**Believing Means Following**

**Focal Text**  
Mathew 16:13-17, 21-26

**Background**  
Mathew 16:13-26

**Main Idea**  
Truly believing in Jesus means following Jesus no matter the cost.

**Question to Explore**  
How much do you believe in Jesus?

**Quick Read**  
True disciples submit everything to their Master.

**Commentary**
Jonathan Edwards, the great preacher of the First Great Awakening, once wrote in his diary: “Resolved first: that every man should live to the glory of God. Resolved second: that whether others do this or not, I will.” William Carey, the pioneer missionary to India, stated: “I am not my own, nor would I choose for myself. Let God employ me where he thinks fit.” F. B. Meyer, perhaps the greatest preacher of his generation, said, “If I had a hundred lives, they should be at Christ’s disposal.”

Do you see a common theme to their lives? What have you sacrificed to serve God? What is God asking you to give for his Kingdom today?
Last week we watched Jesus commission his apostles for their first tour of ministry. Matthew’s narrative continues with our Lord’s endorsement of John the Baptist (Matthew 11:1-19), his judgment against unbelieving cities in Galilee (Matt. 11:20-24), and his invitation to the weary to follow and trust in him (11:25-30). He pronounced himself Lord of the Sabbath (12:1-14) and faced growing criticism and opposition (12:15-50).

Jesus then taught various parables about the Kingdom of God (Matt. 13) and performed miracles to substantiate his claim to be Messiah (Matt. 14). He clarified his expectations of his disciples (Matt. 15:1-20), welcomed a Canaanite woman’s faith (15:21-28), and fed four thousand families (15:29-39). Facing further opposition (16:1-12), he led his disciples to a remote region for a time of spiritual retreat.

Going to the Gates of Hades

Our text begins: “When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’” (16:13). This “region” (mere, area) stood 1,150 feet above sea level on the southwest base of Mount Hermon, the tallest peak in Israel (standing more than 9,000 feet above sea level). The area is one of the most beautiful sites in Israel; whenever I lead study tours to the Holy Land we always take a day to visit.

The site was known as “Caesarea” in honor of Emperor Augustus, who gave the district to Herod the Great in 20 B.C. His son Philip rebuilt and beautified the town after his father’s death in 4 B.C., and named it in honor of both Caesar and himself.

An ancient cave is prominent; before earthquakes filled in its floor it led to a shaft that bored so deeply into the earth that its depth was never discovered. To the ancients this was the “Gates of Hades,” the doorway to the underworld. The Romans built a magnificent white marble temple in front of this cave, dedicated to the worship of the emperor.

Pagan worshipers traveling through the area left idols on shelves they carved into the rock of the hillside. They believed their god Pan to have been born in the cave, and they called the area Panias (or Banias). Fourteen temples to the worship of Baal were scattered around the region as well.

The site is located 120 miles from Jerusalem and 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee; it was north of Israel’s historic boundaries, in the heart of Gentile paganism. Jewish pilgrims seldom if ever visited the area. Jesus and his disciples had to hike for days, climbing 1,700 feet uphill, to reach it.
Claims about Jesus
When they did, Jesus spent some time in private prayer (Luke 9:18) and then asked them (Matt. 16:13), “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” Last week we learned that “Son of Man” was Jesus’ favorite self-designation, a metaphor combining both his divinity (see Daniel 7:13-14) and his humanity (see Ezekiel 2:1).

His disciples were quick to answer: “They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets”’ (Matt. 16:14). The first option was the opinion of Herod: “At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus, and he said to his attendants, ‘This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him’” (14:1-2). Those who agreed with him saw Jesus as a reincarnated messenger sent to prepare the way for the military Messiah to come.

“Others say Elijah,” they reported (16:14). Most Jews considered Elijah the greatest of their prophets. God had promised: “I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse” (Malachi 4:5-6). Since he did not die (2 Kings 2:11-12), many expected him to return in person. Modern Jewish Passover celebrations include an empty chair for Elijah, in hopes that he will come to announce the Messiah’s arrival.

“Still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets,” they added (Matt. 16:13). In the apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees we read:

It was also in the same document that the prophet [Jeremiah], having received an oracle, ordered that the tent and the ark should follow with him, and that he went out to the mountain where Moses had gone up and had seen the inheritance of God. Jeremiah came and found a cave-dwelling, and he brought there the tent and the ark and the altar of incense; then he sealed up the entrance. Some of those who followed him came up intending to mark the way, but could not find it. When Jeremiah learned of it, he rebuked them and declared: “The place shall remain unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy. Then the Lord will disclose these things, and the glory of the Lord and the cloud will appear, as they were shown in the case of Moses, and as Solomon asked that the place should be specially consecrated” (2 Maccabees 2:4-8, NRSV).

Some Jews apparently expected Jeremiah to return before the Messiah came, to bring the ark and other temple furnishing back to their rightful place. In addition, Jesus’ judgments against the people (Matt. 11:20-24) and about the temple (Matt. 12:6; 24:1-2) may have reminded them of this prophet.
Professing the Christ

Now we come to the point of Jesus’ question: “‘But what about you?’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’” (Matt. 16:15). The first “you” is emphatic in the Greek; we could paraphrase, “But what about your opinion?” The One who knew “all things” (John 21:17) did not need the disciples to give him popular estimates regarding his identity. His purpose in asking was to compare conventional wisdom with the growing understanding of his own followers.

Then Peter spoke up: “Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’” (Matt. 16:16). “Christ” identifies Jesus as the Messiah, the promised deliverer of the nation. But “Son of the living God” clarifies—he would not be a mere man come to deliver the people, but God himself come to save his people.

This was not the first such declaration made by Jesus’ followers:

- “The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (that is, the Christ)” (John 1:41).
- “Then Nathanael declared, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel!’” (John 1:49).
- “Those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God’” (Matt. 14:33).
- Peter himself earlier stated, “We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:69).

Our Lord accepted and agreed with his lead apostle’s declaration: “Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven’” (Matt. 16:17). Simon bar Jonah was Peter’s given name. By using it rather than the nickname he assigned Peter, Jesus emphasized Peter’s humanity. Jesus did not want Peter to become prideful as a result of his correct declaration (this was a persistent temptation for Peter; see 26:33; Luke 22:33).

We cannot know God unless he reveals himself to us:

At that time Jesus said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matt. 11:25-27).

Peter made the first essential step toward sacrificial discipleship: know the One you serve. Focus on him as your King and Lord. Proclaim him with what you say and do. Seek to glorify him with your service, whatever its cost. Remember that you serve him, not yourself.
Busyness is no substitute for Kingdom service. Consider this pastor’s description:

Perhaps the ministry was never busier than it is now. Hundreds of men are hoarse from continual speaking, and are wearied out with running here and running there. If things slow down, we evolve yet another type of meeting. And when this new and added wheel is spinning merrily with all the other wheels, there may be no spiritual outcome whatsoever, but there is a wind blowing in our faces; and we hot and sticky engineers have a comfortable feeling that something is going on.

Is this a portrait of the strain and stress of ministry in these challenging days? Actually, these words were written by Arthur John Gossip in 1952. How much busier are things today?

Remember why you teach, and the One for whom you teach. And be sure you do all you do for his glory alone.

**Suffer for Christ as Lord (16:21-26)**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer made famous the statement, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” Our words are important, but the depth of our commitment to Jesus is measured by the degree to which we will suffer for his sake. James warned us: “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder” (James 2:19). Faith is proven by actions.

As our text continues, Jesus responded to Peter’s declaration with the pronouncement, “I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). The church is his, not ours. Anything we do in its service on earth is dependent on his will in heaven (16:19). We must say what he tells us to say, when he tells us to say it (16:20).

**Choosing the cross**

And we must be willing to pay any price to follow him faithfully. Our study continues: “From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life” (16:21).

This was not Jesus’ first reference to his coming death:

- “Then the Jews demanded of him, ‘What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days’” (John 2:18-19).
- “As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt. 12:40).
• “‘Leave her alone,’ Jesus replied. ‘It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me’” (John 12:7-8).

Later Jesus would continue reminding them:

• “As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, ‘Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead’” (Matt. 17:9).

• “Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands” (17:12).

• “When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life.’ And the disciples were filled with grief” (17:22-23).

Why was it necessary that “he must go to Jerusalem” (16:21)? Because Jesus’ entry to Jerusalem would fulfill the prophetic promise:

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!  
Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!  
See, your king comes to you,  
righteous and having salvation,  
gentle and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zechariah 9:9).

Only there could he “suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law” (Matt. 16:21). Why was such persecution necessary to his atoning sacrifice? Because it would fulfill Messianic prophecy:

All who see me mock me;  
they hurl insults, shaking their heads:  
“He trusts in the LORD;  
let the LORD rescue him.  
Let him deliver him,  
since he delights in him” (Psalm 22:7-8).

For these reasons, Jesus was clear: “I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!” (Luke 13:33). All this was because Jesus “must be killed and on the third day be raised to life” (Matt. 16:21).

The writer of Hebrews affirmed: “Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He
sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself’ (Hebrews 7:27). Peter agreed: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24).

Avoiding the cross
At Jesus’ statement in Matthew 16:21 about suffering and being killed, “Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ‘Never, Lord!’ he said. ‘This shall never happen to you!’” (Matt. 16:22). “Took him aside” translates proslabomenos, meaning to pull aside, to take by the hand and draw away. “Rebuke” translated epitiman, meaning to admonish strongly. “Never” translates hileos, meaning may it never be or be it far from you. “This shall never happen to you” is literally, This shall not never come about to you.

Peter was horrified that Jesus would be willing to be so persecuted by his enemies. But the apostle did not know that his words, while well-intentioned, were actually a temptation from the enemy: “Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men’” (16:23).

“Get behind me” translates hypage, meaning to go away, to withdraw, to depart, to die. This was not the first time Jesus had to command Satan to leave him alone (see 4:10). However, the enemy’s tempting strategies would continue across our Lord’s earthly ministry (see Luke 4:13), as this episode indicates.

In Jesus’ earlier temptations, Satan did all he could to lead Jesus away from the cross. He tried to entice him to use his miraculous powers for his personal benefit (Matt. 4:1-4), to incite popularity with the crowds (4:5-7), and to gain “the kingdoms of the world and their splendor” (4:8). As in his wilderness temptations, once again the enemy placed an alternative to the cross before our Lord. Such a suggestion was a “stumbling block,” translating skandalon, literally the trigger of the trap, the place where the bait is placed. Such sin always leads to ruin (see Romans 11:9).

Peter’s dependence on his own misguided wisdom is a warning to us all: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death” (Proverbs 14:12). The Lord cautioned us:

“My thoughts are not your thoughts,  
neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD.  

“As the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Taking up our cross
After rejecting Satan’s attempt to lead him from the cross, our Lord then made such sacrifice essential for those who would follow him: “Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘If
anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me’” (Matt. 16:24). “Would” translates thelei, meaning to wish, will, purpose. “Come after me” renders elthein, meaning to follow along, a reference to discipleship.

“Deny himself” translates aparnesastho, meaning to refuse or disregard oneself. The tense indicates past action, a decision that must be made before the person can move forward. A second decision follows: “take up his cross.” “Take up” translates arato, meaning to lift up, carry along. This verb is also in the aorist tense, indicating past action. Then we can “follow” Jesus. the verb translates akoloutheito and is in the present tense, meaning continually follow me as Master and Lord.

To “take up his cross” meant simply a willingness to die. As many as 30,000 people were crucified by the Roman Empire during Jesus’ lifetime. We might say, Be willing to go to the electric chair or be willing to be hanged. Once a person took the crossbeam onto his shoulders, he began the march to his own execution (see John 19:17). True disciples have already shouldered their own instrument of death.

Here’s why this decision is so necessary: “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it” (Matt. 16:25). “Save” translates sosai, meaning to preserve or keep from harm. “Lose” translates apolesei, meaning to ruin, perish, destroy. All our attempts to protect ourselves are doomed to fail, for we will all one day die. On the other hand, when we give up our lives for Jesus’ sake we “find” (heuresei, meaning to obtain) them eternally.

Earlier, Jesus made a similar statement:

Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it (10:37-39; see John 12:25).

Jesus amplified his assertion: “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matt. 16:26). “Gains” translates kerdese, meaning to make a profit. “Forfeits” translates zemiothe, meaning to give up, lose. Early Christians took this call to suffering seriously: “They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” (Acts 5:40-41).
Peter would later extend this example to his readers:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you (1 Peter 4:12-14).

When last did your commitment to Jesus cost you something significant?

**Conclusion**

Disciples profess Christ as their King and then prove their commitment with their sacrifice. We do this, not so God will love us but because he already does. We serve out of gratitude, not guilt.

On March 15, 1985, Mr. Wayne Alderson appeared on *The Today Show*, on the 40th anniversary of his being wounded as the first American to cross into Germany during World War II. He had a permanent crease in his head from the wound he received on that date.

Asked about his most important memory of the occasion, Mr. Alderson replied that it was of a red-headed friend who saved his life that day. Alderson had come face to face with a German soldier. He shot the German, but not before the man had thrown a grenade at Alderson that exploded and sent him face down and wounded into the mud. Nearby, a German machine gun began firing in his direction. Alderson knew that if the grenade wound did not kill him, the machine gun would.

But this friend turned him over so he could breathe and threw his own body over him. He died protecting him from certain death. With tears welling up in his eyes, Alderson said, “I can never forget the person who sacrificed his life to save me. I owe everything to him. I can never forget... I owe everything.”

What do you owe Jesus?
Believing Means Following

Matthew 16:13-17, 21-26

See [www.baptistwaypress.org](http://www.baptistwaypress.org) for additional study materials on

_The Gospel of Matthew:_
_A Primer for Discipleship_

and more than forty-five other Bible studies by BaptistWay Press®,
or call 1-866-249-1799
(M-Fri 8:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m. central time).

A recent book by Dr. Denison, _The Bible—You Can Believe It: Biblical Authority in the Twenty-First Century_, is also available from BAPTISTWAY PRESS®. The price is only $4.95 each plus shipping and any applicable taxes. A _Teaching Guide_ is available for only $1.95 plus shipping and any applicable taxes.

---

**DENISON FORUM ON TRUTH AND CULTURE**

To receive Dr. Denison’s free daily e-mail, “Denison Forum on Truth and Culture,” see [www.denisonforum.org](http://www.denisonforum.org). The brief essay discusses current events and issues in light of God’s word and provides practical applications to life.

Twitter @JimDenison

---