

# The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

### MATTHEW 16:13-20

THIS is one of the most remarkable passages in the whole of this Gospel of the King. Here we are at the center of our story; here we find light which flashes backward and forward, illuminating the path we have already travelled, and casting its light upon what remains to us of the study of this book. The central matters of the paragraph are evidently those of the confession of Peter, and the answer of Christ to that confession. All the surrounding statements we may therefore treat first by way of introduction.

There is certainly some significance in the place where Peter's confession was made, and where our Lord uttered His first words concerning the Church. Caesarea Philippi was situated at the northern extremity of Jewish territory. It was a district which had been peculiarly and terribly associated with idol worship. To this day there are remains of temples and altars which were raised in connection with idolatry.

There was also a political and religious significance in the place. It was in this vicinity that Herod the Great had raised a temple of white marble to Caesar Augustus, a temple recognizing the element of worship in the attitude of the Roman Empire to the Emperor.

The place in the ministry of our Lord is of supreme interest. The King was practically already rejected, in spirit if not outwardly and openly. The King was about to proceed to that new work, by which His Kingship would be established, and His Kingdom ensured. Having gathered His disciples into this remarkable locality, He said to them, "**Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?**"

The term, "**the Son of man,**" is personal, and not generic here. It was perhaps sometimes used in a generic sense, but not by our Lord; and in this instance the disciples did not so understand it, or they would never have answered, "**Elias,**" "**John the Baptist,**" "**Jeremias, or one of the prophets.**"

They understood it as a personal question. In effect Jesus said to these men, What is the result of My work so far? What do men say about Me? He did not need information; He was perfectly familiar with the general attitude towards Himself; but in order to prepare the way for the new movement, to lead these men forward, He gathered them quietly about Him at Caesarea Philippi, and said to them, if we may reverently change the phrasing:

Now let us see what all My work so far amounts to. What is the result of My preaching and teaching and working of miracles, and your preaching and teaching? **“Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?”**

Their reply was one that shows the measure in which He had succeeded; that there had come to His age a remarkable conviction concerning Him. But it also shows that the men of the age had not appreciated Him, and that the measure of their understanding was distinctly limited. These disciples at Caesarea Philippi told Him only the best things they had heard about Him. Although they had heard men say, He is beside Himself, He hath a devil; they said, **“Some say thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets.”**

Taking that answer very broadly, and accepting their testimony, as a correct estimate of the best which the age had discovered about Jesus; it is evident that there was widespread conviction that there was something supernatural about Him. Men had come so far as to decide that they could not account for Him in any ordinary way; they could not place Him in any school of the prophets of their own day. They listened to other men, and detected the accent of Hillel, or the accent of Gamaliel, or of some other teacher.

They could not do so with Jesus. They said, It is John the Baptist come again; or the prophecy that Elijah should come again is being fulfilled; or Jeremiah has returned with his thunder and his tears; or one of the prophets of the past has returned. They ranked Him amongst the prophets, the men of vision, the men who declared God’s word to their age. They could not account for Him in any other way. If we remember the differences between John, and Elijah, and Jeremiah, and the other prophets, it is evident that these differing opinions constitute a revelation of the variety of the message and mission of Jesus.

They said, we cannot quite place Him. We can hear something of the lamentations of Jeremiah; we have seen a good deal of the fire of Mount Carmel flashing from His eyes; we have also heard the tones of the sweet lullaby of Zephaniah’s final love-song. We do not know where to place Him; He has notes which remind us of them all. His own age had come so far as that, but it had not discovered the deepest truth concerning Him.

Then He narrowed the inquiry. Instead of the wider sweep, He turned to the smaller circle, to those who had been with Him, and still were with Him. He said, You have been with Me, you have walked this highway between Jerusalem and Jericho with Me, you have seen the healing and heard the teaching, and watched the opposition, and seen how I have dealt with it. The age has come so far and no farther; the age has lived in the twilight; have you found the light?

**“Who say ye that I am?”** That leads us to the heart of our passage, to Peter’s confession.

Nineteen centuries have passed, and the phrasing of this wonderful passage has been the familiar language of the Church of God for all that time; and we have often robbed it of its glory by attempting to add to its meaning. We have twisted it and contorted it, to establish some philosophy of our own, to bolster up some preconceived notion, until we are in danger of missing its music.

The simplest way in which to hear this confession is to attempt to lift ourselves out of our present position, and to put ourselves back into the midst of that first little group of disciples, and to listen as they listened to Peter's confession and our Lord's answer thereto. Peter looked at Him and said, "**Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.**"

Let us take the first part of Peter's confession in all its simplicity; and hear only what Peter undoubtedly desired to express, the Hebrew thought, "**Thou art the Messiah.**" If we say to-day, Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, we have a larger conception of the meaning of the title Christ than Peter had.

The very word Christ has taken on a more spacious, radiant, and mystic meaning. Peter was a Hebrew, a child of the Hebrew race. He was born in its midst, and had been nurtured upon its thinking. Every fiber of his personality was affected by its conceptions, and it was as a Hebrew that he said to that Man Who styled Himself "**The Son of man,**" "**Thou art the Christ,**" the Messiah. That is, Thou art the Fulfiller of all the expectations of the Hebrew people, the One by Whom our hopes are to be realized, the One in Whom the economy culminates, the One from Whom there is to break the dawn of a new day and a new era. The Hebrew seers, psalmists, and prophets, had all looked for the coming of One. All through their literature we see the ideal merging into a personality.

If we read Isaiah with any carefulness, we see how through the national ideal there gradually emerges into view a Person, and that Person is at once Servant and King; oppressed, broken, afflicted; and triumphant, crowned, victorious. All the men of vision of the Hebrew economy had looked for One Who should fulfil their expectations, realize their hopes.

The Hebrew prophets were perpetually speaking of the day of God. Their eyes were always looking forward, and as some of them climbed higher than others on the great mountain peaks, they saw farther along the distances, and, with wonderful accuracy, they described that Person.

They waited for Him and watched for Him. He was to break oppression, to establish righteousness, to baptize the nations with the river of God, and wherever the river came there would be life.

At last a son of the nation, a fisherman only, standing in the neighborhood of the ruins of the ancient temples of idolatry, looking into the face of this Man, Whom he had heard teaching and preaching for nearly three years, said to Him, "**Thou art the Messiah,**" the One for Whom we have all been waiting, for Whom we have all been looking; and he added to that, "**The Son of the living God.**"

We must read the question and answer carefully, if we would find the values.

Jesus first said, "**Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?**" When He spoke to the disciples He said, "**Who say ye that I am?**"

Thus He identified Himself with the Son of man. Peter said, "**Thou,**" the Son of man, "**art the Christ, the Son of the living God.**" The description, "**the Son of the living God,**" is correlative to Christ's description, "**the Son of man.**" I am the Son of man, said Jesus in effect, Who am I?

**“Thou art the Messiah, the Son of the living God,”** said Peter. So as the title, **“the Christ,”** answered the question **“Who;”** the description, **“the Son of the living God,”** stood in correlation to **“the Son of man.”**

Peter’s confession was a very definite one, and yet one that recognized his consciousness of the mystic element in this Man, beyond the things the age had seen. The age had caught the comprehensiveness of the prophetic note. The age had recognized more the supernaturalness of this Teacher. Peter, recognizing all this, defined it, and went beyond the age, and said; **“Thou art the Messiah;”**

- More than John the forerunner,
- More than Elijah the fore-teller,
- More than Jeremiah the watcher and the one who waited;

Thou art the One toward Whom they all looked. There is manifested in all Thy doing, and in all Thy teaching, something that differentiates Thee from all other teachers and men. Son of man, but Son of the living God, the Messiah. United to us in that Thou art our Messiah, yet distanced from us by the mystic gleaming of Thy glory, the fair brightness of Thy Person as it falls upon our lives.

*In the King’s answer to this great confession let us notice first, His Beatitude:*

**“Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven”;**

*Secondly, His great announcement:*

**“And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”**

*Finally, the warning note, strange and peculiar at first seeming, yet necessary when carefully considered:*

**“Then charged he his disciples that they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ.”**  
*First, the Beatitude.*

Jesus did not pronounce a reward upon Peter, for the discovery he had made, when He said, **“Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona.”** On the contrary, He was rather describing the condition into which Peter had come by the gain of this new knowledge which he had confessed. Such confession, that He was the Christ, and the Son of the living God, was in itself the result of Divine illumination. Not in the confession, but in the consciousness out of which the confession was born, was Peter blessed.

Probably he spoke for the rest as well as for himself, but one man at least had made contact with the purposes and power of God. He said, **“Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.”** Jesus said, **“Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona.”**

That is the key to the situation.

- That is the discovery upon which the human soul is remade.
- That is the discovery upon which human society is to be remade.
- That is the discovery upon which the city of God is to be built, and the everlasting Kingdom established.

How did Peter learn this fact? Let the Lord continue, **“Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father Which is in heaven.”**

He took hold of a common colloquialism of His times and used it. The man in the street would say, Flesh and blood cannot endure this; flesh and blood cannot see through this. Christ said, That confession you have made is not something that another man told you; you have not discovered it; My Father hath revealed it unto thee.

*How did the Father reveal that to Peter?*

Men have tried to account for it in various ways, and all the while the naming truth is in front of them Through Christ Himself. What Jesus said in effect was this:

“There is My victory as Revealer. I have come to reveal the Father, and I have been successful, for here is one man who finds in Me the expression of the Father, and knows My relation to the Father, not by the wit or wisdom of man, but by My own revelation of the Father.”

One soul at least had seen God in Him, and heard God through Him. He had followed and listened, and had come over the mountains, and through the driving mists, until at last it had flamed upon his consciousness that there was God, in His Son, the long-looked-for Messiah, and he confessed it.

- He had found God,
- He had touched the eternal principles,
- He had come into contact with the purposes and plan and power of God.

Then our Lord went farther. He said, **“Thou art Peter.”** That is when he really obtained his name; he had never possessed it properly before. In the Gospel of John, in the first chapter, we read, **“He findeth first his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messiah (which is, being interpreted, Christ). And he brought him to Jesus.”** Andrew brought his brother Simon. Jesus looked upon him, and said, **“Thou art Simon the son of John: thou shalt be called Cephas which, is by interpretation, A stone.”**

Now at Caesarea Philippi He said, **“Thou art Peter”**

“I told you what you would be when first My eyes rested upon you. I knew your human setting and pedigree; but I said to you, You shall be Stone, a man of strength. He had led the man on and on, and at last He brought him to Caesarea Philippi, and said, Now do you know Me, Simon?”

Simon said, “**Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.**” Jesus said, “**Blessed art thou;**” not by the discovery of thy flesh-and-blood nature, which is represented by the symbol of Simon Barjona, hath it been revealed unto thee; but through My speech and life thou hast come to the light. Now thou art Petros, Stone.

Then what? “**Upon this rock**” not Petros, a piece of rock, a fragment of the rock nature, but Petra, the essential rock “**Upon this rock I will build My Church.**” Thou art of the rock nature, and thou shalt be built upon the rock foundation.

“**Upon this rock.**”

Remember, He was talking to Hebrews. If we trace the figurative use of the word rock through the Hebrew Scriptures, we find that it is never used symbolically of man, but always of God. So here at Caesarea Philippi. It is not upon Peter that the Church is built.

Jesus did not trifle with figures of speech. He took up their old Hebrew illustration rock, always the symbol of Deity and said, Upon God Himself I will build My Church. My Kingdom shall consist of those who are built into God, “**partakers of the Divine nature.**”

Mark the intention carefully by taking Peter’s final words first “**The living God.**” Then the word immediately preceding “**the Son of the living God;**” and then the first word “**Thou art Messiah.**” Jesus said; On that, I will build My Church, on the Lord God, manifest in time in His Son, administering the affairs of the world through that Son as Messiah. Peter had found the foundation, had touched the Lord, and by touching Him had become petros.

As to the structure to be erected on this foundation our Lord said, “**I will build My Church.**”

Our word Church does not correctly express the idea.

The word *ecclesia* was a very familiar word in our Lord’s time, and it had a Hebrew and a Greek use. The Hebrews spoke of the ecclesia. They had two words very much alike in their intention, and yet separated in use synagogue, and ecclesia.

They marked the facts in which the Hebrew people were different from other nations. Synagogue meant the assembling together of God’s people in worship. Jesus did not say, My synagogue, He said, My ecclesia. The Hebrew use of the word ecclesia marked the Hebrew people as a selected people, as a Theocracy. That was the great thought in the word, a God-governed people, not governed by policy or by human kings.

That was the underlying thought in the Hebrew mind. Ecclesia was also in common use in Greek cities at the time. In one of the later chapters of the book of Acts we find that the whole ecclesia came together to discuss their affairs. It does not mean the Church of God.

It was the town meeting, an assemblage of free men. No slave could be a member of the ecclesia. Jesus stood in the midst of these Hebrew and Greek ideas, and said, "My ecclesia;" My people, My Theocracy; and My assembly for the purpose of authority and government in the affairs of the world. "**My Church.**" Of that Church Christ said, "**I will build.**"

There was no unveiling here of the method, save as it is illuminated by the happening at the moment, when this one man was brought into relationship with Jesus Christ. We must wait for the teaching of the Spirit in the Epistles perfectly to comprehend the meaning of the Master. The thought was afterwards elaborated in the teaching of Peter and of Paul.

When Peter himself, later on, wrote about the building of the Church, he spoke of living stones, built on a living Stone. He introduced the thought of life. He lifted the figure out of its natural realm, and infused into it a new quantity and a new element, something which differentiated it from the figure itself, so that by the disparity we learn quite as much as by the actual symbolism. For illumination as to the process of the building we turn to that wonderful fourth chapter of the letter to the Ephesians, with its unveiling of the Church in the process of its erection:

**"There is one body, and one Spirit, even as also ye were called in one hope of your calling."**

That is the whole fact of the Church. One Body, Christ the Head and all believers the members; One Spirit, the common life of Christ shared by the members. That is the true "Catholic" Church.

From that the Apostle proceeded to show how men come into that Body, and share that life,

- "**One Lord,**" the object of faith presented to the mind;
- "**One faith,**" fastening upon the Lordship, and yielding to it;
- "**One baptism,**" that of the Holy Spirit, whereby the believer is made a member of the Lord.

Through the illustration of Paul's phrasing we go back to Caesarea Philippi, and watch the process. "**One Lord,**" Jesus; "**one faith,**" the faith which says, "**Thou are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,**" "**one baptism**" of the Spirit, that whereby Peter was at Pentecost made a partaker of the nature of his Lord, and a member of the body of Christ, a living stone in the great building.

Then the Apostle completed his statement, "**One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.**"

This is the Master's method of building His Church, but it will never be seen in all its perfect glory until the morning of the second Advent, when, gathered into perfect unity with Jesus, all the scaffolding removed, it will be manifested in its splendid beauty and glory.

Because Jesus said, "**I will build,**" we are sure of the impregnability of the Church, that nothing can destroy it, that all the forces of darkness can never finally prevent the completion of His Church.

No rite or ceremony of man can admit us to that Church. Its strength lies in the fact that He builds it stone for stone, fitting each into its proper place, taking only such as by living faith participate in His own nature, and therefore are ready to be built into His great Church.

We know from that declaration also that the Church will be glorious in beauty.

If we are inclined to say that we have not seen very much of its beauty yet, we must remember that we have never seen its corporate beauty. We have, all of us, thank God, had some glimpses of the glory of the Church in its individual members. We have seen and known Christly souls who have not only caught the Spirit of Christ, but who so share the life of Christ, that His beauty, His compassion, and His tenderness are all manifested in their lives.

Think for one prophetic moment, in which we forecast the future, of what it will be when that whole glorious company is gathered out and completed, and He presents His Church to God, a glorious thing, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing.

The beauty of His Church will consist:

- First of all, in the diversity of individual lives, all types and temperaments gathered into one great harmony;
- The beauty will consist finally in the unity of the manifestation of the glories of Christ.

In the letter to the Ephesians the Apostle urges us **“to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace,”** and, as the argument proceeds, we see that we are to **“grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ.”**

If we take that passage as indicating the necessity and importance of individual development, we must not imagine that to be its only meaning, or that it exhausts the passage; **“Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ”**

Individually we can never come to that. It will take the whole Church to realize **“the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.”**

The Colossian Epistle, which is the twin Epistle of the Ephesian one, throws light upon this, **“For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell . . . For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.”**

The fullness of God is the fullness of Christ; and the fullness of Christ is the fullness of the Church. That is the radiant splendor of the Church, that when He has completed His building upon the Rock foundation; then His ransomed and redeemed Church will be a medium through which all the glory of God, realized in Himself, shall flash in resplendent glory through ages that are yet unborn.

Christ then went on to speak of two present activities or influences of the Church.

First, **“The gates of hell shall not prevail against it,”** That is a description of the aggressive mission, or the destructive powers of the Church. This word of Jesus needs careful consideration. In common with many of the utterances of our Lord, we have been in danger of dealing with it superficially. First, notice that there is a difference between the inclusive statement, **“I will build My Church,”** and the next word, **“The gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”**

- The first word declares His construction of the instrument.
- The second word declares partially what the function of the instrument shall be; **“The gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”**

This cannot refer to the strength of the Church against attack. Careless reading would give us to think that Jesus meant, I build My Church, and though all hell come up against it, it cannot overcome it.

The figure the Lord uses does not admit that interpretation. An attacking force never carries its city gates up when it goes to fight. It is not a figure of the defensive strength of the Church.

Neither does it mean that the Church shall be able to capture hell. The Church does not desire to possess hell. We must look more closely, or we miss the meaning of this great word. It is the figure of escape. It is a declaration of the fact that the Church will be able to make a way of escape from a beleaguered city, which is in harmony with the perpetual outlook upon death in the life of the Christian.

Death in the New Testament is never getting into harbor; it is getting out of the harbor on to the boundless sea. Tennyson caught the New Testament idea when he sang,

“I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
When I have crossed the bar.”

That crossing is outward, not inward. It is a false figure of speech that imagines that in the case of the Christian, death is running into harbor with rent cordage and tattered sails. When Paul speaks of death he speaks of his departure, unloosing, the cutting of the cord that binds him, the liberating of the ship from the restraint of the harbor to the boundless sea for which it was made. Here the idea is the same. The Church is seen in a beleaguered city; and Jesus says, The Church will take the gates of the city and escape into the larger life that lies beyond.

But that is not the deepest thing of all.

What is death in the economy of Jesus? The last enemy.

What are the enemies that precede death?

- First, sin, or rebellion, for sin in its genesis is rebellion against God’s government.
- Next, sorrow, in its widest sense, as including all lack and limitation.
- Then the final enemy death.

There they stand, the three great enemies of the race; sin, sorrow, death. The Christian man sings an anthem when he looks at death, **“O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?”**

How can he thus sing in the face of death, the last enemy, that has held the race enthralled so long? **“The sting of death is sin; and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, Who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”**

Victory begins over sin; it proceeds over sorrow; it ends over death. Jesus Christ says, My Church which I build shall be a great aggressive force. Jesus was always merging the two figures of battle and building. He is the Builder, Who needs builders that He can depend upon. He is the King going forth to conquest, Who needs soldiers He can depend upon. For the moment He speaks as the great Commander leading His Church as an aggressive force, and as the great Commander He sees, not merely the battle, but all the issues of the campaign. The whole field was in the vision of Jesus, as He stood at Caesarea Philippi. He Himself was about to enter into conflict with sin; to enter into conflict with sorrow, wiping tears away, healing wounds; mastering death; and all His people coming after Him, must be people in conflict with sin and sorrow, and finally in conflict with death.

Jesus here saw the whole field stretched out before Him, and with the tone of assured victory in His voice, He did not stay to enumerate the battles and the foes, but passed to the last, and said, **“The gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”** “My Church shall be an aggressive force moving ever on, overcoming foe after foe, until, presently, when they come to the gates of the beleaguered city, they shall find their way through them and into the life that lies beyond.”

In the view of Jesus the world itself is seen as a beleaguered city held in death’s power. In the midst of the world, not outside it, He Himself is working, building; and His Church in the beleaguered city is to be a force intended to wage war against things that harm, and open the way out into life for the beleaguered peoples. The war is within, not without.

The Church:

- Wins its victory over sin by His blood;
- Wins its victory over sorrow by His sympathy manifest in the presence of sorrow;
- Wins its victory over death by breaking down the fear of death in trusting hearts, and, as the individual soldiers come down to the end, they find that the gates are captured, and they march through, not passing through swollen rivers as we sometimes sing, but dryshod into the land that lies beyond, without a thread of the garments wetted even by the dews that rise from the river.

**“The gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”**

If the Church has not been victorious in the conflict with sin and sorrow and death, it is due to the unfaithfulness of the Church. Let us not blame the Master and Leader. Did we but realize all His preciousness, that the security and energy of His life is at our disposal by the Spirit, we should be perpetually victorious, and the Church of God would not only be, **“Fair as the moon, Clear as the sun,”** but **“Terrible as an army with banners.”**

If we are defeated in the fight it is because, like the Israelites, we have some Achan in the camp with a wedge of gold or Babylonish garment; and that complicity with the things that are against God, weakens us in our conflict. But further, the King said; **“I will give unto thee the keys of the Kingdom of heaven.”**

*What are these keys?*

He was speaking to Hebrews, and the phrase, **“the keys”** was perfectly familiar to them. They were the insignia of the office of the scribe, the teacher of the law of God. The key was the sign, not of priestly office, but of the office of the scribe. The keys committed to Peter were not the keys of the Church, but the keys of the Kingdom.

When Jesus spoke to Peter upon this occasion He spoke to him as a scribe. In chapter thirteen we have the parables of the Kingdom, and they end with the words, **“Therefore,”** because ye have understood, **“every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old.”**

The parting of the ways had come at Caesarea Philippi. Because Peter had answered, **“Thou art the Messiah,”** he had become a scribe instructed in the Kingdom of heaven. Now, said Christ, I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of heaven. You are My scribe. The keys of the Kingdom were given to the illuminated, to those who understood the principle of the Kingdom, the laws of the Kingdom, the method of the Kingdom. When Jesus said to Peter, **“I will give unto thee the keys of the Kingdom,”** He spoke to him as representative man, He spoke to him as the first man who had gained the vision of illumination, **“Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father Which is in heaven;”** thou shalt have the keys of the Kingdom.

To-day these keys belong to everyone who proclaims that Kingdom. They are the warrant for the preacher. They do not constitute a warrant for priesthood, but for the scribe instructed in the Kingdom, preaching, teaching the Kingdom, unlocking its meaning, explaining its law. So that Christ said not merely; **“My Church is to be an aggressive force; but My Church is to be a constructive force in the midst of the age, teaching the Kingdom and holding the keys of the Kingdom; not to lock, or shut out, or exclude, but to interpret and administer.”**

In close connection follow the words; **“Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”**

In these words He committed to His Church the final authority in human life. These phrases were perfectly familiar to the Jew, we find them in the literature of the time. They said, Shammai binds this, but Hillel looses; which simply meant, Shammai makes this obligatory, but Hillel leaves it optional.

- Binding simply meant an authoritative declaration concerning what must be done, or what must not be done.
- Loosing meant permission given to men to do or not to do.

It was purely and simply a Hebrew method of describing ethical authority.

Jesus said, “In the history of the world, My Church shall not merely be an aggressive force to which hell gates shall yield; My Church shall hold the keys of interpretation of the Divine Will; My Church shall erect the moral standards for the world. Whatever My Church shall bind, shall be bound; whatever it shall loose, shall be loosed.”

In the twenty-third chapter of Matthew Jesus is reported to have said, speaking of the scribes and Pharisees, “**They bind heavy burdens,**” using the word in the same sense as that in which He used it of His Church. The Church is to be the standard of ethics. All the binding and loosing of the Church is to be based upon His authority, and that is what He meant when He said, “**Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.**”

In that word of Jesus is discovered the central authority; it is the will of God. Consequently the Church is to be, not merely an aggressive force, conquering His enemies, and opening a way out of all prisons; but it is also to interpret to the world the moral standards of life, and to teach men the will of God.

Every high ideal that obtains to-day in civilized countries has been learnt from the Church of God.

The final ethic of the world was born with Jesus. Everything that is high, and noble, and uplifting, in the thinking and legislation of the nations, has come out of His heart by the interpretation of His Church. If we had been true to Him the world would have learnt more rapidly; but the measure in which it has learnt is the measure in which the Church has been the interpreter of the ethic of God.

*In conclusion let us glance at the warning that He addressed to these men.*

It seems a very strange thing that He said: “**Then charged he his disciples that they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ.**”

If we connect the word “**they**” of verse twenty with the “**My Father**” of verse seventeen, we shall better understand the meaning of that charge.

Jesus said to Peter, “**Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father Who is in heaven.**” Then He charged them “**that they should tell no man He was Jesus the Christ.**”

That is to say, it is not in the power of the Church to reveal the truth about Christ to the soul of a man; that must be the work of God. The work of the Church is not that of preaching a theory, even though it be a correct theory, of the Person of Christ; the work of the Church is that of preaching the Kingdom of God, the evangel of salvation, by bringing men into personal contact with Christ.

We can do what was done when Peter was led to Jesus, we can say to men, “**Come and see.**” But they must look for themselves, they must have God’s revelation in their own soul.

If men attempt to depend for their Christianity upon another’s theory of the Christ, they will be lost. If a man for himself listen, and watch, and wait, until there is personal revelation, there will come to him the light of the Father’s own manifestation. So shall he be changed into a living stone, be built upon the Rock, become a member of His Church.

All this was teaching in advance, so far as these men were concerned. They did not understand Him perfectly. He had to begin now to show them how He could put His radiant, virtuous, victorious life at their disposal through dying; and when He did so, they were afraid. Never did they understand Him until the Spirit came, and, in answer to their faith, baptized them into living union with their Lord. They received their final explanation of Christ, His Cross, and His Church, by the baptism of the Holy Spirit; and so must we.

~ end of chapter 47 ~

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