

Following Jesus

JESUS IS THE MESSIAH, THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD SENT BY GOD.

Scripture Passage: Matthew 16:13-26 Memory Verse: Matthew 16:24

Imagine taking a walk in a park and asking random people, “Who was Jesus?” You probably would get any number of interesting responses. Some folks might ignore you completely. Others might say Jesus was a prophet or a good teacher. A few might question if He ever really existed, while others might say He was a man who was greatly misunderstood.

The question of Jesus’s identity is an important one for each adult to answer for themselves. But the question that really needs answering is not “Who is Jesus to me?” but “Who is Jesus?” Individual takes on Jesus will vary from person to person. But who Jesus actually is, no matter what anyone thinks about Him, is crucial to understand. This lesson presents Jesus as “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16).

As you prepare to lead this session from Matthew 16, examine your heart. Take time to reflect on what it means for Jesus to be who He said He is—and how that applies to your life. Seek God’s wisdom for ways to guide adults toward acknowledging and committing themselves to Jesus by denying themselves, taking up their cross, and following Him.



Weekly Podcast: Group Leader Training

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The world is made up of leaders and followers. The majority of us are followers. As followers, it is critically important who we follow. History is replete with people who followed others to destruction and death. Leaders like Jim Jones of the Jonestown massacre, cult leader Charles Manson of the murderous Manson family, or David Koresh of the Branch Davidian tragedy, all led their followers to disaster. Each of us must choose leaders wisely. Follow those who lead to life and not to death. You'll be glad you did! (PSG, p. 27)

What are the traits of leaders you want to follow?



Understand the Context (Matthew 16:1-28)

Following His confrontation with the Pharisees and scribes (Matt. 15:1-20), Jesus and His disciples traveled to the region of Tyre and Sidon. (15:21). This move into modern-day Lebanon was Jesus's second withdrawal toward the end of His Galilean ministry.

Shortly after arriving in this Gentile area, a Canaanite woman, a descendant of the people Israel drove out of the land more than a millennium earlier, pleaded with Jesus to heal her daughter who was possessed by a demon. Jesus clearly told her that His mission focused on “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24). When she continued to beg for help, Jesus replied with a seemingly harsh rejection. In response, the woman humbly acknowledged her place in a way that reflected her faith. Based on that great faith, Jesus healed the woman's daughter (15:26-28).

Nothing else is recorded about this brief time in Syrophenicia, but we read that Jesus moved on from there, avoiding the territory of Herod Antipas coming to the region of the Decapolis on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee (15:29). This was the third of Jesus's withdrawals from Galilee.

The Decapolis, mentioned specifically in Mark's parallel account (Mark 7:31), originally was a federation of ten Gentile towns east of the Jordan River. Early in Jesus's ministry residents of the Decapolis were part of the crowds that followed Him (Matt. 4:25), but the people asked Him to leave the area after He drove a legion of

demons out of a local man (Mark 5:1-20). Now, large crowds again came, bringing all kinds of people in need. Jesus's healing ministry lasted for three days (Matt. 15:29-32), leading Him to feed more than four thousand people with seven small loaves and a few small fish (15:32-38).

From there, Jesus went to Magadan (or Magdala, 15:39) on the west side of the sea. This brought Jesus back into Jewish territory. As soon as He arrived, He was accosted by the Pharisees and their rival Jewish sect, the Sadducees. Jesus had just fed a multitude with only a small amount of bread and fish, but these religious leaders asked Jesus to “show them a sign from heaven” (16:1). Jesus used the occasion to rebuke them and to warn His disciples about their teaching (16:1-12).

Crossing the lake again (16:5), Jesus began His fourth withdrawal. The area around Caesarea Philippi (16:13) once again took Jesus out of the realm of Herod Antipas and deep into the Gentile region ruled by Herod Philip. Jesus had not gone into this sparsely populated area before, but He stayed there a few months. Whether Jesus actually went into Caesarea Philippi itself is not clear. Matthew refers to the “region of Caesarea Philippi” (16:13), while Mark wrote of the “villages of Caesarea Philippi” (Mark 8:27).

Read Matthew 16:13-26. Contrast the opinion of the Pharisees and Sadducees and the opinion of the disciples regarding Jesus. (PSG, p. 28)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: On a focal wall, display **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Jesus's Ministry Beyond Galilee*) and **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28*). Make copies of **Pack Item 11** (*Handout: Why Caesarea Philippi?*).

READ:

Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 27 of the PSG. Stress that we all must follow someone at certain points: our teachers, bosses, traffic enforcers, and others.

ASK:

What are the traits of leaders you want to follow?
(PSG, p. 27)

CONTEXT:

Direct attention to **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28*). Explain that Matthew 16 continues to move toward the close of Jesus's ministry in Galilee. Use **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Jesus's Ministry Beyond Galilee*) and page 36 of the Leader Guide to explain Jesus's "withdrawals" in Matthew 15–16.

RECAP:

Summarize the following from Understand the Context (PSG, p. 28) to describe the setting for today's passage:

"Jesus withdrew with the disciples to the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee (v. 5). Their journey would take them north to the area of Caesarea Philippi, where the events in this week's study take place. Thus began a new phase in the ministry of Jesus. From Caesarea Philippi, Jesus would travel south directly to Jerusalem. This move signaled the end of the Galilean ministry and the beginning of the final weeks of Jesus's earthly life, culminating in His arrest and crucifixion in Jerusalem."

TRANSITION:

In today's passage, Jesus focused on what His disciples believed about Him. The question of who Jesus is remains the key question for every person who claims to have faith in Jesus.



Group Activity Option

Music

Encourage adults to listen to a recording of "What a Beautiful Name" by Travis Cottrell. Ask: **What does this song tell us about the identity of Jesus?** Discuss responses. Challenge adults to consider their personal understanding of who Jesus is as they study today's session from Matthew 16. (Note: For groups who prefer hymns, consider "The Solid Rock," No. 511 in the *Baptist Hymnal 2008*.)

Know the Messiah (Matt. 16:13-20)

13 When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” **14** They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” **15** “But you,” he asked them, “who do you say that I am?” **16** Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” **17** Jesus responded, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven. **18** And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. **19** I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven.” **20** Then he gave the disciples orders to tell no one that he was the Messiah.

(vv. 13-14) • **Caesarea Philippi** was located 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee near the base of Mount Hermon. In the third century BC, it was called Paneas because a shrine there was dedicated to the worship of the half-man, half-goat Greek god Pan. Sometime around 20 BC Herod the Great built a white marble temple there and dedicated it to Caesar Augustus. After Herod’s death, the city came under the jurisdiction of his son Philip, who renamed it Caesarea Philippi, honoring both Augustus and himself.

Son of Man was Jesus’s favorite title for Himself. The **people** He was asking about refers to the general public, and they had several opinions related to Jesus’s identity. Although **John the Baptist** was dead, even Herod Antipas, the man who had ordered his execution, wondered if John had come back to life (14:1-2). Some thought Jesus was **Elijah** because Malachi had prophesied Elijah would return before the Messiah came (Mal. 3:1; 4:5-6). Only Matthew included the name of **Jeremiah**. Those who were not prepared to identify Jesus specifically still grouped Him positively as **one of the prophets**.

(vv. 15-17) **But** calls for a contrast and the **you** is plural and emphatic. **Peter** gave a double answer. **Messiah** referred to the “Anointed One” whom God had promised to send. **The Son of the living God** was an Old Testament designation that also distinguished Jesus from all the pagan idolatry in the area of Caesarea Philippi.

Blessed are you represents a divine blessing (see Matt. 5:3-10). Jesus also emphasized that Peter’s understanding did not come from **flesh and blood**, meaning from human insight. Rather, it was a revelation from **my Father in heaven**. In saying this, Jesus highlighted His

unique relationship with God. According to John’s Gospel, Jews once tried to kill Jesus for using this expression and “making himself equal to God” (John 5:17-18).

(vv. 18-19) Jesus’s pronouncement has been the source of controversy. Roman Catholics contend **this rock** means Peter himself, but most Protestants reject this understanding. Instead, they focus either on the confession Peter made in verse 16 or believe Jesus was pointing to Himself and His teachings as the rock of our faith.

What is clear is that Jesus promised to establish His **church**, pointing to Pentecost in Acts 2. And, while Satan might attack God’s people, **the gates of Hades** would never be strong enough to **overpower** His church.

Scholars also wonder about the **keys** Jesus offered Peter. Here the **keys** are said to **bind** and to **loose**. Jesus’s language indicates that He had Isaiah 22:20-22 in mind. The Greek wording suggests that whatever decisions Peter would make already had been made in heaven, thereby enabling Peter to carry out God’s purpose. We see Peter demonstrating this type of binding and loosing when he supported Gentiles at the church council in Acts 15:7-11. Jesus further expanded this privilege to all His disciples in Matthew 18:18 and John 20:23.

(v. 20) **Gave . . . orders** is a strong term for stating a command to be followed in no uncertain terms. Jesus recognized the political and nationalistic misunderstandings related to **the Messiah**. Even the disciples had not yet grasped the true nature of Jesus’s messiahship, as the next verses make clear. So, Jesus did not want them to speak out until they understood things more clearly.



APPLICATION POINT: We cannot follow Jesus fully until we know and accept His true identity.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read **Matthew 16:13-20** aloud as they imagine being in the group of disciples, carefully considering the words of Jesus.

DISCUSS:

Allow volunteers to suggest ways people view Jesus today. Distribute copies of **Pack Item 11** (*Handout: Why Caesarea Philippi?*). Encourage adults to scan the article and to underline key thoughts. Discuss what made this city such a significant backdrop for Jesus’s conversation with His disciples.



RECAP:

Share this as you encourage adults to reflect on Peter’s response to Jesus:

Peter declared that Jesus was “the Messiah.” In the Greek, this word means “the Christ.” The name Christ (taken from the Greek Christos) means “the Anointed One.” Peter acknowledged that Jesus was uniquely the Messiah; there is one and only one Messiah. The name pointed to the Deliverer who was coming from God. Peter also acknowledged that Jesus was the “Son of the living God.” The use of the definite article “the” pointed to the fact that Jesus is uniquely the Son and there is no other. (PSG, p. 30)

ASK:

Why is it important to understand who Jesus is? (PSG, p. 32)

EXPLAIN:

Point out that Jesus pointed to Peter as a representative for all the disciples in receiving the keys to bind and loose things in heaven. Share that this foreshadowed their role in leading people toward the kingdom once Jesus established His church in Acts 2. Note that since the disciples did not have a full grasp of what it meant for Jesus to be Messiah, He ordered them to remain silent for the time being.

Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: A Key

Hold up the key to your car. Say: *You may need to borrow my car sometime; but even if I give you the key, the car is still mine. You have my permission to use it, but I’m still the owner.* Help adults understand that Peter did not own the authority of heaven, but his confession of Jesus as Messiah gave him and the other disciples access to God’s authority, something they would need as they spread the message of the kingdom across the known world.

Embrace His Mission (Matt. 16:21-23)

21 From then on Jesus began to point out to his disciples that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and be raised the third day. **22** Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, “Oh no, Lord! This will never happen to you!” **23** Jesus turned and told Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me because you’re not thinking about God’s concerns but human concerns.”

(v. 21) *From then on* points back to Peter’s confession in verse 16. The words indicate an ongoing new activity. *Began to point out* implies that Jesus would not lay out His future comprehensively, but gradually. *Necessary . . . to go* indicates a divine imperative regarding *Jerusalem*.

He announced that in the capital city He would *suffer many things*. *Suffer* indicates anguish, pain, or agony. *Many things* covers a wide variety of particulars. Jesus also identified three groups that would cause His suffering. *The elders* were the heads of aristocratic families. The *chief priests* included the high priest and the heads of the priestly orders. Many of them were Sadducees. The *scribes* were experts in the law of Moses, and many of them were Pharisees. The only other time these three groups are mentioned together is in Matthew 27:41 when they mocked Jesus while He was on the cross. When Jesus named these three groups, He used only one definite article, suggesting that they actually constituted one group: the Jewish governing body known as the Sanhedrin.

The outcome of Jesus’s suffering at the hands of the Jewish leaders would mean that He would *be killed*. Probably overwhelmed by this shocking announcement, Jesus’s additional words *and be raised the third day* must have gone right by the disciples. The phrase *be raised* is a divine passive, alluding to God’s approval and action. *The third day* includes Friday evening to Sunday morning.

(v. 22) After Jesus’s revelation, *Peter took him aside*. The Greek wording suggests that the disciple tried to speak privately with Jesus in a friendly manner, rather than making a more forceful move. However, *rebuke* is a strong word that highlights the supposed superiority of the speaker. While He addressed Jesus as *Lord*, he included a negative tone in *oh no*.

He then told Jesus that He was wrong and repudiated what his “Lord” had just said: *This will never happen to you!* For Peter, what Jesus just announced was unthinkable.

Key Doctrine

God the Son

In His substitutionary death on the cross Christ made provision for the redemption of men from sin. (See Isaiah 53:5-6; 2 Corinthians 5:21.)

(v. 23) Apparently Jesus had not been looking directly at Peter. Now, though, *Jesus turned* toward him and forcibly said, *Get behind me, Satan!* Jesus’s reprimand was intended to place Peter (and his words) in a submissive position behind Jesus’s back. The words clearly recall those spoken directly to Satan in Matthew 4:10.

With these words, Jesus was not equating Peter as Satan or saying he was possessed by demons. Rather, He was indicating that any attempt to thwart Jesus’s divine mission (no matter how well-intentioned) made Peter “an adversary” (the literal meaning of *satan*). *Hindrance* translates the Greek word *scandalon*, a word that may be rendered as “a stumbling block” (see Isa. 8:14). Ironically, the man Jesus called a “rock” had become a stumbling stone in Jesus’s path toward fulfilling God’s will.

The Greek wording reflects present tense and refers to Peter’s ongoing state of mind. He was failing to focus on *God’s concerns*. In contrast, his thinking was dominated by *human concerns*. That is, he was leaning into natural human patterns of thinking (see Isa. 55:8-9).



Three Predictions

Jesus foretold His death three times in Matthew’s Gospel. Scan this QR code to learn more about His journey to the cross.



APPLICATION POINT: We cannot follow Jesus fully until we accept His mission as Messiah and Savior.

READ:

Invite two volunteers to read Matthew 16:21-23 aloud, one reading Peter’s words and one reading Jesus’s response.

DISCUSS:

Encourage adults to share what they believe motivated Peter to contradict Jesus’s words. Facilitate a brief discussion on ways people might mistake their own wisdom for God’s plans and purposes in life.

RECAP:

Summarize this information from page 32 of the PSG to help adults consider Peter’s motives:

“This was the turning point in the ministry of Jesus. Not only is this the transition point between the Galilean ministry and the events in Jerusalem, but it is also a shift in focus for Jesus. No longer are His teachings about the kingdom and His compassionate healings the central thrust. Now Jesus’s life moved rapidly toward the real reason He came. . . . Presumably Peter knew what was best for Jesus and took it upon himself to rebuke Jesus for speaking of His impending death. This may have arisen from Peter’s brash personality, or his supposed ‘authority’ he had received from Jesus calling him the ‘rock.’ Or it could have arisen out of love for Jesus and fear of the future.”

ASK:

How do we let our own agendas replace God’s greater plans? (PSG, p. 33)

SHARE:

Point out that the literal meaning of Satan is “adversary” or “opponent.” Explain that Jesus wasn’t saying Peter was under demonic influence, but that he was standing in opposition to God’s divine plan for the salvation of the world. Share a time in your own life when you felt like Peter: ready to “correct” God on His plan because it wasn’t going the way you imagined or expected. Help adults see their own Peter-like tendencies, wanting to take control rather than trusting Jesus.

SAY:

Peter was a good leader, and His faith in Jesus was grounded in truth. But he hadn’t yet realized what would be involved in truly following Jesus. He didn’t realize at this point that it would cost him everything. Jesus needed Peter to recognize that his own plan was not God’s plan.

Become His Disciple (Matt. 16:24-26)

24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. **25** For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me will find it. **26** For what will it benefit someone if he gains the whole world yet loses his life? Or what will anyone give in exchange for his life?”

(v. 24) **Jesus** now addressed all of **his disciples**. His pronouncement concerned **anyone** who **wants to** (a choice of the will) **follow after me** (a present ongoing decision that affects the rest of one’s life). **Anyone** with this desire must do three things. **Deny himself** refers to leaving behind all self-interest and everything related to natural human tendencies.

To **take up his cross** referred to the Roman practice of crucifixion in which a condemned person carried the horizontal bar of the cross to the place of execution. From there, it was attached to the upright stake already in place. The implication is not about denying our desires. It means dying to our desires.

Follow me uses a different word for “follow” than the idea of “coming” found earlier in the verse. This word (*akoloutheito*) is a present imperative and suggests one who keeps on following Jesus. It reflects a whole life of discipleship. Discipleship is not merely a matter of correctly confessing Jesus (Matt. 16:16). It requires total commitment of a person’s life to following Him.

(v. 25) Jesus followed these demands of discipleship with three statements containing incentives for making such a commitment. The first reason in verse 25 is a paradox: Anyone trying to **save** their **life** by living for themselves will **lose it**. But anyone who **loses his life** for the sake of Jesus **will find it**. Jesus’s words are similar to what He said in Matthew 10:39 and in John 12:25. But He always emphasized that this was a matter of choice: **whoever wants to**.

(v. 26) As in verse 25, **for** identifies another reason why discipleship is worth the sacrifice. Focusing on the folly of accumulating extreme wealth in this world, Jesus used two rhetorical questions related to the world of commerce. His first question focused on what **benefit** comes if someone **gains the whole world yet loses his life**. *The world* here refers to the riches of this life, and *the whole* emphasizes the extent of those

riches. Of course, the proper answer is “Nothing.” The writer of Ecclesiastes wrestled with this same question and came to the same conclusion (Eccl. 1:3; 2:4-11). Gaining the whole world also reflects the offer Satan made to Jesus in exchange for worship (Matt. 4:8-9).

The Greek word *life* in verses 25-26 is *psyche*, meaning both “life” and “soul.” Those who pursue such foolish goals and distorted values will lose not only their present life, but also their souls for eternity.

To **give in exchange** is another example of commercial language, referring to a trade or purchase. Jesus noted that those who have lost their life/soul (v. 26a) will never be able to buy it back again. This is what Psalm 49:6-7 emphasizes: “They trust in their wealth and boast of their abundant riches. Yet these cannot redeem a person or pay his ransom to God.” Jesus also may have been warning His followers that nothing in this temporal world compares to one’s soul.

The final motivation Jesus named can be found in verse 27 and relates to Jesus’s return. When He comes back in glory with His angels, He will reward His faithful followers. Paul grasped the significance of this incentive for a life of discipleship as he testified in Romans 8:18.

Bible Skill

Read, reflect on, and apply a Bible passage.

Focus on Matthew 16:24. Identify the three qualifications for becoming a true disciple of Jesus. Reflect on the meaning of each qualification by responding to these questions: *What does it mean to deny oneself? What are some things that hinder me from denying myself? What does it mean to take up your cross? What does it mean to follow Jesus? For you, what is the next step in following Jesus?*



APPLICATION POINT: We cannot follow Jesus fully until we sacrifice our personal agendas to Him.

READ:

Instruct adults to read Matthew 16:24-26 silently, inserting their own names throughout the verses.

ASK:

How does making the passage personal by inserting your own name affect the meaning for you? Discuss responses.

EXAMINE:

Direct adults to identify the three qualifications for a true disciple of Jesus (v. 24). Encourage them to reflect on each qualification by responding to these questions:

- *What hinders people from denying themselves?*
- *How does the image of a cross today differ from how crosses were understood by Jesus's audience?*
- *Why is simply holding an orthodox view of Jesus not enough in the Christian life?*

ASK:

What does it mean to deny ourselves and to carry our cross? (PSG, p. 34)

RECAP:

Note that Jesus shared more about why discipleship is important. Read this to help adults better understand Jesus's teaching:

Jesus pictured a person gaining all that the world has to offer in riches, fame, security, and pleasure. Tragically none of this will rescue them at the end of life. Death and judgment will not be delayed by the accumulations of life. The ultimate question in life is simply this: what are we willing to exchange to experience life to the fullest, now and for eternity? (PSG, p. 34)

CHALLENGE:

Urge adults to reflect on what they may be holding that distracts them from complete devotion to God.

Group Activity Option

Lay Down My Life

Ask adults to consider how their life plan at age 16 is different from the path they've actually traveled. Allow volunteers to share responses. Affirm that Jesus had a plan, even if it was different from their plan. Assure them that He still has a plan that will lead to their good and His glory. Challenge them to surrender their own plans to God so that they can follow Jesus as He leads them.

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 35 of the *Personal Study Guide*:

- *We cannot follow Jesus fully until we know and accept His true identity.*
- *We cannot follow Jesus fully until we accept His mission as Messiah and Savior.*
- *We cannot follow Jesus fully until we sacrifice our personal agendas to Him.*

REFLECT:

Invite adults to look back through the direct quotes of Jesus in today's passage. Encourage them to share how they see the summary points from this lesson revealed in these statements from the Lord. Highlight the value of living out each one.

DISCUSS:

Invite a volunteer to read aloud the first set of questions on page 35 of the PSG. Review the various ways people in the world view Jesus and how that differs from what we find in the Bible. Emphasize that Matthew wanted his readers to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, the One sent by God to save the world. Note that this is the view genuine disciples of Jesus understand and embrace.

PRAY:

Direct adults to respond to the second set of questions on page 35 of the PSG. Invite them to meditate on their lists and to talk to God about what each one means to their relationship with Him. Close in prayer, asking God to help each person know Him for who He is and to follow Him without reservation.

AFTER THE SESSION

Send the group a text or email during the week. Encourage them to continue reflecting on their lists from the second set of questions on page 35 of the PSG. As appropriate, share ways God has been speaking to you through this exercise. Challenge adults to consider how their personal worship time can move them toward knowing Jesus better and following Him sacrificially.

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