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RUF Bible Study – The Gospel According to Peter
Sept. 13, 2006
Who Am I? – Matt. 16:13-23

13When Jesus arrived in the villages of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "What are people saying about who the Son of Man is?"

14They replied, "Some think he is John the Baptizer, some say Elijah, some Jeremiah or one of the other prophets."

15He pressed them, "And how about you? Who do you say I am?"

16Simon Peter said, "You're the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

17-18Jesus came back, "God bless you, Simon, son of Jonah! You didn't get that answer out of books or from teachers. My Father in heaven, God himself, let you in on this secret of who I really am. And now I'm going to tell you who you are, really are. You are Peter, a rock. This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out.

19"And that's not all. You will have complete and free access to God's kingdom, keys to open any and every door: no more barriers between heaven and earth, earth and heaven. A yes on earth is yes in heaven. A no on earth is no in heaven."

20He swore the disciples to secrecy. He made them promise they would tell no one that he was the Messiah.

At the beginning of the movie and book “The Bourne Identity”, the main character is knocked unconscious and wakes up not knowing who he is. He can only remember the bank and bank number in Switzerland, so he goes there to see what is in the lockbox. The movie slows down, as each step he is allowed to go further into the back, even though he couldn't have told anyone his name.

He gets his box, opens it, and sees his passport. He says to himself, “My name is Jason Bourne. I live in Paris.” He now knows who he is.

Amnesia is never a good fiction device, so steer clear of it, but it illustrates the point for us tonight. Knowing who you are is essential to life. And I would contend that it is the premiere, quintessential question of your twenties.²

The question tonight is Who Are You? I want to contend tonight that there are three ways that you are able to define yourself. I'll mention two of those now, but it's the other one I want to concentrate on. One of the ways you figure out who you are is thinking through your circumstances. Who your parents are, what experiences you've been through, your gifts and talents, your passions – these things come together to inform you of and about yourself. The more insightful you are about these things the better.

You can also know yourself by yourself. I mean that you can decide who and how you want to be. You can be depressed or happy, go to the movies or not, break up or get married. You can decide your future to a large degree. You have the ability to make yourself in many areas. Who do you want to be? What kind of person do you project yourself to be in the future? Are you progressing toward that sort of person now?

The third thing that makes you is people. People like your friends and family. This is similar to experiences, but also different because people can change throughout your life, and they can speak truth (or lies) into your life. This is what we'll mostly be talking about tonight – the impact of community on your life, the making and shaping you that your friends have on you and who you are.

Peter Defines Jesus

First we'll look at Peter defining Jesus. We're near the chronological end of the story here. Peter and Jesus have been friends for two years, and only six months more time lies ahead until the cross. Can you imagine being together with someone almost every day for two years? You'd think, with all that time and all those experiences, the disciples would understand him by now. But let's give them credit that Jesus was a fairly complicated person to understand.

In our passage, the context of this conversation is a very religious region, Caesarea Philippi. This city was obviously named for Augustus Caesar, who was considered a god by the Romans, and this town was in the center of all

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For this series, I used commentaries all throughout the gospels. I also used as my base text Michael Card's book, The Fragile Stone. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

² (okay, so I'll admit that I wrote a book about it - *TwentySomeone*).

sorts of other pagan gods. It was an interesting place to ask a question of the identity of Jesus, perhaps similar to asking it right here in the middle of the university.

Jesus asks the question, "Who do the people say that I am?" That's a good question, and you might use it's form when you want to know things. He is distancing the answer from the people speaking. What do *they* say?

It's insightful to see what the people thought, to hear the wrong answers from the general population.

Jesus was thought to be:

John the Baptist – this is what Herod thought, but they were contemporaries, so that is impossible. But think about the amazingness of this statement. Jesus was thought to be someone raised from the dead. Uh...it seems that people at least knew that he wasn't an ordinary person.

Elijah – this idea is legitimate and comes from a close reading of Malachi 4:5, but Jesus had said that John the Baptist was the new Elijah. So that is out by Jesus' own testimony.

Jeremiah or some other prophet – this is a general comment of confusion.

What might we say *they* say?

Jesus was a good moral teacher who died a normal death on a cross and inspired a lot of people. I would say this is the most common thinking around today. Jesus is appreciated as a historical figure who said some interesting things, but so much was attached to him that we cannot really know much about who he really is. But we know this for sure – he certainly wasn't God in the flesh, didn't do miracles and didn't raise from the dead. People who think he did all that are entitled to their opinion, but it is pretty narrow-minded, backward and intellectually unsophisticated to do so.

Other options might be: Jesus was a prophet. Jesus was a god and we can all become gods like him. Jesus was made up.

Jesus may give an "Interesting, hm," pause here, but it seems that his next question is the one he really wants to ask. He goes from the people out there to the people in here question. But what about you? Who do you say that I am?

Now, just imagine if no one says anything. Talk about your potential awkward silences. But Peter speaks up. He bold says, "*You're the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*"

Peter is thinking:

1. Jesus does things, and combines character qualities, that have never appeared in a human being.
2. His miracles have a breadth (power over sickness, nature, demons - nothing is way beyond him) and simplicity (he does them effortlessly) that's startling.
3. He forgives sins (Mark 2:1-12 - the story of the paralytic who came through the roof).
4. He never apologizes. Even though he gives clear instructions for us to look first at our own hearts in a conflict, he never does so himself.
5. He never asks for advice - not once.
6. He's his own authority.

He doesn't quote other famous rabbis. This is probably one of the reasons the Pharisees were always asking for a sign.

He amends the words of Moses and gives his own words on the same status as the rest of the Old Testament Scriptures (See the Sermon on the Mount).

He says 'amen' before he starts talking. James Edwards writes:

A clue to Jesus' divine self-disclosure is his use of amen. The Old Testament prophet prefaced his pronouncements with, "Thus saith the Lord" as a guarantee of Yahweh's authority. Jesus, however assumes that authority himself, solemnly pronouncing, "Truly [amen] I say to you." Where the prophet invoked the name of God, Jesus substitutes his own authority, putting himself on a divine level. Amen was customarily used in Judaism as a concluding prayer response. Jesus however, uses it as an introductory formula, and this is without parallel in the New Testament or in Jewish literature. Jesus' prominent and unusual use of amen clearly intends to attribute to his words divine authority and is a provocative clue that his pronouncements are the pronouncements of God."

7. He accepts worship.³

With all that in mind, Peter goes for it, saying "*You're the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*" Jesus is God. Whoa, for a monotheist, that is a huge thing to say and to do so in front of other people takes some guts. Soren Kirkegaard says, "In order to fully understand what it means to be a Christian, you must stand in a crowd, point to the man and say, 'He is God.'"

This is an amazing moment. What would you say. Would you dare to define Jesus in a crowd? Do you think he is the Messiah, the Son of God, the Christ? Is he all man and all God, one person with two distinct natures? Was he born of a virgin, did miracles, saves sinners, resurrected on the third day and will come again to judge the living and the dead? Or was he a prophet, the very thing the disciples would have most likely first thought?

What do you think? Anglican priest William Haslam was preaching on this text, explaining to his congregation the different views the Jews would have had about Jesus and what Peter would have meant by his confession, when it occurred to him that he had never really believed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God. "And as he spoke

³ This list is from *Learning to Love Like Jesus* by Paul Miller.

his heart was warmed and flooded with a new and living faith in Christ. He was thereafter known as the parson converted by his own sermon.⁷⁴

Might your heart be warmed and flooded by this revealed truth today?

Jesus Defines Peter

Now Jesus tells Peter who Peter really is. 17-18 *Jesus came back, "God bless you, Simon, son of Jonah! You didn't get that answer out of books or from teachers. My Father in heaven, God himself, let you in on this secret of who I really am. And now I'm going to tell you who you are, really are. You are Peter, a rock. This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out.*

19 *"And that's not all. You will have complete and free access to God's kingdom, keys to open any and every door: no more barriers between heaven and earth, earth and heaven. A yes on earth is yes in heaven. A no on earth is no in heaven."*

Jesus immediately blesses Peter, calling him by his given name, Simon bar Jonah, Simon Johnson as we would say it. Jesus blesses Peter for his answer, for his confession. Human wisdom offered a list of confusing choices, but God revealed himself to Peter. God would have to reveal the truth for him to get it right. This isn't an achievement by Peter, but an act of God. This is a strongly predestinarian statement – God told you the right answer, and you are blessed because of it.

He has already given Peter the name the first time they had met, but now he explains it, gives it a fuller meaning. His name, the Rock has a meaning of primacy. Peter was the first one (New Testamentally) to confess that Jesus is God. I don't think this is a title of supremacy. In fact, in just the next moment Peter will really mess up and Jesus will say, "Get behind me Satan." Not good. But Peter is the rock, and Jesus is building his church.

Jesus is building his church not on personalities, not on tremendous insight, but by God's grace it being revealed to people like Peter, people given the faith and grace to see Jesus.

So Peter's friend Jesus is telling Peter who he is. He is blessed to have been shown by God the true nature of his friend, Jesus. He is to be a Rock upon which the church is to be built. He is given a task to hold truth to the faith, to build the church and to battle against the devil and to win.

Jesus Defines the Church

I was tempted to skip over this but it's just too important. Jesus defines Peter, and he gives him the task of loving, caring for and leading the church. He gives him the keys of the kingdom, meaning that Peter is to have entrusted to him the keys by the owner of the palace. When you have keys, you have access. You can let people in or keep people out, depending on not your whims but on the instructions of the master. The church, exercising its Christ-given authority, will determine who belongs and who does not to the people of God. The idea is not that the apostles will be determining the policies of heaven, but that they will be carrying out heaven's will.

So Peter is given the keys to the kingdom. Later Jesus extends this to all the disciples in Matt. 18:18. And in his own writing Peter in 1 Peter 2:4-5 says we are all stones in the spiritual temple of God. Again, not supremacy but primacy. His "rock" status isn't exclusive; it's inclusive. Peter isn't the first pope, he's the first among equals.

And look at the promise given to Peter here. *This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out.*

A few brief thoughts. The first is that when this promise is given there really is no empirical evidence to believe it. Jesus is talking to just a few men, and they are men of no influence whatsoever. He has the Jews *and* the Romans against him. When he dies, he won't have many more followers than he does now. And yet – yet the church grows and grows and grows. Look around and you won't always feel that way, will you? You start to wonder sometimes if hell is winning. Terrible things happen. Sin and death are all around us. We hurt others and others hurt us.

The implication in these verses by Jesus is that we are not seeing the true story. In fact, he says that the church is on the offensive, not the defensive. We are storming the gates of hell and those gates cannot hold up. I have pictured in my mind the gates at Mordor in *Lord of the Rings*, those terrible walls surrounding the evil city with its wicked master. We seem small, but we shall prevail. Do you believe that?

Let me remind you of just two small stories. The first is to remember that Christianity spread out of Jerusalem, and had reached all the way to China by the seventh century. However it was banned by the emperor and by the tenth century no Christians remained. The gospel advance, the church was formed, and it all disappeared.

This is the pattern that many have expected. Voltaire predicted in the 1700s that in a hundred years the Bible would be a forgotten book. As late as 1822, Thomas Jefferson predicted that every young man then alive would die a Unitarian.

History has proved them wrong. In fact, in China today there are millions upon millions of Christians.

Even only 50 years ago in Christians numbered in the single digits in Nepal. Now there are over 400,000, all first generation, and there is an incredible missionary zeal there, despite opposition and persecution in an officially Hindu country.

⁴ From Dr. Rayburn's sermon on this text from www.faithtacoma.org.

God is at work! Flesh and blood did not reveal this to these people, but God opened their hearts and minds, and has added them to the church.

The church, sure flawed and sinful as it is, is God's agent for change in the world. Do you believe that? Do you pray for the church? Are you active with your gifts, your presence, your time, your money, your passions in the church? 75% of the church is neither white nor western. It is growing. God is at work, bringing men and women to faith in Christ.⁵

Jesus Defines You

This last point is one of application. Peter tells Jesus who he is, although Jesus already knew. Jesus tells Peter who he is, and he receives clarity and purpose. Jesus is the Solid Rock, and Peter is the fragile stone.⁶ Best friends help define each other. They remind each other of who they are, of what they stand for.

You need friends like this, friends who try to reflect the truth in one another. Friends who you can call and say, "Who am I?" and they will have a coherent real answer. Sometimes I call some friends and say, "Okay, what is it that we're doing again? Remind me why I'm a Christian, a pastor, a husband, a father. Remind me why I believe all of this." And they do that for me. They tell me who I am.

Do you have friends like that? Do your friends remind you of who you are really, or do they tell you that you are pretty, smart, likeable, wealthy, a partier, a... what?

Peter tells you in his writing that you are strangers, a royal priesthood, God's elect. We also know, let me be your friend and remind you that if you are a Christian you are sinners, saved by Grace, justified, child of God, Christian, beloved, Son, Daughter of the King, saint...

We need to ask the question, for it's a good one, "Who do you say he is?" Is Jesus your friend?

But then we also turn to ask the other question, "How does *he* define *you*?" CS Lewis asks this same question (much better than I can) in an essay in *God in the Dock*: "What are we to make of Jesus Christ? This is a question which has, in a sense, a frantically comic side. For the real question is not what are we to make of Christ, but what is He to make of us? The picture of a fly sitting deciding what it is going to make of an elephant has comic elements about it."

This man was a real person, and if we honestly grapple with him, then we are forced, I think, to come to a radical conclusion – he is the Son of God. And from that, we are thrown for a loop, for if he is the Son of God, suddenly he is extremely important. And he sets the agenda.

Who does *he* say *you* are? I'll bet some of you have known Jesus for a long time, maybe some of you for all your lives. That's great. But if you've known Jesus for awhile, how has your friendship changed? Has it? Have you learned anything new about your friend lately? Is he stuck, frozen for you? After all, he is the Son of God, and that certainly isn't an idea that has been exhausted yet has it?

What are you hearing him tell you about yourself? I would encourage you to allow Jesus to define who you are. That you make friends who will you support you when you're lost and confused because they are being defined by Jesus. There are so many other places to go for our identity, but none of these people and places cares for you like Christ does. Is he your personhood dictionary?

In Rev. 2:17 we read, *To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.*'

I don't really know what all that means, but it sounds like we're each going to get a rock, and we're all going to have new names. Like Simon to Peter. Like children of wrath to children of God. It sounds like becoming a new creation, the old is gone, the new has come. It sounds like your heart being turned from stone to flesh. It sounds like being adopted by new parents, going from an orphan to a loved son or daughter. It sounds like a bride coming down the aisle to give up her name and take that of her groom.

What name will be written on your rock?

I ask you, Who are you?

⁵ Many of these thoughts come from Pastor Rob Rayburn's sermon on this text from faithtacoma.org

⁶ This terminology comes from Michael Card's book by the same title.