

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: **Who's Got the Keys to the Kingdom?**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 16:13-20

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DATE: March 9, 2008

We are skipping several portions of Matthew as we come this morning to chapter 16, verse 13. Each of the sections we are passing over from 15:29 to 16:12 has a close parallel with one of the passages we have recently wrestled with, so I am going to move this morning to chapter 16, verse 13, which addresses the critical question of "Who is Jesus?" and the related question of "Who's Got the Keys to the Kingdom?" Let's read Matthew 16:13-20:

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

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. 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." Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

Who do people say Jesus is? (16:13-14)

That's what Jesus asks His disciples as He comes into the region of Caesarea Philippi, not to be confused with Caesarea on the Mediterranean. The latter was the city expanded so significantly by Herod the Great. The History Channel recently had a program on the amazing breakwater and seaport built by Herod at Caesarea—I'm sure some of you saw it. Anyone who has visited Israel has seen his hippodrome and huge amphitheater on the coast northwest of Jerusalem.

Caesarea Philippi, on the other hand, was a small town about 25 miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee, at the foot of Mt. Hermon and very near the Golan Heights. The headwaters of the Jordan River issue from a cave nearby, and an ancient pagan shrine can still be seen in this cave.

The area became part of the tetrarchy of Philip after the death of Herod the Great. He named the place Caesarea Philippi in honor of the emperor Augustus and himself. It was largely pagan Gentile territory and Jesus is there apparently because He is trying to avoid the crowds who want to crown Him as their political Messiah and the religious leaders who want to kill Him. He seizes the opportunity for some teaching time and challenges His disciples to clarify their thoughts about His person. He asks them, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" This was Jesus' favorite designation of Himself, used some 80 times in the NT, but Mark and Luke both record the question as simply, "Who do people say *I* am?" and "Who do the crowds say *I* am?"

The answers are varied but they do not include any hostile views: “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Think with me about these answers. There are no losers in this list. They are all spiritual heroes of Israel, men of faith and action. John the Baptist, of course, had recently been martyred, but the faithful cannot believe they have seen the last of him; perhaps Jesus is the reincarnation of John. Elijah is mentioned because of a prophecy in Malachi 4:5 to the effect that Elijah would appear again before the great and terrible Day of the Lord. Some think Jesus may be the fulfillment of that prophecy.

In the Apocrypha there is a prediction that Jeremiah would come before the end, so he is also mentioned. “One of the prophets” is a grab-bag category for people who aren’t prepared to identify Jesus with any particular prophet, but they believe Him great enough to be numbered among them. Clearly many are impressed by Jesus as they observe Him doing many of the things they expected prophets would do. But in each instance they consider Jesus to be a forerunner of the Messiah but not the Messiah Himself.

I want to spend a little time today asking the same question of our own time and culture. Who do people say Jesus is? Well, one voice that is heard above many today is that of Oprah Winfrey. She just about single-handedly put Barack Obama on the political map just by telling the crowds who she believes him to be. Who does Oprah say Jesus is? Well, if you’re on Ruth Snapp’s ministry email list you received a stunning article this week about Oprah’s course on the *New Age Christ* that airs every day, 7 days a week, on XM radio. It is based on Marianne Williamson’s bestseller, *A Course in Miracles*, the audio version of which is recited by Richard Thomas, who was John Boy in the Walton family. Oprah told her TV audience that Williamson’s book was one of her favorites, she bought copies for her entire studio, and her endorsement put the book at the top of the New York Times bestseller list.

The book is allegedly the revelations Jesus communicated through years of channeling to a Columbia University Professor of Medical Psychology to help humanity work through these troubled times. It includes the following amazing insights:

“There is no sin . . .”

“A slain Christ has no meaning.”

“Do not make the pathetic error of ‘clinging to the old rugged cross.’”

“The Name of Jesus Christ as such is but a symbol. . . . It is a symbol that is safely used as a replacement for the many names of all the gods to which you pray.”

“The recognition of God is the recognition of yourself.”

“The atonement is the final lesson he (man) need learn, for it teaches him that, never having sinned, he has no need of salvation.”

Now I’m a natural skeptic. When I read a critical article like this about a public figure like Oprah, I always consider the possibility that someone is creating an urban legend on their computer. It’s not that I don’t trust Ruth Snapp, but I’m the kind of person who likes to go to the source and check it out. So on Tuesday I got on Oprah’s own website called *Oprah and Friends*

and checked out that day's spiritual lesson from *A Course in Miracles*. Let me read to you word for word:

“To review our last few lessons, your function here is to be the light of the world, a function given you by God. It is only the arrogance of the ego that leads you to question this, and only the fear of the ego that induces you to regard yourself as unworthy of the task assigned to you by God Himself. (So far so good, but now listen. . .) The world's salvation awaits your forgiveness, because through it does the Son of God escape from all illusions, and thus from all temptation. The Son of God is you.”ⁱ

So that's a little of what Oprah says about who Jesus is.

Who does Mormonism say Jesus is? A few months ago Mike Huckabee got into some pretty hot political water by asking a reporter a question related to Mitt Romney's candidacy: “Doesn't Mormonism teach that Jesus is Lucifer's brother?” Wow, the press jumped all over that one, and Huckabee was nearly crucified for such an inappropriate question. This was in the news day after day. But oddly I never heard a single reporter ask, “Well, what about it? Does Mormonism teach that Jesus is Lucifer's brother?” And the answer is, “Yes, it does!”

And Mormonism teaches a lot of other heresies about Jesus. Mormons do not accept the orthodox doctrine of the Virgin Birth, the deity of Christ, or the all-sufficient atonement of Christ on the cross. They have historically taught that Jesus was a polygamist and that the wedding feast at Cana was His own wedding—to Mary and Martha and the other Mary. Now I warn you that Mormons go to incredible lengths to hide their church's historical teaching until someone is thoroughly indoctrinated. They are trying desperately to go mainstream. They want everyone to view them as a legitimate denomination of Christianity. Well, if you compare their views to some mainline denominations, I suppose by that standard they are pretty mainstream, but that's only because those denominations have already abandoned virtually every essential of the Christian faith.

Who does Islam say Jesus is? I don't have time to go into any detail on the Muslim view of Jesus except to warn you that Muslim leaders constantly say they revere Him as a prophet and a spiritual guide, but they do not see him as the Son of God. They view the deity of Christ as a blasphemous denial of Allah as the only true God. Jesus did not atone for anyone's sins, nor did He die on the cross but instead miraculously substituted Judas Iscariot for Himself on the cross.

We could go on and on, asking, “Who does this person think Jesus is? What about that group? What about that religion?” Actually most people on the street would probably answer much closer to how the disciples answered for the people of Jesus' day—He is a great teacher, a prophet, a peacemaker, a friend of the poor. People admire Jesus, they consider Him to be a charter member of the Religious Hall of Fame. He's a hero and definitely wears a white hat.

But Jesus wants us to know that there's a second, far more important question than the first one He asked: “But what about *you*? Who do *you* say I am?”

Who do *you* say Jesus is? (16:15-19)

Jesus asks this question of His closest friends and followers. In fact, this is the most important question in the world for *anyone* to answer. God will not judge you on the basis of what your culture believes about Jesus. He will not judge you on what your church believes about Jesus, or your parents, or your closest friends. You will be judged on the basis of what *you* believe about Jesus. Who do *you* say He is?

Jesus offers a blessing to the one who answers correctly. Verse 16: “Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah’ . . .” We have noted frequently that Peter is the first of the disciples to act or speak. “Impetuous Peter” he is sometimes called. But here is one time that his impetuosity doesn’t get him into trouble. He doesn’t hesitate to affirm that Jesus is the Christ (the term means “Messiah,” the chosen one of God to redeem His people), the “Son of the living God.” For once Peter nails it!

I’m reminded of a story I once heard about Professor Paul Tillich, of Harvard fame and later the University of Chicago, recognized as one of the great theologians of the 20th century by the liberal church. Tillich was scheduled to deliver a lecture at a Midwestern University, and a student arranged to see him for a few minutes the afternoon before the lecture. “Professor Tillich,” he said, “I have a conflict and I can’t attend your lecture. I’m sorry, because I have heard you are the greatest theologian in the world and I have a simple question: ‘Who is Jesus?’” The distinguished scholar is reported to have leaned back in his chair and said, “Well—historically, Jesus is the one transcendent reality beyond all transient reality. Philosophically, He is the dialectical imperative. Ontologically, He is the source of all being. Eschatologically, He is the end of the human impulse toward the apocalyptic.” And the student said, “Huh?” Now I strongly suspect that is an apocryphal story, but if you’ve read much of Tillich, you know it’s not too far-fetched.

In contrast, how simple and straightforward is Peter’s answer! “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus declares Him blessed for his answer. The term “blessed” refers to godly delight or holy joy. Interestingly, however, Jesus denies that Peter’s answer is the result of some splendid logical deduction or human cleverness on his part.

Jesus gives credit for the right answer to His Father in heaven. Peter knows who Jesus is only because of divine revelation. Friends, if we’re going to be really honest, every insight we have about Christ is a result of God revealing Him to us. Never in the history of mankind has anyone come to know Jesus as the Son of God just through reason or effort or ritual or osmosis. “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God” (Romans 10:17). The Holy Spirit has to remove the scales from our eyes, for “the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4).

Peter has seen the light, and he has made a significant statement about Jesus. Now Jesus makes a

significant statement about Peter. In fact, He makes four amazing promises to Peter, all based on his answer.

Jesus makes four amazing promises to Peter, based on his answer:

1. “On this rock I will build my church.” (18) This simple sentence has caused endless controversy in the Church. Roman Catholics, of course, appeal to this verse as the basis for the papacy. Jesus, they say, is establishing Peter as the earthly head of the church, and by extension that authority goes to his successors. Thus the Pope in Rome is the Vicar of Christ on earth. Now I think it’s easier to prove that Jesus’ words don’t mean what the Roman church says they mean than it is to prove what they do mean.

Peter simply never functioned in the early church even remotely like the Pope has functioned through the centuries. In Acts 3, for example, Peter encounters a crippled man at the temple gate begging and heals him. Peter then says to the huge crowd that gathers in awe, “Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?” In other words, Peter declines all adulation and fanfare; in fact, he doesn’t even speak in the first person singular. Rather he says, “Why do you stare at *us* as if by *our* own power” I’m sorry, but that kind of humility just doesn’t seem to match the picture of a Pope dressed up in white robes, wearing a mitre, holding a scepter, and accompanied by a huge entourage.

If Jesus meant to anoint Peter as the earthly head of His church, why didn’t He say, “You are Peter, and upon YOU I will build my church.” That would certainly be the easiest way to express the point. Instead He says, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” There is a play on words here that is not immediately obvious in the English language. The terms for Peter and rock, *petros* and *petra*, are related but not identical. *Petros* is a masculine noun referring to a pebble or a stone, while *petra* is a feminine noun that means a mass of rock. The big question is the meaning of *petra*. Does it mean the man Peter? It would be highly unusual to use a feminine noun to refer to a man. Does it refer to the faith Peter has just professed? Or is it the teaching of Jesus? Each of these views has been argued passionately, but it is not easy to be dogmatic.

I’m inclined toward the view that the Rock upon which Jesus promises to build His Church is Peter’s confession. This is actually quite an ancient interpretation, not one devised to counteract the papacy. Chrysostom, one of the greatest of the early church fathers, cites the words, “upon this rock will I build my church” and immediately goes on to say, “that is, on the faith of his confession.”ⁱⁱ

What is the point, then, of Jesus saying, “You are Peter (*petros*) and on this rock (*petra*) I will build my Church”? I personally think Jesus is affirming Peter’s faith and insight by saying, in effect, “Simon, you have confirmed the rock-solid truth of who I am, so from now on I’m going to call you Rocky.” You see, there is no evidence that anyone had the name Peter before Christian times, either in its Greek form, *Petros*, or its Aramaic, *Cephas*. In fact, it is not a name at all, but a nickname, and it should really be translated, “Rocky.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Now I have no desire to demean Peter's place among the Apostles. He was clearly their spokesman. In the early chapters of Acts He was their leader and the boldest among them in preaching the Gospel. But he was no Pope, and there is certainly no mention in Scripture of him having any authoritative successors. Nor did he speak infallibly on doctrine, as the Pope claims to be able to do when he speaks *ex cathedra*. In fact, in Galatians 2 when Peter and Paul had a dispute over the truth of the Gospel, it was Peter who displayed fear and hypocrisy and Paul who prevailed.

And surely the other Apostles did not recognize Peter as having any authoritative preeminence over them. Just a short time after this incident, in Matthew 20, we read about a request from the mother of James and John to Jesus to give her sons the chief places of honor in His kingdom, one on His left and the other on His right. In Mark 10 we learn that James and John were themselves directly involved in the request. Would they have done this had they understood Peter to have been given primacy as Jesus' successor?

Furthermore, Peter never claimed a superior title, rank or privilege over the other apostles. He referred to himself as a "fellow elder" (1 Peter 5:1), and he soberly warns his fellow elders to guard against lording it over those under their pastoral care (1 Peter 5:3).

Most importantly, whatever Jesus meant here about building His Church on the Rock, it cannot contradict the fact that Jesus Himself is the foundation and the cornerstone of the Church, as taught by Peter himself in 1 Peter 2:4-6 and by Paul in 1 Cor. 3:11. In the latter passage the Apostle Paul says, "By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ." So the massive rock upon which the Church is built is Christ Himself. Peter just professed the truth of who He is.

2. "The gates of Hades will not overcome it." (18) The church which Christ will build will not be overcome by the gates of Hades, meaning "the place of the dead." We have often misunderstood this to mean that Satan and His forces will attack the Church but will not prevail because God will defend his Church. But please realize that gates are not offensive weapons but defensive ones. The picture is not of Satan attacking the church but rather Christ's church literally banging down the gates of Hades. Its gates are not strong enough to withstand the church. It seems to me that the point is that sin and death have been conquered by Christ, that He will raid the place of the dead and raise up His saints to be with Himself.

3. "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." (19) The symbol of keys speaks obviously of admitting people through a door, but it is also used of exercising authority. Dick and Tom have the keys here at First Free. I've been given one key to the front door and one to the office. I can get you in either of those places. But if you want to get into the baptistry or the catwalks above the sanctuary or Frontline or E & F Hallway now being remodeled or the thermostats, don't come to me—Dick or Tom are the guys with authority.

Clearly Peter is given the keys to the kingdom here in this passage. Jesus uses the second person singular pronoun, “I will give *you* the keys . . .” And historically Peter was given the privilege of opening the way for many into the Kingdom. In Acts 2 and 3 his preaching resulted in thousands of new converts. In Acts 10 he shared the Gospel with the Gentile Cornelius and introduced the Gentile world to baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 8 we find Peter excluding, i.e. locking the door, to an unrepentant sinner named Simon the Sorcerer. Peter seems to have the keys alright, but the question is, “Is he the only one with the keys?” I don’t think so, and this becomes more apparent as we look at the fourth promise, which is closely related.

4. “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (19) The metaphor of binding and loosing was used by the rabbis for declaring something forbidden or permitted.^{iv} But it is critical that we pay attention to the grammar here in verse 19. In my version there is a footnote with the verb “will be” both times and a note that the Greek literally reads, “will have been.” It’s actually a future perfect tense. That makes a huge difference. If it said “will be,” that would mean that Peter would be setting policy in heaven. But the future perfect means that Peter is just discerning and responding to what God has already done in heaven.

I don’t have any problem accepting that this was Peter’s job, because it’s also the task of every apostle and every true follower of Jesus. Furthermore, Matthew makes it absolutely clear that Peter is not the only one given this responsibility. Look over one page to Matthew 18:18. There the identical promise is made, but Peter is nowhere mentioned in the section from verse 15-20. Jesus is evidently speaking to all the apostles, or better yet, speaking to the church as a whole.

In fact, the very next verse reads, “I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” This has always been interpreted as “two or three believers,” not just as “two or three apostles.” So, apparently this wonderful promise of binding and loosing, of authority in His church is not the exclusive property of Peter or even of the Apostles. But there is no need to minimize Peter’s role—He had a very significant one in the early church.

Why does Jesus forbid His disciples to tell anyone that He is the Messiah? (16:20)

Our text closes with a strange statement: “Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.” He doesn’t deny that He is the Christ; rather He tells them not to make it known. Why? Again, because the time is not ripe. In a very short time, probably within six months from this moment, the time would arrive when Jesus would be charged under oath before the high priest, “Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God,” and He would Himself acknowledge, “Yes, it is as you say.”

Conclusion: Let me come back to this issue of the importance of having a personal faith. Second-hand faith is not enough. It must be our own. You may be a member of a Christian family or a Christian church or a Christian youth group. If so, you realize it is not that difficult to go with the flow and assume that the faith of your friends is your faith also.

But saving knowledge of Jesus is always a personal discovery, *not* the passing on of a report learned from others. It is faith in a person, *not* in a set of beliefs. Paul did not say, “I know *what* I have believed.” He said, “I know *whom* I have believed.”

Do you know Jesus as the Son of God, as your own personal Savior? I urge you to confess Him as Lord today.

i. A little later Marianne Williamson puts in italics, in a paragraph all by itself, the particular thought she wants her readers to focus on, meditate on, and repeat over and over throughout that day: “This is the world it is my function to save.” Well, that sure makes sense! If I’m the Son of God, then it must be my job to save the world. Website, *Oprah and Friends*, Tuesday, March 4, 2008.

ii. Cited by Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 423.

iii. See footnote in Morris, 422.

iv. TDNT, II, 60-61.