



# Choosing Christ

Matthew 16:13-28

TRINITY PULPIT

**C**hoices! We all make choices. Life really is a series of choices made or not made. Everyday we make choices. Some of them we give a lot of thought too and others we do with a natural impulse. When we reflect on our life we can think of all the choices we have made. Some of our choices of course are more important than others. The choice of where we are going to live, who we might marry, if we will marry, how many children we will have, if we are going to have children, and what we might do for a living are all important decisions. What we had for breakfast this morning, or exactly what we are wearing this morning is all decisions we made for certain reasons. However, in contrast they are not huge decisions. Most of the time those decisions are just taste and a little discipline.

We would all agree that there are some decisions that are more important than others. There are also decision which we delay. We put them off as long as possible. In fact, sometimes we hope hard decisions will just resolve. We hope if we wait long enough the conflict will go away, the opportunity will disappear or the symptom will cease. Yes, some decisions we delay with the hope they will either become easier, more apparent or just disappear.

Choices. There is one choice that the Bible teaches us is the most important decision that we will ever make. It is the decision that separates us not only in this life, but also for eternity. There is a decision we must make a choice that is ours that is the most important decision we will ever make and that is the choice to follow Jesus or not to follow Jesus. Many of us made such a decision as a young person and it was the most natural decision we ever made. We had been raised in the church and we had been taught about God and God's love. We have learned that Jesus loves me this I know. We had heard the plan of salvation that is outlined in scripture.

We had learned that simple plan that God so loved the world that he sent Jesus to die for our sins and if we would simply receive God's forgiveness and choose to follow Jesus as Lord... we would be saved. The Bible teaches us that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Every one of us is sinful. There is no one who has ever lived but Jesus who did not sin. The word means to fall short or miss the mark. In other words, we might be a good person, a good neighbor, we might donate to charities, we might volunteer in the community, we might be the nicest, kindest person anyone has ever known but even so... we have sinned.

This is a great problem in our culture today. We think of people who are not followers of Jesus and sometimes think they are better people than some who are in the church. That is not only a perception that is true. It does not matter if you are a church person or claim to be a Christian or if you are not in the church and claim not to be a Christian... we are all the same. We have sinned and fallen short of God's expectations.

We cannot be good enough to earn God's love. We cannot be bad enough to keep God from loving us.

So the Bible teaches us that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The Bible also teaches us that the wages or the consequences of sin are death. Not physical death, for we are all going to die a physical death, but a spiritual death which means to be separated from God for eternity. It is clear this is what the Apostle Paul means when he writes, "the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

We have sinned and sin unchecked, unaddressed leads us to spiritual death. But the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus. The gift we cannot buy, earn, purchase, or barter for is free and it is Jesus. You see, when we are still sinners, when we were unlovable, Jesus died for us. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross becomes the



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payment for the ugliness of sin once and for all and for all people for all time.

The result is a choice. The choice that is ours and the choice that is everyone on God's beautiful earth. So, now listen for a moment. You might say well I don't have to make this choice. The truth is... when you put off the choice you are making the choice. There is a choice we must make and we cannot avoid. To avoid it is to make the choice.

Here is the choice we must make: Is Jesus God's son, the Christ or is he not. If Jesus is the Christ, then I must choose to follow Him. That sounds like two choices but the truth is if you come to the first realization that Jesus is who Jesus claimed to be, then to follow Jesus is the most natural choice.

We have a choice to make. I am here this morning as we begin a new church year, as we begin a new year in school, as many take leadership in our church to say to you "choose Christ."

In our text today, Jesus finally gets his disciples to that place where they can be alone. We have witnessed in our text, the last few weeks, that Jesus has been trying to get his disciples away from the crowds and away from the Pharisees who continue to confront them, for the purpose of teaching them. We are told that Jesus came to the region of Cesarea Philippi and there he asked his disciples a simple question "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

Their response was a natural response and actually fairly flattering. The first response was John the Baptist. John the Baptist had been beheaded and some were saying that Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life. First, that reveals John's popularity and respect. John had a tremendous ministry that is obvious with this response. It had not been that long since John's death, but even so there were some pointing to Jesus and saying there is John. Jesus shared much in common with John. They both preached and they both preached repentance and the coming of the Kingdom of God. They both called all people both the righteous and unrighteous to God. John, in some sense, was a fascinating person. He was charismatic; he was eccentric, and quite a show. Jesus was an attraction. His healing and teaching was attracting crowds. Some were fascinated with Jesus.

There are many in our world who are fascinated with Jesus. You might be fascinated with Jesus. You are attracted to His words. You are interested in who He was. You would like to know more. Jesus you are like John and so many others who have come in the name of

God. You are fascinating.

The second answer is Elijah. Elijah was one of the great prophets of Israel. Elijah did not taste death, but was taken up by God. So, it was believed that Elijah would return and usher in the time of the Messiah or Christ. This is what Jesus meant by saying that John the Baptist was Elijah the one who would be the forerunner. To say that Jesus is Elijah is an incredible compliment and statement. To suggest that Jesus is the one who has come to usher in the Kingdom of God was a statement of great faith, but to listen to it also says something else. It says that Jesus is not the Christ, but we must wait on another.

When John the Baptist was in prison he sent word to Jesus and asked this question. Are you the promised one or should we look for another. Jesus said go tell John what is happening. People are being healed, the good news is proclaimed. Blessed is the one who does not fall away on account of me. Jesus is saying what is promised with the coming of the Christ was happening and John should keep the faith that yes, Jesus was the promised one.

There are some who are fascinated with Jesus, but are always thinking there must be something more. I know what Jesus says, what Jesus claims but maybe there is another one to come. Maybe there is another way.

Then there is the response of Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a great suffering and compassionate prophet. He prophesied in a time of great distress in Judah's history. He preached a message that was not popular. He called the nation back to God and called for repentance and when many left, Jeremiah stayed with the ones left behind in Judah and kept preaching. He preached not only repentance and a coming judgment, but he also preached a word of hope of what would one day be again. God would judge, but God would restore His people.

There was some saying Jesus was like Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets. Again, very flattering but essentially they were saying there is nothing that sets Jesus apart from all the rest. There are some in our world that would say that Jesus is an important voice, however He is but one of many voices that must be considered. What He says is important, but so are other religious figures. There is nothing that sets Him apart from the others. He is like the ones before Him and those who would come after Him.

Then, Jesus turns His question to the 12. These are the ones who have followed Him and observed Him. The question is no longer who do others say I am, but who do you say I am. This is personal question. What about

you? What do you say?

It is Peter, outspoken and impetuous Peter, who blurts it out "you are the Christ, the Son of the living God." In one sentence Peter has made his choice and in one sentence Peter has spoken the whole truth.

Jesus is the Christ. Jesus is the promised one. Jesus is the Jewish Messiah that was to come and reveal the fullness of God. Jesus is the Son of the living God. Jesus was God. The living God was a way of saying the God of Israel or the one true and living God. It was to separate God from the idols of human creation. Jesus is God.

The choice had been made. It is a choice we all have before us. We all have this choice to make. Do we believe Jesus is the Christ and are we willing to follow Him?

Notice that this is a choice of identification. Jesus says to Peter, "you say I am the Christ, I say you are Peter the rock." You are identified through this choice and confession. The choice that is before us all defines us. It identifies us with Jesus. We either are following Jesus are we are not. We either will choose to identify ourselves with Jesus or we will not. There is no real middle ground in this choice.

Notice Jesus words later in this chapter "If anyone would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." For whoever wants to save his life will loose it, but whoever looses his life for me will find it." There is no middle ground in following Jesus. The choice to follow Jesus identifies us.

It is a choice of foundation. Jesus says to Peter upon this rock I will build my church. There of course has been much debate about this verse. Those of us who are children of the protestant reformation reject that Jesus was setting up a Papacy or that Peter himself was now the foundation of the Church. Instead, we have pointed to the confession of Peter as the foundation of the church. The confession that Jesus is the Christ is the foundation. Upon this confession, upon those who make such a confession, God was going to gather a people. The confession was the beginning. It was the foundation for living and for the future.

That is what I want us to think about for a moment. The choice to follow Jesus identifies us, but also becomes the foundation for our living. Everything we do should be

influenced on the decision that we are followers of Jesus. So, how I respond to others, how I think about others, the values I have, the way I spend my resources and use my time is built on a choice I have made to follow Jesus. I am denying self and I am embracing Christ. This choice is not only identification, but also a foundation.

It leads me to action. Jesus says that He will give us the keys to the kingdom of heaven and whatever is you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. There is much debate on the tense of these verbs. Is it loosed past tense or is it will be loosed and bound future tense. One scholar suggests that the best reading might be there will be a state of boundedness and loosedness. I don't want us to get lost in this discussion and miss the major point of my

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sermon this morning, so let us say that what we have here is the constant action of the work of God through Jesus and now through his followers. In other words, the word of God is occurring in your life and my life. The work of God that began in Jesus is continuing through those who follow Him. The choice to follow Jesus identifies us with Jesus, becomes the foundation for our living and calls us to action as God's people.

We have a choice to make. It is the most important choice we can make. Who is Jesus to you?

There are some choices that are more important than others. Then, there is a choice that is the most important of all.

It is always before us. Jesus asks "Who do you say I am?"

How will you answer? What will you choose?

