

HE SAID WHAT?!?!

Title: Part 1 – “The Only Question That Matters”

Date: April 12, 2026

As we continue in this moment of worship and prepare our hearts for the teaching of God’s word I want to read you a passage of Scripture that I honestly believe contains the most important question ever asked in human history. Not by a politician. Not by a journalist. Not on a podcast. By Jesus Himself.

Matthew 16, starting in verse 13:

¹³ 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?”** ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ 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.” ²⁰ Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Today we are beginning a brand-new collection of messages and I am really, really excited about this one. We are calling this, **“He Said What?!?!”** and it is all about meeting the real Jesus in His own words. Who would like to get to know the real Jesus better?

So, let’s pray and ask God to meet us in this moment and then we will dive into this.

[PRAYER TIME]

Hey, before you grab a seat, say “Hi” to 4 or 5 people and thank them for being here today. While everyone in the house is saying “Hi” I want to take a second to welcome everyone joining us online or on our app—we think you are a part of our family, and we are glad you’re here! If there’s any way we can pray for you or serve you this week, don’t hesitate to reach out.

By show of hands today, how many of you have ever thought you knew someone only to realize you didn’t know them as well as you thought? Has that ever happened to you? Some of you are like, “I was married to that person once...”

Well, I think that happens with Jesus A LOT! So, over the next several weeks, we're going to look at some of the shortest, punchiest, most surprising one-liners Jesus ever said. Things He dropped on people that made entire crowds go silent. Things that made religious leaders furious. Things that made broken people weep with relief. And here's what I believe is going to happen: I think some of us in this room are going to meet someone we didn't expect.

Because here's the thing. Whether you just showed up for Easter last week and something stirred in you, or whether you've been coming to church for years and Jesus has kind of become more of a concept than a person—either way, I want to do something simple over the next several weeks. I just want to look at what Jesus actually said. Not what the internet says about Him. Not what your weird uncle posts on Facebook about Him. Not what the culture or the news or the algorithm says about Him. What HE said.

Because I'm convinced of this: the real Jesus is wilder, more compassionate, more confrontational, and more beautiful than the version most of us are carrying around. And His words are still speaking.

Turn to somebody near you and tell them, “You might not know Him like you think you do.”

Today I want to preach a message I am calling:

The Only Question That Matters

We live in an age of opinions, amen? Everybody has one. About everything. Go online for thirty seconds and you will find seventeen different opinions on any topic you can imagine—politics, parenting, whether a hot dog is a sandwich, whether it's acceptable to put pineapple on pizza. We are drowning in opinions.

And we have opinions about Jesus too. The culture has formed an opinion. The media has formed an opinion. Your coworkers, your professors, your old roommate who took one religion class in college—everybody has a take. And what's wild is most of those opinions have been formed by everything EXCEPT actually reading what He said. People form their view of Jesus from social media, from a bad church experience, from a movie they saw, from a professor who had an ax to grind, from their parents' version of Christianity that may or may not have looked anything like the real thing. They've got this secondhand, thirdhand, fifthhand version of Jesus bouncing around in their heads, and they think that's Him.

In fact, a 2024 study from the Barna Group found that while over 70% of Americans still say they have a generally positive view of Jesus, less than half could name a single thing He actually taught. Did you catch that? Most people like Jesus. They just have no idea

what He said. They're forming opinions about a person they've never actually listened to! That would be like saying, "Oh yeah, I love that band!" but you've never heard a single song. You just saw somebody wearing the t-shirt.

I'll be honest with you; I catch myself doing this with people too. There are people I have opinions about that I've never actually talked to. I've just heard things. I've seen clips. I've read a headline. And from that I've formed an entire picture of who I think they are. And then you actually sit down with that person and go, "Oh. You're not who I thought you were at all." We do that with people all the time AND I think we do it with Jesus.

AND I'm not just talking to those of you who are still searching and skeptical of all this. I think a lot of us who have been in church for years have done the same thing. We've let familiarity replace intimacy. We've let assumptions replace actual encounters with the living Christ. We think we know Jesus, but what we actually know is a version of Him we assembled from sermons and songs and bumper stickers and Veggie Tales. "Veggie what?" If you know you know... We've created a safe, manageable, predictable Jesus—and the real one is none of those things.

BUT what I find so helpful is that this is nothing new! People in Jesus day were doing the same exact thing! So, what does Jesus do about this? He doesn't give a lecture. He doesn't write a book. He doesn't start a podcast. He asks a question. And this particular question is going to be the thread that runs through every single week of this collection of messages.

SO, let's dig in. If you are taking notes today, here is the first thing I want you to see:

1. Everyone has an opinion about Jesus, but not everyone has an answer.

Right? Everyone has an opinion about Jesus, but not everyone has an answer. Let's look back at verse 13 and I will show you what I mean and how this is nothing new:

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

Before we look at what the disciples said, I need you to understand WHERE Jesus asked this question, because the location is not accidental. Jesus is very intentional about geography in the Gospels, and this is one of those moments where the setting changes everything.

Caesarea Philippi was about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, up at the base of Mount Hermon. And this region was the epicenter of pagan worship in the ancient world. I'm talking a massive rock cliff face with carved-out niches where statues of Greek gods were

displayed. If you visit the site today, you can still see those carved-out niches in the cliff face. There were temples to Caesar Augustus. Shrines to the god Pan—Pan was the god of the wild, of chaos, of unrestrained desire. In fact, the region was originally called Paneas after this god. And at the base of this rock cliff, there was a deep cave that the locals literally called “The Gates of Hades” because they believed it was a literal entrance to the underworld. The spring that came out of the cave was thought to be bottomless. Ritual sacrifices were thrown into it. It was the most spiritually dark, pluralistic place in the entire region. It was the Vegas of the ancient world, but with more goats and fewer neon lights. If you were a first-century rabbi and your mother asked where you were taking your students this week, this would not be the answer she wanted to hear. No respectable Jewish teacher would take his disciples here. And yet Jesus walks them right into the middle of it.

I think there's something worth noticing about that. Jesus is not afraid of dark places. He doesn't avoid the places where the false gods are loudest. He walks right up to them and asks the most clarifying question anyone can ask. That tells me something about the God we serve. He's not threatened by the competition. He's not intimidated by the noise. He will stand in the middle of a thousand competing claims and calmly ask: “But who do you say that I am?” That's confidence that comes from actually being who you claim to be.

Now hold that picture in your mind. Jesus doesn't ask this question in the synagogue. He doesn't ask it at a Bible study or a prayer meeting. He walks His boys 25 miles north on a field trip to the most religiously contested, spiritually chaotic place He can find—a wall literally covered with false gods—and with all of that as the backdrop He says: “Who do people say that I am?”

He's essentially saying: With every other option on display behind me, every competing claim, every idol, every counterfeit—what are people saying? AND the disciples report back the popular answers. Verse 14:

¹⁴ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

Notice what all of those answers have in common. They're all flattering. They're all respectable. John the Baptist? That's a great guy. A little intense, ate some weird stuff, but people loved him. Elijah? The greatest prophet in Israel's history. Jeremiah? The weeping prophet who told the truth when nobody wanted to hear it. And I love that even back then the minor prophets were getting lumped together, “or one of the prophets,” like, one of the other ones we don't remember, like Amos or Habakkuk. BUT these are all impressive comparisons. They're all WRONG, but they're very polite about it.

And that's exactly what our culture does with Jesus today. We're very polite about Jesus. We'll call Him a good teacher. A moral example. A revolutionary. A social activist ahead of His time. We'll put Him on the Mount Rushmore of great religious leaders right next to Buddha and Gandhi and Muhammad and whoever else makes us feel culturally tolerant. But calling Jesus a good teacher while ignoring what He actually taught is not a compliment. It's avoidance. It's a way of appearing to honor Him while keeping Him at a safe distance where He can't actually disrupt your life.

C.S. Lewis saw right through this. He said: **“A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice.”**

Lewis was right. You don't get to call Jesus a nice guy and move on. He made claims that don't allow for that. He said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” He said, “Before Abraham was born, I am”—using the name of God for Himself. He forgave sins—something only God can do. He accepted worship. He told a storm to shut up, and it did. You either believe Him or you don't. But “good teacher” is not on the menu. That's the one option He didn't leave open.

SO, everybody had an opinion. But an opinion about Jesus is not the same thing as an answer about Jesus. An opinion keeps Jesus at arm's length. An answer changes the direction of your life. And most people—then and now—are way more comfortable with opinions. Because opinions don't require anything from you. Answers do.

Come on, be honest. How many of us have been running on an “opinion” about Jesus for years without ever actually wrestling through to an ANSWER? You've got an idea of who He is, a vague sense, a general impression, a childhood memory. But when was the last time you actually sat down and said, “Who is this man? And what does that mean for how I live my life?”

Because that's exactly where Jesus takes the conversation next. And this is where it gets personal. Write this down:

2. You can't answer for the crowd; you can only answer for yourself.

So, everyone gives their opinions about who people say Jesus is, the word on the street. But now look at verse 15 again:

¹⁵ **“But what about you?” he asked.** [And here is THE question, the question everyone has to wrestle with, Jesus says] **“Who do YOU say I am?”**

When Jesus says “you” here, He uses the Greek word, *humeis*, and it's placed at the very beginning of the sentence for emphasis. In Greek grammar when a writer front-loads a word, it's because he wants you to feel the weight of it. So, a more literal translation of what Jesus is saying would be: “YOU—who do you say I am?”

In other words, there's the crowd's answer, the poll results, the trending opinion. And then there's YOUR answer. And those are two very different things. AND this is what I love about Jesus. He's not interested in polls. He's not interested in consensus. He doesn't check His Google reviews. He doesn't care what's trending on X. He doesn't ask, “What's my approval rating?” He asks YOU. Directly. Personally. Unavoidably. “Who do YOU say that I am?”

And that question cannot be inherited. It can't be borrowed. It can't be crowdsourced. Your grandma's faith, as beautiful and as real as it may be, cannot answer this question for you. My conviction as your pastor, even if you sit here for a decade listening, doesn't count as your conviction. Your spouse's relationship with God is not your relationship with God. You can ride someone else's faith for a while but there will come a day, a crisis, a moment of truth where borrowed faith collapses.

At some point, every single person has to answer this question for themselves. Who do YOU say that I am?

As I was doing some studying for today's message I came across a psychologist who studied how people form their identity, and he identified a status he called “identity foreclosure.” I won't bore you with the details, but this is when a person adopts beliefs and commitments without ever actually exploring them. They just absorb whatever their family or culture handed them and call it their own. They've got an answer, but it's someone else's answer. And what this psychologist found was that people in identity foreclosure are significantly more fragile when their beliefs are challenged. The first serious storm knocks them over because the roots were never theirs.

That's why so many people walk away from faith in college or after a crisis or after a really bad experience with a church. It's not because Jesus failed them. It's because the Jesus they were carrying around was someone else's Jesus. And the first serious challenge knocked it right out of their hands because they had never actually gripped it themselves.

That's why 2,000 years ago Jesus was not interested in inherited religion. He was interested in a real, personal encounter. He's not asking, “What did your parents teach you?” He's asking, “What do YOU believe?”

AND maybe you know what happens next, but impulsive, foot-in-mouth Peter. The guy who always speaks first and thinks second. He says in verse 16:

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Now catch this. Peter doesn't just say a "Messiah." A lot of people in first-century Israel were hoping for a Messiah—a political liberator, a military commander who would throw off Roman occupation and restore the glory of David's kingdom. That was the popular expectation. But Peter goes way further: He says, "THE Messiah," and adds, "the Son of the living God."

Why does that matter? Go back to where they're standing. They are standing in front of a rock wall covered in dead gods. Statues carved from stone that could not see, could not hear, could not speak, could not save. Lifeless images of lifeless deities. And Peter, looking past every single one of them, declares: "My God is alive!"

The word "living" means actively, presently, continuously alive. Not alive once upon a time. Not alive in principle or in some philosophical sense. Alive right now. Breathing. Moving. Speaking. And He's right here in front of me! Every god on that wall is stone cold dead. Mine lives!

Here's why that matters for you today. There are a thousand philosophies out there, a thousand self-help systems, a thousand wellness trends, a thousand spiritual paths you can walk. Some of them have some truth in them. Some of them will even help you for a season. But come on, how many of them have a LIVING God at the center? How many of them are built on a person who died, was buried, and three days later got back up? Only one! There's only one empty tomb in the history of the world! And it belongs to Jesus!

Peter didn't give the popular answer. He didn't give the safe answer. He gave the right answer. AND look at what Jesus says about how he got there. Verse 17:

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

Peter didn't reason his way to Jesus. God opened his eyes. It was revelation, not information.

That's why this question is different from every other question you'll ever be asked. You can't Google or ChatGPT the answer. You can't debate your way to certainty. At some point, it requires revelation. It requires God pulling back the curtain and showing you who His Son actually is. And that's a prayer you can pray right now, today, wherever you're at. You can say, "*God, open my eyes. I want to see Jesus for who He really is—not who I've been*

told He is, not who I've assumed He is, but who He actually is." God loves that prayer and He will answer it every single time!

A.W. Tozer from *The Pursuit of God* said it like this: "To most people God is an inference, not a reality. He is a deduction from evidence which they consider adequate; but He remains personally unknown to the individual."

Meaning we don't need more information about Jesus. We need an encounter with Him! Amen? Because information keeps Jesus at a distance. An encounter changes everything. Information gives you something to think about. An encounter gives you someone to follow.

And listen to me, some of you have been living on information for way too long. You've got notebooks full of sermon notes. You've read the books. You've done the studies. But when was the last time Jesus made you cry? When was the last time He disrupted your plans? When was the last time His presence was so real to you that you couldn't explain it away?

Peter didn't give a theological essay. He gave a confession from the gut, from the place where your heart meets the Holy Spirit and something inside you breaks open and says, "I don't have all the answers, but I know who You are, and I'm Yours."

SO: Everyone has an opinion about Jesus, but not everyone has an answer. You can't answer for the crowd; you can only answer for yourself. One more:

3. Your answer to this question will shape everything else.

Let's look at what happens after Peter's confession. Verse 18:

¹⁸ 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.

Jesus takes Peter's answer and He builds a church on it. Think about that for a second. Peter's confession—this one moment of clarity, this single answer to a single question—becomes the foundation of the most enduring, most transformative, most resilient movement in the history of the world. Two thousand years later, we are still talking about it. Still gathering because of it. Still being changed by it. All because one guy, standing in a dark place surrounded by dead gods, gave the right answer to the right question.

This tells me that your answer to this question is not theoretical. It's not academic. It's FOUNDATIONAL. It shapes everything that comes after it. What you believe about Jesus

will determine how you handle suffering when it comes. It will determine how you raise your kids. It will determine what you do with your money. It will determine how you treat the person who hurt you. It will determine whether you forgive or hold a grudge for the next thirty years. It will determine whether anxiety runs your life or faith does. This is not a Sunday school trivia question. This is the load-bearing wall of your entire existence.

AND I want you to notice something else. Look at what Jesus says about the gates of Hades. Remember where they're standing—right in front of the cave literally called the Gates of Hades. And Jesus points at it and says, “The gates of Hades will not overcome it.”

Now, most people hear that and think: the church is going to survive attacks from hell. The church will hold up under spiritual warfare. And that's partially true. But don't miss this, **gates are not offensive weapons. Gates are defensive structures.** Right? Gates don't attack. Gates don't charge. Gates hold ground. Gates keep things out. Gates are what you hide behind when someone's coming for you.

So, when Jesus says, “the gates of Hades will not overcome it,” He's not saying the church will survive a siege from hell. He's saying the church is ON THE OFFENSE! We're the ones advancing! We're the ones kicking down doors! We're the ones marching into enemy territory! And hell's gates—its best defenses—won't be able to hold against what Jesus is building!

Come on! Do you hear that? The people of God are not a people who huddle in our church buildings hoping the darkness doesn't get in! We are a people who march INTO the darkness knowing it cannot stop what Jesus started! The church is not on defense! The church is not retreating! The church is not hiding! Jesus said I will build my church, I will build it, and the enemy's best fortifications will crumble!

This is the Jesus that a lot of us have missed! He's not just gentle and compassionate—though He absolutely is both of those things. He's a builder! He's a warrior! He's a King with a Kingdom that is advancing and will never, ever, ever stop advancing! And He invites you to be a part of it! Ten thousand years from now His Kingdom will still be marching victoriously! Not because of us, but because of Him!

But it all starts with your answer. “Who do you say I am?”

If He's just a good teacher, you'll take what you like and leave the rest. If He's a moral example, you'll try harder and fail more. If He's a historical figure, you'll study Him from a safe, academic distance. But if He is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God—then He gets everything!

Your plans. Your fears. Your marriage. Your career. Your kids. Your calendar. Your bank account. Your future. Your anxiety. Your addiction. Your shame. He's either Lord of all of it or He's not Lord at all.

Tim Keller said it like this years ago: "If Jesus is not who He says He is, He's not worth following. But if He is who He says He is, nothing else matters."

That's it. That's the whole thing right there. If He's not who He claims to be, then we should all go home, sleep in on Sundays, and find something else to build our lives on. But if He is? If this carpenter from Nazareth really was God wrapped in human flesh? If He really did walk out of that tomb on the third day? Then there is nothing in your life, nothing in your circumstances, nothing in your past, nothing in your future that He cannot handle. And following Him—really following Him, not just agreeing with Him from a comfortable distance—is the single most important decision you will ever make.

And I just need to tell you something before we close, because somebody needs to hear this today. Some of you have been making decisions based on who you think God is, and you've been working with bad information. You think God is angry. You think God is distant. You think God is disappointed. You think God gave up on you a long time ago. And because you've been operating with the wrong picture of God, you've been making decisions that are pulling you further and further from the life He designed you for.

But what if your picture is wrong? What if the God you've been running from isn't the God who's actually there? What if the real Jesus—the one who shows up in dark places, the one who asks questions instead of throwing stones, the one who builds churches out of broken fishermen—what if He's been standing right in front of you this whole time and you just didn't recognize Him?

It starts with one question. The only question that matters.

SO, let me land this, I want to give you two things to take with you this week. If you're here today and you're not sure what you believe about Jesus—maybe you came last week for Easter and something about it stuck with you, or maybe a friend dragged you here today, or maybe you've been coming for a while but you've never really gone all in—I am not going to pressure you. Our church is a safe place to kick the tires. But I am going to ask you to do one thing this week. Actually, consider the question. Not what your parents told you. Not what a professor told you. Not what Reddit told you. YOU. Who do you say He is?

Sit with it. Read one of the Gospels—I'd start with the book of John. Read a chapter a day this week and just watch what Jesus does. Watch how He talks to people. Watch how He treats the broken, the arrogant, the overlooked, and the outcast. And be honest with yourself about what you find. That's all I am asking. Just give Him a real look. Not a glance. A look.

And if you're already a follower of Jesus—if you've given your life to Him—here's my question for you: when was the last time you actually answered this question? Not from memory, but from the gut? Not because someone told you to, but because you wrestled with it yourself? Because here's the thing about Peter's confession—it wasn't a one-time event. Peter would deny Jesus three times on the worst night of his life. He would waver. He would fail spectacularly. And then the resurrected Jesus would come back to him on a beach and ask him a different question three times: “Do you love me?”

The answer to “who do you say I am” is not something you decide once and file away. It's something you live into every single day. Every morning you wake up, the question is back on the table. Will I follow Him today? Will I trust Him today? Will I let Him be Lord of the thing I'm facing today?

So, this week, I dare you—open your Bible to one of the Gospels and read Jesus' words like you've never read them before. Because I promise you, He is more than what you've settled for. Let Him reintroduce Himself to you.

Church, the same Jesus who stood in front of a wall of dead gods and asked His disciples, “Who do you say I am?” is standing in this room right now asking the same question. Don't run from it. Don't deflect. Don't give Him the popular answer. Give Him the real one. Because the God who shows up in the darkest, most spiritually chaotic places and asks the hardest questions is the same God who catches you when you finally let go and say yes.

[PRAYER TIME]