



east side CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

CHURCH

a teaching series

STUDY GUIDE



Matthew 16:13-20 / Why Church?

Week 1—Kasra Soltani

BIG IDEA:

Church is God's design for His kingdom on earth, and there is no plan B.

COMMENTARY: © *Matthew Henry's Bible Commentary (concise)*

Peter, for himself and his brethren, said that they were assured of our Lord's being the promised Messiah, the Son of the living God. This showed that they believed Jesus to be more than man. Our Lord declared Peter to be blessed, as the teaching of God made him differ from his unbelieving countrymen. Christ added that he had named him Peter, in allusion to his stability or firmness in professing the truth. The word translated "rock," is not the same word as Peter, but is of a similar meaning. Nothing can be more wrong than to suppose that Christ meant the person of Peter was the rock.

Without doubt Christ himself is the Rock, the tried foundation of the church; and woe to him that attempts to lay any other! Peter's confession is this rock as to doctrine. If Jesus be not the Christ, those that own him are not of the church, but deceivers and deceived. Our Lord next declared the authority with which Peter would be invested. He spoke in the name of his brethren, and this related to them as well as to him. They had no certain knowledge of the characters of men, and were liable to mistakes and sins in their own conduct; but they were kept from error in stating the way of acceptance and salvation, the rule of obedience, the believer's character and experience, and the final doom of unbelievers and hypocrites.

RESPONSE:

The church by no means is a perfect entity. Outside of Christ's perfection, the human condition (brokenness, even in the redeemed) makes it bumpy and sometimes even chaotic, bordering on disastrous. A phrase most of us can sympathize with is, "some of my best and some of my worst memories happened at church". We've all experienced incredible highs and some gritty lows during our church journeys. Some choose to walk-away from the fellowship following deep wounds. But if we're honest with ourselves, it's the human condition that creates these unhealthy environments, where hearts are not stewarded well, and leading to brokenness and lost trust. When we analyze the church from an honest perspective, we can agree that God's design for fellowship on earth was not the root cause of our challenges, but the fallible people (us) this fellowship was entrusted to. Sometimes walking away from the church and foregoing fellowship feels like the right thing to do, yet we know that is not God's design or intent for His children. We are called into this fellowship, described as the rock, which is Christ Himself. All that to say, there is no plan "B". We've got to keep striving towards honoring God with how we engage this fellowship and how we practice kingdom living on earth as we look forward to eternity with Christ.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Can you share about the best experience you've had as a result of being part of a church?
2. Can you share about the worst experience you've had as a result of being part of a church?
3. How would you describe the concept of the church, to someone who has no church background?
4. What are some safeguards/habits you can practice in avoiding conflict and disunity in the church?

BIG IDEA:

One body, with many members.

COMMENTARY: © *Matthew Henry's Bible Commentary (concise)*

Christ and his church form one body, as Head and members. Christians become members of this body by baptism. The outward rite is of Divine institution; it is a sign of the new birth, and is called therefore the washing of regeneration, Titus 3:5. But it is by the Spirit, only by the renewing of the Holy Ghost, that we are made members of Christ's body. And by communion with Christ at the Lord's Supper, we are strengthened, not by drinking the wine, but by drinking into one Spirit. Each member has its form, place, and use. The meanest makes a part of the body. There must be a distinction of members in the body. So Christ's members have different powers and different places. We should do the duties of our own place, and not murmur, or quarrel with others. All the members of the body are useful and necessary to each other. Nor is there a member of the body of Christ, but may and ought to be useful to fellow-members. As in the natural body of man, the members should be closely united by the strongest bonds of love; the good of the whole should be the object of all. All Christians are dependent one upon another; each is to expect and receive help from the rest. Let us then have more of the spirit of union in our religion.

Without doubt Christ himself is the Rock, the tried foundation of the church; and woe to him that attempts to lay any other! Peter's confession is this rock as to doctrine. If Jesus be not the Christ, those that own him are not of the church, but deceivers and deceived. Our Lord next declared the authority with which Peter would be invested. He spoke in the name of his brethren, and this related to them as well as to him. They had no certain knowledge of the characters of men, and were liable to mistakes and sins in their own conduct; but they were kept from error in stating the way of acceptance and salvation, the rule of obedience, the believer's character and experience, and the final doom of unbelievers and hypocrites.

Contempt, hatred, envy, and strife, are very unnatural in Christians. It is like the members of the same body being without concern for one another, or quarrelling with each other. The proud, contentious spirit that prevailed, as to spiritual gifts, was thus condemned. The offices and gifts, or favors, dispensed by the Holy Spirit, are noticed. Chief ministers; persons enabled to interpret Scripture; those who labored in word and doctrine; those who had power to heal diseases; such as helped the sick and weak; such as disposed of the money given in charity by the church, and managed the affairs of the church; and such as could speak divers languages. What holds the last and lowest rank in this list, is the power to speak languages; how vain, if a man does so merely to amuse or to exalt himself!

See the distribution of these gifts, not to every one alike, verses 29, 30. This were to make the church all one, as if the body were all ear, or all eye. The Spirit distributes to every one as he will. We must be content though we are lower and less than others. We must not despise others, if we have greater gifts. How blessed the Christian church, if all the members did their duty! Instead of coveting the highest stations, or the most splendid gifts, let us leave the appointment of his instruments to God, and those in whom he works by his providence. Remember, those will not be approved hereafter who seek the chief places, but those who are most faithful to the trust placed in them, and most diligent in their Master's work.

RESPONSE:

There is so much beauty in this passage. What an incredible picture of God's design for the "how to" part of the function within the rock (Jesus Himself). When you compare and contrast other attempts in our world to practice diversity, they all fall short of the biblical standard. Within this passage and elsewhere in the bible, we are given incredible insight into God's perspective on diversity. Within these verses, we see some key dynamics regarding diversity in the church. For example, Scripture teaches that regardless of your unique design or role, you have been given intrinsic value from the Lord. We even see the notion that parts of the body that may often be considered as less important still receive great attention or honor. The result of all these dynamics ultimately is v.25: *"that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another."* Ultimately, the church is a collection of the peculiar ones (ecclesia) who not only have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior, but have also been given gifts and talents (or callings) to play their part in this beautiful and symbiotic organism, designed and ordained by the creator.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Are there any experiences you can share, that illustrate your understanding of this passage? A time or place, where it clicked for you?
2. Do your struggle with your role/giftings in comparison to others in the church?
3. What are ways that you have or are serving in the church that absolutely feeds your soul? Why?
4. Can you share about someone in your journey who exemplified this passage, in how they valued and treated others in the body?

1 Peter 5:1-5 / *Who Leads the Church?*
Week 3—Kasra Soltani

BIG IDEA:

Leading through humility and vulnerability will always yield God-honoring results.

COMMENTARY: © *Matthew Henry's Bible Commentary (concise)*

The apostle Peter does not command, but exhorts. He does not claim power to rule over all pastors and churches. It was the peculiar honor of Peter and a few more, to be witnesses of Christ's sufferings; but it is the privilege of all true Christians to partake of the glory that shall be revealed. These poor, dispersed, suffering Christians, were the flock of God, redeemed to God by the great Shepherd, living in holy love and communion, according to the will of God. They are also dignified with the title of God's heritage or clergy; his peculiar lot, chosen for his own people, to enjoy his special favor, and to do him special service. Christ is the chief Shepherd of the whole flock and heritage of God. And all faithful ministers will receive a crown of unfading glory, infinitely better and more honorable than all the authority, wealth, and pleasure of the world.

Humility preserves peace and order in all Christian churches and societies; pride disturbs them. Where God gives grace to be humble, he will give wisdom, faith, and holiness. To be humble, and subject to our reconciled God, will bring greater comfort to the soul than the gratification of pride and ambition.

RESPONSE:

Those that are called to lead the church indeed carry a heavy burden, but only if they take up the challenges on their own. Church leadership isn't about making decisions, but more about modeling a Christ-centered life and approach in all circumstances. We also tend to focus on those that are the visible leaders, folks we see and hear from often, but leadership in the church has many layers. There are many that lead quietly and effectively. Those that take up the discipling mantle and take the initiative to speak loving truth into others. Those who step up and teach our students. Those that lead the charge into being effective in our greater community. We all can find our place of leadership, regardless of our gifts and talents. What we don't have the luxury of, is being a sideline observer.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Who/how have church leaders in your past that affected you in positive ways?
2. What are leadership opportunities you've embraced and what were the results?
3. Are there opportunities God is calling you into that you may be resisting? Why?

BIG IDEA:

What does it mean to train myself to be like Christ?

COMMENTARY: © *Matthew Henry's Bible Commentary (concise)*

Outward acts of self-denial profit little. What will it avail us to mortify the body, if we do not mortify sin? No diligence in mere outward things could be of much use. The gain of godliness lies much in the promise; and the promises to godly people relate partly to the life that now is, but especially to the life which is to come: though we lose for Christ, we shall not lose by him. If Christ be thus the Savior of all men, then much more will he be the Rewarder of those who seek and serve him; he will provide well for those whom he has made new creatures.

RESPONSE:

Richard Foster and many other theologians have sought to explain the way of Jesus through describing 12 different things that he would often do throughout the Gospel accounts. Some argue that there are 13, however let's keep it simple - there are 12. Prayer, fasting, meditation, celebration, silence, solitude, Sabbath, service, simplicity, study, confession and worship. These 12 things Jesus did all throughout his life and if we are called to train ourselves to be like him, we should consider them as a way of life.

When it comes to “my role in the church,” one important take away is that Sundays aren't only about my desire to be filled. In fact, we should participate in Sunday worship from a place of already being filled because of what we have done during the week through Christ. If we are practicing sabbath, if we are in constant prayer, fasting, spending time serving others, then we come to church on a Sunday ready to share that and serve, celebrate and help others to do the same.

That's training to be like Christ. For me, church is a time to worship with my community, pray together, and challenge each other and to serve one another. For me, there are two spiritual disciplines that I have been practicing over the last 3 months, and they are Sabbath and Simplicity. Every Friday from 8:30pm to Saturday 8:30 pm, Brie and I (and the kids) practice Sabbath. We turn off electronics (mostly) and spend time together. We pray, we go on a walk, we nap, do a puzzle, play a game, invite friends over, eat lots of good food and delight in the presence of God. Ever since we have done this, we have found a sense of peace in our house, a feeling of ease, and love. It gives us the ability to show up Sunday and to be more present and more available to those around us.

So, what is my role in the church? To be present, worship my creator with those like-minded around me. To serve where and how I can. To join a community that makes us all stronger and kingdom work that much more effective.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What Spiritual Disciplines have you practiced that you would like go back to or do more of?
2. What do you think your role is in the church?
3. What do you do throughout the week to train yourself to be Godly?
4. Who in your life is a good example of someone who's living this out?

2 Timothy 4:1-8 / What is My Role? (Proclaim & Disciple)
Week 5—Kasra Soltani

BIG IDEA:

Everyone in the church is able (*in their own ways*) to teach and help grow others.

COMMENTARY: © *Matthew Henry's Bible Commentary (concise)*

People will turn away from the truth, they will grow weary of the plain gospel of Christ, they will be greedy of fables, and take pleasure in them. People do so when they will not endure that preaching which is searching, plain, and to the purpose. Those who love souls must be ever watchful, must venture and bear all the painful effects of their faithfulness, and take all opportunities of making known the pure gospel.

The blood of the martyrs, though not a sacrifice of atonement, yet was a sacrifice of acknowledgment to the grace of God and his truth. Death to a good man, is his release from the imprisonment of this world, and his departure to the enjoyments of another world. As a Christian, and a minister, Paul had kept the faith, kept the doctrines of the gospel. What comfort will it afford, to be able to speak in this manner toward the end of our days! The crown of believers is a crown of righteousness, purchased by the righteousness of Christ. Believers have it not at present, yet it is sure, for it is laid up for them. The believer, amidst poverty, pain, sickness, and the agonies of death, may rejoice; but if the duties of a man's place and station are neglected, his evidence of interest in Christ will be darkened, and uncertainty and distress may be expected to cloud and harass his last hours.

RESPONSE:

One of the enemy's brilliant tactics is to plant a seed of doubt in our minds. Convincing the saints that we are not equipped or gifted to "reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching," in every season. Yes, not all of us are wired to dive into the depths of theology, but what all of us possess is our experience of how Jesus has reproved, rebuked, and exhorted us with complete patience and teaching. Hopefully most of us can relate to that when it comes to our personal journey with Christ. It's important to acknowledge that our personal experience creates a powerful opportunity to be a witness for Christ. We're not called to simply disseminate information, but to be "Jesus with skin on." When we approach biblical mandates with this mindset, then it's no longer about ability, but the willingness for God to redeem our journey for the benefit of newer saints. We know the expectation, which leads us to constantly remind ourselves, of the source that will help and guide us, who is Jesus, Himself!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. In your journey to Jesus, who can you recall that was an unlikely person to share some profound truths with you?
2. Were there people in your church experience that took the initiative to have a difficult conversation with you?
3. Read 4:3, and comment, if you think "the time is coming," or if it's already here.
4. How can we daily, work towards verse 7?

BIG IDEA:

Wisdom is not just knowing the truth, but living it. What good is a truth if we don't know how to live/use it?

COMMENTARY: © *Matthew Henry's Bible Commentary (concise)*

If we heard a sermon every day of the week, and an angel from heaven were the preacher, yet, if we rested in hearing only, it would never bring us to heaven. Mere hearers are self-deceivers; and self-deceit will be found the worst deceit at last. If we flatter ourselves, it is our own fault; the truth, as it is in Jesus, flatters no man. Let the word of truth be carefully attended to, and it will set before us the corruption of our nature, the disorders of our hearts and lives; and it will tell us plainly what we are. Our sins are the spots the law discovers: Christ's blood is the laver the gospel shows. But in vain do we hear God's word, and look into the gospel glass, if we go away, and forget our spots, instead of washing them off; and forget our remedy, instead of applying to it. This is the case with those who do not hear the word as they ought. In hearing the word, we look into it for counsel and direction, and when we study it, it turns to our spiritual life. Those who keep in the law and word of God, are, and shall be, blessed in all their ways. His gracious recompence hereafter, would be connected with his present peace and comfort. Every part of Divine revelation has its use, in bringing the sinner to Christ for salvation, and in directing and encouraging him to walk at liberty, by the Spirit of adoption, according to the holy commands of God. And mark the distinctness, it is not for his deeds, that any man is blessed, but in his deed. It is not talking, but walking, that will bring us to heaven. Christ will become more precious to the believer's soul, which by his grace will become more fitted for the inheritance of the saints in light. When men take more pains to seem religious than really to be so, it is a sign their religion is in vain. The not bridling the tongue, readiness to speak of the faults of others, or to lessen their wisdom and piety, are signs of a vain religion. The man who has a slandering tongue, cannot have a truly humble, gracious heart. False religious may be known by their impurity and charitableness.

True religion teaches us to do every thing as in the presence of God. An unspotted life must go with unfeigned love and charity. Our true religion is equal to the measure in which these things have place in our hearts and conduct. And let us remember, that nothing avails in Christ Jesus, but faith that worketh by love, purifies the heart, subdues carnal lusts, and obeys God's commands.

RESPONSE:

Christian churches, because they are made up of imperfect individuals, have all the challenges and drama that secular organizations experience. Outsiders may see this as merely a group of hypocrites, but insiders recognize that church is messy and will be as long as sinful people gather. In v.22, which states, "Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves, Do what it says," James touches on one of the reasons outsiders tend to see Christians as hypocrites. They see the church as a group that listens while gathered as a church, but does not act out their faith. Like the servant in the parable of the bags of gold, doing nothing is sinful.

On the other hand, sometimes what we do or say can get us into trouble if we do not 'keep a tight rein on our tongue' (verse 26). Personally, the word "religious" tends to make me think of an outward show or insincerity similar to what the Pharisees often displayed. But God, in His wisdom, gives us examples of what pure and faultless religion looks like - "to look after orphans and widows and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

Wisdom is not just knowing the truth, but living it out each and every day. What good is truth if we don't know how to live it out as we strive to honor God? Because Satan is all about deception, it makes sense that he would try to deceive us - especially in regards to scripture as he did with Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Would you say it's difficult to follow through and obey scripture and if so, why?
2. How does the law give freedom?
3. Can you share about a time your tongue got you into trouble?

BIG IDEA:

Being isolated in our faith gives our thoughts time to wander.

COMMENTARY: © *Matthew Henry's Bible Commentary (concise)*

The apostle having closed the first part of the epistle, the doctrine is applied to practical purposes. As believers had an open way to the presence of God, it became them to use this privilege. The way and means by which Christians enjoy such privileges, is by the blood of Jesus, by the merit of that blood which he offered up as an atoning sacrifice. The agreement of infinite holiness with pardoning mercy, was not clearly understood till the human nature of Christ, the Son of God, was wounded and bruised for our sins. Our way to heaven is by a crucified Saviour; his death is to us the way of life, and to those who believe this, he will be precious.

They must draw near to God; it would be contempt of Christ, still to keep at a distance. Their bodies were to be washed with pure water, alluding to the cleansings directed under the law: thus the use of water in baptism, was to remind Christians that their conduct should be pure and holy. While they derived comfort and grace from their reconciled Father to their own souls, they would adorn the doctrine of God their Saviour in all things. Believers are to consider how they can be of service to each other, especially stirring up each other to the more vigorous and abundant exercise of love, and the practice of good works. The communion of saints is a great help and privilege, and a means of steadfastness and perseverance. We should observe the coming of times of trial, and be thereby quickened to greater diligence.

RESPONSE:

The evil one is always looking for ways to disrupt our lives in a way that we won't even recognize. Being isolated in our faith gives our thoughts time to wander. We may ask, "Does God care? Am I really loved?" Or, we may become overly independent and idolize the self, believing that we can do it on our own and don't need God. This takes us away from the loving arms of our savior.

Boundaries give us a safe space in order to be confident in healthy growth. Like a parent who says only one cookie knowing that if the child eats the whole bag they will get sick to their stomach. A church community creates a safe space where we can grow confidently in our faith. When we connect with our community, participate as a member of a small group, or attend a worship service as part of the larger body that we call the church, it helps us to stay reliant on God to provide for our needs. It also reaffirms that we are worthy and loved.

God does care and that is why He surrounds us with others to encourage us to be more like Jesus every day. That is also why He sends us to be the encourager when others are in need of one as well.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How have you been encouraged this week? How have you been an encourager to someone else this week?
2. Do you struggle with a guilty conscience standing in the way of you confidently having a sincere heart?
3. How can you begin to transition from seasons of isolation to a new season of engagement?

BIG IDEA:

God has entrusted us with the good news and promised to be with us always!

COMMENTARY: © *Matthew Henry's Bible Commentary (concise)*

This evangelist passes over other appearances of Christ, recorded by Luke and John, and hastens to the most solemn; one appointed before his death, and after his resurrection. All that see the Lord Jesus with an eye of faith, will worship him. Yet the faith of the sincere may be very weak and wavering. But Christ gave such convincing proofs of his resurrection, as made their faith to triumph over doubts. He now solemnly commissioned the apostles and his ministers to go forth among all nations. The salvation they were to preach, is a common salvation; whoever will, let him come, and take the benefit; all are welcome to Christ Jesus. Christianity is the religion of a sinner who applies for salvation from deserved wrath and from sin; he applies to the mercy of the Father, through the atonement of the incarnate Son, and by the sanctification of the Holy Spirit, and gives up himself to be the worshipper and servant of God, as the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, three Persons but one God, in all his ordinances and commandments.

Baptism is an outward sign of that inward washing, or sanctification of the Spirit, which seals and evidences the believer's justification. Let us examine ourselves, whether we really possess the inward and spiritual grace of a death unto sin, and a new birth unto righteousness, by which those who were the children of wrath become the children of God. Believers shall have the constant presence of their Lord always; all days, every day. There is no day, no hour of the day, in which our Lord Jesus is not present with his churches and with his ministers; if there were, in that day, that hour, they would be undone. The God of Israel, the Savior, is sometimes a God that hides himself, but never a God at a distance. To these precious words Amen is added. Even so, Lord Jesus, be thou with us and all thy people; cause thy face to shine upon us, that thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving health among all nations.

RESPONSE:

This passage is often referred to as the Great Commission, and Christians tend to focus on its evangelistic aspect. But the commission is actually to “make disciples,” not merely to “win converts.” Most of our journeys include two key moments. The first being the time you accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior and the second one includes all the other times that followers of Christ have poured into you. It's these two acts that make up the symbiotic circle that is the Church. As many of us already know, the word translated as “church” in the New Testament always refers to the people and not a location or place. Without the people, there is no church.

Many people first enter the church as a result of an invitation by another person. This individual becomes the bridge (*even though it's always the spirit that compels*) to surrendering to Christ - it is not often a slick marketing campaign or fancy building that draws people in. This is something that every believer is commissioned to do, and not only those gifted with evangelism. In addition to being the bridge, we also have the obligation (*blessing*) to play a role in discipling others. This is where the collective church comes into play. We can all write a list of the multiple people that have discipled us thus far, either directly or indirectly. Remember that actions often speak louder than words.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Who invited you to your first church experience?
2. Who's the one person that stands out to you throughout your journey, as someone who invested in you?
3. How have you been an influence in someone else's journey?
4. What are some dynamics that make it challenging or intimidating, when it comes to being the bridge for someone, or speaking truth/instruction to them? How can we overcome these challenges?

CHURCH STUDY GUIDE

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