

What Do You Seek?

Session 3: The Question He Asks Back

A study for seekers, and for the friends who walk with them

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers that Jesus Himself forces the question of His identity, that “great moral teacher” is the one answer the sources do not permit, and that last week’s airtight premise, only God can forgive sins, now points somewhere the scribes never intended.

Catholic Touchstone: On the rock of the faith confessed by St. Peter, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God, Christ built His Church (CCC 424).

The Knock and the Door: Piece Three

This week's piece, in one sentence: The answer to the ache is not a philosophy or a program; it is a person, and He asks each of us directly who we say He is.

Note the knock this week: Jesus initiates the identity conversation Himself. Nobody in Matthew 16 raises the subject; He asks. For a seeker, this reframes the whole investigation: Christianity is not us interrogating a historical figure; it is a living question aimed back at us. Keep the frame implicit; the pattern gets named at Session 6.

What You Need to Know

Caesarea Philippi is a deliberate stage: a pagan district at the foot of Mount Hermon, site of a grotto sacred to the god Pan and a center of Caesar worship. Surrounded by the market of religious options, Jesus polls the disciples: “Who do men say that the Son of man is?” (Mt 16:13). The crowd’s answers are all flattering and all inadequate: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, a prophet. Then the pivot on which the session turns: “But who do you say that I am?” (Mt 16:15). The question moves from survey data to personal verdict.

Peter answers: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16), and Jesus responds that flesh and blood did not reveal this, “but my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 16:17). Even the right answer is described as a gift received, not merely a conclusion computed. That balance matters for seekers: evidence is real and worth weighing, and the final step is still grace meeting freedom, which is this study’s frame in miniature.

“Son of man” sounds like modesty to modern ears. It is the opposite: in Daniel 7 the “one like a son of man” rides the clouds of heaven into God’s throne room and receives everlasting dominion from the Ancient of Days. Jesus chose the title Himself, and the group will find its source live.

Last week’s plant now pays off. The scribes reasoned: only God can forgive sins. In Mark 2 Jesus forgave sins and offered a public healing as evidence of the authority. Add John 8:58, “before Abraham was, I am,” echoing the divine name of Exodus 3:14, and the “just a teacher” reading has nowhere left to stand. The claims run through the whole Gospel witness, and the forgiveness scene stands in Mark, among the earliest strata of the sources; they cannot be trimmed away and leave a teacher behind.

Verses 18-19 give the session its threshold imagery: “the powers of death shall not prevail” (the Greek reads “the gates of Hades”) and “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” Gates and keys. Do not develop the church-authority theme in a seeker core session; it is real, it is ours, and it belongs to a deep-dive. Protect the imagery for the thread and keep the session on the identity question.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Daniel 7:13-14. The source of Jesus’ favorite self-title: one like a son of man comes with the clouds of heaven, is presented before the Ancient of Days, and receives an everlasting dominion that all peoples should serve. The group finds it live.

Exodus 3:14. “I AM WHO I AM.” Background for John 8:58: Jesus does not say “before Abraham was, I was,” but “I am.” His hearers picked up stones, because they understood Him perfectly.

Isaiah 22:22. The key of the house of David laid on a steward’s shoulder: he shall open and none shall shut. Background for the keys of Matthew 16:19; developed in the Dig Deeper and later in the catalog.

Voices of the Church

St. Ignatius of Antioch *Letter to the Ephesians, opening greeting (c. AD 107)*

In the early second century, within living memory of the apostles, Ignatius greets the Ephesians in the name of “Jesus Christ our God.” The divinity of Christ is not a later development the Church drifted into; it is the plain speech of the generation the apostles themselves taught.

St. Athanasius *On the Incarnation, 54*

“For the Son of God became man so that we might become God.” The famous exchange formula, quoted in the Catechism itself (CCC 460), states why the identity question carries such weight: what Christ is determines what He can do for us.

St. Leo the Great *Tome to Flavian (summary)*

In the fifth century, Leo gave the Church its enduring grammar for Peter’s confession: one and the same Christ, truly God and truly man, each nature intact. Not a demigod, not a costume, but God with us in full. A faithful summary of the Tome’s teaching rather than a quotation.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 424:** the Church is built on the faith confessed by Peter at this very scene.
- **CCC 464:** the Church confesses that Jesus is inseparably true God and true man; the belief the identity question is driving toward.
- **CCC 151:** for the Christian, believing in God cannot be separated from believing in the One He sent.

Hosting Your Seeker Friend

This Week’s Coaching

This is the intellectual objections week, so know your posture in advance: you are a host, not a debater. When your friend raises an objection, your first sentence is some honest version of “that is a real question,” because it is. If you know the answer, offer it briefly and return to the text. If you do not, say so, write it down where they can see you write it, and bring something back next week; a kept promise persuades more than a won argument. Never let the group pile on the one skeptic. And keep the goal

straight: the aim tonight is not that your friend concedes; it is that they leave believing the question deserves their adult attention.

Thread Watch (leader only)

- **The First Word:** Jesus raises the identity question Himself, unprompted. Note it silently; the count is growing.
- **Doors and Thresholds:** gates of Hades, keys of the kingdom. Two threshold images in two verses. Protect, do not connect.
- **Payoff logged:** the scribes' premise from Session 2 has now done its work. If anyone in the group makes the connection unprompted, enjoy it and confirm nothing beyond the text.

Session Goals

1. Present Piece Three: the answer is a person, and the person asks back.
2. Walk Matthew 16:13-17 inductively, moving the group from the crowd's answers to the personal question.
3. Land the live discovery in Daniel 7:13-14, converting Son of man from modesty to majesty.
4. Steelman “great moral teacher” at full strength and answer it from the sources, including the honest handling of the legend objection.
5. Close with the question itself left standing: who do you say that He is?

Time Note

75 minutes of content in a 90-minute evening. If long: cut the Dig Deeper first, then compress Build questions 1 and 2 into one. Never cut the steelman or the Daniel discovery; they are the session.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening

Leader prays alone, briefly.

“God, tonight we are asking the biggest question there is. Give us clear heads, honest mouths, and the patience to hear each other. Amen.”

The Knock and the Door (read aloud, under 3 minutes)

Piece Three: The Answer Is a Person

“Piece one: you were made for God. Piece two: something real stands in the way. Tonight, piece three, and it is the one that makes Christianity different from a self-improvement plan. The Christian claim is not that there is a technique for the ache, or a philosophy that reframes it. The claim is that the answer is a person, that he walked in history, and that the wall from last week was something he came to deal with personally. Which means the whole thing stands or falls on one question: who is he, actually? Tonight we are going to watch Jesus ask that question himself, out loud, to his closest friends, and then we are going to sit with the fact that he is still asking it.”

Win

Bart Ehrman is an agnostic New Testament scholar with no stake in defending Christianity, and in his published work he argues that the existence of Jesus and His crucifixion under Pontius Pilate are about as historically secure as ancient facts get. That is the skeptics' own floor: a real man, a real cross. The argument is about everything above the floor.

1. Before tonight, if someone asked you “who was Jesus,” what would you have said? Where did that answer come from?
2. Why do you think nearly everyone, including people with no religion, wants to keep some version of Jesus?

Build

Read Matthew 16:13-17 aloud.

1. Jesus asks two questions in three verses. What is the difference between “who do men say” and “who do you say”? Why does He refuse to leave it at the survey?
2. The crowd's answers, John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, a prophet, are all compliments. What do they all have in common, and what do they all avoid?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The first question costs nothing; it is sociology. The second is a verdict, and He aims it at persons, not crowds. The crowd's answers all classify Jesus inside an existing category, a prophet among prophets, which is precisely the safe move: honor Him enough to avoid deciding about Him. Peter's answer breaks the category: the Christ, the Son of the living God. And notice verse 17: Jesus says the Father revealed it. Evidence matters, and the last step is still a gift; both things are true at once in this scene.

3. Jesus calls Himself “the Son of man” here and dozens of times elsewhere; it was His favorite self-title. It sounds humble. Let's find where it comes from.

Live discovery: *have the group find Daniel 7:13-14 and read it aloud. Let them react before you say anything.*

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

In Daniel's vision, "one like a son of man" comes with the clouds of heaven, is presented before the Ancient of Days, and receives dominion, glory, and a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, with all peoples serving him. It is one of the highest scenes in the Old Testament. Jesus' "humble" title is a claim to the throne room. At His trial, when the high priest demands an answer under oath, He answers with this very scene, the Son of man coming with the clouds of heaven, joined to the enthronement at God's right hand from Psalm 110, and the court calls it blasphemy and tears its robes. The court that heard Him pair the title with Daniel's clouds knew exactly what it meant; the torn robes are the proof.

4. Now cash in last week's premise. The scribes said only God can forgive sins, and we agreed their logic was airtight. In Mark 2, Jesus forgave sins and healed a man as public evidence of the authority. Walk the logic: where does the scribes' own premise now lead?
5. One more data point: in John 8:58 Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am," and His hearers immediately pick up stones. What did they hear in that sentence? (Hint: Exodus 3:14.)

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The syllogism the scribes built now runs against them: only God forgives sins; Jesus forgives sins, and stakes public, checkable evidence on the authority; the conclusion writes itself, and it was their own premise. And in John 8:58 the grammar is deliberate: not "before Abraham was, I was," but "I am," the name God speaks from the burning bush (Ex 3:14). The stones prove the audience understood. These claims are not scattered decorations; they are load-bearing in the Gospel witness, and the Mark 2 forgiveness scene sits in the earliest stratum of it.

Where the Skeptic Is Strongest (steelman)

Give the objection its best form, in two layers. Layer one: "Jesus was a great moral teacher; the divine claims are later legend, added by devoted followers as the stories grew." It deserves a real answer, so here is one. Paul quotes an already-formed creed in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, that Christ died for our sins, was buried, was raised, and appeared to Cephas and the twelve, and scholars across the spectrum, including skeptical ones, date that creed to within a few years of the crucifixion, because Paul says he received it, and his own timeline in Galatians puts the receiving early. There is no multi-generation gap for legend to grow in; the resurrection claim is the founding claim, not a late addition. Be honest about the scope of that point: it dates the resurrection proclamation, not every saying in every Gospel. But the same early letters of Paul already speak of Jesus in language Israel reserved for God alone (1 Cor 8:6; Phil 2:6-11), so the high view of Jesus is demonstrably early too, not a slow-growing legend. Layer two, then, is C.S. Lewis's famous fork, stated fairly: a merely human being who said the things the earliest sources report, forgiving sins, claiming the Daniel throne, taking the divine name, would not be a great moral teacher. He has not left us that option. Liar, madman, or Lord remain; be honest with the group that this narrows the field rather than mathematically closing it, and that next week we look at what He actually did about the wall.

Dig Deeper (optional)

Verses 18-19 hand Peter "the keys of the kingdom of heaven," and the image has an address: in Isaiah 22:22 the king lays "the key of the house of David" on the shoulder of his chief steward: "he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open." A king appointing an office in his kingdom. There is a whole further conversation here about what Jesus built and why it is still standing; this study keeps tonight on the identity question, and that conversation has its own session in the deep-dive shelf for any group that wants it.

Send

3. “Who do you say that I am?” is grammatically a question you cannot answer with a poll. What would you need to see, or understand, to answer it with confidence either way?
4. Suppose, just as a hypothesis, that Peter’s answer is true. What in your life would that touch first?

Live It This Week

1. Write your current, honest, one-sentence answer to “who do you say that I am?” somewhere private. Date it. Nobody sees it; you may want to compare it with something later.
2. Bring one question about Jesus you have always wanted a straight answer to. We will collect them next week, no names attached.
3. Optional: read Luke 23:32-43 before next time. Three crosses; watch the man on the third one.

Closing

Leader alone, briefly: “God, the question is on the table and we are not going to fake our answers. Meet each of us where our answer actually is tonight. Amen.”

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“He said to them, But who do you say that I am? Simon Peter replied, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” **Matthew 16:15-16**

Before you dismiss: hand out Take-Home 3; standing sealed-sheet reminder.

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Every Passage in This Session

Primary Text

- Matthew 16:13-20, the two questions, Peter's confession, the revelation from the Father, gates and keys

Live Discovery Text

- Daniel 7:13-14, one like a son of man receives everlasting dominion

Supporting Texts

- Mark 2:5-12, recalled: the forgiveness premise from Session 2
- John 8:58 with Exodus 3:14, before Abraham was, I am
- 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, the early creed (steelman)
- Isaiah 22:22, the key of the house of David (Dig Deeper)
- Matthew 26:63-65, the Son of man answer at trial (leader background)

Catechism

- CCC 424, 464, 151

Memory Verse

- Matthew 16:15-16

The Knock and the Door

- Piece Three: the answer is a person, and the person asks back