

Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Sermon

I think there’s a really good reason that Matthew starts this passage by telling us that Jesus was entering into the district of Caesarea Philippi when he asked the disciples this question about who he is. Caesarea was named to honor Caesar Augustus, the leader of the Roman Empire, who most Romans would have called a God. They even set up a temple to Caesar there. A place where Caesar could be worshipped. And in that town they were known to feed Jews like Jesus and his disciples to the lions, to help them remember who was in charge.

And when the Bible closes this passage with Jesus telling his disciples not to speak about their conversation, not to tell others that they had called him the Messiah. Well, I think he had a pretty good reason for that too.

- Because if the people who worshipped the Emperor in Caesarea heard them using that name, images would come to their mind of some conquering hero come to overthrow the Empire and set the Jewish people free. And if Caesar himself overheard Jesus being called Messiah: well, he’d start worrying about his position. He’d start worrying about his power. The Emperor would start worrying that all those people who worshipped them might find something better. That they might find something true.
- And he might strike out; to show his power and protect it, to eliminate this threat that Jesus showed to him, to intimidate Jesus’ disciples and maintain his control.
- Because somewhere within Caesar, he had to know, that he was no Messiah. He was no Son of God. He was not the one who was God’s chosen servant, sent to gather, redeem, & restore God’s people and bring salvation to God’s world.

Because no matter how much power any of us have. No matter how many titles or positions we hold. No matter how many people we can influence. No matter how big our bank accounts are, none of us are the Messiah. Because God only sent one Savior. And that is Jesus Christ who built up the church and who carries the keys to the Kingdom of God. That is the Son of the living God, who sets us free and saves us from death. That is the Suffering Servant, who gives himself for all.

So, remember who it is that came to save you. And know that he's the only one who can.

And when others try to claim your attention and your obedience, your loyalty and your praise: Do not forget.

And if they threaten you with violence to try to keep their power: trust that you are saved already and have no need of their protection.

Because Jesus might not have wanted the disciples to **tell** people that he was the Messiah. But, he certainly wanted them to **show** it to be true in a way that all could see. He wanted them to make it clear in the way that they **lived**. Throughout the rest of Matthew's gospel, he teaches them to become the opposite of Caesar in the way that they live. To embody the values of the Messiah, rather than the Emperor. To give away what they had to the poor, rather than accumulating more. To show mercy to the suffering, rather than pushing them further down. To forgive their enemies, rather than going to war.

And this is the call of the church, still today. To walk on past that temple to the emperor in Caesaria Phillipi and to follow Christ into lives of mercy, generosity, sacrifice, and grace. So that all might see what our lives proclaim - that Jesus is the true Messiah, the Son of the Living God, and all that we will ever need.

Amen.

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