

“The Church; The Hope of the World”
Matthew 16:13-20
Dr. Rob Pacienza
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Words do not do justice to how we felt about Harry Reeder. He was my hero and as he would say, ‘you can’t have a hero until they go into glory’ and we have not only seen him live, but we have seen him die well and finish the race well. I remember the first time hearing him and it was Harry’s first Sunday as the senior pastor of this church. I was captivated. I didn’t know if I was listening to Winston Churchill or Jonathan Edwards. Here was this man with his presence and bold preaching, I couldn’t get enough; I was coming back on Sunday evening, going down to the Mountain Brook Inn and hearing him do his men’s Bible study in the bar, hearing him do his lectures on gods and generals and in the movie theater, hearing about a campus outreach event. But I knew this was a man that I wanted to emulate. I knew this was a man that I could look up to as a father of the faith.

My wife asked me a few weeks ago, ‘Why are you so sad with Harry’s passing? Explain to me the sadness your feeling.’ I said, “This isn’t just an ordinary loss. It was like Dad was gone. I knew if Harry Reeder was in the fight, we were going to be okay. Now Dad’s gone, a father to me.” But rest assured, as we were sitting there in General Assembly this past week in Memphis, that your pastor’s labors were not in vain, that this church’s labors were not in vain. I left General Assembly more encouraged about our denomination than ever before, and it was because of men like Harry Reeder, who fought and contended for the faith against progressive Christianity. So, we honor his legacy but we remember you, Briarwood and the Reeder family in the days and weeks and the months ahead. I believe that God has amazing plans in store for this church but in your season of lament and loss, know that we love you and that we are behind you. We are here. We stand with you as you move forward by faith.

In this study we turn our attention to Matthew 16, a familiar passage for many of you. It’s the encounter of Jesus and the Apostle Peter in a message I have entitled The Church; The Hope of the World. Your pastor loved the church and so we turn our attention to the first mention of the church in the Bible. Matthew 16 is an encounter between Jesus and Peter at Caesarea Philippi, that great Greco-Roman city just to the north of the Sea of Galilee.

Matthew 16:13-20 says [13] *Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” [14] And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” [15] He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” [16] Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” [17] And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. [18] And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. [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.” [20] Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.*

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of our Lord stands forever. Amen.

How would you describe the church today? Or how would you describe the culture’s view of our church? Is it highly regarded when you turn on mainstream media, when you think of our government’s view of the church? It’s not so highly regarded, is it? It seems like as we look outside, we see the way the world is going and we think about our cultural moment, we

might be tempted to think that the church is no longer relevant. We might be tempted to think that the church is losing because the church is not held in high esteem. I'll tell you one person who holds the church in the highest regard and hasn't given up on the church, His name is Jesus Christ.

It is here 2000 years ago in Jesus' encounter with Peter that establishes the beauty and the glory of the Church of Jesus Christ. For 2000 years, the church has been regarded as the hope of the world. I want us to look at Matthew 16 together as we are reminded and reoriented concerning the power, beauty, glory and the hope of the Church of Jesus Christ. I want us to remember that the church is built upon a definitive statement. Secondly, that the church will prevail against darkness and lastly, that the church is given authority and power.

Why is the church considered the hope of the world? First, we need to see in Matthew 16 that the church is built upon a definitive statement. In Matthew 16:15-17 we hear the definitive statement of the Apostle Peter that 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' To set the context, Jesus has been teaching, preaching and performing miracles and the Name and ministry of Jesus is gaining a lot of attention and traction. There's a lot of buzz around the ministry of Jesus Christ.

As Jesus encounters Peter here He wants to ask this question. He says "I hear that many people are talking about Me, but Peter, what are they saying? Who do men say that I am?" And Peter answers, 'Some say Jeremiah and some say John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets.' Then Jesus takes it a step further and as He digs a little deeper and says, "But Peter, I want to know, who do you say that I am?" Peter answers with that glorious, definitive statement by saying "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Note that Peter doesn't say 'I think you're the Christ.' Note that Peter also doesn't say, 'Well, you are the Christ to us.' As often they say today in popular culture, what's true for you is not necessarily true for me, but he says definitively, without a shadow of a doubt, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'

What is so significant about that encounter with Jesus is Jesus doesn't correct him. You might be thinking, 'Pastor, why is that significant?' No other founder of any other world religion claims to be God. Any other founder of any other world religion would have stopped Peter and said, 'No, I am not the Christ the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' Every other founder except for one, Jesus Christ. Because Jesus didn't correct Peter it was Jesus affirming that this is true – I, alone am the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

How did Peter arrive at this profession? How come everybody didn't acknowledge Christ as Lord? How come everybody in your life, your family members and friends and neighbors, don't acknowledge Christ as Lord? We are told in Matthew 16:17 why [17] *And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.* This is so important because for centuries the Roman church has built the erroneous doctrine of the Roman papacy, teaching that the papacy or the Pope, that the doctrine of the office of the papacy was established here in Matthew 16 with Peter being the first pope. But what Jesus is revealing in verse 17 is that there's nothing special about Peter. It's not your flesh and blood, Peter, that revealed this to you. What Jesus is saying is you're just a man, that there's nothing significant about the flesh and blood of Peter. It wasn't Peter's intellect, it wasn't his competency, it wasn't his power or his strength, but it was the Father in heaven that revealed this to him.

If you're reading this today and you're a Christian, it's not because of your flesh and blood. It is because God, through His divine providence and His sovereign grace, has opened up your eyes and has softened your heart and has brought you sovereignly from death to life. You

contributed nothing to your salvation and you contributed nothing to acknowledging Jesus is Lord. Jesus has been building His church not on the competency or strength of men or women, but building His church on the profession of men and women who acknowledge Him as Lord and Savior. This is the central doctrine of the church, the doctrine of justification by faith alone. There's a lot of people that come to church on Sunday morning, a lot of flesh and blood that come and they practice religion, but only those that have their eyes opened and their hearts softened and are brought from death to life through the sovereign grace and mercy of God can actually acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and that is what Jesus builds His church upon.

Two years ago, at Easter, somebody came up to me in our church and said, "It must be hard on an Easter Sunday to try to convince people to believe in Jesus Christ." I stopped him and said, 'I don't have to do any of the convincing. It is my job to preach the Word faithfully and allow God and His sovereign mercy to do what only He can do.' So I ask you today, who do you say that He is? The church is built upon the most definitive statement, the first creed of the church – Christ is Lord.

The second thing I want us to see and understanding the church is the hope of the world, is that the church will prevail against darkness. We read this in Matthew 16:18. Peter is the first convert. They have one. But how in the world would one turn into ten, into a 100, into a thousand and eventually reach the far corners of the world? The operative word is *build* in verse 18 when Jesus says, 'I will build My church' from every tongue tried and nation. The most devout throughout church history have at times doubted the promises of God. The most devout have questioned the promises of God. Many, even today, are disillusioned by the church and full of despair. And we need to cling to this promise in the 21st century that no matter how dark it gets out there, Christ will build whose church? His church – My (Jesus') church. Not yours or my church but the church of Jesus Christ. Jesus makes this promise. It's His church, His family, His bride. What's the character of this church? The character of this church is that even the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

A few months ago, I had the privilege of leading a tour through the Holy Land. As many of you have through this church, and in Caesarea Philippi for those that have been there, that great Greco-Roman city, there is literally a cave known as the Gates of hell, full of shrines to the idols and the gods of the underworld. In that cave, men and women would offer their children as a sacrifice to appease the gods of the world and of the underworld. It was in this place, you could picture the setting, in front of what the Romans thought were the gates of hell that Jesus makes this bold declaration to Peter that even where the masses gather here to sacrifice their children and to appease the Roman gods and the idols of this culture, even these gates of hell will not prevail against the Church of Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, we are the prevailing church. We are the church that prevails even against the gates of hell and hell cannot stand the power of Christ's Church because Satan knows that this church of Jesus Christ that was established 2000 years ago through the blood and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, will not be defeated. The Church of Jesus Christ is Satan's worst nightmare, and we need to believe it to be true yet again in the 21st century. I don't need to tell you here at Briarwood, for you not only had a pastor, but you had a historian here in this pulpit that would often talk about 2000 years of historical precedent of Christians standing in the gap and standing firm and transforming culture and being a lighthouse in the midst of darkness, that if it was not for the Church of Jesus Christ over 2000 years, Western civilization would be unrecognizable. Why? It is because we are the prevailing church that prevails against darkness

and even the gates of hell. The church is built upon a definitive statement – Christ is Lord. The church prevails against darkness, even the gates of hell.

Third and lastly, the church is given authority and power. We read about this authority in power in Matthew 16:19 which says *[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.* Jesus is basically saying, ‘Peter, I’m giving the church the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven.’ In the ancient world keys represented authority and power. If you would like to get into my office at Coral Ridge, you can’t unless you have the keys. What Peter receives there and what the church receives is absolutely profound – that you are given and entrusted with the very keys to the Kingdom of Heaven that men, women, boys and girls can only get into heaven through the keys.

What are the keys? They are the Word of God, the Gospel of Jesus Christ and so what Jesus does is He by His grace and according to His mercy entrusts us with the keys, the Gospel, the Word of God to steward faithfully and oh, how this church has stewarded the Word of God faithfully from generation to generation. This alone is what gives the church power not winsome words, not a watered-down message, but the bold preaching of the whole council of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ alone has given the church from one generation to the next real authority and real power. Unfortunately, we have pastors and churches that are drifting doctrinally that instead of preaching the Word of God in season and out of season, are looking to the philosophies of this world, the traditions of man, instead of boldly preaching the Word of God and declaring it as truth, not only in private but in public. It is the sufficiency and authority of God’s Word, which is our only hope in a lost and dying world.

May we as a congregation recommit ourselves to bringing this truth and this power, because it’s the only power that will transform people, marriages, children, nations and cultures. Because Jesus has given the church the keys of authority and power. It means you don’t need your Bible and your horoscope. It means you don’t need your Bible and People magazine. It means you don’t need your Bible and a liberal college professor. And you certainly don’t need your Bible and a social media influencer. You need the Word of God alone. This is our hope, and this is what we stand firmly upon as our rock for the past 2000 years under the authority and power of God’s Word, assaulting the very gates of hell.

Over 2000 years ago, Jesus asked Peter a most poignant question, a most decisive matter for Peter in that moment – who do you say that I am? But it’s a most decisive matter for you today and if there is anyone reading this now that has never been brought to the place in their life where they have been able to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, today is your day. Today is a day of salvation. There are many decisive matters in life, but there is no more decisive matter in life than to answer the question, who do you say Christ is? If you’re a teenager or a college student, there will be many decisive matters throughout your life – who you marry, where you go to college, what your vocation will be, but there will be no more decisive matter than answering the question, who do you say Christ is?

The offer of the Gospel is this; that by faith alone you can become a follower of Jesus Christ simply by repenting and believing, repenting of your self-sovereignty, your self-sufficiency and your self-righteousness, and recognizing that on the cross, our unrighteousness was cast upon Jesus so that God, the Father looked at Jesus who was pure, holy and blameless and because our unrighteousness fell on Jesus, God the Father treats Jesus as if He were us. And by faith alone, God the Father treats us as if we were Jesus. That is double imputation in the

miracle of the Gospel. And today is the day of salvation to repent, believe and to confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and to believe it in your heart that God raised Him from the dead. You will be saved. Put your faith in Jesus and be saved and reconciled to God and be a part of the Church of Jesus Christ. The greatest movement this world has ever seen.

It was the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia and one afternoon, as the delegates were busy at work at their desk, a storm rolled in. Some said it was the second coming of Jesus, an apocalyptic storm. As many were running for safety and shelter, one delegate remained at his desk and all of his friends were saying, 'run for safety, run for cover for it's as if Jesus is returning.' The delegate who remained at his desk said, "If Jesus is certainly returning, I want Him to find me right here at work at my post, at my desk."

Brothers and sisters, that's the Church of Jesus Christ. We don't leave our desk and we do not move from our post. It doesn't matter how dark it is out there. It doesn't matter how hard the cultural winds are blowing. We do not leave our desk until the Lord returns. Every Lord's Day we gather and we gather to celebrate but once we leave those doors, we take that celebration with us and we march that celebration right past the gates of hell. We do this because the Church of Jesus Christ is the salt of the earth, the light of the world and a city on a hill that is the only hope for a lost and dying world.

It is my prayer that in a season of lament and loss, that you would not give up on the promises of God for His church, that He continues to build it, He continues to fight your fight and fight our battles, and that He will lead us forward by faith because we know how the story ends and we bring that story of the end into our presence and we are a healing balm to a world that desperately needs the Good News of the Kingdom of God. So how about this week? Let's march the celebration right past the gates of hell and bring real hope and real promise and real joy and salvation to a world that is lost, dying and broken. Why? It is because we have the keys. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Our Father and our God, we are so grateful for the Word of God and the promise of the Church of Jesus Christ and may we not, by the lie, the lie of the evil one that the church is losing, that the church is irrelevant, and that somehow in order to regain its relevance, we need to change our message or change our mission. May never be said of this church or the churches in our denomination that we have drifted from the only real authority and power which is found alone in the Word of God. I thank you for the steadfastness of Dr. Harry Reeder, the steadfastness of Briarwood Presbyterian Church. Lord, we pray Your abundant blessing upon the Reeder family, upon the elders and deacons, pastors and staff, and this sweet congregation that they would be able to say from generation to generation that they remained steadfast because they knew the One who was steadfast for them. If there is anyone reading this today that has never acknowledged Jesus Christ as Lord, may they surrender today and place their faith in you. Repent and believe and be saved and experience life to the full, both now and forevermore, realizing that if Jesus Christ is Lord, there is no neutrality. We either embrace Him or reject Him. May this be a day where men and women, boys and girls surrender their lives to Jesus and become a part of the Church of Jesus Christ. The Church militant living in light of the Gospel promises that those that are part of Jesus Christ and His church will one day be a part of the church triumphant. But in this age and the in-between that we preach this Gospel boldly to a lost and dying world that we are salt and light, a city within a city, boldly standing for Christ and advancing His kingdom by His grace and for His glory, in Jesus' Name, Amen.