

The Turning Point

Matthew 16

In Matthew's account, the turning point seems to have been reached with an event recorded in 16:13-20. The end of chapter 15 records that great crowds had continued to come to hear Jesus and to rejoice in His healings. In Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do people say the Son of man is?" The disciples reported a variety of ideas.

Clearly Jesus was regarded as one who was under the blessing and authority of God. But still Israel did not recognize Jesus as the promised Messiah and Son of God. How long does it take to really get to know someone?

Jesus was rejected by most of the people, not just by the leaders. It was not that the crowds opposed Jesus: they simply refused to commit themselves to Him.

But the rejection was real. From here on Jesus spoke not so much of His kingdom as of His cross. And Jesus began to present more clearly the way of Kingdom living.

Along with the question above, this chapter raises critical questions for Matthew's brethren as well as every generation: who is Jesus, really? Why does Peter seem to get special treatment? What is the firm foundation against which even the gates of hell cannot prevail? What are, or were, the keys to His kingdom? What is the cross Jesus' disciples are called

on to bear? The answers to these questions are found in the identity and mission of Messiah.

Chapter 16 begins as chapter 15: with Pharisees. (16:1) "The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven."

He was again confronted by religious leaders. But this time, Pharisees with Sadducees. These two groups hated each other. But they hated Jesus more than they did each other. Hate makes strange bedfellows. The Pharisees had great popular support, whereas the Sadducees held political power. Together they made a dangerous team.

They tested him by asking for a sign from heaven. By asking, they had rejected all the signs that they had witnessed to that point. What more did they need to see? What more could he do? How long does it take to really get to know someone?

The two groups mentioned here represent the Sanhedrin, the ruling religious council. They have shown they cannot interpret spiritual signs, for Jesus has performed many authenticating miracles. They want a sign from heaven. Heaven is a place prepared for those who are prepared for it. A sign from heaven will not convince a person who is determined not to believe.

Matthew had already recorded that the only sign this generation would receive was the sign of Jonah. In 12:39, Jesus told the Pharisees, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

If they wanted signs from Heaven, Jesus could have pointed back to the star that appeared at his birth; or the report of the shepherds about the angles; or the magi's arrival following the star. He could have reminded them about Herod's murderous acts on the innocent while trying to kill him. Were any of these men old enough to remember these events? Any of them in their mid 40's should be able to remember these signs. As far as signs go, they had all the proof they needed, but chose not to believe.

In verses 5-12 of chapter 16, Jesus explains to the disciples the "teaching", or yeast, of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Though they had many differences, they had one thing in common. Both parties claimed Abraham as their father. But, Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. (Gen. 15:6) By demanding more signs or proof positive

that Jesus was Messiah, they were not exhibiting the faith of their father Abraham. Beware disciples, the yeast or teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Let's pick up the chapter with verse 13.

¹³When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

¹⁴They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

¹⁵"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

¹⁶Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, [□] the Son of the living God."

¹⁷Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And 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. [□] ¹⁹I 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." ²⁰Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

Jesus asked one of the most controversial questions that has ever been asked, "Who do men say that I am?" Is it a coincidence where Jesus chose to ask this question, for there are few areas in the entire world with more pagan religious links than Caesarea Philippi? Here is some interesting information from various sites on the Internet.

Caesarea Philippi was built on a terrace 1,150 feet high overlooking a fertile valley. It is also an area dotted with the temples of ancient Syrian Baal worship. Historians have listed at least fourteen such temples. It was a city built beneath the shadow of ancient gods.

A cave near Caesarea Philippi is said to be the birthplace of the Greek god Pan, the god of nature, fields, forests, mountains, flocks and shepherds. A spring emerged from the large cave, which became the center of pagan worship. Beginning in the 3rd century B.C., sacrifices were cast into the cave as offerings to Pan, a half-man half-goat god.

During the Hellenistic period, a sanctuary was built to Pan, with five niches hewn out of rock to the right of the cave. Three of the niches bear inscriptions in Greek relating to Pan. There was also a great temple of white marble built to the godhead of Caesar, built by Herod the Great.

Standing in an area plagued with the temples of the Syrian gods, a place overshadowed by pagan worship, a place where an important river sprang to life but shrouded by death, a place where the white marble luxury of the home of Caesar-worship dominated the scene: here, a place of beauty, but also a place representative of the gates of Hell, all that stands opposed to God and His Kingdom, Jesus asks twelve men who they believe Him to be.

Anything less than acknowledging Jesus as the Son of God slanders and denies Him.

Peter speaks up and gets the right answer – revealed to him by God Himself. And the debate is on. Does this mean that Peter moves to the head of the class? Is he the first pope as the Roman church claims? Or is it the confession that Peter speaks, revealed to him by God Himself? Or is it the truth, the identity of Jesus that becomes the foundation, the cornerstone, of the Church? What is it?

Let's ask Paul. He tells the Corinthians, "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ." (1 Cor 3:11) He tells the Ephesians, "...you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, ²⁰built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²²And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." (Eph 2: 19-22)

I think Paul settles the issue, but the issue will surely be debated on and on, until Christ returns. Yet there is no doubt that Peter, always mentioned first in any NT listing of the Twelve, played the most prominent role in the earliest years of the church, as seen in Acts 1-12. There is also no doubt that our confidence of security in Christ rests not on the fact that Peter

believed, but on the great reality that Christ Himself is the firm foundation on which the church rests.

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

What about the keys Jesus refers to?

In biblical times “keys” frequently served as a symbol of a steward’s authority in a master’s household. These keys were used by the master’s steward to lock or unlock, “bind or loose”, according to the master’s instruction. This “key” metaphor is the Gospel message given not only to Peter, but to many other “stewards” as clearly seen from the book of Acts and church history.

To this point, we have briefly touched on four of the questions: who is Jesus; why does Peter seem to get special treatment; the keys of the kingdom, and the firm foundation against which even the gates of hell cannot prevail?

Now let’s pick up in verse 21 of chapter 16 and read about the cross.

“From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

²²Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”

²³Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling

block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”

²⁴Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. ²⁶What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? ²⁷For 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 he has done. ²⁸I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

What is the cross Jesus’ disciples are called on to bear?

The taking up the cross statement is a clarification of the stumbling block and the “keys of the kingdom” just entrusted to Peter. Peter got the identity of Jesus right but did not yet understand the deliverance part of Messiah.

The cross here does not just symbolize suffering, but the decision to do the will of God whatever the cost. When we deny our “old man’s” drives and desire to choose God’s will for our lives, we take up our cross. By that choice we lose our old self, and we begin to become the new self that God will enable us to be. By losing our “old” life, we find our “new” life in Jesus Christ.

The Gospel message is the keys to the kingdom and delivering that message as the master’s stewards is the cross the disciples are called to bear.

Matthew’s brethren are brought to the turning point and central theme of his story. With Jesus identity made clear, Matthew now begins to reveal Jesus’ mission as Savior.

This takes us back to our first question. How long does it take to really get to know someone? It’s been 2000 years, give or take. The evidence that Jesus is God’s Son is clear. What will you do with Jesus?

The story that Jesus told to the Pharisees in Luke 16 is a fitting summary to the sign question in verse one.

¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

²²“The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’

²⁵“But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus

received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.

²⁶And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'

²⁷“He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, ²⁸for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

²⁹“Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

³⁰“No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

³¹“He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

The desire for the nation of Israel to become a world power like in the time of David became a stumbling block for the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They could not see beyond this desire that Jesus had fulfilled the Law and Prophets. They had in their hearts the things of men rather than the things of God.

Everyone has a lifetime to make up their mind about Jesus, some live long, some don't. The problem is that we never know how long we have. How much time do you need? Do you need a sign from Heaven? What if you wait too long waiting for your sign and end up like the

rich man? What would you give in exchange for your soul? If you could ask the rich man, what do you think he would say? He might say something like this:

Sons of Abraham, my brothers; what would you benefit if Messiah had freed you from the Romans, and given you an earthly kingdom as grand as David's and you miss God's Eternal Kingdom? Would the earthly riches and power be worth your soul? No! Believe me! You don't want to end up where I am!