

Title: Confession, Church, Cross and Crown
Text: Matthew 16.13-28
Theme: The mark of the church is love
Occasion: 1st Sunday of 2015
Prop. Stmt: The church is called to reflect Christ in such a way that people experience a taste of Him by being around his bride.

George Orwell, wisely observed that, "The further a society drifts from truth the more it will hate those who speak it." Our study of Matthew's gospel puts that on clear display. Jesus, the Creator, has come to be part of his own creation. He not only speaks the Word of God, but he is the Word of God. He is the expression of God. If you want to know what the Father is like, look at his Son. This is what Matthew is helping us see. Week after week we see more and more of what God is like by listening to what Jesus says and examining what Jesus does. And our study of this first gospel has been so fruitful. Some of you have come to faith in Christ in this study. Others of you are being set free from the bondage of legalism and self-righteousness and are learning what it is like to live as a child of God who is loved perfectly. You are learning to actually trust God because you are being convinced that he means what he says. There are still some of you who have not yet come to faith in Christ, and others of you who are fearful of trusting God, but some of you are going to be gripped with grace and blown up in a good way by the gospel as well.

I am really looking forward to this coming year because I know what we are going to be studying together and I pray and am convinced that God is going to use his Word to create fresh life and fresh evidences of grace and love in us. So, here is what I aim to accomplish this morning: 1) I want to give you a taste of what is in store for us in the coming weeks and then 2) I want to help you see what is behind this. I want you to know what is going on "behind the scenes" so that you value and enjoy what God has done for you. And then finally, 3) I want you to know how this is influencing what I am going to be emphasizing this year for us as a family. So, this sermon is going to be a bit different than usual since I am not going to be on a hiking expedition through a few verses, where we stop to examine some rocks, mushrooms and trees. This sermon is going to be a flyover, where we can see the outline of the land and the terrain that we are traversing.

I am going to read from Matthew 16.13-28 because I not only want you to know what we are going to be studying, but I want you to be personally prepared for this study. Things are about to change. The crowds get smaller, the animosity gets more intense, his relationship with his disciples gets more personal, his focus on the cross becomes more vivid, and his plan to build his kingdom through what he calls the church, starts to come into view. We are turning a corner in the life of Christ.

Read Text:

There are 4 interrelated themes in these verses.

- The Confession of Jesus (13-17)

The Confession of Jesus as not only the Messiah (Anointed one, promised one) but also as the Son of the Living God. This is a huge moment in the life of Christ. In spite of what the angel told

her, his own mom doesn't yet understand who he is. His brothers and sisters don't understand who he is. The people from his village don't understand who he is. His own people don't understand who he is, but finally, someone gets it. Peter gets it. It may not have been until this very moment that the pieces came together for Peter, but it does and he says it. Now, keep this in mind. Peter's confession is not just repeating words, like reciting a creed. This is a personal statement of belief. He is actually convinced of this. As we like to say, this is not just coming from his intellect, this is coming from the heart of who Peter is.

I want you to know who Jesus is. What I mean by that is this: I not only want you to be intellectually convinced that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, I want you to personally embrace that with your whole being. Obviously, this is a very, very important passage. The entire theme of Matthew "Behold, your King" is tied directly to the identity of Jesus. And I want you to go from being informed, to being convinced to embracing this truth with your whole being. The confession of Peter is no small matter, because, as Jesus then says, this confession by Peter is a critical component to grounding and founding of the church. This is the second theme that arises.

- The Church of Jesus (my church) (18-19)

Up until this point in the Bible, we do not know anything at all, really about the church. Granted, many of the prophets spoke of the day when the nations would worship God and love him, but no one had a clue about how all of this would take place. Here Jesus talks about his church that he is going to build. It hasn't been built yet. It hasn't started yet, but what Peter just did was going to be pivotal somehow in the church being launched. A couple of chapters later (Matthew 18) Jesus talks about the church again. So, obviously, he is formally beginning the process of preparing his disciples for an entirely new phase in the plan of God to build a kingdom for his Son by securing a bride for her from people from every tribe, language and nation. We are going to be looking at how all of this began, and I am particularly excited about this because it helps call us back to what we intended to be. But, this confession by Peter marks another change and another theme.

- The cross (21-23)

(v.21) Now Jesus begins to talk openly with them about his death and resurrection. Peter's response reflects the fact that this does not make any sense to him. You cannot advance the kingdom if the king dies, right? How can the Messiah be the Messiah and die? Wow! The cross is not only central to the gospel, but because it is central to the gospel, it is central to the message, the ministry and the motives of the church. Peter could not understand how a king could die and be victorious, just as we are called to live lives that are very counter-intuitive to our world. We do not make decisions based on how the world thinks. Our goals are different, and therefore, our methods are different. Much of what we do does not make sense to our world.

For example, a business exists to make money for the owners. If you have a division of your company that is costing you more money than it is generating, you will probably, at some point, shut it down. What would happen if you would apply that metric to the church? We would not have a college ministry or a high-school ministry. Ministry to these students costs way more than

what they contribute. What about the recovery ministry? How much income is generated by people whose lives are in bondage to life-dominating sins? Not too much, right? At what point should we expect revenue to come flowing back to us from our investment in the Kiev Theological Seminary and Jerry and Kellie Benge, or from the 20 Schemes Church-Planting ministry in Scotland, or from the orphanage ministry of Andrew and Katie Dodd?

All of this, the confession, the church, the cross are part of the kingdom that Jesus keeps talking about. And the more we listen to him, the clearer this comes into view. Because he is a king, unlike any king you have ever seen, his message is unlike anything you have ever heard, his people are to be unlike any people you have ever met. This is all in preparation for the rule and reign of Jesus in a kingdom unlike any kingdom you have thought of.

- The Kingdom (24-28)

This kingdom does not have an army, yet. This kingdom does not have land, yet. This kingdom does have power and influence, but it is not seen on battlefields or in high-level negotiations in halls of power. It is seen in one life after another yielding to the unstoppable love and grace of the King. The love of God is the most personal and most powerful reality that you can ever encounter. God's love is so gripping and so pure and so perfect and so enduring that it truly is overwhelming. This brings us to the second thing that I want to point out. What is behind the scenes of the life of Christ? What is God's motivation for doing this? Why does Christ get up everyday and go through these experiences? Why is he so patient? Why is he so faithful? Why is he so unlike us? Simply put, Christ is the revelation of God and since God is profoundly loving and profoundly good, the love of Christ is overwhelming.

Beloved, I aim to convince you of the absolute love of God for you. I know that for most of you, if not all of you, that coming to the point where you dare to believe that God is who he says he is and what he says he is, is your biggest battle. But, this is the greatest truth that drives all other truths. Which is also why this was the heart of the first sin in Genesis 3. In that moment, Adam did not believe in the absolute love and goodness of God. But, when you do believe that God is love and is good, then you are free. You are set free to love God and set free to enjoy God. Listen, Christ came to this earth to do more than just rescue your back-end out of hell. He came to save you to himself. He came to bring you into relationship with him. What kind of a relationship is that? Well, to us, it is overwhelming. Let me connect some dots.

1. **The Love of Christ is Overwhelming.**

The love of Christ is overwhelming because behind Christ's love for us, is the love that Christ has for his Father. Matthew's gospel tells us of some of the accounts, where Jesus spends hours, sometimes all night, talking with his Father. Christ loves his Father. The relationship that Jesus has with us is directly related to his relationship with the/his Father.

A. Love of the Father

Christ perfectly and purely loves his Father and Christ is perfectly and purely loved by his Father. Since God is highest good and the greatest glory, this means that Christ loves what is truly good and truly glorious.

- 1) Love of what is good.
- 2) Love of His glory.

Let's say that you are sick and you go to the doctor. You have known this doctor for many years you are convinced because of your many experiences with him that he really cares for you. He recommends that you try this new medicine. He's never actually used it on anyone before, but he heard that it is pretty good. Obviously, you are a bit hesitant, why? You know that he means well. But, you are not sure if he has all of the data that he needs. On the other hand, let's say that you are sick and you go to an urgent care facility, where you are assigned to a doctor whom you do not know. And let's say that his doctor is covertly participating in a research project funded by a pharmaceutical company and he recommends this new medicine because the study that he is participating in needs more data (guinea pigs). In the first example, you know the doctor means well. In the second, you have reason to believe that the doctor's own agenda is clouding his perspective of what is truly good and best for you. But, when it comes to God, you never have to fear his competency or his motivation. He always loves what is good and best because he is the highest good and best. Christ loves his Father do perfectly and purely that he does everything that his Father asks him to do. In fact, Christ will lay down his very life for us. Why? Is it because he loves us? Yes! But, behind his love for us, is his love for the Father! So, what I am trying to help you understand is this. The reason why you can trust Christ's love for you, is because his love for you is driven by and fueled by and informed by and shaped by and colored by and filled by his love for the Father. And that is why he loves with a ...

B. Love that is self-less.

He has no nothing to gain from loving. He cannot be more glorious, more powerful, more secure than what he already is. He does not love you because you affirm him, or because you make him feel special. He does not love you because your loving him in response makes him secure and happy. He cannot be more secure, more full, more complete, and more perfect. He lacks nothing. But, his lack of need of you, does not cause him to be indifferent to you. His lack of need of you, means that he loves you purely for the sake of your good, in which he is glorified because his love for you reveals how glorious his love really is.

Let me give you an example of this. When we get to Matthew 22, we will read the account of one of the Pharisees, who was a lawyer, challenged Jesus by asking him, which is the great or greatest commandment in the law. Jesus replied that you are to 1) love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and you are to love your neighbor as yourself. Now, in that moment, we think, wow! that sure stumped the lawyer, didn't it? That was a great answer. Well, yes, it is a great answer, but think about it. We have been made in the image of God. Because God has existed from eternity past and will always be a three-person God, means that he is the template. Because God is in a perfect relationship with himself as God, he made us, in part to be in a relationship with one another. It is not good for us to be alone. It is not good for us to live for ourselves. We know that people who are alone are lonely, depressed, bitter, etc. We know that it

is not good for people to be alone. Why is it not good for people to be alone, because it is not like God! When Jesus tells us that we are to love one another as we love ourselves, he is telling us something about himself. We were made in the image of God. We were made to image him. We were made to reflect him. Therefore, God commands us to love one another, not simply because it is nice, but because God loves himself. The Father, Son and Spirit all love the relationship they enjoy as God. When we read Matthew's gospel, we are observing a love that is overwhelming because it comes from his love for the Father. That means that it is selfless. It also means that He loves with a...

C. Love that is unchanging.

You know that when some people tell you (or have told you) that they love you, that they do not really love you. They love how you make them feel. They love what you do for them. They love the affirmation, the attention, the pleasure, the way you make them laugh, or the way that you make them appear. They may actually think that they love you because they really do not know what love is. But, if you ever stop making them feel affirmed, or pleased, or humored or respected, or if they think that there is someone who will affirm them more, or please them more, or humor them more or respect them more, then their affections for you will stop and they will look elsewhere because in reality they do not love you, they love themselves. And because they crave affirmation, respect, attention and pleasure, their affections are fickle. They will give affection to those whom they perceive will give them what they "need" in the moment.

God does not crave affirmation. He does not need your respect. He is glorious, whether or not you acknowledge it. God's love for God is so perfect and pure that he already is and already has all that makes him complete and sufficient. He is not looking to you give him what he is lacking because he has no needs. That is why love is unchanging. It is also why He loves with a

D. Love that is eternal.

E. Love that is sacrificial.

All of this is seen in the life and ministry of Christ. He stands in complete and utter contrast to our world. He is the good Shepherd who loves and dies for his sheep so they will be rescued and kept safe from all harm. But, the story does not end there, does it? Matthew's gospel is the first book in the New Testament. There is a lot more to come. All that we are studying here in Matthew is in preparation for the church (us) and we live in anticipation of the return of the King and the establishment of His kingdom.

Let me ask you this: Will God love you more in glory than he does now? No. What will change? We will change. We will believe his love for us perfectly and we will love him back perfectly AND, we will love one another perfectly! There is so much to look forward to! So, how are we to live now, in view of that? And that brings me to the conclusion. Here is what I want us to emphasize this year. We are the body of Christ. We are the church and Christ is our head. That means that Christ is both the brains and the heart of the whole deal. Therefore, if the love of Christ for us is overwhelming, then...

2. The Love of the Church is to be Overwhelming.

We are loved perfectly. Just as Christ was loved perfectly and was free to love us perfectly, we are free to love others because we are loved by Christ. But, here is the difference. Christ never stopped believing that he was loved perfectly. We fail to believe that God is infinitely good and loving. We say that we do not feel loved by God. We feel abandoned by God, or unloved in some way. We doubt God's love for us. The problem is not with God. The problem is with our perception of God. This is a problem for all of us. This is one of the reasons why we need each other so much. We need one another to remind us of the love that God has for us. We remind one another of the love of God for us as we sing to one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. We remind one another of the love of God as choose to gather together in order to pray for one another, to read the Word to one another, to hear the Word together and worship together. We need this. God does not need this, but God enjoys this! We need this not only because we tend to forget, and because our perception of God's love is so easily skewed, but when you realize how much you are loved by God, you are free to enjoy God! And beloved, I want you to enjoy God!

2 Corinthians 5.14 – “For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.”

Do you see how this changes everything? I want the elders to come forward and sign the doctrinal statement and the church covenant. We do this every year as a reaffirmation of our commitment to what we believe and our commitment to live and serve you in keeping with the charge that you have given to us.

A. The love of the shepherds for the sheep.

I want the elders to remember this, and I want you to realize this about them (us). This group of men do not function like so many religious leaders that we see in our culture, or the religious leaders in the days of Christ. These men are not glory hounds. They are shepherds who are to love you in such a way that we give you a taste of the love that Christ has for you. Do you remember how Jesus commissioned his disciples? He said that all authority was his. What did he do with that authority, he not only died for the sheep, but then he shared that authority with them so that we could participate in his mission. That is the heart of these men. The church is not ours to own. We are stewards for the King. We share the authority and live accountable before you.

1 Timothy 1.5 – “*The aim of our charge* (the charge that Paul is giving to Timothy on how to lead the church) *is LOVE that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.*”

One of the things that we want to work on this year is how we can love you better. I desire this because I long for us to love one another better.

B. The love of the people for one another.

One of the things that people often note about our church is that we are well-taught. I am grateful for that. That is not just good, that is vital. That is a non-negotiable. But, Jesus not only came in truth, he came in grace. He came full of grace and truth. I want us to reflect grace and truth. I think that there is a lot of love here, but I think that there are ways in which we can be more intentional and focused in how we express that. I really long for every member of the church to be known, to be loved and to know that they are loved and cared for.

Jesus was full of grace and truth and he went on a mission to this world. As we grow in our knowledge and experience of grace and truth, then we will be driven even more to love the people in our world who do not know Christ, that they might come to know him, love him and enjoy him (and us) forever.

C. The love of the church for our world.

John 3.16 and John 20.21 – “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”

That is my aim for this year.

Elders sign doctrinal statement and church covenant

Congregation recites church covenant