

“The Keys to the Kingdom”

Matthew 16:5-20

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX
Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • December 22, 2013

I know that I’m certainly not the smartest person around and sometimes I’m a little slow to catch on to things, but when I read passages like this one, the way Jesus’ disciples keep misunderstanding Jesus, I think, these guys must have been pretty dense.

For the last couple of chapters in Matthew, ever since he heard of the death of John the Baptist, we have found Jesus trying to get away to be alone with his disciples. But everywhere he goes there are people who want something from him. They tried sailing to a remote area across the lake but the crowds met him there and he taught and healed and then performed the miracle of feeding the crowd of 5,000 men plus women and children with just a handful of food. That was followed by another miracle, Jesus walking on the water during the night demonstrating again his divine nature.

Those stories are immediately followed by the scribes and Pharisees challenging Jesus about keeping the Jewish rules. Jesus’ next trip takes him to Gentile territory where he heals Gentiles and then repeats the miracle of feeding the crowd, but this time it’s a crowd of people who were excluded from the covenant.

When Jesus gets back to Israel there is an official investigating committee made up of Pharisees and Sadducees waiting for him. They demand a sign from Jesus proving his claim to be divine. Jesus tells them that his resurrection is the only sign they will get. And really, it’s the only sign you and I need.

Now Jesus and his disciples get back into the boat and head once again to Gentile territory. They’re exhausted and probably a little shaken about the religious leaders being upset. As a result, they forget to pack enough food. Verse five points out that “they had forgotten to take bread.” Remember that these men are still devout Jews. They were not permitted to eat Gentile food. So they begin to discuss the situation. Jesus uses the

opportunity to turn the discussion from groceries to spiritual truth. He says, “Watch and beware of the leaven (or yeast) of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

The disciples, of course, don’t catch what Jesus is trying to do. When they hear yeast, they think he’s talking about bread. Jesus says, “you of little faith, why are you talking about bread? Don’t you understand what’s going on? Don’t you see that lack of bread is not the problem? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

Yeast, which is a leavening agent, is an important ingredient in bread. But it works invisibly. You can’t point to a loaf of bread and say, “there’s the yeast.” It’s mixed in thoroughly and so it affects the entire loaf. Jesus has already compared the Kingdom of Heaven to yeast that a woman puts in her bread dough. So the disciples finally understand that Jesus is talking about the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The Pharisees and Sadducees were the two main groups of leaders in ancient Israel. The Pharisees were primarily concerned with keeping God’s law. They voluntarily held themselves to a higher standard. The Pharisees were very strict. To make sure that God’s laws weren’t broken, the Pharisees added even stricter rules that they wanted people to follow. Jesus was most critical of the Pharisees.

The Sadducees, on the other hand, were the politicians. They were much more interested in political power than they were in issues of faith. The Sadducees rejected the reality of miracles and they only accepted the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, as authentic. They also didn’t believe in resurrection or the dead. While the Pharisees were guilty of adding to the Word of God, the Sadducees were guilty of taking away. The Pharisees tended toward legalism while the

Sadducees tended toward license. The one thing they agreed on was the rejection of Jesus.

We face the same circumstances today. As Christians, we must always be on guard against legalism that says we must keep certain rules to get into heaven and against license that says we can do whatever we want. There are lots of churches that promote one or the other of those views even today. The goal is to lovingly guide people to truth about Jesus, to help them see and accept who Jesus is. The Pharisees and Sadducees rejected Jesus because they failed to see who He really is.

Jesus and his disciples reach their destination, the town of Caesarea Philippi north of the Sea of Galilee. This is the farthest from Jerusalem that Jesus will ever travel in Matthew. He's finally alone with his disciples and he asks them, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" he wants to know what people are saying. The disciples answer that some think he's John the Baptist, some think he's Elijah, others Jeremiah or another prophet. Based on Malachi 4:5, the Jews were anticipating the return of the prophet Elijah, who was carried away into heaven. Since Jesus spoke and acted like a prophet, people were hopeful that he was the long-awaited Elijah. In the same way, there were Jewish traditions that Jeremiah had hidden the Ark of the Covenant and some other things from the Temple at the time of the exile and that he would return at the time of the Messiah to restore them.

Many people today view Jesus in the same way. If asked about Jesus they will say they consider him to be a great teacher or even a prophet, but they don't think he's God. The problem is that over and over again Jesus claimed to be God. As C.S. Lewis pointed out, there are only three possibilities concerning Jesus' identity. Either he was lying about being God, which would seem to disqualify him from being a good teacher, or he was a lunatic, meaning that he only thought he was God, or it's true and he really is God in the flesh.

Jesus then asks his disciples, "Who do *you* say that I am?" This is the most important question Jesus ever asks. This is a plural *you*. He's speaking to all of the disciples. He's also speaking to you. How you answer that question has eternal consequences. Peter answers for all of them saying, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Christ is the Greek word for Messiah and they both mean "anointed." In ancient times kings were anointed as a symbol of being called by God to that position. By the time of Jesus it had come to mean specifically the one that God had promised to take the throne of King David. Most people at the time assumed that meant a warrior king who would deliver Israel from Roman occupation. But Peter adds that Jesus is "the Son of the living God." In other words, he's saying that Jesus is not merely human. He's God.

Jesus praises Peter for his confession and tells him that it's only because God the Father revealed that truth to him that Peter could see Jesus as the promised divine Messiah. It's the same for us. The only way we will ever truly believe Jesus is God is if the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see the truth.

Next we find some of the most controversial and misunderstood verses in the Bible. After Peter makes his confession, Jesus says, "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." At first this seems straight forward. Peter is the foundation, the key person in building the church. Except that over the rest of Matthew we find that Peter really knows how to screw things up. In the very next section he rebukes Jesus and then after Jesus' arrest Peter denies that he even knows Jesus.

There are two keys to understanding this. First, Jesus is using a play on words. He doesn't tell Peter, "on *you* I will build my church." Instead he says, "on *this* I will build my church." The play on words is this: Peter means rock or stone. In Greek it's *petros*. The

other word Jesus uses is the feminine form, *petra*, which means foundation or base. So if Peter is not the foundation of the church, what is? It's the confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus is the rock, the foundation of the church. We often sing the great hymn that goes, "the church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord."

The other thing that is extremely important to understand Jesus' comment is that he says, "I will build my church." It's Jesus' church and he promises to build it. As a result, the gates of hell will not prevail against it. This is often thought to mean that the church will be able to withstand the assault of Satan. But that doesn't fit with the Scripture. You see, gates are not really offensive weapons, they're defensive. So Jesus is saying that the gates of hell or Hades will not be able to withstand the assault of the church. Evil, sin and death don't stand a chance against the church that's actually confessing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and sharing that message with the world.

That brings us to the last statement Jesus makes about the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Keys have one purpose and that's to lock and unlock doors. In this case the key to the kingdom of heaven is Peter's confession about who Jesus is. When we share that same message we are unlocking the Kingdom for

people. Not that we have any control over whether someone gets into heaven or not. That's entirely God's work. But He uses us to bring the message – the keys – to people.

So what about us here today? What is Jesus trying to tell you? First, he reminds us to trust in him to provide, just as he did for the crowds that he fed with the bread and fish. It's not easy. We want to take care of things ourselves and we want to worry about it. Jesus reminds us that he is able to provide better than we can provide for ourselves.

Second, he tells us to be on guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees. We are to constantly be on guard against legalism on one hand and lawlessness on the other. Third, we need to know who Jesus is. We need to trust that he is who he says he is – that he's the Savior of the World promised in the Old Testament. He's not just some good teacher who showed us how to love God and love each other. He's God in the flesh, Emmanuel, God with us. If you believe that it's because God has revealed it to you. If you're not sure you believe it, begin asking God to show you the truth. And finally, we need to be all about loving people enough to share the keys to the kingdom of heaven with them.

Amen