

"Who Is This Guy?"
Matthew 16:13-20
Pastor Dan Erickson
May 3, 2026

Here are some questions you might want to ponder: Why is the third hand on the clock called the "second hand? Why do people sing "Take Me Out to the ballgame" when they are already there? Why does "fat chance" and "slim chance" mean the same thing? Why does "wise man" and "wise guy" mean the opposite? Why is phonics not spelled the way it sounds? And why do we press harder on the buttons of a remote control when we know the batteries are dead?

Friends, I can tell you two things... First, I don't know the answers to any of these questions. Second, it doesn't really matter. Learning why phonics doesn't start with and F would probably not improve my life in any way. There are some questions, however, to which we need to have answers.

We will be looking at a couple of them today: Who is this guy, Jesus? And why is He so important? It seems every year around Easter time, various media outlets raise these questions. I think some folks are genuinely puzzled how someone who lived on earth 2000 years ago can continue to have such a huge impact on the lives of so many.

Now, some of you know the answers to these questions, and many of the rest of you have a pretty good idea of what the answers are. However, I want all of us to focus on these questions today, either for our own benefit or so we might be better able to help others understand who Jesus was/is. Today we are going to explore Matthew 16:13-20. Here we find the Apostle Peter's conclusion about who Jesus is. Let's pause and pray the Lord will use His word to make it more clear and certain in each of our minds and hearts who Jesus really is and why that matters.

Matthew tells us about a conversation between Jesus and His disciples in Caesarea Philippi, which was located about 25 miles north of Galilee. The town was built by Phillip the Tetrach in honor of Caesar. It is there that Jesus asks His disciple this question: **Matthew 16:13b "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"**

Jesus has used the phrase, "Son of Man" often enough so that they understand He is referring to Himself. They may not have realized, however, that this title belongs to the Messiah, the one whom God would send to save His people. So, Jesus is simply asking them, "Who do people think I am? What are you hearing when you go to market or to synagogue?" It is an interesting question.

The disciples respond, **Matthew 16:14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."** These are various theories people believed about Jesus. John the Baptist, who happened to be Jesus second cousin, had been a popular religious prophet. He had gotten into trouble with King Herod Antipas, however, and if you may remember in Matthew 14, Herod has John beheaded. Apparently, rumors were circulating around Israel that this magnificent teacher, Jesus, a man who could heal the sick and perform miracles, was actually John the Baptist, who had come back to life.

Elijah was a great Old Testament prophet who had lived over 800 years earlier. According to 2 Kings 2, he never died but was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. Based upon what is written in the book of Malachi, many Jews believed Elijah would some day return to earth to announce the coming of Messiah. So, some folks thought that was what Jesus was doing, announcing that the Messiah would soon come. We should note that in Matthew 11:14 Jesus says John the Baptist was fulfilling the role of Elijah, heralding the coming of Messiah.

A third suggestion is that Jesus is kind of the reincarnation of the Old Testament Jeremiah. Apparently, His message of repentance and turning to the Lord reminded people of what Jeremiah had preached. Some folks thought He was one of the other Old Testament prophets. What seems clear is that a lot of people understand Jesus is someone very special, but they really didn't understand who He is.

Jesus then asks His disciples **Matthew 16:15** **“But who do you say that I am?”** Now the spotlight is turned onto the twelve. I suspect that when the topic was what other folks thought about Jesus, most of these guys were eager to share what they had heard.

At this point, however, I think there was some silence. It would be embarrassing to give a wrong answer about who Jesus is. But then Peter, bold and sometimes impulsive, speaks up. His answer hits the nail right on the head. **Matthew 16:16** **Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”**

“Christ” is not just Jesus’ last name, but the Greek and Latin term for Messiah, the anointed Savior and King the Jewish people were waiting for God to send. It would be appropriate for us to say, “Jesus the Christ.”

Peter says two important things as he answers Jesus’ question: First, “Jesus, I believe you are the Messiah. Many people think you are preparing the way for Messiah, but I know you are the one.” Second, Peter says, “Jesus you are ‘the Son of the living God.’” Now, I am not sure he understood that Jesus was the eternal Son of God at this point, the second person of the divine trinity. Yet he certainly knows that Jesus has a unique relationship with God the Father that no one else ever had he could see that Jesus and the Father were very close.

We know Peter’s answer hits the nail squarely because of Jesus’ response. **Matthew 16:17** **And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! (That is his last name, son of Johan, Jonahson) for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.** This is one of the many places that the Bible reminds us that spiritual truth cannot really be grasped with our natural intelligence. Peter does not figure out who Jesus is because he is smarter, more righteous, or more willing to believe than other people. He figured it out because God graciously revealed the truth to him. By the grace of God, Peter knows who Jesus is.

The next two verses are the subject of much debate. They raise this question: Is Peter, as an individual, the foundation of the church? **Matthew 16:18** **And I tell you, you are Peter,**

and on this rock (the name Peter means rock) I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Now, we are not going to spend a lot of time analyzing this verse. However, I will say I think both the traditional Roman Catholic and traditional Protestant interpretations have kind of missed the mark. Protestants, for example, have claimed that the rock upon which Jesus promised to build His church meant Peter’s confession of Jesus as Messiah. That may be stretching what the verse actually says and ignores the key role Peter did play in the early Christian church.

Ephesians 2:20 tells us the church is **built on the foundation of the apostle and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.** In the book of Acts, Peter, more than anyone else, is the individual the Lord uses to begin His church. At the same time nothing in this passage or anywhere else in the New Testament teaches Peter was infallible or had exclusive authority in the church. Paul’s rebuke of Peter in Galatians 2 makes both those things clear. Nor is there any indication that Peter’s successors would somehow inherit his role as the church’s foundation, as the Roman Catholic church teaches. After Peter’s death the man the church in Rome certainly may equal to the apostle John.

Jesus’ next words to Peter have been debated as well. **Matthew 16:19** **I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.** I believe “the keys of the kingdom” involves preaching the gospel. Hearing and responding to that message is what enables people to enter God’s kingdom. In the early chapters of Acts, Peter is indeed the primary preacher of the gospel. Thousands of people became believers and enter God’s kingdom through his message.

But the other apostles, especially Paul, and really anyone else over the centuries who proclaims the great news of Jesus, has the keys of the kingdom. The binding and loosing to which Jesus refers likely means the authority Peter, the apostles, and the leaders of any congregation have to exercise church discipline when the beliefs and actions of professing Christians within a church are contrary

to what the Bible teaches. Okay, these are worthwhile topics, but not our focus today.

Let's go back to our big question. Who is Jesus? As in Jesus' day, there are a lot of different opinions on the internet about the identity of this person that we base our calendar upon. Yes, the year 2026 means 2 thousand and 26 years since the birth of Jesus Christ.

About 20 years ago my mom watched a TV special hosted by Peter Jennings entitled, "The Search for Jesus." I remember she called me and asked, "Where do people get these goofy ideas?" Well, let me explain what happens.

For the last 100 plus years, many in academic circles have claimed that the real Jesus, the one who actually lived in the first century Israel, is quite different from the Jesus portrayed in the New Testament and worshipped by the Christian church for 2000 year. Today most Bible scholars reject this idea, but because these are seen new and innovative theories, they often get a lot of publicity in the media.

That was true a few years ago of a group known as "the Jesus Seminar." These were scholars, theological liberals, who sought to determine what Jesus really said and did. They don't believe the New Testament provides an accurate account, so they obviously don't believe the Bible is the Word of God. Instead, they think the early Christians wrote the New Testament and depicted Jesus, not as He really was, but as who they would have liked Him to be. They claim the early church made up things about Jesus so others would be more likely to join their religion.

Basically, there are all sorts of problems with the methods, logic and conclusions of the Jesus Seminary. Most people saw through the communist propaganda and people would have seen through the propaganda of the early church, if that is all it was. What is interesting, however, is that folks who toss aside the Jesus described in the Bible, in search of "the real Jesus" almost always end up finding a Jesus that makes them feel more comfortable. As someone said, these folks keep digging until they hit a pool of water and then see a reflection of themselves and decided, "Look, it's Jesus."

In the early 1900's New Testament scholars who believed in progressive social reform searched for the historical Jesus, and surprise, found that Jesus was actually a progressive social reformer. The conclusion of the Jesus Seminar is "the real Jesus" was "an iterant sage with a good sense of humor." Many of those folks would like to describe themselves that way. Today, so called "queer scholars" have discovered that Jesus was really a homosexual. So rather than the early Christians creating Jesus as they wanted Him to be, it appears it is the so-called scholars who ignore the real Jesus, the one who is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and create an imaginary Jesus in their imagination.

I am convinced an honest look at the evidence will conclude that the New Testament provides a very accurate and reliable account of Jesus' life. Sir William Ramsay, a premier archaeologist of the 20th century once said, *"I set out to disprove the historical reliability of the Gospels. But as I made many archeological trips, I discovered that, one after another, their historical statements proved accurate."* In recent years authors like Lee Strobel, Josh McDowell or Wes Huff have done great jobs explaining how the evidence is overwhelming that the four gospels are accurate records of Jesus' life.

Even if you don't believe the gospel account are necessarily the inspired Word of God, but realize they are essentially accurate, then you are left with what is call the Christian trilemma. C.S. Lewis puts it this way: *"I am trying to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people say about Him. 'I am ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of that Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level of a man who says he is a poached egg—or else He would be the devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit on Him and kill Him as a demon, or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."*

Who is this Jesus? No, He is not a great teacher, social reformer, or sage with a good sense of

humor as some claim. Was Jesus a lunatic? Was He just a man who truly, but mistakenly though He was God? I don't think so. When we see how Jesus dealt with people and handled Himself in all sorts of very difficult situation, I would say one would have to be nuts to think Jesus is a nut.

Was Jesus an evil liar, the world's greatest con man? Was He an ordinary guy who decided to deceive people and trick them into thinking He was God? Were all His miracles just magic tricks. Was the empty tomb just a "Harry Hourdini" act of some type? I don't think so. When we look at Jesus' teachings, how He treated others, and how He was willing to suffer and die for His beliefs, it is hard to believe He was anything but totally sincere and honest.

Who is Jesus? There is every reason to believe He is exactly who Peter said: the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. There is every reason to believe He is exactly who the Bible and the Christian church proclaim Him to be: the eternal Son of God, who came to earth, died on the cross, and rose from the dead to be our Savior. There is every reason to believe He is today, right now, at the right hand of God the Father, interceding for us as we pray, and that one day He will return to earth and will then reign for eternity as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

But the question remains for each of us. Who do you say Jesus is? Many people today have some very honest doubts about whether what the Bible says about Jesus is true. If you are in that boat, I hope what I have said today is helpful to you. If you know other people with honest doubts, I hope what I have said will enable you to answer some of their questions and cause them to think more seriously about Jesus.

Most of you, however, already believed what I have said before you got to church this morning. Many of you have believed these things for a long time. There is no doubt in your mind that Jesus is the Messiah, the eternal Son of God. who was born of the Virgin Mary, died on the cross as a sacrifice for sin, rose from the dead three days later, ascended to heaven and will one day come again. You believe those to be facts.

And yet, my fear is that for some of you, that is all they are-just facts. Facts that you believe in your

head, but facts that have little impact on how you feel in your heart or on how you live. My fear is some of you believe in Jesus in the same way you believe in George Washington. You believe George Washington was the first president of our country. You believe he led the continental army. You know about him crossing the Delaware and praying at Valley Forge. You believe he was married to Marth and lived at Mount Vernon. You may even think he was our greatest president and are glad his likeness is on Mount Rushmore.

But even if you believe those things about Washington, my guess is that you have probably not thought about him all week. Maybe you have not thought about him in many weeks. To say George Washington was America's greatest president probably doesn't change one's life in the slightest.

But it is much different when you confess with Peter, "Jesus, you are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God." To believe that is what the Bible calls faith in Jesus Christ. That faith changes not only what you think but how you feel and how you live.

Maybe this illustration will help. Believing George Washington was a great man when you live in Minnesota in 2026 doesn't change your life much. But if you really believed George Washington was a great man and you lived in Pennsylvania 250 years ago, 1776 that would impact your life. You would become a patriot and do all you could to help the cause of the continental army. And friends, if you really believe in Jesus Christs, not just believe about Him, but believe in Him, you will strive, by the grace of God. through the Holy Spirit, to live in a way that honors Him and serves His kingdom.

Friends, who do you say Jesus is? Th question is not who your friends say He is, not who your parents say He is, not who other people in the church say He is, but who do You day He is? Do you believe He is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God? Have you embraced Him as your Savior and Lord? Are you trusting in Him today? Are you trusting Him to forgive your sin, free you from its power, and enable you to conquer death, escape hell, and enter God's kingdom?

Are you trusting Him to help you deal with the difficult situations you face in life right now? Are you trusting Him to help you deal with your illness, financial problems, a stressful situation at school or work, a difficult marriage, or a battle with depression? Are you trusting Him? If so, great, praise God! If not, or if you are not sure, I encourage you to turn to Him today. But, that question: "Am I trusting in Jesus Christ?" is just about the most important question you will ever answer.