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March 15, 2026

FOLLOW JESUS: MATTHEW 16:13-26

Introduction: In middle school and high school, test days are always stressful. It doesn't help that tests can take on different forms depending on the subject or the teacher. In math or algebra class, you simply solve the equations. On a spelling/vocabulary test, you might simply spell the words correctly based on their definition. But in the humanities, tests might be multifaceted. There might be sections for fill-in-the-blank or matching, short answer, and an essay. On these types of tests, the different sections are graded differently. Matching or filling in the blank might be worth one or two points each. The short answer questions will be worth more points, and the essay will be worth the most points. This weighted form of grading means that getting some answers incorrect will cost you fewer points, but if you bomb on the essay question, it might be very difficult to get a high score on the test. To put it simply, it's more important to get some things correct than others.

In the Christian life, we don't generally take quizzes to judge our commitment to Christ. But let's imagine we were to take a quiz today to determine our knowledge of the Bible and the teachings of the Bible. There might be some fill in the blank questions like "_____ was Jesus' cousin who preached near the Jordan river and baptized people." There might be some short-answer questions like, "Explain Jesus teaching in Matthew chapter 14." There might be an essay question like, "Based on Jesus teachings in Matthew 16, explain the nature of Christ, the reasons for Christ's coming, and the response those two things should engender in His followers." While it is important that we know the Bible and what the Bible teaches, some aspects of the Bible and doctrine have a more significant weight. We might not know the name of John the Baptist, but that will not significantly impact our understanding of salvation. An inability to cogently articulate the events that took place in the days after John the Baptist was murdered, as explained in Matthew 14, will not impact our ability to grasp salvation, but it definitely could help us understand the nature and power of Christ as well as His deity. The weightiness of the question increases when we get to the content relayed to us in Chapter 16. Here we discover the nature and purpose of Christ. If we get this question wrong, we are in danger of getting the entire gospel incorrect. So, let's look at that today.

Summarize and Transition: In our lesson today, Jesus is going to quiz the disciples. The quiz relates to Jesus' nature. The answer the disciples give will be vitally important moving forward. Jesus is also going to begin teaching His disciples about His purpose for coming. He will conclude this lesson with directions related to following Him correctly.

1. KNOW THE MESSIAH (MATT. 16:13-20)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 16:13-20.

Explain: Jesus sets the stage brilliantly for this lesson. He took the disciples to a place called Caesarea Philippi. The city lay at the base of Mt. Hermon in the region north of Galilee (25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee). The area was lush and filled with springs and rivers. The Jordan River begins in this region. This city has a storied history, but the most important thing for us to understand is the religious setting of the city. Since ancient times, the city had been a center of pagan worship. The Canaanites worship Baal at this location. During the Greek period, a temple to the Greek god Pan, the lord of the underworld, was built near the mouth of a cave.

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Matthew* (Preaching)
- *New American Commentary: Matthew* (NAC)
- *Exalting Christ in Matthew* (Exalting)
- *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Matthew 14-28* (ACCS)
- *The King Has Come* (Spurgeon)

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Later, Herod the Great built a temple out of white marble and dedicated it to emperor worship.¹ It is against this backdrop that Jesus asks His question. “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” What do John and Jane Jew think of me?

Ask: What answers do the disciples give? (John the Baptist, Elijah, and Jeremiah)

Explain: When we read this, none of these answers seems to make any sense. But for some reason, people had various ideas related to Jesus’ identity. Matthew 14:1-2 tells us that Herod had identified Jesus as a resurrected John the Baptist. Many might have thought Jesus was Elijah because some OT prophecies predicted the return of the prophet prior to the coming of the Messiah (Mal. 3:1, 4:5-6; See Notes Box). According to Ken Schroeder, the connection to Jeremiah might be related to the opposition the prophet faced from the religious authorities of his time. (ETBC, 30) More generally, the people thought that Jesus could be any of the OT prophets. Each of these allusions is positive, if irrational or extrabiblical. John and Jane Israelite have a positive impression of Jesus.

Discuss: If Jesus were to ask our group that same question today, “Who do people say that I am?” how would you answer? (Here you are trying to get the group to consider what non-Christians would say about Jesus.)

Explain: Generally, people would have good things to say about Jesus. He was a good teacher, He healed people, and He cared for the poor and the outcasts. All these things reflect positive feelings about Jesus. Some might go so far as to say they follow Jesus (as the crowds did in Jesus’ day). However, there is more to Jesus than those things. That is why Jesus asks His follow-up question to the disciples

Ask: How does Peter answer the question? (“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”)

Explain: Peter’s answer, on behalf of the other disciples, contains two important truths. First, Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One, promised in the OT to redeem Israel. Second, Jesus is more than a man. He is God Himself. Peter’s answer was correct, but it was the minority opinion in Israel. It is still the minority opinion in the world, and the church does not always get the answer correct. In 2025, Lifeway produced a report on the state of theology in America. In the research, they asked Americans to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement “Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God.” Among *Americans*, 11% said they were not sure, 48% agreed with the statement, and 40 disagreed (see the attached graph). If you dig into the report, you will discover that among Evangelicals 62% disagree with the statement (meaning they affirm the

Notes:

Teachers’ Note: Remember, we ask different types of questions to accomplish different tasks. This question is meant to draw the group’s attention back to the text. There is no reason for you to relay this information when you can use the question to involve group members in the teaching.

Malachi 3:1

“See, I am going to send my messenger, and he will clear the way before me. Then the Lord you seek will suddenly come to his temple, the Messenger of the covenant you delight in—see, he is coming,” says the Lord of Armies.

Malachi 4:5-6

⁵ Look, I am going to send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. ⁶ And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers. Otherwise, I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

“Like, most people today, the people here, have good thoughts about Jesus, just not precisely right thoughts.” (Preaching, 446)

“No one, however, thought Jesus was the Messiah. He was a good man, or even a godly man, but certainly not God himself.” (Exalting, 215)

¹ W. T. Edwards Jr., “Caesarea Philippi,” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Chad Brand et al. (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 247.

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deity of Christ).² That sounds good, but it also means that 38 out of every 100 people in the pews of “good evangelical churches” do not affirm the deity of Christ. Before we start going on about liberal Christians, remember these are people who affirmed a conservative theological view of the Bible. The people who answered this question are us!

Discuss: If this is how Christians in churches answer the question, what are the implications for the church?

Explain: There are at least 2 implications for the church: we must diligently teach the Truth of Scripture, and we must prayerfully share the Truth of Scripture. Local churches should repeatedly affirm the Truth of Scripture from their pulpits and in their small groups. Moreover, believers should commit to being present regularly at church. The Lifeway study showed that those who attend church once or twice a month are more likely to affirm the deity of Christ (the same is true of other basic theological issues). Not only should we attempt to teach and learn the doctrines of the faith, but we should also prayerfully share them. Note what Jesus says in verse 17.

Reread Matthew 16:17 (See Notes Box.)

Explain: Jesus had been teaching these men for a while, but instead of pointing to His great teaching skills, He points to the Father. We must depend on the Holy Spirit in our teaching and evangelism. It is only by the work of the Spirit that a believer will grow in the knowledge of Truth, and it is only through the work of the Spirit that someone will come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. As a church, we should depend on the Lord, and it is the church that Jesus turns to next.

Reread Matthew 16:18-19

Explain: These are two of the most debated verses in the Bible. What is the “rock,” and what are the “keys?” Regarding the rock, some say it is Peter himself. Others say it is Peter and the Apostles. Others think that it is the gospel message. Still others say it is Jesus Himself. Among conservative evangelicals, the last two hold sway. I would say it is the gospel concerning the Lord Jesus (in effect, combining the last two). It is on the work of Jesus and our proclamation of Jesus that He built/builds His church. From this explanation comes our understanding of the keys. The apostles, and we, have the key to heaven: the gospel message. As we share the gospel, we open the door to heaven, and as we refuse to share the gospel, we leave the door to hell wide open.

Summarize Transition: In this passage, we have a **Messianic Declaration** by Peter that makes way for the church and the advancement of the gospel. In verse 20, Jesus forbids the 12 from sharing this with the world, at least for a time. The truth is impossible to understand outside of the work of God. Those to whom they would currently share might insight a revolution against Rome. Only with the coming of the Holy Spirit could

Notes:

Matthew 16:17
Jesus responded, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven.

Matthew 16:18-19
18 And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven.”

² <https://research.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Ligonier-State-of-Theology-2025-Report.pdf> (accessed February 28, 2026) See pages 10 and 48.

widespread evangelism take place. That time is now. We should tell as many as we can about Jesus because of who Jesus is and what Jesus came to do. In the next passage, Jesus will address that issue.

2. EMBRACE HIS MISSION (MATT. 16:21-23)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 16:21-33.

Explain: Whereas before Peter had made a great Messianic Declaration, here he utters a **Devilish Denunciation** of Jesus' coming work. Only after hearing the confession of the 12 does Jesus begin to openly share with them the reason for His mission. It was not a mission to overthrow the Romans or even push aside the religious elite. Instead, it was a mission to die. From the beginning, literally from the beginning of time, the plan was for Jesus to come to earth, live a sinless life, and die as an atoning sacrifice for all mankind. He is telling the disciples, "I must go to Jerusalem, the city where those millions of atoning sacrifices have been offered, to sacrifice myself, once and for all, for millions, for the sins of my people." (Preaching, 456)

Ask: Why do you think Peter reacted so forcefully against such a thought?

Explain: In this passage, Peter is demonstrating **his overt love for Christ**. However, he also **oversteps in his relationship with Christ**. We see his love in the words he uses. He says, "Oh no, Lord!" This phrase "may be literally translated 'mercy on you,' asking God to show His mercy by preventing what Jesus had indicated was coming to pass." (ETBC, 34) It was great love, but misapplied love.

Application: We can act likewise sometimes. Our great love for our children or friends can become barrier to God's desires. Our children or friends might express a God-given call to missions. Our love for them might tempt us to discourage them from answering God's call because of the danger or the "missed opportunity" for a career. Our great love for the Lord Himself can cause us to become a stumbling block as well. We have such a great love for Him that we might be tempted to "defend" Him or fight for Him in ways that are not Christlike.

Explain: Peter's love was a problem because he did not understand Jesus' mission. Peter's actions were also a problem because he overstepped in his relationship with Christ. Peter should have just stayed in his lane. He acts here as the teacher not the student. We should remember that Peter is Christ's disciple. This means he should be learning *from* Christ, not reprimanding Christ. Peter, the disciple, did not like the plans of Jesus, whom he had just declared to be the Messiah and God Himself.

Discuss: How can we sometimes act like Peter and overstep in our relationship with the Lord?

Explain: As believers we understand that God cares for us and wants the best for us. However, when we experience a negative life experience, we are tempted to correct God and demand God tell us why He "derailed" our life. As church members, we understand that God wants the best for our church and His Kingdom. However, when God decides to shuffle the deck a little and call a preacher to another mission assignment, we are tempted to get mad at the preacher, complain to God, and declare that all is lost. Likewise, we desire God to grow the church (and thereby His Kingdom), but when He sends new people with different ideas or a new pastor with an expanded vision we reject them and God's new plans. In each of these situations

and more, we are tempted to act like Peter. And when we do, we become a stumbling block. Jesus explains in verse 23.

Reread Matthew 16:23 (See Notes Box.)

Explain: Let's see what Jesus is talking about from His perspective and then apply this to our lives.

First, Jesus reveals the **evil source of Peter's denunciation** of Jesus' plan. Jesus tells Satan, not Peter, to get behind Him. Jesus is not saying that Peter is possessed by Satan or a demon. Instead, Jesus is saying that Peter is acting like Satan. Peter is trying to dissuade Jesus from following through on the only plan that can truly free mankind from Satan. The devil had already tried this in his attack on Jesus in the wilderness. In Matthew 4:1-11, we read about Satan's trilogy of temptations. Each was designed to tempt Jesus away from the cross. At the end of the third temptation, Jesus tells Satan to "go away." Peter's denunciation of Christ's plan is indeed a Devilish Denunciation because it is the same as Satan's in the wilderness.

Second: Jesus next reveals the **great reality of the temptation** to diverge from the plan. In our translation of the Bible, He calls Peter a "hindrance." The word can also be translated "offense" (KJV), snare, or "dangerous trap" (NLT). The word can also be translated as "stumbling block." In verse 21, Jesus said that He must "go" to Jerusalem and face death. Peter's denunciation of this plan is a stumbling block on Jesus' path. Peter had gone from being a chip off the Rock to a stumbling block in just a few verses.

Third, Jesus reveals the **"reasonable rationale" behind Peter's denunciation** of His plan. He has already revealed the spiritual forces at play and the true reality of the temptation. Jesus then reveals that Peter is too focused on this world. In Peter's mind, the Messiah can't die. He has to stay around to fight the Romans, lead the church, or teach the disciples more. "The larger picture had not yet been revealed to Peter, and he was confused and overwhelmed. Peter had learned that Christ is the Son of God. But had not learned of the mystery of the cross and resurrection." (Chrysostom in ACC, 48)

Summarize and Transition: We too can act like Peter. When we focus too much on the world, we can develop "good" reasons for doing things our way instead of God's way in our personal life, our finances, and even in church life. When we do this, we can become a stumbling block to God's true plan. When we act in such a way, we are acting like the devil. In those times, we need to repent of our actions and get behind Jesus *and follow Him*.

In the next passage, Matthew is going to follow up on this account, and Jesus is going to teach His disciples and us how to truly follow Him.

3. BECOME HIS DISCIPLE (MATT. 16:24-26)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 16:24-26.

Notes:

Matthew 16:23

Jesus turned and told Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me because you're not thinking about God's concerns but human concerns."

Explain: Let's think back for a second to Jesus' initial invitation to these men. At some point early in His ministry, He called each of them to "Come follow me." He was asking them to come and be His rabbinical disciples. In the passage we read of the beginning of the lesson, Jesus asked them to reveal their understanding of His true nature—He is the Christ, the Son of God. In that moment, He was allowing them the opportunity to make a personal confession of their *belief* in Him. In this passage, after revealing more about His true mission to die for humanity, He intensifies the call. He reveals what it truly means to follow Him—not just as a Rabbi, not just as the Messiah, but the Messiah who would die for humanity. Jesus is calling them to a **New Direction**, and He gives them three requirements and three incentives.

Three Requirements: First, a follower of Jesus must deny himself. This simply means putting God's Kingdom before our own. It's a simple command, but it is not a simple act. "If we want to reach heaven, if we want to receive a crown of glory upon our heads, we must first robe ourselves with self-denial and suffering." (Preaching, 456) True suffering comes with the next requirement: take up your cross. The disciples would have immediately understood the word picture. "Anyone carrying his cross was a dead man walking. Your life as you once knew it was over." (Exalting, 220) Spurgeon couched the command in Jesus' previous explanation of His true mission to suffer and die. The preacher writes, "As our Lord, to fulfill his destiny, must sacrifice himself, so also must everyone who would be his follower." (Spurgeon, 228) We do not just passively deny ourselves; we actively die and suffer in order to follow Christ wherever He leads. That is the third requirement: follow Jesus. We might say we are followers of Jesus, but until we follow Him on the road of self-denial and suffering, we have not followed Him far enough.

Three Incentives: The first incentive is paradoxical (read verse 25) and can only be understood with a fuller understanding of the spiritual teachings of Jesus. "Throughout Matthew's Gospel, our Lord Jesus has been looking at reality in a very different way than everyone else around him." (Preaching, 455) When Jesus gives this incentive in verse 25, Peter might have been remembering his words in verse 23, "you're not thinking about God's concerns but human concerns." As followers of Jesus, we must (and I say must) take our eyes off this world (read as this life) and focus on the spiritual reality. When we do this, we will obtain true life (a life of abundance [John 10:10] **AND** a life of denial and suffering). Jesus reiterates this in His second incentive. In verse 26a (read it), Jesus contrasts the spiritual self and the temporal self. The opposite of self-denial and suffering is self-aggrandizement and accumulation. If we choose the worldly path instead of the narrow path of following Jesus, we will gain much here but lose much more in the end. This leads into the third incentive in verse 26b (read it). There is nothing in this life worth more than your soul. No car or house, no promotion and business venture, no royalty check or timber land is worth more than your soul. Jesus calls us to self-denial and suffering, and the pros far outweigh the cons.

Notes:

Denying one's self "means putting God and His kingdom priorities first." (ETBC, 35)

"As our Lord, to fulfill his destiny, must sacrifice himself, so also must everyone who would be his follower." (Spurgeon, 228)

"God's plan of salvation and sanctification has one summary command: Deny yourself!" In salvation, we deny ourselves and admit we're sinful. In sanctification, we deny ourselves and follow him daily. (cf. Preaching, 462)

Take up your cross "meant to follow Jesus wherever that may lead and no matter the consequences." (ETBC, 35)

"He told them of *his cross*; now he tells them of their own crosses." (Spurgeon, 229)

"We have cross—work to do! There is his cross *and* our cross." (Preaching, 461).

As Bonhoeffer said in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." (Preaching, 461)

"He suffered once for all, necessarily; we now suffer willingly." (Exalting, 220)

CONCLUDE

We began the lesson talking about quizzes. We do not generally take quizzes to prove our allegiance to Jesus. Nevertheless, we are tested in our allegiance. The first test relates to Jesus' identity.

- Will you make a great **Messianic Declaration**? Have you declared Jesus is the Messiah, the God who saves?

The second test relates to Jesus' Mission.

- Will you announce Jesus' plan to save the world, or will you succumb to the **Devilish Denunciation** of His plan? We announce His plan by sharing it with others. We also announce His plan by living in light of it and not standing in the way of achieving it.

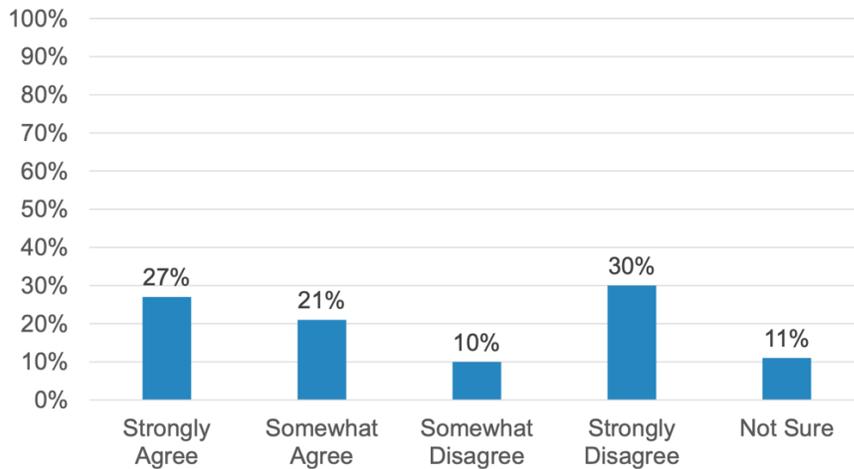
The third test relates to following Jesus.

- Will you walk in a **New Direction**? Jesus calls us to self-denial and suffering. This means giving up the treasures of this world and living in self-sacrificial dedication to Him, His plan, and His way.

Challenge your group

- To whom do you need to share the gospel this week?
- How will you support God's plan this week? In other words, how are you working to expand God's Kingdom?
- How will you walk in a New Direction this week? Do you need to give something up?

Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God.



Lifeway research

Q22_3: "For each of the following statements, please indicate your level of agreement. Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God."

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"Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God."

- Americans in the South are the most likely to Disagree (45%)
- Americans age 50-64 (48%) are more likely to Disagree than 18-34 (30%) and 65+ (41%)
- Americans in a large city (53%) or a small city (52%) are more likely to Agree than those in a suburb (46%) or a rural area (43%)
- Americans who attend a religious service at least once or twice a month are more likely to Disagree than those who do not (54% v. 30%)
- Evangelicals are the most likely to Disagree (62%)
- Americans with Evangelical Beliefs are more likely to Disagree than those without Evangelical Beliefs (68% v. 33%)

Lifeway research

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<https://research.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Ligonier-State-of-Theology-2025-Report.pdf>