**GETTING IT RIGHT**

**(Matthew 16:13-20)**

Think back to when you were in high school or college. You take your seat, the bell rings, your teacher or professor looks at the class and says the seven words every student dreads hearing: “Get out a clean piece of paper.” Those words are followed with the instructions to put away your notebook and number your paper 1 to 10. What is happening? You are being given a pop quiz. Maybe you are being quizzed over yesterday’s lecture or last night’s assigned reading. You didn’t see it coming. That is why it is called a pop quiz. It pops up suddenly, without warning

In Matthew 16, Jesus gave his students, the 12 disciples, a pop quiz. Jesus, however, didn’t tell his pupils to get out a clean piece of paper, and He didn’t ask them ten questions. He only asked them two.

Pastor Skip Heitzig said that of the two questions, the first didn’t really matter and the second was pass/fail.

We are going to look at those two questions today. They are found in our text—Matthew 16:13-20.

The students might not have been expecting to be quizzed. After all, they thought they were on fall break, so to speak. Jesus had taken them north, all the way up to Caesarea Philippi. They came to the very headwaters of the Jordan River. Jordan means “descending from Dan.” The tribe of Dan had located themselves in the far northern part of Israel.

Had this trip taken place in the summer, it would have been a welcome reprieve from the sweltering heat of Galilee. Caesarea Philippi was at a much higher elevation. There was a cave there inside of a 100-feet high cliff. Inside the cave was a natural spring, and out of that cave ran cool water. The water still runs today, and as it travels south it joins with two other tributaries. They form the Jordan River. That river runs into the northern top of Lake Galilee, and exits the southern tip of the lake. It continues all the way to the Dead Sea.

There was only one thing that would have kept the disciples from enjoying this field trip. Their Master had taken them to a decidedly evil place. There were numerous shrines to various fertility gods. The worship of these fertility gods involved all manner of sexual perversion.

In the days of the OT, the people in that place worshiped Baal. It was believed that Baal would go to the underworld every year. He would return in the spring, and with his return, new life would spring up. The people in that area believed that the gate to the underworld was the spring inside the cave of that rocky cliff code to where they lived. The referred to it as the gate of hades. That phrase shows up in our text.

If you are asked a question by a teacher on an exam or in life by a friend, you want to give a correct answer. You want to get it right if you have any sense of self-respect. None of us are perfect. Sometimes we give bad answers. Maybe we thought we knew, but we didn’t. Maybe we are parroting what we’ve heard, but what we heard was false information.

What does it take to get it right? Based on today’s text, I’m going to make three statements.

1. **HUMAN SPECULATION WON’T HELP US GET IT RIGHT.**

Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” Jesus routinely referred to Himself as the Son of Man. He called Himself by that title more than any other designation.

The phrase “Son of Man” comes from Daniel 7. Daniel had a dream, and in his dream, the Son of Man was given “dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages should serve Him” (Daniel 7:13-14).

Jesus saw Himself as the fulfillment of that prophecy. He asked His disciples how others view Him. The disciples answer was correct in the sense that they accurately told Jesus what others were saying about Jesus. The people’s views of Jesus, however, were incorrect because they were engaging in human speculation. They were guessing. They were talking off the top of their head with no firm basis for their answers.

Who did they guess that Jesus was? Look at v. 14. The first guess was that He was John the Baptist. That is what Herod feared. Herod had John beheaded, and he was afraid that Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life.

You and I have the Bible. We can read the story. We know that John the Baptist baptized Jesus. Jesus didn’t baptize Himself. It is clear they were two distinct individuals.

Some speculated that Jesus was Elijah. Elijah was the most respected of the prophets, and in the second to last verse of our OT, Malachi prophesied that Elijah was going to come back before the Day of Judgment arrived. “Maybe Jesus is really Elijah,” people wondered aloud.

Others said, “No. I think He is Jeremiah.” Why Jeremiah? Well, Jeremiah was persecuted by the powers that be of his day, and he preached tough stuff as he called the people back to God. He foretold the downfall of Judah and the destruction of the temple.” There were certainly some parallels between Jeremiah and Jesus.

Finally, some weren’t sure, but they certainly thought Jesus was a prophet. As a prophet, they believed He was sent by God and sent with a message. As such, He deserved to be honored, but such an estimation falls far short of who Jesus really is.

Many of the people were basing their guesses on hearsay, rumors, and the speculation of others. Let me be clear about this: Do not traffic in the gossip of others. Don’t you ever dare say, “Well, you know, what I heard is blah, blah, blah.” It does not matter in the least what you heard. What do you know, and how do you know it?

Don’t pass on what you’ve heard. Only pass on first, what you know and second, what you know other people need to know. Not everyone needs to know what you know. So even if you know something, don’t pass it on unless others need to know what you know.

People need to know who Jesus is. If you don’t tell them, they might never know until it is too late. “Good teacher,” “fine moral example”—that doesn’t begin to touch who Jesus really is.

Let me read to you the famous poem, “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” by John G. Saxe:

It was six men of Indostan, to learning much inclined,  
who went to see the elephant (Though all of them were blind), that each by observation, might satisfy his mind.  
  
The first approached the elephant, and, happening to fall,  
against his broad and sturdy side, at once began to bawl:  
“God bless me! but the elephant, is nothing but a wall!”  
  
The second feeling of the tusk, cried: “Ho! what have we here, so very round and smooth and sharp? To me tis mighty clear, this wonder of an elephant, is very like a spear!”  
  
The third approached the animal, and, happening to take,  
the squirming trunk within his hands, “I see,” quoth he,  
“the elephant is very like a snake!”  
  
The fourth reached out his eager hand, and felt about the knee: “What most this wondrous beast is like, is mighty plain,” quoth he; “Tis clear enough the elephant is very like a tree.”  
  
The fifth, who chanced to touch the ear, Said; “E'en the blindest man can tell what this resembles most; Deny the fact who can, This marvel of an elephant, is very like a fan!”  
  
The sixth no sooner had begun, about the beast to grope,  
than, seizing on the swinging tail, that fell within his scope, “I see,” quoth he, “the elephant is very like a rope!”  
  
And so these men of Indostan, disputed loud and long,  
each in his own opinion, exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong!  
  
So, oft in theologic wars, the disputants, I ween,  
tread on in utter ignorance, of what each other mean,  
and prate about the elephant, not one of them has seen!

It is terribly unhelpful to speculate about the identity of Jesus if you are basing your theories of Jesus on what you have simply heard others say. We need more than that.

1. **THE BEST EDUCATION IS NOT ENOUGH TO GET IT RIGHT.**

Think for a moment about the disciples. They had spent three years with Jesus, traveling with Him, eating with Him, listening to Him teach both the crowds publicly and them privately. Jesus was their Rabbi and the best teacher anyone could hope to sit under. Their theological education was far better than any school or seminary could ever hope to provide their students.

When Jesus asked them, “Who do you say that I am?” it got a little warmer. They were no longer dealing with the theoretical or hypothetical. Now, it was intensely personal. Peter, as you might expect, was the one who spoke up. He gave a good answer. He got it right, but Jesus didn’t credit Peter for having studied his lecture notes. He didn’t say, “Peter you are one of My best students because you spend late nights at the library doing extra credit work.”

Look at Peter’s answer in v. 16 and the first half of Jesus’ reply in v. 17. Jesus said, “Peter you were able to answer correctly, but your ability to do so has nothing to do with your education or your experience.”

I believe in education. I went as far as I could go. I got my terminal degree in ministry. While education is a good thing, it is not everything. I’m not going to name any names, but some people are nothing more than educated fools. They know a lot of stuff, but they have missed the point.

In 1 Corinthians 1:14, Paul claimed that the things of the Spirit of God are spiritually discerned. They are not facts which are scholastically or academically discovered.

A professor can teach you the background of a passage. He can teach you Hebrew and Greek so that you can read the text in the original language. You can learn all kinds of laws and principles of biblical interpretation. Only the Spirit of God, however, can touch your heart and change your life with what God has said in His word.

I said I wouldn’t name names, but let me give you one name—Bart Ehrman. Dr. Ehrman is a professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, NC. He has edited 30 books, written three text books, and five NY Times best sellers. He was educated at Moody Bible Institute, Wheaton College, and Princeton Seminary. His specialty is in New Testament Studies.

Dr. Ehrman, however, doesn’t believe in the truthfulness of the NT or the OT. He doesn’t believe that Jesus rose from the dead and that Jesus is God. Of course, he doesn’t believe in the Trinity, and he doesn’t even believe in the existence of God. He claims to be both an agnostic and an atheist. I always thought you could be one or the other, but He says he is both.

As I thought about Dr. Ehrman, I wondered, “Did Ehrman’s education fail him?” Then, I remembered what Paul wrote in Romans 1. Listen to vv. 18-22 in the NLT:

**18**But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness. **19**They know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them. **20**For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So, they have no excuse for not knowing God.

**21**Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn’t worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused. **22**Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools.

Paul says in v. 25 that they “exchanged the truth of God for a lie.” I say, “That’s a bad trade.” The problem is not Ehrman’s education. The problem is he has a heart of unbelief. He chooses not to believe. He has been blinded.

Understanding who Jesus really is has nothing to do with human speculation or the best education. What do we need to get it right?

1. **DIVINE INSPIRATION IS WHAT WE NEED TO GET IT RIGHT.**

Look now at all of v. 17. God is the One who reveals truth. We don’t hunt for truth and find it on our own. God reveals it; He makes it known to us.

One of the great hymns of the faith is “Amazing Grace.” You know the first verse: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like. I once was lost, but now I found it.” Is that how the song reads? No! We don’t find God’s grace. His grace finds us. We are the object of God’s search. He is not the object of ours because, truth be known, we aren’t even searching for Him.

Paul wrote in Romans 3:11, “No one understands; no one seeks for God.”

Our text shows us four things that God reveals.

1. *God Reveals Who Jesus Is.*

Look again at what Peter said in v. 16. He claimed that Jesus is *the Christ.* That means “the anointed One.” He is the Messiah, the One who was promised in the Scriptures, the One for whom the people were looking. He added that Jesus is the *Son of God.*

Jesus said to Peter, “You didn’t come up with this on your own. You had some help, some bigtime help.”

I don’t know if he still is, but a few years ago, Bill Gates was the richest man in the world. He was asked, “Do you believe in God?”

In his answer he talked about how he believes in science, but he conceded that science can’t answer everything. He went on to say:

The mystery and the beauty of the world is overwhelmingly amazing, and there’s no scientific explanation of how it came about. To say that it was generated by random numbers, that does seem, you know, sort of an uncharitable view [laughs]. I think it makes sense to believe in God, but exactly what decision in your life you make differently because of it, I don't know.

Bill may be close, but neither he nor anyone else will get across the line and truly believe in God without some help.

I was watching football on TV recently. I have forgotten which game it was, but the team I was rooting for had the ball near the goal line. The quarterback handed off to the running back. He started toward the goal. There were a host of defenders between him and the endzone. A number of his teammates got behind him and pushed him, and they kept pushing until he scored.

If you and I are going to score, so to speak, God is going to have to push or carry us or something because we will never make it to the zone of belief on our own.

1. *God Reveals Who We Are.*

In v. 17 Jesus refers to the one we call Peter as Simon. That was his given name. But then, in v. 18, Jesus says, “And I tell you, you are Peter.” The Greek word *Petros* means stone, little stone.

Both God and Jesus had a habit of re-naming people. In the OT, Abram became Abraham, Sarai became Sarah, and Jacob became Israel. In the NT, Simon became Peter, Levi became Matthew, Saul became Paul.

There were others, but in the process of being renamed, the person began to exhibit traits that corresponded to their new name. God knows you better than you know yourself, and you will never be all God means for you to be until you place yourself under His Lordship.

1. *God Reveals the Truth About the Church.*

The truth is that the Church is far more than a human institution, and it doesn’t belong to us; it belongs to the Lord. Jesus said in v. 18, “I will build My Church.” In this verse, Jesus made a play on words. Petros means *stone* and Petra means *large rock.*

For centuries there has been great debate about what Jesus meant. The Catholics teach that Jesus built the Church on Peter. That is why they claim Peter was the first pope. Most Protestants say that Jesus is building His Church upon the confession that Peter made, which is that Jesus is the Christ.

Personally, I think Jesus is saying that He Himself is the rock upon which He is building His Church. Consider just a couple of verses. In Romans 9, Paul quotes from Isaiah. In v. 33 we read, “Look, I am laying in Zion a stone that will cause people to stumble and a rock that will make them fall, yet the one who believes in him will not be put to shame.”

Then in 1 Corinthians 10:4 Paul recalls a story about the Israelites during their time in the wilderness following their exodus from Egypt. He writes, “and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they were all drinking from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.”

Jesus is building His Church upon Himself, and His Church will be triumphant. He promises in v. 18 that the gates of hell or hades will not prevail against it. Gates are a defensive structure. They are meant to keep people out. Jesus is portraying that Church as being on the move. We are going to attack the place reserved for the dead and de-populate it. Those who are separated from Christ will come to know Him and be brought into a life-giving relationship with Him.

Not only is Jesus building His Church, He is also guiding it. Look at v. 19. This verse is a bit confusing. Binding and loosing has to do with declaring what is and is not permitted. Basically, the verse is teaching that whatever the Church says “no” to, God has already said, “no” to, and whatever the Church says, “yes” to, God has already said, “yes” to. God is going to guide His Church to perform and pursue His will.  
 By the way, v. 20 was a temporary restriction. The disciples were not to go around telling others that Jesus is the Messiah until after He came to do what God sent Him to do—die for the sins of all who would trust Him. Now that He has done that, we are to go into all the world and make disciples.

At my 8th grade graduation in 1978, I was awarded the Language Arts pin. That meant I was the best language arts student on the entire 8th grade at the Herbert Hoover Middle School in OKC. I was pretty proud of receiving that award.

It was then that I discovered I had pretty good instincts. I usually got the right answers on language arts exams because I could trust my instincts.

As the years passed, I discovered I didn’t have such good instincts when it came to science, chemistry, math. I couldn’t always trust my instincts in regard to those things.

Some of you may have good instincts when it comes to business or finance or management . . . mechanical things and how to fix what is broken . . . cooking and working in the kitchen. You know what goes with what and how to substitute one ingredient you have with another that you don’t have.

But because you have good instincts in one field doesn’t mean you have good instincts for another. None of us can pretend that we are omni-competent because all of us aren’t.

When it comes to spiritual truth, we can’t just guess our way to God. No matter how many books we have read or classes we have attended, we can’t just assume that now we know all we need to know. Like those blind men feeling the elephant, we are bound to get it wrong.

Let’s suppose, however, that the elephant is able to talk. We feel his side and say, “My, you must be like a wall.” He laughs and says, “No. That’s just my side.” We take hold of his tail, and say, “This feels like a rope.” He corrects us and says, “That’s just my tail.”

If God is the elephant in the room, I’ve got good news—He talks. He has chosen to reveal Himself, and He has perfectly shown Himself in the person of Jesus. Ask Him to take off your blindfold so you can see Him for who He is.