

Matthew 16

by John Nelson Darby

The sermon explores the revelation of Christ's Person as the foundation of the assembly and the kingdom, and the forms of unbelief that precede a true confession of Christ.

Scripture: Matthew 16:13

Topics: "Revelation of Christ", "Authority in the Kingdom"

Description

John Nelson Darby expounds on Matthew 16, emphasizing the revelation of Jesus as the Christ and the Son of the living God, contrasting the unbelief of the Pharisees and Sadducees with Peter's divinely revealed faith. He highlights the transition from the Jewish system to the establishment of the assembly, built upon the acknowledgment of Christ's true identity, and warns against the subtle influences of unbelief that can affect even the disciples. Darby illustrates how Peter's confession signifies a pivotal moment in understanding Jesus' mission, which includes suffering and the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. He also discusses the authority given to Peter and the implications of the keys of the kingdom, underscoring the necessity of mortifying the flesh to truly follow Christ. Ultimately, the sermon calls believers to recognize the significance of Christ's identity and the implications for their lives and faith.

Transcript

Chapter 16 goes farther than the revelation of the simple grace of God. Jesus reveals what was about to be formed in the counsels of that grace, where He was owned, shewing the rejection of the proud among His people, that He abhors them as they abhor Him. (Zechariah 11). Shutting their eyes (through perversity of will) to the marvellous and beneficent signs of His power, which He constantly bestowed on the poor who sought Him, the Pharisees and Sadducees-struck with these manifestations, yet unbelieving in heart and will-demand a sign from heaven. He rebukes them for their unbelief, shewing them that they knew how to discern the signs of the weather; yet the signs of the times were far more striking. They were the adulterous and wicked generation, and He leaves them: significant expressions of what was now passing in Israel.

He warns His forgetful disciples against the devices of these subtle adversaries to the truth, and to Him whom God had sent to reveal it. Israel is abandoned, as a nation, in the persons of their leaders. At the same time in patient grace He recalls His disciples to the remembrance of what explained His words to them.

Afterwards He questions His disciples as to what men in general said of Him. It was all matter of opinion, not of faith; that is, the uncertainty that belongs to moral indifference, to the absence of that conscious need of soul which can rest only in the truth, in the Saviour one has found. He then inquires what they themselves said of Him. Peter, to whom the Father had deigned to reveal Him, declares his faith, saying, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." No uncertainty, no mere opinion is here, but the powerful effect of the revelation, made by the Father Himself, of the Person of Christ, to the disciple whom He had elected for this privilege.

Here the condition of the people displays itself in a remarkable manner, not, as in the preceding chapter, with respect to the law, but with respect to Christ, who had been presented to them. We see it in contrast with the revelation of His glory to those who followed Him. We have thus three classes: first, haughty unbelieving Pharisees; next, persons conscious and owning there was divine power and authority in Christ, but indifferent; lastly, the revelation of God and divinely given faith.

In the fifteenth chapter, grace towards one who had no hope but in it, is put in contrast with disobedience to and hypocritical perversion of the law, by which the scribes and Pharisees sought to cover their disobedience with the pretence of piety.

The sixteenth chapter, judging the unbelief of the Pharisees respecting the Person of Christ, and setting aside these perverse men, brings in the revelation of His Person as the foundation of the assembly, which was to take the place of the Jews as the witness for God in the earth; and announces the counsels of God with respect to its establishment. It shews us, in adjunction to this, the administration of the kingdom, as it was now being established on the earth.

Let us consider, first, the revelation of His Person.

Peter confesses Him to be the Christ, the fulfilment of the promises made by God, and of the prophecies that announced their realisation. He was the One who should come, the Messiah whom God had promised.

Moreover, He was the Son of God. The second Psalm had declared that, in spite of the schemings of the leaders of the people, and the haughty animosity of the kings of the earth, God's King should be anointed on the hill of Zion. He was the Son, begotten of God. The kings and judges of the earth [See Footnote #42] are called to submit themselves to Him, lest they should be smitten with the rod of His power, when He takes the heathen for His inheritance. Thus the true believer waited for the Son of God born in due time upon this earth. Peter confessed Jesus to be the Son of God. So had Nathanael also: "Thou art the Son of God, thou art the King of Israel." And, still later, Martha did the same.

Peter however, especially taught of the Father, adds to his confession a word simple, yet full of power: "Thou art the Son of the living God." Not only He who fulfils the promises, and answers to the prophecies; it is of the living God that He is the Son, of Him in whom is life and life-giving power.

He inherits that power of life in God which nothing can overcome or destroy. Who can vanquish the power of Him-of this Son-who came forth from "Him that liveth"? Satan has the power of death; it is he who holds man under the dominion of this dreadful consequence of sin; and that, by the just judgment of God which constitutes its power. The expression "The gates of hades," of the invisible world, refers to this kingdom of Satan. It is then on this power, which leaves the stronghold of the enemy without strength, that the assembly is built. The life of God shall not be destroyed. The Son of the living God shall not be overcome.

That; then, which God founds upon this rock of the unchangeable power of life in His Son shall not be overthrown by the kingdom of death. If man has been overcome and has fallen under the power of this kingdom, God, the living God, will not be overcome by it. It is on this that Christ builds His assembly. It is the work of Christ based on Him as Son of the living God, not of the first Adam nor based on him—His work accomplished according to the power which this truth reveals. The Person of Jesus, the Son of the living God, is its strength. It is the resurrection that proved it. There He is declared to be the Son of God with power. Accordingly it is not during His life, but when raised from the dead, that He begins this work. Life was in Himself; but it is after the Father had burst the gates of hades—nay, He Himself in His divine power had done so and was risen—that He begins to build by the Holy Ghost as ascended on high, that which the power of death or of him who wielded it—already overcome—can never destroy. It is His Person that is here contemplated, and it is on His Person that all is founded. The resurrection is the proof that He is the Son of the living God, and that the gates of hades can do nothing against Him; their power is destroyed by it. Hence we see how the assembly (though formed on earth) is much more than a dispensation, the kingdom is not.

The work of the cross was needed; but it is not the question here of that which the righteous judgment of God required, or of the justification of an individual, but of that which nullified the power of the enemy. It was the Person of Him whom Peter was given to acknowledge, who lived according to the power of the life of God. It was a peculiar and direct revelation from heaven by the Father. Doubtless Christ had given proofs enough of who He was; but proofs had proved nothing to man's heart. The Father's revelation was the way of knowing who He was, and this went far beyond the hopes of a Messiah.

Here, then, the Father had directly revealed the truth of Christ's own Person, a revelation which went beyond all question of relationship with the Jews. On this foundation Christ would build His assembly. Peter, already so named by the Lord, receives a confirmation of that title on this occasion. The Father had revealed to Simon, the son of Jonas, the mystery of the Person of Jesus; and secondly, Jesus also betokens, by the name He gives him, [See Footnote #43] the steadfastness, the firmness, the durability, the practical strength, of His servant favoured by grace. The right of bestowing a name belongs to a superior, who can assign to the one who bears it his place and his name, in the family or the situation he is in. This right, where real, supposes discernment, intelligence, in that which is going on. Adam names the animals. Nebuchadnezzar gives new names to the captive Jews; the king of Egypt to Eliakim, whom he had placed on the throne. Jesus therefore takes this place when He says, The Father hath revealed this unto thee; and I also give you a place and a name connected with this grace. It is on that which the Father hath revealed unto thee that I am going to build My assembly, [See Footnote #44] against which (founded on the life that comes from God) the gates of the kingdom of death shall never prevail; and I who build, and build on this immovable foundation—I give you the place of a stone (Peter) in connection with this living temple. Through the gift of God thou belongest already by nature to the building—a living stone, having the knowledge of that truth which is the foundation, and which makes of every stone a part of the edifice. Peter was pre-eminently such by this confession; he was so in anticipation by the election of God. This revelation was made by the Father in sovereignty. The Lord assigns him, withal, his place, as possessing the right of administration and authority in the kingdom He was going to establish.

Thus far with respect to the assembly, now mentioned for the first time, the Jews having been rejected because of their unbelief, and man a convicted sinner.

Another subject presents itself in connection with this of the assembly that the Lord was going to build; namely, the kingdom which was going to be established. It was to have the form of the kingdom of

heaven; it was so in the counsels of God; but it was now to be set up in a peculiar manner, the King having been rejected on earth.

But, rejected as He was, the keys of the kingdom were in the Lord's hand; its authority belonged to Him. He would bestow them on Peter, who, when He was gone, should open its doors to the Jews first, and then to the Gentiles. He should also exercise authority from the Lord within the kingdom; so that whatsoever he bound on earth in the name of Christ (the true King, although gone up to heaven) should be bound in heaven; and if he loosed anything on earth, his deed should be ratified in heaven. In a word, he had the power of command in the kingdom of God on earth, this kingdom having now the character of kingdom of heaven, because its King was in heaven [See Footnote #45] and heaven would stamp his acts with its authority. But it is heaven sanctioning his earthly acts, not his binding or loosing for heaven. The assembly connected with the character of Son of the living God and built by Christ, though formed on earth, belongs to heaven; the kingdom, though governed from heaven, belongs to earth-has its place and ministration there.

These four things then are declared by the Lord in this passage:-First, the revelation made by the Father to Simon; Second, the name given to this Simon by Jesus, who was going to build His assembly on the foundation revealed in that which the Father had made known to Simon; Third, the assembly built by Christ Himself, not yet complete, on the foundation of the Person of Jesus acknowledged as Son of the living God; Fourth, the keys of the kingdom that should be given to Peter, that is to say, authority in the kingdom as administering it on the part of Christ, ordering in it that which was His will, and which should be ratified in heaven. All this is connected with Simon personally, in virtue of the Father's election (who, in His wisdom, had chosen him to receive this revelation), and of Christ's authority (who had bestowed on him the name that distinguished him as personally enjoying this privilege).

The Lord having thus made known the purposes of God with regard to the future-purposes to be accomplished in the assembly and in the kingdom, there was no longer room for His presentation to the Jews as Messiah. Not that He gave up the testimony, full of grace and patience towards the people, which He had borne throughout His ministry. No; that indeed continued, but His disciples were to understand that it was no longer their work to proclaim Him to the people as the Christ From this time also He began to teach His disciples that He must suffer and be killed and be raised again.

But, blessed and honoured as Peter was by the revelation which the Father had made to him, his heart still clung in a carnal manner to the human glory of his Master (in truth, to his own), and was still far from rising to the height of the thoughts of God. Alas! he is not the only instance of this. To be convinced of the most exalted truths, and even to enjoy them sincerely as truths, is a different thing from having the heart formed to the sentiments, and to the walk here below, which are in accordance with those truths. It is not sincerity in the enjoyment of the truth that is wanting. What is wanting is to have the flesh, self, mortified-to be dead to the world. We may sincerely enjoy the truth as taught of God and yet not have the flesh mortified or the heart in a state which is according to that truth in what it involves down here. Peter (so lately honoured by the revelation of the glory of Jesus, and made in a very special manner the depository of administration in the kingdom given to the Son-having a distinguished place in that which was to follow the Lord's rejection by the Jews) is now doing the adversary's work with respect to the perfect submission of Jesus to the suffering and ignominy that were to introduce this glory and characterise the kingdom. Alas! the case was plain; he savoured the things of men, and not the things of God. But the Lord, in faithfulness, rejects Peter in this matter, and teaches His disciples that the only path, the appointed and necessary path, is the cross; if any one would follow Him, that is the path He took. Moreover what would it

profit a man to save his life and lose all-to gain the world and lose his soul? For this was the question, [See Footnote #46] and not now the outward glory of the kingdom.

Having examined this chapter, as the expression of the transition from the Messianic system to the establishment of the assembly founded on the revelation of the Person of Christ, I desire also to call attention to the characters of unbelief which are developed in it, both among the Jews and in the hearts of the disciples. It will be profitable to observe the forms of this unbelief.

First of all, it takes the grosser form of asking a sign from heaven. The Pharisees and Sadducees unite to shew their insensibility to all that the Lord had done. They require proof to their natural senses, that is, to their unbelief. They will not believe God, either in hearkening to His words or in beholding His works. God must satisfy their wilfulness, which would be neither faith nor the work of God. They had understanding for human things that were much less clearly manifested, but none for the things of God. A Saviour lost to them, as Jews on earth, should be the only sign granted them. They would have to submit, willing or not, to the judgment of the unbelief they displayed. The kingdom should be taken from them; the Lord leaves them. The sign of Jonah is connected with the subject of the whole chapter.

We next see this same inattention to the power manifested in the works of Jesus; but it is no longer the opposition of the unbelieving will; occupation of heart with present things withdraws such from the influence of the signs already given. This is weakness, not ill-will. Nevertheless they are guilty; but Jesus calls them "men of little faith," not "hypocrites," and "a wicked and adulterous generation."

We then see unbelief manifesting itself in the form of indolent opinion, which proves that the heart and conscience are not interested in a subject that ought to command them-a subject that if the heart would really face its true importance, it would have no rest until it had arrived at certainty with respect to it. The soul here has no sense of need; consequently there is no discernment. When the soul feels this need, there is but one thing that can meet it; there can be no rest till it is found. The revelation of God that created this need, does not leave the soul in peace until it is assured of possessing that which awakened it. Those who are not sensible of this need can rest in probabilities, each according to his natural character, his education, his circumstances. There is enough to awaken curiosity-the mind is occupied about it, and judges. Faith has wants, and, in principle intelligence as to the object which meets those wants; the soul is exercised till it finds that which it needs. The fact is that God is there.

This is Peter's case. The Father reveals His Son to him Though weak, living faith was found in him, we see the condition of his soul when he says, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life; and we believe and are sure that thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Happy the man to whom God reveals such truths as these, in whom He awakens these wants! There may be conflict, much to learn, much to mortify; but the counsel of God is there, and the life connected with it. We have seen its effect in the case of Peter. Every Christian has his own place in the temple of which Simon was so eminent a stone. Does it then follow that the heart is, practically, at the height of the revelation made to it? No; there may be, after all, the flesh not yet mortified on that side where the revelation touches our earthly position.

In fact the revelation made to Peter implied the rejection of Christ on earth-necessarily led to His humiliation and death. That was the point. To substitute the revelation of the Son of God, the assembly and the heavenly kingdom, for the manifestation of the Messiah on earth-what could it mean, except that Jesus was to be delivered up to the Gentiles to be crucified, and after that to rise again? But morally Peter

had not attained to this. On the contrary, his carnal heart availed itself of the revelation made to him, and of that which Jesus had said to him, for self-exaltation. He saw, therefore, the personal glory without apprehending the practical moral consequences. He begins to rebuke the Lord Himself, and seeks to turn Him aside from the path of obedience and submission. The Lord, ever faithful, treats him as an adversary. Alas! how often have we enjoyed some truth, and that sincerely, and yet have failed in the practical consequences that it led to on earth! A heavenly glorified Saviour, who builds the assembly, implies the cross on earth. The flesh does not understand this. It will raise its Messiah to heaven, if you will; but to take its share of the humiliation that necessarily follows is not its idea of a glorified Messiah. The flesh must be mortified to take this place. We must have the strength of Christ by the Holy Ghost. A Christian who is not dead to the world is but a stumbling-stone to every one who seeks to follow Christ.

These are the forms of unbelief that precede a true confession of Christ, and that are found alas! in those who have sincerely confessed and known Him (the flesh not being so mortified that the soul can walk in the height of that which it has learnt of God, and the spiritual understanding being obscured by thinking of consequences which the flesh rejects).

But if the cross was the entrance into the kingdom, the revelation of the glory would not be delayed. The Messiah being rejected by the Jews, a title more glorious and of far deeper import is unfolded: the Son of man should come in the glory of the Father (for He was the Son of God), and reward every man according to his works. There were even some standing there who should not taste of death (for of this they were speaking) till they had seen the manifestation of the glory of the kingdom that belonged to the Son of man.

We may remark here the title of "Son of God" established as the foundation; that of Messiah given up so far as concerned the testimony rendered in that day, and replaced by that of "Son of man," which He takes at the same time as that of the Son of God, and which had a glory that belonged to Him in His own right. He was to come in the glory of His Father as Son of God, and in His own kingdom as Son of man.

It is interesting to remember here the instruction given us in the beginning of the Book of Psalms. The righteous man, distinguished from the congregation of the wicked, had been presented in the first Psalm. Then, in the second, we have the rebellion of the kings of the earth and the rulers against the Lord and against His Anointed (that is, His Christ). Now upon this the decree of Jehovah is declared. Adonai, the Lord, shall mock at them from heaven. Further, Jehovah's King shall be established on Mount Zion. This is the decree: "Jehovah hath said unto me, Thou art my Son: this day [See Footnote #47] have I begotten thee." The kings of the earth and the judges are commanded to kiss the Son.

Now in the Psalms that follow, all this glory is darkened. The distress of the remnant, in which Christ has a part, is related. Then, in Psalms 8, He is addressed as Son of man, Heir of all the rights conferred in sovereignty upon man by the counsels of God. The name of Jehovah becomes excellent in all the earth. These Psalms do not go beyond the earthly part of these truths, excepting where it is written, "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh at them"; while in Matthew 16 the connection of the Son of God with this, His coming with His angels (to say nothing of the assembly), are set before us. That is to say, we see that the Son of man will come in the glory of heaven. Not that His dwelling there is the truth declared; but that He is invested with the highest glory of heaven when He comes to set up His kingdom on earth. He comes in His kingdom. The kingdom is established on the earth; but He comes to take it with the glory of heaven. This is displayed in the following chapter, according to the promise here in verse 28.

In each Gospel that speaks of it, the transfiguration immediately follows the promise of not tasting death before seeing the kingdom of the Son of man. And not only so, but Peter (in his second Epistle, 1:16), when speaking of this scene, declares that it was a manifestation of the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He says that the word of prophecy was confirmed to them by the view of His majesty; so that they knew that whereof they spoke, in making known to them the power and the coming of Christ, having beheld His majesty. In fact it is precisely in this sense that the Lord speaks of it here, as we have seen. It was a sample of the glory in which He would hereafter come, given to confirm the faith of His disciples in the prospect of His death which He had just announced to them.

Footnotes for Matthew 16

42: The study of the Psalms will have made us understand that this is the connection with the establishment of the Jewish remnant in blessing in the last days.

43: The passage (chap. 16: 18) should be read, "And I also say unto thee."

44: It is important here to distinguish the church which Christ builds, not yet finished, but which He Himself builds, and that which is, as a manifested whole in the world, built up in responsibility by man. In Ephesians 2: 20, 21 and 1 Peter 2: 4, 5, we have this divine building growing and built up. No mention of man's work is found in either passage; it is a divine one. In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul is a wise master builder; others may build in wood, hay and stubble. The confusion of these has been the basis of Popery and other corruptions found in what is called the church. His church, looked at in its reality, is a divine work which Christ accomplishes and which abides.

45: Remark here what I have spoken of elsewhere-there are no keys of or to the church or assembly. Peter had the keys of administration in the kingdom. But the idea of keys in connection with the church, or the power of the keys in the church, is a pure fallacy. There are none such at all. The church is built; men do not build with keys, and it is Christ (not Peter) who builds it. Further, the acts thus sanctioned were acts of administration down here. Heaven puts its sanction on them, but they did not relate to heaven, but to earthly administration of the kingdom. Further, it is to be remarked that what is conferred here is individual and personal. It was a name and authority conferred on Simon, son of Jonas. Some further remarks here may help us to understand more fully the bearing of these chapters. In the parable of the sower (chap. 13) the Person of the Lord is not brought forward, only that it is sowing, not reaping. In the first similitude of the kingdom He is Son of man, and the field is the world. He is quite out of Judaism. In chapter 14 we have the state of things from John's rejection, to the time the Lord is owned on His return where He had been rejected. In chapter 15 is the moral controversy, and God in grace in Himself as above evil. On this I dwell no further. But in chapter 16 we have the Person of the Son of God, the living God, and hereon the assembly, and Christ the builder; in chapter 17 the kingdom with the Son of man coming in glory. The keys (however heaven sanctioned Simon's use of them) were, as we have seen, of the kingdom of heaven (not of the assembly); and that, the parable of the tares shews, was to be corrupted and spoiled, and this irremediably. Christ builds the church, not Peter. Compare 1 Peter 2: 4, 5.

46: In the Epistle of Peter we continually find these same thoughts-the words, "living hope," "living stone"-applied to Christ, and afterwards to Christians. And again, in accordance with our present subject, salvation through life in Christ, the Son of the living God, we find "receiving the end of our faith, even the salvation of [our] souls." We may read all the verses by which the apostle introduces his instructions.

47: We have seen that Peter went beyond this. Christ is here seen as the Son born on the earth in time, not as the Son from eternity in the bosom of the Father. Peter, without the full revelation of this last truth, sees Him to be the Son according to the power of divine life in His own Person, upon which the assembly consequently could be built. But here we are to consider that which belongs to the kingdom.}

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