

Week 18: Matthew 16

Hook



Main Point: The religious leaders didn't get it – the Messianic king would suffer and die for His people.

Sometimes it feels as if people just don't get it. Take this, for example. The year was 1846 and a Hungarian doctor named Ignaz Semmelweis was working at a maternity clinic, a clinic that faced a unique problem: women giving birth under the care of male doctors were five times more likely to die than those cared for by female midwives. It seemed odd that these two different wards within the same hospital should have experienced such different results. Eventually Semmelweis figured it out – the men were coming in contact with disease and then carrying that disease to their patients. The solution was simple: Wash your hands. The hospital implemented the solution, and the death rates plummeted. However, getting other medical professionals on board with the new protocol was more difficult than Semmelweis had anticipated. Some doctors felt that they were being blamed for the passing of disease and they opposed Semmelweis. Eventually, the doctors gave up on handwashing and Semmelweis lost his job.¹

Q: Describe a time when you thought you had a great idea, and it seemed like no one would listen.

Q: Have you been resistant to change in the past despite knowing that it would be good for you? What caused you to resist?

Transition: Today, Jesus confronts those who simply keep missing the message.

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Book

Main Point: The religious leaders didn't get it – the Messianic king would suffer and die for His people.

Matthew 16:1–12 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Some people will always ask for “signs,” even when clear signs of God's work are all around them.

Q: Why was it wrong for the Pharisees and Sadducees to ask Jesus for a sign from heaven?

Q: What is the sign of Jonah? How does it relate to Jesus and the Gospel message?

Matthew's Gospel is made up of narrative interwoven with five carefully crafted blocks of topical teaching that are marked off by a similar concluding formula – “When Jesus had finished saying these things....” This chapter occurs a little later in His ministry, after the first three blocks of teaching. The disciples, the crowds, and the Pharisees and Sadducees had heard His teaching and seen His miracles for *years* at this point, and yet they still asked for a sign from heaven. Matthew explicitly tells us this was testing Jesus (v. 1). When Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, He quoted the Scriptures, saying, “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test” (Deuteronomy 6:16). It is no surprise, then, that Jesus explicitly condemned those who test God – not those who genuinely fear God and ask for a sign such as Gideon (Judges 6) or Hezekiah (2 Kings 20) did, but those who are trying to find grounds for *disbelief*.ⁱⁱ

Jesus knew they weren't really asking for a sign that He was from God. They had been given plenty of signs already. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, had told Jesus, “We know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him” (John 3:2). They were looking for anything to publicly discredit Him. But Jesus didn't respond by saying, “Just look at all my miracles!” Through a metaphor that played on their request for a “sign from heaven,” He chastised them for not being able to interpret “the signs of the times.” They could interpret the natural signs of the heavens – a red sky in the morning meant Mediterranean winds from the west would bring rain.ⁱⁱⁱ As experts in the law, they should also have been able to interpret the signs of the coming of God's kingdom. Remember how Jesus responded to John the Baptist's followers when they asked if He were really the One who was to come? “The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them” (Matthew 11:5). The Pharisees and Sadducees should have been able to tell that Jesus was the Messiah.

Jesus repeated the exact same condemnation He had given them in Matthew 12 when they asked for a sign (Matthew 12:38–42). This is likely why He didn't explain what "the sign of Jonah" was; He had already done so four chapters earlier. It was a common Jewish belief at the time that a wicked and adulterous generation would immediately precede the coming of God's kingdom through the Messiah.^{iv} This echoed what God said about that first generation of Israel in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 32:5) and what He said through the prophets about many generations of Israel throughout their whole covenant relationship with God (Hosea 2). In chapter 12, Jesus had told them that at The Judgment, they would be condemned by pagans like the Ninevites and the Queen of the South who repented without demanding a sign. The irony that Gentiles accepted the message of repentance more readily than His own people was also reflected in Jesus' condemnation of Capernaum, Chorazin and Bethsaida in Matthew 11. Even though they saw the most signs of Jesus, they rejected Him, while the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon would have repented (Matthew 11:21). This same thing was true of the Pharisees and Sadducees. They knew God's law the best. They should have recognized God's message and His character in Jesus. If the Pharisees really knew God, they should have recognized Him in Jesus.

This is why Jesus warned the disciples to be on their guard against of the "yeast" of the Pharisees and Sadducees, which, as a play on words in the Aramaic, refers to their teaching (also, Matthew tells us it's their teaching in v. 12).^v In their culture, yeast was a metaphor for something that grows and spreads and changes that which it inhabits. Today, we might use the image of a cancer.^{vi} The teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees were dangerous, toxic. They could spread into the culture like a cancer. Legalistic teachings, heretical teachings, prosperity gospel teachings, or teachings that intertwine politics and the Gospel in an unhealthy way ... these can also grow insidiously in our culture, without our even realizing it, and infect the Church like a cancer. We have to be on guard against false teachings and the "schemes of the devil" (Ephesians 6:11). We have to know the Word so well that we can recognize false teachings, even when they mix lies with a little truth, which is one of the ways false teaching can so easily worm its way into our hearts and minds without our realizing it (2 Timothy 4:2–3). We have to abide in Christ, immerse ourselves in Him, be led by the Holy Spirit, and "pray at all times in the Spirit" (Ephesians 6:18).

The disciples completely missed Jesus' whole metaphor. They thought He was talking about bread. This was not one of their finer moments. You can almost hear the frustration in Jesus' voice, "Do you *still* not understand?" (v. 9). They had seen Him materialize enough bread for thousands of people out of nowhere, so how could they still think He was worried about whether they had brought bread? Just as the Pharisees should have known better, the disciples should have known better. Again, Jesus rebuked them for having too little faith, though Bible commentator Craig Keener writes that it is "a reproof like that of a concerned parent's, not that of a harsh drill sergeant."^{vii} The disciples needed more faith, more wisdom, more understanding. But the difference between them and the Pharisees is that they didn't think that they already knew it all; they looked to Jesus for wisdom and understanding. They may not have fully understood everything yet, but they didn't try to test Him. They trusted in Jesus and followed Him, and eventually, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on them at Pentecost, they

finally got it. This is the mark of a disciple. Not having everything already figured out or, as Paul wrote, have “already become perfect,” but in humility, pressing on, and running the race with perseverance, keeping your eyes fixed on Jesus (Philippians 3:12–14; Hebrews 12:1–2).

Q: What false teachings do we encounter in the world today that are particularly insidious?

Q: How can we keep ourselves from being hoodwinked by false teaching?

Q: How can we grow in faith, wisdom and understanding? What actions can we take?

Matthew 16:13–20 [Read]

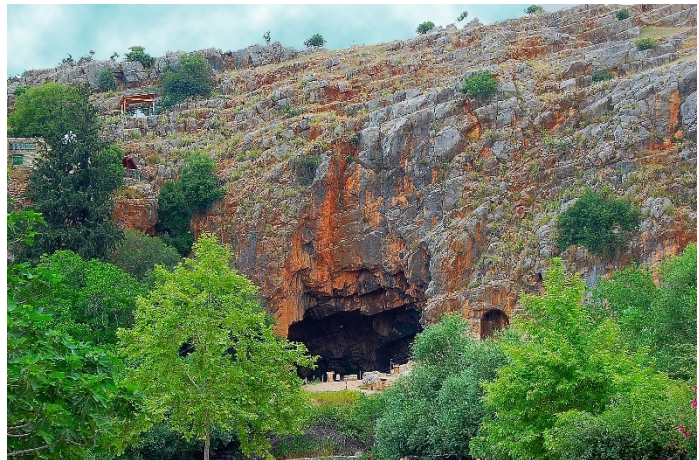
Talking Point 2: Confession of Jesus as Messiah is the rock on which the Church is built.

Q: What is “the rock” on which Jesus would build His Church?

Q: Why would Jesus tell them not to tell anyone He was the Messiah?

Jesus has taken His disciples far away from the crowds in the Jewish territory in Galilee to Caesarea Philippi, near the ancient city of Dan, the northern boundary of ancient Israel. It was in the Golan Heights at the source of the Jordan River, at the base of Mount Hermon. This was as pagan a territory as one could find in Israel. When the kingdom split in the Old Testament, the city was the center of false worship to Baal. In Jesus’ day, it was famous for a grotto where people worshipped the pagan god, Pan.

There was a cave at the bottom of a cliff, with spring water running from the mouth of it. The pagans believed their gods lived in the underworld during the winter and returned to earth each spring, traveling by the spring waters through this cave, because water is the source of life. They considered this cave to be a gate to the underworld, the “gates of hell” (v. 18). Each spring, to entice Pan to return to earth, the pagans engaged in “worship” that included drunken orgies and other perverse activities.^{viii}



Jesus’ disciples would have been shocked that He brought them there. This was like a red-light district in their world; devout Jews would not have gone there. He had brought them there to get away, but this wasn’t the place for a godly spiritual retreat! It was, however, the perfect place for Jesus to encourage His followers that the gates of Hades would not prevail over their mission.

Scholars have interpreted the meaning of the word “rock” in this passage in several ways. Some believe the rock refers to all the apostles, as in Ephesians 2:20: “You are ... members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.” Some believe the rock to be Peter himself. This is the view of the Catholic Church, which believes special authority is passed down to every pope from Peter, the first pope.

However, the rock is not Peter himself, but his confession of Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (v. 16) – the Gospel message, the true teaching of the kingdom of God, not the “yeast” of the Pharisees. This passage is a play on words between *petra* and *petros*, which are not just masculine and feminine of the same word but are considered two different words (Strong’s #4073 and #4074, respectively). *Petra* is a large mass of connected rock, such as a cliff or a rock riverbed – an immovable rock or foundation. *Petros* (Peter’s name) is a detached stone or boulder that is movable and can even be thrown.^{ix} In this interpretation, Christ compared Peter to the rock in character, but He was not saying Peter *was* the rock on which He would build the Church. The large mass of rock is the foundation. Peter was simply one stone in the building, like the other apostles, and the cornerstone is Christ. This connects well to Jesus’ words at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, which compare those who act on Jesus’ teachings to a wise man who builds his house on the rock, *petra* (Matthew 7:24–27).

While Jesus criticized them for having too little faith in the previous story, here He commended Peter for confessing a truth that could have only been revealed to him by the Father, not through human logic or wisdom (v. 17). The Pharisees could study all their lives and never understand because true spiritual wisdom is only revealed by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2). To Peter – and all those who shared His confession – Jesus gave the “keys” to the kingdom, another play on words. Jesus is referring here to the keys commonly held by scribes as a symbol of their teaching function. The disciples would be the teachers of the Church in the same way the scribes were the teachers of the Old Covenant. These keys – God’s Word, the Gospel, the supernaturally revealed truth of God – open the gates to the kingdom. As teachers of the Word, the disciples were the gatekeepers to the kingdom. Because what is bound/loosed on earth is bound/loosed in heaven, when the disciples taught and lived according to God’s Word here on earth, their actions and decisions on earth would be in accord with what was already decided in heaven (v. 19). In our own lives, we don’t have to seek individual direction on every situation in life. When we follow God’s Word with a pure heart, we will achieve God’s will on earth as it is in heaven.^x

Q: What are some practical ways you can focus on fulfilling the Great Commission this week?

Q: How can you reach out with the Gospel to people who are far from God? (This may mean simply starting a relationship with someone who is far from Him. It may mean taking the next step by sharing your testimony or asking thought-provoking questions about faith. It may mean serving someone in need, sharing the Gospel through your actions.)

Matthew 16:21–28 [Read]

Talking Point 3: This upside-down King would suffer and die for His people. The cost of discipleship is to give our lives to follow Jesus, too.

Q: How is Peter's role in this story different from his role in the previous story?

In this passage, Jesus condemned Peter and even called him Satan! The same guy He had just praised for knowing the truth that only God could have revealed to him. Peter knew Jesus was the Messiah, but he misunderstood who the Messiah was and why He came. This is when Jesus explained to them that following Him meant following Him to death. That if you want to save your life, you have to lose it. That nothing in the world – even everything in the whole world – is worth losing your soul for. All of this was in response to the false teaching of the Pharisees, which would only lead to losing your soul to the gates of Hades.

Many people have debated the meaning of “take up his cross and follow me.” The context and the textual evidence point to Jesus’ speaking literally, not metaphorically. This would have been hard for the disciples to understand and even offensive to hear. Not only because they pictured the Messiah as a conquering hero, but also because that specific method of death – crucifixion – was the most scandalous form of execution in their world.^{xi} Yet this text and many others point to the difficult truth that Jesus knew He would be martyred and expected the same for His disciples, which was consistent with the Jewish view that prophets were often martyred (Matthew 20:22–23; 26:26–29).^{xii} Those who wish to follow Jesus must understand from the start that following Him means giving up your life for Him. Nothing less.

The saying itself, “whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (v. 25), is a play on words, a kind of riddle. The word for “life” here is not the one we often see, *zoe*, which is a mere physical life. It’s not *pneuma*, which is breath or spirit. The word is *psuche*, which means the “soul” or more literally, “the breath of life.” When the Bible talks about eternal life, it uses *zoe* (Matthew 19:16; 25:46; John 10:10; 14:6; 17:3; 1 John 2:25). It would really be better translated as “whoever wants to save their *soul* will lose it.” Using “life” here makes it sound as though Jesus is only talking about people who lose their lives (die) as martyrs. But it is much deeper; it’s losing your soul.

It’s a riddle because both people lose their soul, but one loses his soul *for Jesus*. The first man thinks he can keep his soul for himself, that he can center his life on himself. But he’s kidding himself. He can’t keep his soul for himself; He will have to serve somebody. He’ll lose his soul to the devil. But the one who chooses to lose his soul to Jesus ends up saving his soul from the gates of Hades.

Losing your life for the sake of Jesus doesn’t mean you have to die a martyr. It means you give up for your life for Him, as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1–2). The irony is that giving up your life is what actually saves it. Consider the old story of the woman who was so afraid to lose her money that she buried it – 100,000 *yuan*, her life savings – under her house. When she dug it up to use for her son’s wedding, the money had decomposed. In trying to save her money, she lost it. If she had just “lost it” to a bank instead, she would have actually saved it. In this way,

Jesus is like the bank – He is safe to lose our soul to. Jesus will take care of our soul and make us even richer spiritually in the end.^{xiii}

This is somewhat written in hyperbole to make a point. None of us can actually “gain the whole world.” Even Jeff Bezos doesn’t own the whole world. Jesus was saying that even if you could gain the whole world, it wouldn’t be worth losing your soul. Your soul is far more valuable than even the entire world (Psalm 49:8).

As God spoke through Isaiah, “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.... Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? ... Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live” (Isaiah 55:1–3).

Q: Why is it so easy for us to lose our souls to the things of this world? Why is it so tempting?

Q: Why is it so easy for us to go from our owning things to our things “owning” us?

Q: Describe someone you know who has really given up their whole life for Jesus.

Q: What would it look like for you to offer your whole life as a living sacrifice to Him? Give practical examples.

Week 18: Matthew 16

Took

Main Point: The religious leaders didn't get it – the Messianic king would suffer and die for His people.

The first cost-benefit analysis was proposed in 1844, a tool by which to compare the benefits to the costs of a particular action.^{xiv} Consider a cost-benefit for taking up your cross and following Jesus. What would you lose? What would you gain? Paul came to his conclusion, in fact he shared that “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). Give everything you have to Jesus and watch what He does with your life.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Have I really given up my life for Jesus? Am I truly taking up my cross and following Him? Am I offering my whole life as a living sacrifice? Are there things I am holding back from Jesus? Are there ways I have sold my soul to the world or lost myself in the world instead?

PRAY: For those who are far from God, who need to be rescued from the gates of Hades. Pray for God to give you or other believers near them the opportunity to share the Gospel with them and for God to soften their hearts so they will hear and receive it.

ACT: Share the Gospel with at least one person this week. Pray for God to reveal to you those in your life who need and are ready to hear the Gospel. Look for opportunities to bring Jesus naturally into the conversation. Or simply be up-front and tell your friend that you have wanted to share your experience with Jesus with them for a while ... and go for it!

ⁱ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2015/01/12/375663920/the-doctor-who-championed-hand-washing-and-saved-women-s-lives>

ⁱⁱ Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans, 1999).

ⁱⁱⁱ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1992).

^{iv} 2 Baruch 27:12; Mishnah Sota 9:15; Cairo Damascus Document 20.14–15

^v Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew, The New American Commentary, 22* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992).

^{vi} Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans, 1999).

^{vii} Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans, 1999).

^{viii} Tzaferis, 1992.

^{ix} Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Iowa Falls, IA: World Bible Publishers, 1992), 1154.

^x Max Anders and Stu Weber, *Matthew, Holman New Testament Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2000)

^{xi} Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

^{xii} Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971).

^{xiii} Celine Sun, "A Chinese Woman Buried Her Life Savings Under Her Kitchen, and It Turned to Mush" *Business Insider*, Aug 31, 2015 - <https://www.businessinsider.com/why-you-should-never-bury-your-money-2015-8>

^{xiv} <https://www.britannica.com/topic/cost-benefit-analysis>