

## Tangible Kingdom

When I went to seminary, I didn't intend to work in a church. My goal was to go on and get my PhD and teach in a college or seminary. Growing up, my church experience was pretty good. I was usually happy to go, even though my church wasn't very cool. It was more like a family and family isn't cool.

I wasn't hurt by the church, I just didn't have any interest in working there. But, over the course of four years of seminary, my heart changed toward the church and after graduation, I took a job at a church, which began my love affair.

Looking back, one thing that's clear to me is that the main reason I didn't want to work in the church is that I really didn't understand what the church was, because if I did, I would have jumped at the opportunity. And I believe that if you really understand what the Church actually is, you will, too.

You see, many people have a misunderstanding of what the church is. At its worst, some people view it as a tool of oppression or the cover for money-hungry clergy. Other people are able to see the great good the Church has done throughout history—founding countless hospitals, orphanages and adoption agencies, schools, disaster relief agencies and other compassionate and justice-oriented organizations. Despite the bad press, the Church has always been on the front lines of help for the poor and marginalized. But is that all the church is—just a social-service agency?

The Biblical answer is “no.” The Christian Church—when it’s operating the way it was meant to—is the Kingdom of God in tangible form. The question I have for you today is, *“When you get up on Sunday morning, get dressed and get in the car, what do you think you’re going to?”*

If you’re not already there, turn with me to Matthew, chapter 16 and let’s try to answer that question. We’re getting toward the end of our “God’s Big Story” series where we are walking through the big story of the Bible. We’ve gone all the way from creation to Jesus’ life and ministry. These next two weeks are in kind of a strange order. This week, we’re talking about the church, which was only made possible by what we’re talking about next week—the death and resurrection of Jesus. And yet, in the story, we find out what the church is from Jesus’ ministry starting here in Matthew 16.

Now, we know that the Jews were expecting a king to come and restore Israel. We also know that Jesus claimed to be that king—what we call the Messiah. He’d been doing ministry for three years and his disciples can start to feel things are ramping up. So far, he’s been traveling around the back-woods region [jesus ministry image], teaching in the small towns north of the religious center of Judaism—Jerusalem. But at some point, if he’s going to be the King of Israel, he’ll need to go to Jerusalem in the south. [Jerusalem]

If we go back a chapter, they’re up by Tyre and Sidon, on the Mediterranean coast. Then they go southeast to the sea of Galilee, then cross the sea of Galilee. Then they take

about a 20 mile detour up to Caesarea Philippi. [caesarea] It's no coincidence that Jesus had this conversation with his disciples right here.

When Jesus first called his disciples, he didn't tell them, *"You need to give your life for me. Who am I Peter? You need to commit right now!"* They had to be curious enough to leave their job and follow him, but Jesus didn't start out by telling them that they would one day die for him. Instead, they followed him around for three years, heard his teachings, saw him heal people and cast out demons.

Three years later, the disciples are still with him, but because of what was about to happen, he needed to see if they were really committed. The conversation starts, [13] *"You've been with me for a while and you've heard people talk about me. Who do they say I am?"* And the disciples tell him what they've been hearing—he's one of the prophets, he's Elijah reincarnated—all the usual things.

But this is only the setup for the critical question. You see, this was a DTR. What's a DTR? Define the Relationship. You know, when a couple goes out a few times and can tell they like each other, but they're not sure what the other's intentions are. So, they go out for a nice dinner and one of them asks, "OK, where are we? Is this going somewhere?"

That's what Jesus is doing here. He asks them. *"But what about YOU. Who do you say I am?"* They couldn't just continue to hang around and see more miracles and hear great stories and teaching because things were about to change. They needed to decide.

This is a question all of us have to answer eventually. All of you are here today because you're interested. There's something about Jesus that you like. Maybe it's his teaching, maybe it's just his way. Maybe you've seen something in one of his followers that have made you curious, so you're hanging around and checking it. Eventually, you'll have to decide. Maybe today, maybe not, but eventually we all have answer that question, "Who is Jesus?"

Now, it's no coincidence that he has this conversation at Caesarea Philippi. I think if it was possible, Jesus might have had this conversation in Rome. But Rome is was too far away, so Jesus took his disciples to the most Rome-like place he could.

Caesarea Philippi was a significant city. Caesar Augustus gave the city as a gift to Herod the Great. Before it was Caesarea Philippi, its name was Paneas, after the Greek god, Pan. But when Herod received the city—by the way, how about getting a city for gift? That's gotta be one of the best, right? Maybe someone will eventually get Greenland. Anyway, Herod named the city after Caesar—Caesarea—and his son, Philip to distinguish is from another Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast.

Caesarea Philippi was famous for two things: It was a pagan religious center and a political hub. Centuries earlier the city was a center for worship of the god, Baal, and in Jesus' day there were temples to other gods all around the city. But the greatest building in the city was a marble temple to Caesar that sat up on top of the highest hill in the region. The sun would glisten off the white marble from miles away.

But in Jesus' day it was an important political center—Rome away from Rome. So when Jesus took his disciples there, I can see him sitting outside the city with the temple to Caesar on the hill in the background. It would have been like taking you to Washington DC and teaching with the Washington monument or the White House in the background. Jesus was associating what he was doing with what went on in Caesarea Philippi.

It was here that Jesus asked the question. And Peter answered, **“You are the Christ, the son of the living God.”** Now Peter didn't know all the ins and outs of what that means. Jesus hadn't died yet, and Peter didn't know he *would* die. But he had been with Jesus enough to say, *“I believe this guy is who he says he is and I'm willing to follow him.”* You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!

And Jesus answers in verse 17, **“<sup>17</sup>Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup>And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”** In other words, “You got it because God revealed it to you. Now, *remember* what you just said. Etch it in your mind, because I'm about to gather *my ekklesia! And you are going to play a foundational role!*”

Peter committed, then Jesus started to reveal his plan. He was going to build an ekklesia. Now, we translate the word as “church,” but the word in Matthew is ekklesia. To us, church is a religious word. But *ekklesia* was not a religious word. It was used primarily for two things: politics and military. When the government wanted to have a

political vote, they would call people out of their homes and into a central place in the city. That gathering of people was called an *ekklesia*. It comes from two words; ek=*out*, and kaleo=*to call*.

Ekklesia is a group of people who are called out because there's something that needs to get done. It was an old word, but Jesus used it because he wanted to say something specific about what he was creating. *With the backdrop of Caesarea Philippi, he used it to say that he was calling a body of people out of the comfort of their homes to accomplish something even the government couldn't do.* And people today believe the government can do anything.

Some people view government as the savior of people and the church as a quaint institution of people sitting in pews once a week, singing together and feeling good about themselves. Jesus wasn't against the government. He knew the government needed to do its thing. But He created the Church to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to do what the government can never accomplish. And what is that?

Look at the end of verse 18—on this rock I will build my church, **“and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”** So, the church isn't here just to exist or just so people have something to do on Sunday morning. It has a purpose. And that purpose has something to do with hades? What in the world is Jesus talking about?

Well, you might recognize hades as the underworld or the place of death. The New Living Translation says it this way, **“I will build my church and all the powers of death**

**will never conquer it.”** I am assembling a group of people that will be so powerful and so long-lasting that even death itself will never defeat it.

He created the church to be *anything but* an irrelevant club of people trying to escape from the world. It was created to be the greatest force the world has ever seen—greater than any government, greater than any military, and greater than any religion could ever be. Governments will try to kill it and it'll just come back stronger.

Now you might say, “Well, that’s a bit overdramatic.” And I ask, do you know the history of the Church? Let’s walk through it.

When we look at the whole book of Matthew, we find that this passage is the climax of the book. Jesus spent the first half of his ministry teaching and doing miracles to get the disciples to convince the disciples that he’s the Messiah. When he finally hears the confession and tells them that through this handful of fishermen he’s planning on changing the world, things start to go downhill.

Look at verse 21, **“<sup>21</sup>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, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”**

*Well...that stinks!* Here he had the disciples all pumped up and ready to go change the world—“yeah, the Church rules!” But Jesus tells them to just hold on a minute. *Yeah,*

*the Church will do all those things, but you know how you'll do it? Through suffering. By sacrificing yourselves. Some of you will ever die for me. But it's gonna be great.*

But Peter pulled Jesus aside, *"Jesus, I don't think you understand what this Messiah thing is all about."* Peter thought, like us, that if you want to be a force for good, you have to do it with power. You invade a country like Iraq or Afghanistan—that'll change things. You set up your system of government and people will be so happy about it they just can't wait to thank you. How has that worked? You try to take control of political office and vote Christian values, then everyone will see the light. How's that going?

Well, Jesus responds to Peter about as strongly as you could imagine in verse 23, *"Get behind me, Satan!"* No, Peter. *It's YOU who doesn't understand.* The power of this ekklesia is not the power of the military or the government, it's the power of the *cross*. The church is less like Superman flying in to save the mere mortals and more like firemen running into the World Trade Center to get people out—many of them knowing, they're probably not coming back out. There is no church that is more powerful than one that understands that very principle. Jesus didn't create his Church for pew-sitters.

When Jesus completed his journey to Jerusalem, he rode into the city on donkey with people lining the roads, cheering for him as the new king. But he upset the religious leaders so much that they trumped up charges against him to have him killed. The Romans nailed him to a cross and raised him up as a spectacle to those around. They nailed a sign above him, *"Here's your king of the Jews!"*



He was buried in a borrowed tomb and it seemed the gates of hades had prevailed. His disciples were devastated. But three days later, a few of his disciples went to look at the tomb, but when they arrived there, the body was gone.

At first, they thought someone stole the body, but then Jesus appeared, first to a few. Then to all his disciples and over 500 people in all. As they thought back on Jesus' ministry they realized that Jesus had been telling them this all along—that he would die, but he would rise again—conquering death in his body. In all, he spent 40 days with his disciples. At the end he gave them some instructions.

First, this from Matthew 28, **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”** He gave them a task and promised his power and his presence would go with them.

Then, right before he left, he told them one more thing. He said, **“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”**

Then they gathered around him and asked him, **“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”**

**He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”**

So, they went into Jerusalem and sat in a room and waited. Acts 2 tells us, **“<sup>2</sup>Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup>They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. <sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”**

And Peter went outside and faced thousands of Jewish worshippers on pilgrimage and he preached about Jesus and they heard him in whatever language he spoke and three-thousand of them believed on that day.

From there the Church grew and grew and was persecuted more and more. All of the disciples were martyred for their faith in Jesus except for John who was exiled to the Island of Patmos. Something happened that transformed this ordinary group of working-class men into fearless missionaries. But even their deaths couldn't stop the church.

Over the next three-hundred years, the Roman Empire made systematic attempts to squash the growth of the church. Forcing Christians to burn incense to the Emperor, putting them before lions and gladiators, burning them on poles, but the Church continued to grow. When people joined the Church, they knew what they were getting

into. It was not secret their lives would be in danger, but the power of the Holy Spirit overcame it all.

The mission wasn't carefully thought out, there was no organized and strategic mission program. In fact, because of the persecution happening, most churches met in secret—and yet the Church grew, seemingly miraculously it was prevailing. The sociologist, Rodney Stark estimates that within 300 years, despite the fact that the church was persecuted, it grew from a handful of followers to about 30 million. But the time Constantine came to power, there were so many Christians, it was only a matter of time before the Roman Empire became itself, Christian. That's staggering growth.

And it did so, not through conquering armies, but when armies conquered Christian lands, it was the conquerers who often joined the church. When the church tried to expand through military force, like during the Crusades, the result was disastrous. But when the Church lived like Jesus and relied on the power of the Holy Spirit, God moved and lives were changed.

In the early years of the church in the Roman Empire, the greatest times of growth happened during the plagues of 160 and 260 AD. The plagues were so severe that even the best doctors ran for the hills to save themselves. But the Christians risked their lives to stay. They pulled dying people out of the gutters they'd been thrown into and nursed them back to health. Historians tells us they might have saved literally millions of lives just because they believed that everyone was made in God's image and deserved care.

In fact, the only powers that have been able to make a dent in the church to this point have been apathy or the corruption of the leadership because of the worldly power they had amassed. There have been many times in its history when it seemed like the church was all but dead. But each time, God revives his Church.

When the church in England seemed to have been lost to alcohol and apathy, God raised up George Whitfield, John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards sparked the First Great Awakening that not only revived the church, but saved England and led to the abolition of slavery there.

I know many people believe that in U.S. history, practically everyone was a faithful church attender. After all, the pilgrims came to America for the freedom of religion. But it seems like most Americans practiced freedom from religion since less than 20% of colonial Americans claimed any church affiliation. One author said that single people in 1776 were more likely to be sexually active than active church attenders. Most of those who did attend were part of the state-sponsored denominations that were notably dead.

But again, God revived his church through the Methodist and Baptist circuit-riders who sparked the Second Great Awakening, preaching about the need for repentance and faith and through the work of the Holy Spirit, called people out of their dead religion and into the church that even the gates of hell could not prevail against. Over the next 50 years, the church grew like crazy.

Abolitionist movements grew out of the Spirit-empowered church and the Civil Rights movement of the 50s and 60s was empowered by the Black church. God has worked through his church to save souls, transform lives, free slaves, and free addicts, empower women, feed the hungry, heal the sick, educate the poor, adopt orphan children, bring relief in disasters, and advocate for people unjustly imprisoned.

We have certainly had our flaws. And they are unconscionable and devastating. We cannot excuse them or sweep that under the rug. We have to own them and repent. But God always raises people up from his Church to do what he wants to accomplish because he builds his Church and he promised that even death itself will not prevail against it.

So, let me ask you the question again, *“When you get up on Sunday morning and get dressed, hop in the car. What do you think are you going to?”* When you become a member of local congregation, what are you becoming a part of? When you throw a few bucks in the plate as it goes by, what are you giving to? When you mow the church lawn, or shake people’s hand and greet people at the door, lead a ministry, teach a kids Sunday School class or play an instrument in the worship team, who are you serving?

Knowing what we know, can we continue to be casual? Can we continue to participate in the Church like it’s no big deal. If we really understand what the Church is, can we give our leftover energy to it rather than our best?