



SPECIAL SESSION

“Who Do You Say That I Am?”

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we take a closer look at the central confession of the Christian faith—that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. When Jesus asked His disciples about His identity, He challenged their understanding of the Messiah and pointed forward to His death and resurrection. As Christians, we confess that Jesus is the Son of God who died for us and rose again. By faith, we are united with Jesus our Messiah, and we are called to take up our cross and follow Him, no matter the cost.

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 16:13-28

THE POINT

The call to follow Jesus includes a call to self-denial.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Jim Elliott was athletic, smart, winsome, a man who “had everything.” He could have been anything he wanted. Yet early in life he chose to follow Jesus. That decision led him to the mission field and ultimately to martyrdom trying to reach the Auca Indians of Ecuador.

Why would Jim and his friends give up everything, including their own lives, for these tribal peoples? While Jim was still in college he penned words that have pierced the hearts of millions, he said, “He is no fool to give what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” These words came from one who echoed the great confession of Peter: Jesus is the Savior, the Messiah, the Son of the living God who suffered, died, and rose again.

- **How does Jim’s decision to give up everything to tell the Auca about Jesus contrast the materialistic nature of our culture today?**

Option 2

Have you ever seen a message pop up on a computer screen saying, “access denied”? This usually happens after an incorrect password has been entered several times. Maybe you’ve seen a basketball player block a shot and heard that the shot was “denied!” Or maybe your teacher denied your request for an extension on an assignment. Being *denied* means *something is not allowed to happen or continue on a desired path*. The denial’s listed here are all external, meaning others denied something we wanted. But how do we deny ourselves?

When Jesus asked His disciples to deny themselves and follow Him, He was essentially asking them to change directions, not to allow themselves to continue down the path they had previously wanted. Instead, He asked them to form their desires to His will, their plans to His plans. Jesus asks the same of His followers today.

- **Consider the world around you. How do you think most people would respond to Jesus’ command to deny themselves and follow Him?**
- **What are some obstacles that might keep young people from denying themselves to follow Jesus?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

The call to follow Jesus includes a call to self-denial.

CHARACTERS

- **Jesus** - the eternal Son of God; second person of the Trinity
- **The Disciples** - the group of individuals Jesus invited to follow Him and be a part of ushering in the kingdom of God

PLOT

In this session, we'll take a closer look at the central confession of the Christian faith—that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. When Jesus asked His disciples about His identity, He challenged their understanding of the Messiah and pointed forward to His death and resurrection. As Christians, we confess that Jesus is the Son of God who died for us and rose again. By faith, we are united with Jesus our Messiah. Therefore, we are called to take up our cross and follow Him, no matter the cost.

TIMELINE

**Special session*

WHO IS HE?

The disciples learn Jesus' identity and the purpose behind why He came.

THE CALLING OF THE DISCIPLES

Jesus invites ordinary people to follow Him.

BORN AGAIN

Nicodemus encounters Jesus and learns about the new birth.

THE DISCIPLES AFFIRMED JESUS AS MESSIAH

The events of Matthew 16 were a turning point in Jesus' ministry and in the disciples' understanding of who Jesus was and what He had come to do. The events in this chapter took place in Caesarea Philippi which was located 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, at the headwaters of the Jordan River, in Gentile territory. Jesus went to this lush, beautiful place for a retreat with His disciples. And then, He asked the question that prompted Peter's confession of faith.

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matt. 16:13-16)

Meeting or being acquainted with people does not mean we know them well. Many people were acquainted with Jesus. He was popular with the crowds, but they had an insufficient view of His identity.

The general population put Jesus in good religious company. Some saw Him as a "revived John the Baptist" because Jesus' message and ministry resembled John's. Others saw Him as a prophet like Jeremiah, who ministered during the Babylonian captivity and spoke often of Israel's future. John the Baptist and Jeremiah were heroes to the Jews in the first century, and it was seen as a compliment to Jesus that the crowds would put Him in such company.

However, the disciples knew Jesus was more than a "religious hero." Notice how Jesus' question changed. When He asked about the crowd's opinions, He wanted to know who people said the Son of Man was. *Son of Man* was a messianic title from the Old Testament Book of Daniel, and it was the most common way Jesus referred to Himself (27 times throughout Matthew). But when Jesus asked His disciples about His identity, Jesus phrased the question in a more personal way: "Who do you say that I am?"

Peter spoke up and identified Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. The title *Messiah* or *Christ* comes from the Hebrew word for *anointed*. This title referred to God's Servant who would deliver the people from their oppressors and bring about a golden age for Israel in fulfillment of Old Testament promises.

17 And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” 20 Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. (Matt. 16:17-20)

How did Peter understand what others did not? According to Jesus, God Himself who revealed this information to Peter. It wasn't possible for “flesh and blood” (humans unaided by God's Spirit) to arrive at this conclusion. In other words, even Peter did not have the spiritual resources to grasp this truth on his own.

Yet, when Peter followed Jesus He saw more than others. When Peter heard Jesus, he heard more than others. Others saw mighty and compassionate works; Peter saw God in action. Others heard unique explanations of Scripture and life; Peter heard God speaking. As the disciples followed Jesus, they grew in their understanding day by day, by observing Jesus and considering His words. Peter comprehended more than most. Still, Peter had more to learn about Jesus' identity.

JESUS CHALLENGED THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF THE MESSIAH

Peter stated the foundational confession of faith in Jesus' identity: He is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Peter got the title right, but his understanding of what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah was incomplete. Take a look at what happened next.

21 From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” 23 But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” (Matt. 16:21-23)

Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah was a major moment in the life and ministry of Jesus. According to Matthew, Jesus spoke about His coming death from that point on. Jesus' thoughts and actions turned toward the cross. From our perspective in history, we understand the reality and significance of Jesus' death; however, from their perspective beforehand, the disciples could hardly imagine the Messiah dying.

Peter's strong reaction to Jesus' teaching revealed the tension in his thinking about a Messiah who would die. Peter spoke boldly based on his understanding of what God revealed to him (Jesus as the Messiah), but Peter spoke wrongly because of his faulty understanding of what that title represented. The idea of a Messiah who would suffer and die was not on Peter's radar (even if there were Old Testament texts that taught this truth, such as Isaiah 53).

Jesus rightly rebuked Peter. A little earlier Jesus commended Peter for listening to God as He revealed truth to Peter. Later, Peter acted as an agent of Satan, meaning he spoke only from human wisdom in that moment. This does not mean that Peter was somehow demon-possessed; it only means that as Peter stood in opposition to God's plan of redemption through suffering, he momentarily sided with Satan and his agenda. He sounded like the Tempter who Jesus had overcome in the wilderness. Peter did not realize that he repeated the same temptation—exaltation apart from the cross—Jesus had faced in the wilderness.

JESUS CHALLENGED THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF PERSONAL JOY

Understanding the identity of Jesus as the Messiah who died and rose again is not just an exercise in knowledge. For those of us who are Christ's disciples, there are practical implications to knowing Jesus as the Messiah. We follow in His steps.

Disciples must learn how to live as Jesus did if we are to be part of His messianic kingdom. Entering God's kingdom is a matter of faith in Jesus' provision—His suffering, death, and resurrection. Here Jesus emphasized the fact that Kingdom living requires self-denial.

24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? 27 For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. 28 Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." (Matt. 16:24-28)

Deny yourself? Take up your cross? Lose your life? You may read this passage and wonder: Does Jesus want us only to focus on what's negative? Not quite.

Jesus' emphasis on self-denial isn't just about what we lose, but what we gain when we give up our lives to Him. Deny yourself in order to be filled. Die today in order to rise tomorrow. Instead of focusing solely on what we should deny or the command to follow, we should focus instead on the One we follow—Jesus!

TIMELINE

THE ECLIPSE OF JOHN'S MINISTRY

John the Baptist points others to Jesus.

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

Jesus reaches out to the outcasts of society.

HOMETOWN OPPOSITION

Jesus makes plain His identity and is rejected in His hometown.

- **What happens when we focus on the action of following apart from Jesus, the One we are called to follow?** (p. 48 PSG)

Discipleship is not a constant act of depriving yourself of happiness, but a glorious exchange for true and abundant life. Those who decide to “lose their lives” for Jesus find life. They begin to experience the glorious joy of the Kingdom. Following Jesus on earth may bring sacrifice and even suffering, but suffering brings glory—the glory of the crucified and resurrected Messiah in a Kingdom that will never end.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Union with Christ (p. 47, PSG)

At the heart of our salvation is our union with Christ. The Bible describes salvation as entering into a covenant relationship with God and also describes the church (which is made up of believers) as the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:23-32). Christians believe that Christ dwells in our hearts through faith (Christ in us) and that we are simultaneously dwelling in Him (Eph. 3:17; Col. 1:27; 3:1-4). This union is indissoluble; it will last for all eternity.

CHRIST CONNECTION

Jesus knows that our natural inclination will always be to preserve our lives. We do that instinctively, and we make choices each day under the belief that these choices will bring our lives more joy than not. However, as is often the case, Jesus challenges our thinking and even turns it upside down. He knows we want to save our lives, but He also knows we won't succeed unless we do it His way. If we want to save our lives, then we are called to lay them down for His sake and the sake of the gospel. When we do this, Jesus knows that the joy we all seek will ultimately come from doing things His way, and not through the misguided ways of the world.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What are some answers people might give to the question: "Who do you say Jesus is?" What answers are good, but insufficient?** *Many will say He was a great moral teacher, a cultural revolutionary, or even a prophet of God.*
- **What was missing in Peter's understanding of Jesus as the Messiah? What important aspects of Jesus' identity are missing in the way most people think of Him today?** *Peter misunderstood the suffering Servant aspect of the Messiah—the reason for Jesus' coming.*
- **In what ways do you notice people "saving their lives" instead of "losing their lives" for Jesus' sake?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What does self-denial look like? How can self-denial lead to greater personal joy?** *Self-denial recognizes that worldly possessions, earthly status, and the pursuit of one's passions are not of supreme value—only Jesus is. Not only does self-denial recognize that Jesus is of supreme value, but it also demonstrates the reality that more happiness and joy come from following Christ than in pursuing the things of this world.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

As is often the case in the Bible, an encounter with God can often result in a name change for the individual. Peter's name wasn't the first to be changed (Abram to Abraham), nor would it be the last (Saul to Paul). In this account, Jesus gave Simon a new name (Peter). In Greek, *Peter* means *stone*. His name was a play on the words found in verse 18 about building the church on the rock of confessing Jesus as Lord. Consistent with his new identity, Peter would be a spiritual rock, and his confession would become the foundation of the church.

- **How has your identity changed as a result of following Christ?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why is it important that we understand ourselves based upon what God says regardless of what others say about us or what we believe about ourselves?** *Answers will vary.*



HEART

Jesus corrected the disciples' misunderstanding regarding what it meant to follow Him. They assumed knowing the Messiah meant they would experience earthly comforts and ease in a matter of time—just as soon as Jesus overturned the established government. However, Jesus taught them that the ultimate comfort and ease they sought wouldn't be found that way. Worldly possessions, personal status, and achievements won't satisfy in the end. Only following Jesus satisfies.

- **In your own words, summarize Jesus' first question in Matthew 16:26.** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why is Jesus more satisfying than any comfort the world has to offer?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

We make choices every day as disciples of Christ. The biggest choice for each of us is the daily decision to follow Jesus and live like He lived. Like Jesus, we are to avoid hanging on to the earthly things and treating them as though they are all we have. Like Jesus, we are to put others before ourselves. Like Jesus, we should be willing to even suffer for the sake of the gospel, knowing there is a greater joy that awaits those who do. All of this is part of what it means to follow Him. It is a costly thing to follow, but the cost quickly fades when we focus on the One we get to follow—Jesus.

- **How can we avoid following Jesus as if it is only a task to accomplish? How can we willingly, wholeheartedly follow instead?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How does following Christ in your own life demonstrate to others the joy of following Him?** *We find joy in the treasures of our hearts. The people around us see where we place the treasures of our hearts, whether that be in a relationship with a person, a hobby, or a sport. If they see us finding our ultimate treasure in Jesus, then they will know where we find our ultimate source of joy.*

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPRescueSpr17)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit

MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject