



March 25, 2012
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*Loaded Questions:
Who Do You Say That I Am?
Matthew 16:13-20*

I meet a lot of people in my line of work. Mostly, I enjoy it. But there is one greeting that I don't like at all; in fact, I think it's rude. It's when a person walks up and says, "Hi. Remember me? Do you know who I am?" I want to reply, "Ah... yes, you're the narcissist that thinks the world revolves around you." Or, if I'm feeling less snarky, "Sorry, I fell on my head once. Everything's foggy. Are you my mother?" What makes this greeting worse is if it is a person I should know but just cannot remember their name. "Remember me? Do you know who I am?" Now, imagine if it was Jesus asking this question!

[Read Matthew 16:13-20]

If I said the words, "Sin City," what would that mean to you? If you said the words "Sin City" during the time of Christ, folks in Israel might have pointed to this place: Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi sits in the very north of the country at the base of Mt. Hermon. It is one of my favorite spots in Israel. It is lush, cool and beautiful. It is also spectacular. A red-colored rock wall 100 feet tall and 500 feet wide dominates the area. And in the face of that wall is a huge cave. At the time of Jesus, it led to a water-filled grotto that was so deep, it was said that no line was long enough to reach the bottom. The waters from that grotto flowed from beneath the stone cliff and into a stream that fed the Jordan River.

It was a spectacularly beautiful setting. But Caesarea Philippi was famous for more than its beauty: for centuries, it was the center of pagan worship. You've heard me talk about Baal and Asherah? Fertility gods? Remember? Elijah and Mt. Carmel? Centuries before Jesus, this was a site of Baal worship. It was believed that during the winter, the gods descended into the underworld to escape the cold. You've heard of snowbirds? These were snow-gods. And how did they escape into their version of demonic Palm Springs? Right here. This cave was known as the Gates of Hades.

It sounds silly to us, but it was actually gruesome. In the spring time they needed the fertility gods back up on top of the earth to bless the harvest. In order to entice them up out hades, Baal worshipers would toss newborn babies into the grotto as a sacrifice to the hibernating gods. They would then watch for blood downstream to know whether their sacrifice was acceptable. Awful!

By the time of Jesus, the Romans eliminated child sacrifice and switched gods. It became a shrine to the god Pan, a half-goat, half-man fertility god. He was also the god who caused terror. What's another word for terror? Yep. "Pan-ic." Niches were carved in the rock wall and filled with obscene and very sexually suggestive idols. An elevated platform was the site of various acts of worship to Pan. Singing, dancing, feasting and, most disturbingly, sexual acts—including bestiality with goats. And to cover all their religious bases, the Romans built a temple in front of the cave to worship Caesar Augustus.

Can you see why I call it Sin City? Caesarea Philippi was, and for centuries had been, a beautiful and evil place devoted to the most decadent and gruesome of religious practices. So why in the world would Jesus walk 25 miles north to visit this place? And why would he take teenage disciples to witness such disturbing things?

Last summer, Cyndi, Cooper and I stopped in Las Vegas on the way back from Hoover Dam. Cooper wanted to visit the Bellagio because he had seen it in the movie "Ocean's Eleven." We thought we'd just take a stroll along the streets. It was horrible! We couldn't walk twenty feet without someone trying to put a card with a picture of a naked woman in the hands of me or my son. I'll tell you...Cyndi was on the war path! Vegas is not a place for a teenage boy.

Neither was Caesarea Philippi. Yet Jesus took them there on purpose. He had never gone this far north before. They had never visited a place like this before. But clearly, Jesus had something in mind. And it must have been a shock to their young, pious Jewish minds! All this idolatry! Obscene acts taking place in the name of worship. They must have walked along in shocked silence.

Finally, Jesus stops, turns and asks these words: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (That was Jesus' favorite way of referring to himself.) In other words, in this setting of pagan idolatry, Jesus says, "This is what people say about Pan and Baal and Asherah and Caesar. What do they say about me?"

The boys probably hmmmmed and hawed a bit, looking back and forth at each other. Jesus sometimes tripped them up with His questions, and they wanted to "get it right." "Well, some say you are John the Baptist, returned from the dead. Others say one of the prophets like Elijah or Jeremiah." Jesus paused another moment—perhaps looking once more at the scene that surrounded them. Then He turned back—with those laser-sharp eyes of His—and asked the single more important question that every human being will one day answer. "Who do **you** say that I am?"

This is **the** loaded question, isn't it? Most people don't mind talking about Jesus as an idea, a philosophy, one of many good religious options in the spiritual smorgasbord. And the disciples didn't have much riding on their answers. They were offering hypothetical answers about what "others" might say about Jesus.

But then He turns the temperature up. “Who do **you** say that I am?” Not these worshipers around us. Not the crowds in Galilee. Not the religious people in Jerusalem. You—who have lived with me, listened to me, witnessed my miracles; you who know me better than anyone else on earth—who do **you** say that I am?” How would you answer that loaded question? Here’s how some have. [Video of on-the-street interviews]

We don’t know how long it was before someone spoke. But finally the silence was broken. By whom? Simon, of course! You gotta love this guy! Simon was like a bull in a china shop sometimes, but he was so eager and gutsy. So Simon takes a stab at it, and it is his finest moment. “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” There. He said it. Out loud. “You are the Messiah. God’s chosen one. The prophets foretold you. We’ve been waiting for you for centuries. And now you are here. You are the holy, anointed, Savior sent from the living God.”

Anyone here ever watch *Cash Cab*? The driver asks questions worth money, the passengers answer; and then he pauses dramatically before saying, “That’s right!” You can almost sense Peter and the boys holding their breath... waiting to see what Jesus would say. “Well done, Simon! Great job! But you didn’t come up with this answer on your own. God gave it to you. And so that you will remember this moment when you got it right, I’m going to change your name. Your momma named you Simon. But I’m going to call you Rocky.” (That’s what ‘Peter’ means: Rock.)

Peter was beaming. The disciples were slapping him on the back. He screwed up a lot—as a matter of fact, next week will be one of his biggest screw-ups ever—but this time... this time he got it right. Huzzah!

But Jesus wasn’t done. Simon wasn’t going to just get a new name. He and the rest were about to get their marching orders. If you are church folk, you know this story. But I want you to think about the setting of this conversation in order for the power of this moment to really hit home. Jesus continues: “...on this rock I will build my Church ...and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”

This is one of the most controversial verses in the Bible. Catholics claim Jesus makes Peter the first pope. Rocky I. And upon this “Rock” Jesus will build His Church. Protestants say, “No, it was Peter’s confession of faith that formed the foundation of the church.”

But let’s go back once more to the location. Remember what towered above them as Jesus spoke those words? A huge rock cliff. As a matter of fact, the entire area is one big slab of rock. Even as Jesus was saying the words, “Upon this rock...” they were standing on a plateau of rock. And another thing... Do you remember the name of that cave? The door that Baal used to access the spirit world? The grotto where they sacrificed babies? The Gates of Hades! The Gates of Hell.

How powerful must Jesus' words have been in that setting? "Do you see that cave? That place called 'The Gates of Hell'? Where evil things have been done for centuries? Do you see this place? Devoted to the worship of gods of human creation? It is right here—right on this rock, right in front of the Gates of Hell, right in the midst of brutality and carnality and idolatry and bestiality, right next door to the filth and brokenness of this world—that I will build my church."

Think about it this way: why else would Jesus lead teenage boys into such a setting? He could have asked them that same question anywhere. But he walked them more than 25 miles to a place that every Jew avoided and exposed them to one of the vilest places of the time. Why would he do that? Perhaps to say, "It is exactly here—where things are most filthy and evil—that I am going to build my Church. And by the way, I want you to take this evil place by storm. I'm not building a fortress where you can hunker down and hide. I want you to go on the offensive. I want you to charge right into the gut of evil."

Where do I get that idea? Look at the text. "...the Gates of Hades will not overcome it." Other translations say "the Gates of Hell will not prevail." I have read these words all my life, but for the first time this week, I thought, "Wait a second. That doesn't make sense. How do "gates" "overcome?" How do "gates" "prevail?" "Overcome, prevail"... those are offensive, attacking words. Gates don't attack. Gates defend. Gates don't assault. Gates repel. Gates keep things out. Gates preserve the way things are. We don't understand that as clearly because we don't have city gates, but if you ever join me in the Holy Land you will see what city gates look like.

I think this passage makes deeper sense if we understand Jesus saying, "Listen, I don't want my Church hunkering down in safety in a fortress. I want my Church to advance right into the world—into the darkest places... the places where Satan and his forces think they are in control. That's why I brought you to this beautiful place that has been overrun by evil. I want to reclaim the beautiful places. I want my Church to storm the Gates of Hell. That's why we are going to set up shop right here, right in the middle of everything. And you know what? Hell doesn't stand a chance! We are going to attack the Gates of Hell, and they will not hold; they will not prevail."

That's why we have a team returning from Cambodia where we support a ministry that battles the sex trafficking of ten-year-old girls. That's why our high school ministry and our men cross into Mexico in spite of scary headlines. We are attacking poverty that is born out of a corrupt system, and we are attacking terror that paralyzes some into inactivity. That's why we have women in our church who go into strip clubs and befriend the dancers with gifts and kindness. That why Celebrate Recovery fills our Memorial Chapel every Thursday night, because we are attacking the demons of addiction that terrorize and dehumanize people. And may I say, that is also why we have chosen to align ourselves with a new denomination. We are watching a culture that is disintegrating around us. Even in

our own state, the very definition of marriage, the fundamental unit of God's society, is under attack. We cannot and will not let these destructive forces go unchallenged. We want to be part of a denomination that supports us in that battle.

We are convinced that Jesus meant it when he said that the Gates of Hell need to be stormed, and we, His Church, will make that charge.

So then, what is the nature of this warfare to which we are called? Are we jihadists? Called to arms to destroy our enemies? No. Paul reminds us that our enemies are not flesh and blood. Our enemies are spiritual forces aligned against us. Our battle is a spiritual one. The Church of Jesus prevails against the Gates of Hell through the spiritual weapons of presence, prayer and proclamation.

We prevail through presence. We don't hide or hunker, we move right into the places of evil and brokenness in the name of Jesus. We stand with, suffer with, and serve with those whom Satan wishes to destroy. We prevail through prayer. We move beyond our self-centered appeals to God and lift up the whole of His creation, pleading, as Jesus taught us, "...**Thy** kingdom come, **Thy** will be done on earth as it is in Heaven." And we prevail through proclamation. We dare to speak up about what is wrong and call our culture back to the life that only comes when we live it as our Creator intended. We confront the evil squatters who occupy the beautiful places and declare, "This belongs to God! It is not yours. We reclaim it in the name of Jesus Christ."

We need to be a church that is on the offensive without being offensive. We are proactive, moving into places of darkness and need with the light and provision of the Holy Spirit, but doing so with a graciousness that will disarm every person who would want to criticize us, but will find it hard to argue with the love and grace we display.

This is a noble cause—a cause worth devoting our lives to—joining with Jesus in His assault on the spiritual forces that would steal, kill and destroy the goodness of life. Becoming part of what Jesus is doing in His world. But that brings us back to His question of the morning: "Who do **you** say that I am?" It is the single most important question that every human being must answer. And make no mistake: every human being will answer this question—if not today, someday. Because ultimately, every one of us will draw a last breath and re-open our eyes to find ourselves standing before Jesus. Not the baby in the manger, not the carpenter from Nazareth, but the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords... the final Judge of all humanity.

One day He will direct his gaze upon you, and you, and you, and you. He won't care what "others" think about Him. He won't ask what your wife thinks, or what your husband thinks, or what your brother or parents or kids or co-workers think. The one question that Jesus will ask in that moment is this: "Who do **you** say that

I am?" It will be a question of eternal significance, because the answer we give will determine which gate we enter. The gate leading away from God and into a place the Bible calls hell? Or the gate leading toward God and into a place the Bible calls heaven?

"Who do you say that I am?" It is here and now that we make the declaration that will affect our eternity. Here and now is the point of decision. Who do you believe Jesus to be? Do you belong to Him? Do you want to be part of His church planted right in the middle of a beautiful and broken place, ready to storm the gates of the enemy with the grace, hope and love that evil cannot resist? "Who do **you** say that I am?"

Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **DIG DEEPER**

1. Why was Caesarea Philippi "Sin City?" Why would Jesus take his young disciples to such a place?
2. What was Jesus' question to his disciples? How did he respond to Peter's answer? How could you imagine using that same question in your conversations with not-yet-believing friends?
3. What is "the Rock" upon which Jesus would build His Church? In what way is the Church to be on the offensive without being offensive?