

LIFE BIBLE STUDY

SESSION OBJECTIVE: MATTHEW 16:1-28

To understand Peter's role in the development of the church and to identify the "keys of the kingdom."

Bad Bread

We recently learned in Matthew 13 (Session 17), that the kingdom of heaven is like leaven, in that it penetrates and spreads in the dough that it comes into contact with. Jesus used a very well-known practice in bread making to illustrate a deeper spiritual reality regarding the power of the Gospel. However, what we find in



Matthew 16 is that the same spreading power of sound, kingdom-oriented teaching also occurs in legalistic, false teaching. Jesus tells His disciples to, "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matt. 16:6). It takes them a minute (they have a propensity to get it wrong about as much as I do, which is often), but they finally come to understand that He is talking about their teaching. There is a powerful reminder here for us today; we must be on the lookout for false teaching, ready to snuff it out as quickly as possible.

What's the Forecast?

We find Jesus sparring with the Pharisees and the Sadducees in the first four verses of chapter 16. Jesus makes an observation based on their rejection of Him as the Messiah. The illustration He uses is a simple one based on the practice of understanding the weather from merely looking at the sky. The Pharisees and Sadducees could interpret the weather by seeing what the color of the sky was and what the clouds were doing, a simple task for virtually anyone. If you wanted to modernize this, imagine Jesus saying, "When you see rain clouds rolling in, you don't plan an impromptu picnic because you understand it's about to rain." It's common sense. And therein lies the blow delivered in this illustration. The signs Jesus performs indicate that He is the Messiah. It's common sense, and yet, they don't get it. Are people not guilty of this today? In the face of lives being changed by the power of the Gospel, people still reject Jesus, and yet they can tell when it will rain.

Quite the Reputation

Upon entering Caesarea Philippi (named by Philip the Tetrarch), Jesus begins to question His disciples regarding who the people believe He is and the response is quite diverse.

JOHN THE BAPTIST

It seems such a distant option to the reader of Matthew's Gospel because we have seen John the Baptist and Jesus interact with one another, but remember, the contemporaries of Jesus existed in a much smaller and less connected world where information did not travel like it does today. The belief that Jesus was John the Baptist resurrected is not a new one at this point in the Gospel; Herod feared it to be true as well (Matt. 14:2).

ELIJAH

There were some who believed Jesus was Elijah the prophet, based on Malachi 3:1; 4:5-6. There is some irony here. There were people who believed Jesus was Elijah, and there were people who believed Jesus was John the Baptist, who was the *actual* Elijah figure (Matt. 11:14).

JEREMIAH

It isn't unreasonable for the people of this time to think of Jesus as a Jeremiah figure. Jesus, like Jeremiah, was a prophet and preacher who proclaimed judgment to an unrepentant people and who was rejected overwhelmingly by the leaders of His day. Beyond that, there was an apocryphal Jewish teaching that Jeremiah would come, along with Isaiah, before the End comes (2 Esdras 2:18). In the apocryphal book known as 2 Maccabees, Judas Maccabaeus has a vision of Jeremiah praying for the people and the city of Jerusalem.

ANOTHER PROPHET

This one has potential to be half-right. Deuteronomy 18:15-19 promises that God will eventually raise up another prophet like Moses, one that the people of God should listen to. This turns out to be Jesus, as attested by Peter in Solomon's Portico in Acts 3:22. The problem here is that Jesus was not a prophet like Moses, but one *greater than* Moses. For this reason, the people still got Jesus wrong.

Peter Rocks!

There have been few verses as controversial as Matthew 16:18-19, and the issues are both grammatical and theological.

WORDPLAY WITH PETER'S NAME

The first interpretative hill to climb is determining what Jesus meant in the wordplay with Peter's name. The Roman Catholic tradition derives its practice of being led by a Pope from this verse, citing Peter as the first Pope. We have taken exception to this, arguing the difference in words or a difference in what the rock is connected to. The words for Peter's name and "rock" are virtually identical, with the exception of a difference in gender. Peter's name is reasonably masculine (Petros, Πέτρος), and the word for "rock" is feminine (petra, πέτρα). Sometimes it is argued that Jesus is saying something like, "You are the little rock (Peter), and upon this huge rock (your confession of Me as Christ), I will build my church." While it is true that in Classical Greek, the masculine form is *sometimes* used to communicate a smaller stone, it is unlikely that many of Matthew's readers would have been able to catch the nuance. Nonetheless, this is a very real possibility in the interpretation of this passage.

There is of course a third and much simpler way of addressing this, and that is to admit that by all counts it appears Jesus is telling Peter that upon him *and* his confession He will build His church, but to also acknowledge that this doesn't necessarily entail that Peter is any kind of Pope figure. Simon Peter at this point has already been called Cephas as early as John 1:42 (Cephas is Aramaic for Peter), so this isn't a new name necessarily. He is also called, "the first" of the disciples in Matthew 10:2. Eventually James, the half-brother of Jesus, becomes the head of the church in Jerusalem, but between the resurrection and that point, Peter is critical to the building of the church. Peter is the one who preached the sermon on Pentecost that saw three thousand people be saved in Acts 3. Peter is the one involved in the infamous Ananias and Sapphires incident in Acts 5. He also sees Cornelius and his entire Gentile family be saved in Acts 10. Peter is a sort of early leader in the church that is vital to its health and growth. However, to insist he was the first Pope is flawed at many levels. For one, "the keys of the kingdom" to bind and loose on earth are not given to him alone (more on that in the next section). Moreover, Peter submits to James' ruling regarding the Gentiles in Acts 15. If anyone carries a Pope-like leadership it's James, not Peter. It is true that the New Testament claims that one single man is the final authority of the church, but it's not Peter; it is the God-man, Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:19-22).

KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

Then the question arises regarding the keys to the kingdom. What does Jesus mean? He has just made the statement regarding the gates of hell, and the keys are significant to it. Gates are, historically, a measure of defense, but Jesus is saying that the confession of Him as the Christ are keys that open the gates. These heavenly keys are powerful. This is why Paul says that belief in and confession of Him have the power to save. Save from what? Hell! The keys open the gates for those who repent and believe.

One final important point to make is the issue of who the keys belong to. Once again, the Roman Catholic view is that they belong to the Pope, beginning with Peter. However, consider two things. One, the power to bind and loose (the keys) are also given to all of the apostles in Matthew 18:18. Secondly, Jesus says He is the One that still holds the keys in Revelation 1:18. Peter, the apostles, and now the church are merely stewards of these keys, and when confession is made, the gates of hell spring open.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Matthew 16:1-4. Who is asking Jesus for a sign here? What is their motivation? In your own words, what is Jesus' response?

2. Read Matthew 16:5-12. What is the significance of Jesus' statement about leaven? Why does He apply it to the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees? What did the disciples think He meant? When did they finally understand Him properly?

Day Two

1. Read Matthew 16:13-20. What are the keys to the kingdom? Is Peter the only one given them? What is Peter's role later in the development of the church? (Hint: See above section)
2. Read Matthew 16:21-23. It seems like a total shock to the disciples when Jesus is crucified. How surprised were you when you read verse 21? In your opinion, why do you suppose they were still so dismayed at the cross?

Day Three

1. Read Matthew 16:24-27. What is necessary to follow Jesus? In your opinion, why is this necessary?
2. Read Daniel 7:13-14. How does this passage relate to Matthew 16?

Day Four

1. Read Matthew 16:28. In your opinion, what does this passage mean?
2. How important is it for believers to proclaim Jesus as the King of Heaven and Earth? What happens when someone recognizes His Sovereign Kingship and bows in submission before Him?

Week 20 Discussion: Take Up Your Cross

In Matthew 16, Jesus tells His followers plainly: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matt. 16:24-25). The cost is high to be a Christian. One must regard his or her own life and all that matters as secondary to Jesus and His Kingdom. Talk as a group about the challenges of this and how you overcome them.

1. Icebreaker: What is something you have had to give up ("deny yourself and take up your cross") in order to follow Jesus?
2. How much persecution do Christians face in America today?
3. What is something you know you should give up but haven't yet. What has held you back?
4. What is something you gave up in the past that was difficult, but now are happy you did?
5. Why does Jesus demand this of us? Why can't we have all the things we want and do all the things we want to do and still follow Jesus? Use Scripture if possible.
6. How important is accountability regarding dying to yourself?

Takeaways:

1. Jesus had a growing, albeit misunderstood, reputation among the people by this point.
2. Peter plays a significant role in the early development of the church, but he is not the Pope.

PRAYER REQUESTS: