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Sermon Notes

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The Most Important Question in History

Matthew 16:13-20

In our text today, we come to the central question of all human history: Who was Jesus of Nazareth?

James C. Hefley: One Solitary Life

Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty, and then for three years He was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never owned a home. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put His foot inside a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place where He was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but Himself. He had nothing to do with this world except the naked power of His Divine manhood. While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against Him. He was turned over to His enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a Cross between two thieves. His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth while He was dying—and that was His coat. When He was dead He was taken down and laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. Such was His human life—He rises from the dead. Nineteen wide centuries have come and gone and today He is the Centerpiece of the human race and the Leader of the column of progress. I am within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever were built, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that One Solitary Life.

Napoleon Bonaparte: I know men and I tell you that Jesus Christ is no mere man. Between Him and every other person in the world there is no possible term of comparison. Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have founded empires. But on what did we rest the creation of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ founded His empire upon love; and at this hour millions of men would die for Him.

I. The Most Important Question You Will Ever Answer

Matthew 16:13-15 *When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ They 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?"*

A. A World Full of Questions

1. Every day life, we face critical questions constantly

a. A doctor probing for diagnosis

“Where does it hurt?” “How long have you felt this pain?” “Do you have any other symptoms?” “Are you taking any other medications?”

b. A 911 Operator

“What is the nature of your emergency?” “Is the break-in still in progress?” “Is the patient still breathing?” “What is your address?”

c. A professor’s final examination

Little blue examination booklets... asking probing questions on calculus, or economics, or sociology: write out your essay answers in clear sentences, showing good detail, on the sociological development of American Cities after the Industrial Revolution

d. Students taking SAT

Questions on Math, English, an essay... need to be good with algebra, geometry, reading comprehension, vocabulary, etc.

e. A suitor popping the question

A man proposing to a woman is about to ask her one of the most important questions she will ever face in her life: “Will you marry me?”

f. A witness about to give testimony in a courtroom

“Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.”

2. Deeper questions face us constantly

a. What will the future hold?

b. What is the meaning of life?

c. What will happen to me when I die?

B. A World Full of Opinions

1. So many experts, so many answers to life’s most vital questions

2. The world is full of opinions on every topic

3. Internet spews forth opinion constantly: blogs especially good forums for venting opinions
4. Should I refinance my home? Should I invest in the stock market at the present time? Should I marry this guy? Should I quit my job?
5. You can get answers to any question by just typing it into the Google Search line, and some website will pop up ready to give you an opinion

C. The Most Important Question You Will Ever Answer

“Who do you think Jesus of Nazareth was?”

More directly from the text: “Who do you say I am?”

According to the Bible, whether you spend eternity in heaven or hell depends on your heart answer to that question

D. Context: Jesus Raises the Issue, Surveys the Terrain

1. Caesarea Philippi

- a. Located 25 miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee, 40 miles southwest of Damascus
- b. On a beautiful plateau near the headwaters of the Jordan River
- c. Nearby, a few miles to the north was Mount Herman; generally snow covered, and over 9000 feet tall
- d. Caesarea Philippi: originally named Paneas (after the Greek nature god Pan) who, according to Greek mythology was born in a cave nearby
- e. Caesar Augustus gave the region to Herod the Great; Herod’s son Philip the tetrarch had named the city Caesarea (after Caesar) and Philippi after himself
- f. A few miles from the ancient Jewish city of Dan, the northernmost tribe of Israel
- g. Surrounded by Gentiles, more of a cosmopolitan area, a cross-roads where Jewish and pagan culture met

2. Retreat from the maddening crowd

- a. Huge crowds yearning for constant healings
- b. People wanted to make Him King by force

- c. Herod probably wanted to kill Him
 - d. Pharisees definitely wanted to kill Him
 - e. Jesus withdrew to Tyre and Sidon, now to this quiet area
3. Jesus desires to spend quality time with His disciples
- a. Central part of His strategy was preparing them for carrying the gospel to the ends of the earth
 - b. Central part of His saving ministry was bringing people to personal faith in Himself
 - c. Key question:

Matthew 16:13 When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

- i) Survey of public opinion on this vital topic
 - ii) Jesus wants to focus their attention on this matter
- d. "Son of Man"
- i) Jesus' most common self-designation: thirty times in Matthew's gospel
 - ii) Almost certainly took this title from Daniel 7: the vision Daniel had of "one like a Son of Man" who approached Almighty God and received from Him a kingdom... and people from every tribe and nation on earth worshiped Him
 - iii) A title that emphasized the DEITY AND HUMANITY of Jesus
4. Wide ranging opinions
- a. John the Baptist: raised from the dead
 - b. Elijah: come back to earth after ascending to heaven in a chariot of fire
 - c. Jeremiah: a popular legend taught that Jeremiah had taken the Ark of the Covenant and Altar of Incense out of the temple and hidden them from the Babylonians on Mount Nebo... and that he would return to earth and restore the Ark and Altar to the temple before the Messiah came to earth
 - d. One of the prophets: general answer by those who acknowledged Jesus' uniqueness and great power, but didn't know what to say
5. All answers fall infinitely short of the truth

a. People commonly give honor to Jesus lower than He truly deserves

Benjamin Franklin: As to Jesus of Nazareth, my Opinion [is], I think the System of Morals and his Religion, as he left them to us, the best the world ever saw or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has received various corrupt changes, and I have, with most of the present Dissenters in England, some Doubts as to his divinity; tho' it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and I think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an Opportunity of knowing the Truth with less Trouble.

As quoted in *Benjamin Franklin: An Exploration of a Life of Science and Service* (1938) by [Carl Van Doren](#), p. 777

Albert Einstein: “As a child I received instruction both in the Bible and in the Talmud. I am a Jew, but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene....No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life.”

French atheist Ernest Renan: “Jesus was the greatest religious genius that ever lived.”

German rationalist Strauss: Jesus is “the highest model of religion”

John Stuart Mill (Philosopher): called Jesus “the guide of humanity”

Transcendentalist philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson: Jesus belonged to the race of prophets. He saw with open eyes the mystery of the soul. One man was true to what is in you and me. He, as I think, is the only soul in history who has appreciated the worth of man.

Mikhail Gorbachev : "Jesus was the first socialist, the first to seek a better life for mankind."

Most commonly, people call Him a “good moral teacher”

Well, Jesus was infinitely MORE than a “luminous figure,” a “religious genius,” “the highest model of religion,” “the guide of humanity,” of the “race of the prophets,” “the first socialist, seeking a better life for mankind” or a “good moral teacher”

b. Jesus of Nazareth was actually God the Son... eternal God in human form

E. Jesus Forces Us to Declare

1. Our opinion doesn't change the fact one way or the other
2. BUT our future destiny depends on what answer we give
 - a. Other subjects do not force a commitment, a moral decision

- b. You can study biology or geometry or economics and not have to make a commitment of your life
- c. Jesus forces us to declare ourselves
- d. No other figure in history does that:

You can study Alexander the Great's life and campaigns and you don't have a single decision to make

You can study the writings and life of Winston Churchill and have nothing to commit yourself to

You can read an excellent biography of Benjamin Franklin and go on about your business

BUT Jesus of Nazareth says, "Unless you believe that I AM God, you will die in your sins." (John 8:24)

3. Jesus was extremely self-centered in His teaching

The message of Christ is not Christianity. The message of Christ is Christ. --Gary Amirault

- 4. He knew that the only salvation from sin available was to believe that He was God
- 5. Jesus confronts each of us with Himself... with His awesome miracles, His astonishing statements about Himself, His infinitely deep teachings, and His supernatural person
- 6. Most of all He confronts us with His deity and challenges us to believe in Him

The life of Jesus is bracketed by two impossibilities: "a virgin's womb and an empty tomb". Jesus entered our world through a door marked, "No Entrance" and left through a door marked "No Exit." --Peter Larson

That's what Jesus confronts us with today: WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

II. The Only Right Answer Must Be Revealed by God

Vs. 15-17 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.

A. There is a Right Answer

- 1. In the end, all the opinions about Jesus don't change who He was
- 2. He either was the Son of God or He wasn't

3. There is a right and true answer... and in Matthew 16:16, Simon Peter gave it:

“You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God”

B. Simon Peter’s Saving Confession

1. Out of the fullness of the heart the mouth spoke
2. Peter went far beyond the current opinions
 - a. He had seen Jesus’ astounding miracles
 - b. He had heard Jesus’ amazing words... later he would say to Jesus

“You alone have the words of eternal life.”

- c. He had seen the perfection of Christ’s character... handling every interaction with perfect love, perfect poise, perfect courage, perfect words
 - d. He had seen Jesus read people’s minds, make predictions and have them come true
 - e. All of this was the foundation of his confession
 - f. But even with all that evidence he would not have believed in Christ unless he had had a special work of God’s grace in his heart
3. This is not the only saving confession... you don’t have to get the words exactly right

John 1:49 Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel."

John 20:28 Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Mark 15:39 the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, [and] said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

Even Peter had a different confession in John 6:

John 6:69 We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

The key element is a recognition that Jesus is God... to see in the face of a man the glory of God incarnate... and to recognize that Jesus’ death is your only hope of forgiveness... this is the saving confession

C. Revealed by God the Father

Vs. 17 Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven."

1. Salvation is God's work from beginning to end
2. Except a person receive direct revelation from God the Father, they will never believe
 - a. Jesus did tremendous miracles in front of the Jewish leaders, and they never believed
 - b. Jesus healed people of paralysis and fed people who didn't believe in Him
 - c. Miracles alone are not enough
3. Christ must be revealed directly to the heart by the power of the heavenly Father
 - a. Amazingly, God the Son entered the world to reveal God the Father to us
 - b. Here, though, Jesus says unless God the Father reveals God the Son to a human heart, we will never believe
 - c. Both of these were already stated earlier in Matthew's gospel

Matthew 11:27 No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

- d. This special revelation of God the Son to the sinful human heart is called regeneration... and it is a MIRACLE of God's grace

2 Corinthians 4:6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

4. "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah"
 - a. If this revelation does indeed come, then BLESSED is the man to whom it comes
 - b. Blessed means richly, deeply happy... happy with a heavenly happiness
 - c. This blessedness includes full forgiveness of all sins
 - d. Adoption into the family of God
 - e. An incorruptible inheritance in heaven and a secure dwelling place that no man can steal from you

- f. Best of all, this revelation of God the Son by God the Father will go on and on for eternity... Jesus is a topic God the Father never tires of discussing

5. Jonathan Edwards sermon on this text

In 1734, during the First Great Awakening, Edwards preached a great sermon on this text saying **the** spiritual knowledge and illumination needed to understand the gospel and to internalize the excellencies of divine truth, is imparted directly by God alone

- a. Main idea: there is such a thing as divine, supernatural knowledge imparted directly to the soul

b. NOT

- i) Mere conviction of sin and misery
- ii) Mere impressions on the imagination
- iii) New revelations apart from Scripture
- iv) Mere religious insight or affection

c. IS

- i) A strong sense of the excellence and greatness of God and of Christ
- ii) A conviction of the truth of divine things

6. This is precisely what God the Father did for Peter, and it is what He must do for you if you are to make Peter's confession for your salvation
7. You must come to see Christ as the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being
8. You must come to see in the face of Christ the glory of God's holy attributes... His power, His love, His knowledge, His goodness, His mercy, His wrath, His justice, His patience... all of these in Christ
9. You must especially see and feel the weight of these divine perfections in Christ's death on the cross for sin and His mighty resurrection

D. Without this Revelation We Are Lost

1. God retains this glory... to reveal Christ directly to lost souls
2. If God does not speak this light into our dark hearts, we will be lost forever

From those who can make this simple confession Christ builds His church

Over the next few weeks we will look at how He does it

I will give you a brief overview now

III. On This Rock I Will Build My Church

Vs. 18-19 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. ¹⁹ 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."

A. The Foundation of the Church: On Which Rock Does Christ Build?

1. Answer: On the Apostolic Testimony of Christ... as Peter and the Other Apostles Testified to Christ's Resurrection, the foundation of the Church was laid
2. AND as they wrote down their testimony in what became the New Testament, the foundation for the church was established for every generation... the foundation of Scripture's clear testimony to Christ

B. The Progress of the Church: Christ's Unstoppable Building Project

"On this rock, I will build my church, and the Gates of Hades will not prove stronger than it."

1. We will see Christ's absolute commitment to building a worldwide church in every generation,

C. The Authority of the Church: The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven

Vs. 19 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."

1. Spiritual authority given by God: The Keys of the Kingdom; the Binding and Loosing
2. The power to deal with Spiritual Ministry, to make key decisions and strategies, to establish proper theology and worship
3. BUT especially, to deal with sin, inside and outside the church
 - a. To discipline sinning members inside the church in church discipline
 - b. To proclaim forgiveness of sins outside the church in evangelism

IV. The Gates of Hades Will Not Prevail Against It

- A. What are 'The Gates of Hades'?
- B. The Present Triumph of the Church: Irresistible Attack on Satan's Kingdom
- C. The Future Triumph of the Church: Irresistible Conquest of the Grave
- D. The Puzzling Manner of Triumph: Suffering in Store

V. Application

- A. Face the Most Important Question in History
 1. "Who do you say the Son of Man is?"
 2. Who was Jesus?
 3. "What about YOU... who do YOU say I am?"
 4. Understand that your answer will determine the destiny of your soul
 5. Understand that there is one RIGHT answer, and there are MANY wrong answers
 - a. One right answer: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God
 - b. Many wrong answers: Jesus was a great moral teacher, a prophet, a misguided visionary, a myth who never lived, an ascended master of enlightenment, etc. etc. etc.
 6. Understand the fact that flesh and blood cannot reveal this doctrine to you
 - a. I could preach with the greatest eloquence or the simplest of terms... if God the Father doesn't reveal this to you, you will never believe
 - b. A friend could share the gospel with you in the most powerful logic of proofs from prophecy or archaeology or history, and still you would shrug and go on in unbelief
 - c. A mother or father could plead with you with tears coming down their faces to repent and trust Christ so you won't go to hell, and if God the Father doesn't reveal this to you, you will never believe
 7. BUT YET God the Father uses ALL of these means to persuade us that Jesus of Nazareth was in fact the Son of God, whose blood was shed on the cross that sins like yours might be forgiven

2 Corinthians 5:20 We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

Romans 10:17 Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

B. Believers: If you can make Peter's confession

1. Give glory to God for revealing this directly to your hearts
 - a. God has thought about you personally, by name
 - b. He has moved His almighty hand toward your darkened heart
 - c. He has spoken "Let there be light" inside your heart
 - d. It's a special kind of light: "The light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ"
 - e. To you Christ has become unspeakably precious, unspeakably valuable
 - f. The deepest desire of your hearts is now one thing: to know Christ and be known by Him
2. Meditate on your "blessedness"... your greatest blessing comes in this divine supernatural light imparted directly to your soul
 - a. God has blessed you with many gifts... this knowledge of Christ is your most prized possession
 - b. God has blessed you with a healthy body, with an intelligent mind, with an attractive face, with musical skill or athletic talent... this blessing is greater
 - c. God has blessed you with a good income, or a wealthy inheritance... with a beautiful house, a new car, fine clothes... this supernatural knowledge of Christ is your greatest blessing
 - d. God has blessed you with a wonderful family, loving parents or brothers and sisters, perhaps a loving wife or husband, beautiful children... that's wonderful... this gift is infinitely greater... to KNOW that Jesus is the Son of God, and by believing that having life in His name
3. Be active in building His Church
 - a. The church is built living stone by living stone, as individual people from all over the world are led to make Peter's confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

- b. God alone can reveal this directly to their hearts, but He does it as we preach the gospel to lost people
 - c. Next week (God willing) we'll talk about the rescue mission God sends the church on... rescuing perishing souls in Satan's dark kingdom
 - d. Everything we do as a church should advance Christ's cause... rescuing the perishing
 - e. Pray for lost people around you, that God would reveal Christ's true identity to them
 - f. Talk to them... ask them how they would answer Christ's question... "Who do you say that I am"
 - g. If they need help in believing then point them to the Scripture, which is the foundation of faith... read them accounts of Christ's miracles in the NT, read them the prophecies in Isaiah
4. Look ahead to the infinitely greater blessings that are yet to come
- a. God revealed Christ to Peter in Caesarea Philippi... God is STILL revealing Christ to Peter
 - b. Christ is an infinite topic... there is ALWAYS more to learn about him
 - c. Even the saints in heaven who have been there a thousand years, though they are perfect students with perfect hearts and perfect memories, yet they are still STUDENTS of Christ... they have not finally mastered the subject
 - d. Look ahead then to an eternity of getting to know Christ in His infinite character, His wise plan in history, His marvelous building project for us

Philippians 3:10-11 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Isaiah 9:7 Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.