

Study Notes: Matthew 16:13-20
January 25, 2026: "Jesus Asks a Crucial Question"
Prepared by Reverend Robert W. Rice
Pastor, Muncy Baptist Church

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

- Matthew's Gospel includes several stories before this one, about people misunderstanding who Jesus was. Jesus began this interaction by asking the disciples who people were saying that He was.
- The title, Son of Man, is a messianic title that comes from Daniel 7:13, which Jesus was fond of using for Himself.

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

- There was a great deal of speculation about who Jesus was, and several ideas were circulating around His work and ministry. Herod clearly thought Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead (see Matthew 14:1). Other people believed that Jesus was Elijah, the forerunner to the Messiah, while others simply thought Jesus was one of the prophets.
- The New American Commentary gives insight into these views about Jesus, "All the opinions the disciples report are complimentary and demonstrate that Jesus remains quite popular. The crowds view him as some kind of spokesman for God. The equation with John the Baptist recalls Herod's fears in 14:2 and suggests that others shared these sentiments. Elijah represents the messianic forerunner of Old Testament prophecy (see comments under 11:7-15). Many had obviously not made the link between Elijah and John the Baptist. It would be natural to think of Jesus also as a kind of Jeremiah, a preacher of judgment and repentance who was widely rejected by the leaders of his nation."

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

- Rather than talk about what other people were saying, Jesus asked His disciples directly. The "you" in this verse is emphatic, demanding an answer.
- This was a crucial question for them (and by extension for us), because what matters was not so much what the crowds or others were saying, but what the disciples believed about Him.

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

- Simon Peter, empowered by the Holy Spirit, probably speaking for the group, declared that Jesus is the Messiah (or Christ), God's chosen deliverer of the people. He further declared that Jesus is the Son of God, indicating that their understanding was that Jesus is not simply a deliverer, but the ultimate deliverer of God's people.
- Biblical Scholar, James Boice, notes that this confession carries great force and weight, "In the Greek text, this is as forceful as any confession could be. It is only ten words, but

in it the definite article occurs four times, like this: “You are the Christ, the Son of the God, the living One.”

- The Pillar New Testament Commentary explains the confession, “Jesus was God’s Anointed One, the One who was sent to do God’s will in a special way. It may not be easy to understand precisely what Peter thought the Anointed One would be and do (even with his insight that he was God’s Son), but he was certainly giving voice to an exalted view of Jesus. He could not have ascribed a higher place to him. His words bring out the essential being of our Lord in the most comprehensive expression in the Gospels.”

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. 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.”

- Jesus blessed Peter after this confession, and then spoke of building the church upon this rock. There is debate on whether or not Jesus was referring to Peter (whose name translates as “rock”) or the confession when He spoke of what the church would be built upon. Likely, it is both, as Peter would be a key figure in the start of the church, but the confession was the primary point of belief that would unite the church.
 - The Pillar New Testament Commentary adds, “On this rock I will build my church’ is a saying that has caused endless controversy in the church’s history. The big question is the meaning of this rock. Does it mean the man Peter? Or the faith Peter has just professed? Or is it the teaching of Jesus (as in 7:24)? Or Jesus himself? Each of the views has been argued passionately by some exegetes, often maintaining at the same time that other views can be espoused only by people who refuse to accept the plain meaning of the Greek. Clearly this is a place where we must tread carefully and keep in mind the possibility of interpreting the passage in ways other than the one that appeals to us.”
- Jesus further discussed that nothing would overcome or stop the building of His church. Peter was given authority over the Kingdom. This probably refers to Peter’s charge to preach the Gospel, which was the only thing that allowed entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven. Only through confession will heaven’s gates open.

Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

- Jesus’ command for the disciples not to tell anyone that He was the Messiah stems from the fact that there was a great misunderstanding about the work of the Messiah, with many people believing that the Messiah would overthrow Rome and bring immediate peace. Even Peter misunderstood some aspects of the Messiah, as evidenced in the next story in Matthew’s Gospel.
- Jesus desired to reveal who He was as the Messiah at the appropriate time in God’s plan, and He would fully assume this role only with His death and resurrection.