. And something that struck me in studying for this week’s message is that, in sports, claiming a title, such as being recognized as a “champion,” comes at the end of a season or event. Almost always, claiming a title means that the work is over because the goal — becoming the champion — has been achieved; there’s nothing left to do.

By way of contrast, when I was growing up, one of the events that could be counted on to be watched in our house without fail every year was the “Miss America” pageant. At the end of the evening, after watching various competitions, and to thunderous applause, the winner received the crown that signified her becoming “Miss America.” And I remember the long-time host of the event, Bert Parks, serenading the winner with the song, “There She Is, Miss America,” as she walked down a runway for the audience to see her up close as flashbulbs popped like crazy. It was a big deal!

Now what I’ve learned is, while this was the culmination of many pageants and equally many years of preparation, winning the title was actually just the beginning. For the next year, the winner’s life would be incredibly busy. You see, Miss America travels approximately 20,000 miles a month (meaning just under a quarter of a million miles in a year), changing her location every 24-48 hours as she tours the nation, making countless personal appearances as she promotes the issues that are of particular importance to her.

The point? While the title of Miss America carried all kinds of fame and glamour, having the title was a whole lot of work that would not be ended until the next Miss America was crowned. The title carried with it an incredible amount of responsibility and expectation. Simply put, the title meant something to do, not just something to be.

In our story today, Jesus is acknowledging a title in front of His disciples. But that title was far from just being something to claim. It was also about something to do — something that would impact everybody on the planet, and that would also have profound implications for His followers. This conversation would also contain a number of “firsts” that had never been brought up to the disciples before. Few texts have ever been as impacting as this one so, as we begin, **let’s start out with a very necessary word of prayer!**

TEXT (Matthew 16:13-28)

We’ll be telling this story mostly from Matthew 16 but also borrowing a little bit from Luke 9 as well as some from Mark 8, which is actually where we’ll begin:

Jesus and His disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi — Mark 8:27a.

Jesus and His disciples (both the Twelve and others who followed) had been moving north from the village of Bethsaida (last week’s story) into the area of Caesarea Philippi. This would have been a journey of about 25 miles. Overall, they were about 120 miles from Jerusalem, in the extreme northern part of Palestine, and in an area known today as the Golan Heights.

What’s ironic about this conversation is that it took place in a decidedly Gentile-influenced area filled with pagan religions and beliefs. It had once been a center for the worship of the Canaanite god Baal. There was a shrine for the Greek god Pan as well. Herod the Great, the same one who had

directed such an extended and magnificent remodeling of the temple in Jerusalem, had also had a temple built there to honor the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus.

As the time for this momentous conversation approached, Jesus did what He always did; Luke tells us that: ***Jesus was praying in private — Luke 9:18a.*** Jesus had prayed when He first selected the men who would become His disciples (Luke 6:12-13), so it is no coincidence that He would be praying now at this moment of bringing those same guys into such an incredibly challenging recognition.

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” — Matthew 16:13.

This was a question that was asking for opinions. What were they hearing regarding this One they were following so closely? And their answers came quickly.

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, [that] Jeremiah or one of the prophets [of long ago has come back to life]” — Matthew 16:14 [Luke 9:19b].

What’s interesting about each of the answers they gave was that, had any such event actually occurred, it would have involved something miraculous, something God would have very directly had to have had a hand in.

Remember that Herod Antipas once thought Jesus was really John the Baptist risen from the dead (Matthew 14:1-2). John had been murdered at the direction of Herod; his death was pretty much a matter of public record, having occurred at his birthday party with a whole bunch of public figures in attendance.

Elijah? Well, their own Scriptures had told the famous story of how he had been miraculously transported to heaven without ever having died (II Kings 2:11). What’s more, in some of his last words, the prophet Malachi had recorded God’s words when He said: ***“See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes” — God speaking, Malachi 4:5.*** And in truth, it had been John the Baptist who had fulfilled both that prophecy and the words of the angel Gabriel, who told John’s father Zechariah in announcing John’s coming through his aging wife Elizabeth: ***“[H]e will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous — to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” — Gabriel, Luke 1:17.***

Jeremiah, or any of the ancient prophets for that matter, had all been dead for centuries. Jeremiah had been known as the “weeping” prophet, and Jesus in His compassion for sinners certainly made people mindful of Isaiah’s words that foretold One who would be, in the beautiful words of the King James Version: ***a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. . . One who [s]urely hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows — Isaiah 53:3a, 4a (KJV).*** Now certainly God was capable of bringing any, or even all of them, back to life but, bottom line: God would have been a required part for any of these answers to even be possible, let alone real.

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” — Matthew 16:15.

And then the entire tone of the conversation changed in the blink of an eye. No longer was this about the opinions of others, but rather about the beliefs and convictions of the disciples themselves. Who was this One they followed? What did they believe about Him; what were their convictions about Him? his was one of the most important moments of their lives because they will never be asked a more consequential, important question — the reason being that Christ’s ID will become an inseparable part of their ID as well.

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” — Matthew 16:16.

What an amazing answer, which combined several elements:

- 1) “You are the Messiah (Hebrew) (the “Christ” in Greek)” — Jesus was the fulfillment of all the promises of God, through all His prophets, which had been communicated through His scriptures since man’s initial fall into sin in the Garden of Eden. In other words, this was a God who kept His word.
- 2) “You are the ‘Anointed One’ (the meaning of Messiah)” — Jesus was here by God’s command to do God’s bidding for God’s glory.
- 3) “You are . . . the Son of the living God” — Jesus is God, Jesus is divine, Jesus is deity, Jesus is also the eternal I AM — completely one with His Father.

This answer made it known that Christ’s disciples, then and now, were dealing with far, far more than just a great man, or a great teacher, or any other human acknowledgement. Christ’s greatness was directly attributable to His Godhood. They cannot be separated.

Now there had certainly been previous acknowledgements of who Jesus was. Nathanael had confessed to Christ’s identity when first being introduced to Him: ***“Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel” — Nathanael, John 1:49.*** But that was a response to Jesus’ miraculously seeing him. When the disciples had been caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee (when Jesus walked on the water to meet them), they had collectively declared: ***“Truly you are the Son of God” — the disciples, Matthew 14:33b*** when He entered their boat, but that was a response to His miraculously stilling the storm.

But this acknowledgement was profoundly different, as Jesus makes very plain: ***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” — Matthew 16:17.***

So why was this particular confession so different? Well first, it was not an emotional response in the moment to witnessing some kind of miracle but rather an objective confession as to who Jesus was by means of His being ID’d by the Holy Spirit. Secondly, Jesus accepted this confession by amplifying it into the basis for how the ministry He had started was going to continue. He was going to use it as a foundation, a starting point for going forward into the world.

And His response to Peter serves as an important reminder that justification — new birth in Christ — and sanctification — a growing life becoming like Christ — are both outcomes of God’s sovereign rule in our lives. God draws us to Himself, secures us in Himself, and causes our growth in Himself. Our lives are completely the result of the power and grace and directing of God alone.

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. 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” — Matthew 16:18-19.

Time for a little word study to really get behind what Jesus is saying:

- 1) “You are Peter” (*petros* in Greek, *Cephas* in Aramaic) — a piece of detached rock, sometimes suggested as a piece of rock that can be lifted or thrown. This was a name given him by Jesus Himself. But in a sense, we are all “Peters” according to Peter’s first letter, who identifies all who confess Jesus as Lord as ***living stones — I Peter 2:5a.***
- 2) “On this rock” (*petra* (Greek), a mass of rock). This is the word linked not with Peter or even with the confession he gave but rather with the source of that confession — God Himself, through His Holy Spirit. And for the disciples, the use of the word “rock” would have directly

reflected God Himself in their scriptures, such as these words from Moses: ***“He is the Rock, His works are perfect, and all His ways are just” — Moses, Deuteronomy 32:4a.***

- 3) The “rock.” In addition to being connected to God, their scriptures would have connected Jesus to being the specific God-designed foundation for their future; just listen to these prophetic words of God Himself: ***“See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation” — God speaking, Isaiah 28:16a.***
- 4) “My church” (*ekklesia* (Greek), a called-out assembly. This is the first time this word was used in scripture. The NT ultimately contains 114 occurrences of this word, 90 of which refer to the local body of believers. But here, Christ is referring to the universal church, that is, to all who claim the same confession which Peter presented. Now that word would have initially been familiar to the disciples in the context of assemblies of citizens helping to collectively govern their cities or districts, or in the Greek translation of the Old Testament — the *Septuagint* — being used to describe Israel whenever it came together as a nation for religious activity. But Christ’s use of the word meant something very new, for this would be an assembly of unity — bringing together Jews and Gentiles into a new kind of temple, a spiritual temple in which otherwise natural distinctions — gender, age, ethnicity or any other human differences — were meaningless, overwhelmed by the far greater reality of Jesus as the founder, builder and head. It also let Christ’s followers know that the kingdom of heaven was not the imminent next step some might have thought. Following Christ’s earthly presence was going to be His ongoing presence in the church — His assembly of believers.
- 5) Gates of Hades. In the ancient world, there were not boardrooms or council chambers. There was the city gate; this is where the major issues of the day were deliberated. This was a place where the powerbrokers of the city were on display. This then was Christ’s way of picturing the combined power of sin, death and Satan. His point? All that power would not matter because the church would be founded on a far greater power — Christ Himself. But keep in mind that this is not based on the power of religion, but rather on the power of genuine relationship with God through Jesus Christ. That is the key to power over the “gates of hades.”
- 6) Keys of the kingdom of heaven. This cannot be understood to be meaning heaven itself; no man will ever have that authority. But what keys can do is open doors — meaning being a means of understanding faith, as for instance Peter did for Jews at Pentecost (Acts 2) and for Gentiles with his witness to the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10). All faithfully witnessing Christians have this privilege to claim.
- 7) Whatever you bind/whatever you loose. The Greek really helps here. Essentially what is being said is: “Whatever you bind on earth (forbid to be done) shall have already been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth (permit to be done) shall have already been loosed in heaven.” In other words, the church is to obey on earth whatever God has already declared in heaven; likewise, what God has permitted be done, the church shall allow to be done. And lastly, heaven is in agreement with church decisions properly determined (made in line with God’s will).

Then He ordered [strictly warned — Luke 9:21a] His disciples not to tell anyone that He was the Messiah — Matthew 16:20.

Nobody understood the process of what was to come, and why, better than Jesus. The cross was the centerpiece of the Messiah’s purpose; therefore, the identity of the Messiah must wait until all things had been accomplished.

From that time on Jesus began to explain to His disciples [began to teach them — Mark 8:31a] 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 — Matthew 16:21.

So now that Jesus had claimed who He was, He now went on to explain what that meant. His title was not just a thing to be but, far more importantly, a thing to do — and those two things, the title and the task, could never be separated. So, He began the process of explaining to His disciples the horrific details of what being the Messiah ultimately meant. In fact, Mark tells us in his gospel that Jesus ***spoke plainly about this — Mark 8:32a.***

But Peter, having just provided the ID a moment before, would have none of what he was hearing come from his master's mouth: ***Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him.***

“Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” — Matthew 16:22.

And in a moment Peter went from a living stone to a stumbling block. Now it was Christ's turn to have none of what was coming out of Peter's mouth: ***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” — Matthew 16:23.***

Now think what Jesus is saying: “This is the path I want because this is the path God wants. So don't you dare get in My Father's way!” And hold on to that thought about “human concerns” because it is going to be a major point of emphasis for the rest of Christ's ministry — and the church's ministry as well.

[Then He called the crowd to Him along with His disciples and said — Mark 8:34a] [to them all — Luke 9:23a]: “Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross [daily — Luke 9:23b] and follow Me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me [and for the gospel — Mark 8:35b] will find it” — Matthew 16:24-25.

There's the life Christ is looking for in His followers — following in His steps.

To deny yourself means to give yourself wholly to Christ and willingly and gladly share in His shame and death. It means first things first in the use of our energy and efforts. To take up the cross means to completely identify with Christ in His rejection, shame, suffering and death. Again, first things first. Only those things done for the sake of the Father and our Master will matter, and only those things will last on into eternity.

“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 Christ, Matthew 16:26.

It doesn't take long to hear the world's message, that the greatest things we can ever know are found right here — in our own resources, in our own ideas. Generations of people have totally lost themselves in chasing after the “good life” and totally wound up losing “eternal life.”

“If anyone is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation [Mark 8:38a], the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when He comes in His glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels — Jesus Christ, Luke 9:26.

Christ came into this world with an impassioned desire to “save sinners.” Nothing was more important than that — including His own well-being. We are to adopt that same attitude, being proud of the name we claim and excited to do whatever is necessary to share the gospel — thinking about ourselves as unimportant to that process. One way that we do make claim for ourselves is when being associated with Jesus Christ embarrasses us. According to His words here, He won't

forget those who weigh the odds and choose themselves over Jesus. A real Christian, knowing precisely who Jesus is, will never be embarrassed by association with Christ. person of religion will, because being religious is optional.

“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” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 16:27.

Our days are all coming to an end, with a perfect scorekeeper watching over us and our lives. What will the record show we have done for the Master? And what will the record show were our reasons?

“Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom [before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power]” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 16:28; Mark 9:1b.

This was a teaser for what was coming next, and that would be experienced personally by three of His disciples — Peter, James and John: the “transfiguration.”

APPLICATION

One of the points that Christ wanted to make to His disciples was the primacy that He deserves. There is no other life to live for than for the sake of the gospel. That has primacy, according to words that Christ Himself spoke, over family, extended family, or any other of our own considerations. And what that looks like is shared by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippian church where he said: ***Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross — Paul, Philippians 2:5-8 (NASB1995).***

I recently heard of a woman who asked a friend of hers, a Christian, that, if she didn’t forgive this friend of hers, would she lose her salvation — because she had no intention of forgiving her friend. I would respond on the authority of scripture that, if that is her attitude, I would question exactly what Savior she says she believes in. He didn’t pour out a bit of Himself and then say, “That’ll do.” Going into a marriage with that attitude would produce nothing but failure. Going into parenthood with that attitude would likewise fail. Going into a career with that attitude would achieve absolutely nothing. How in the world would we dare approach our relationship with our Savior like that? Jesus poured out everything — to the point of severing His eternal relationship with His Father — all on account of desiring our salvation. Now that’s taking up a cross. If we put limits on our Christianity, that may be religion, but that is no reflection of any kind of scripturally based faith.

CONCLUSION

“Who do you say that I am?” In heaven we will celebrate the answer to that question. For now, we reveal the truth of our relationship to Jesus Christ by our answer to that question. Don’t let that answer wait. Let’s be firm in knowing the answer, and then live it out. Let’s pray!