

“Two Important Questions”

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Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” ²⁸ And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹ He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” ³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹ Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

In today’s lesson Jesus asks his disciples two important questions.

First, he asks them,
“Who do the people say that I am?”

And second he asks them,
“But, what about you?
Who do you say that I am?”

I used to think that the second question was more important. Making a personal decision for Jesus was paramount.

I grew up singing, “I have decided to come to Jesus.
No turning back. No turning back.”

Faith was all about making this personal decision for Jesus.

And I tended to downplay or even reject that first question. In fact I wondered why Jesus would even ask that question.

In my tradition, I was taught that it didn't make any difference what others said about Jesus.

The important thing was what I had to say.

The evangelists of my youth usually put it this way,

“If you were to die tonight, would you go to heaven?
Do you know Jesus as your personal Savior?”

You can accept him here and now.
You need to accept him.

It's more important than life or death.
It's a matter of eternity.”

At every youth retreat and every revival the message was the same.
“Say that Jesus is your Savior
now before it's too late.”

Now there's something right about that.
It is important what we say about Jesus.

I believe that the question Jesus asked the disciples long ago is the same question he asks us today.

“What about you?
Who do you say that I am?”

Answering that one question may be one of the most important things we ever do.

It is a personal question.
It’s a question that no one can answer for us.

What do I say about Jesus?

We answer that question all our life in many different ways.

But, over the years I’ve come to realize
that I can’t answer that second question with integrity unless I also answer
the first question that Jesus posed.

WHAT ARE THE PEOPLE SAYING ABOUT JESUS?

What are the people saying about Jesus?
How does the popular image of Jesus match up with His actual life and
teachings?

And there’s a corollary question that I also need to ask and answer, “Does
public opinion about Jesus affect my view of him?”

That’s not an easy question to answer.
Our deeply held beliefs are often tied to family history, cultural influences,
and our own desires.

All people, religious or not,
have a lot to say about Jesus.

But, often what the people say
(and sometimes what we say)
has no relation to the Jesus we find in the Bible.

There was a song we would sing at those youth meetings,

“Jesus, Jesus there’s just something about that name.”

But, that would be as far as we would go.

We would use the name of Jesus.

We would talk about accepting Jesus as our Savior.

But, who was this Jesus?

What did it mean to follow him?

What would “salvation” look like?

Quite often we didn’t get answers to those questions. We just assumed that we knew the answers to those questions.

But, that wasn’t always true.

Sometimes we didn’t have any answers when it came to the person of Jesus.

Or at least our answers to those questions were woefully inadequate. We did know some things:

For most of us, salvation meant that we would go to heaven after we died.

For some salvation meant that our enemies would be defeated.

For others salvation would take the form of a prosperous and fulfilling life.

After all didn’t Jesus say that he came to give us an abundant life?

We said a lot of things about Jesus.

Some of them were true.

Some of them were half-true.

And, as I’ve learned over the years, some of our answers were misleading or even contrary to the message of the gospel.

That’s why we need to pay attention to what others are saying about Jesus.

Our image of Jesus is often shaped

by what others say.

And we're not even aware that it's happening.

It's important that we ask what others are saying about Jesus.

We need to bring that cultural image into focus so that we can compare it to what the Bible actually says.

CHRIST AND CULTURE

Culture can sometimes be a more powerful force in our life than God's Word.

Sometimes this cultural influence will cause us to overemphasize some Scriptures while neglecting others.

And sometimes we can even "invent" Scripture to make our point.

A relative once told me,
"Well, like the Good Book says,
'God helps those who help themselves.'"

Of course I pointed out that this was not in the Bible. Indeed, the Bible teaches the exact opposite of that saying. God helps those who can't help themselves.

(And that includes all of us by the way.)

But, it didn't make any difference to my relative.
I couldn't convince him.

Never mind that I was a minister and had spent many years studying the Scripture. This was what he wanted to believe about the Lord and so this was what he believed.

What others say about the Lord is a very strong influence.

And sometimes no amount of evidence to the contrary can convince them to think in a different way.

That's why we can even find ourselves doing something "in Jesus' name" that is absolutely the opposite of what Jesus teaches.

That's exactly what happened in our lesson for today.

Peter, Jesus' disciple finds himself on the side of Satan instead of on the side of the Savior.

Now how did this happen?

How could this dedicated disciple get things so wrong that he would be on Satan's side instead of the Savior's side?

I would contend that Peter was influenced more by culture than Christ.

In order for us to avoid that same mistake we have to be very intentional about comparing what Jesus said and did with what people in our culture say and believe about Jesus.

This is the task of theology and Christian ethics.
And it is a very important task indeed.

JESUS AND JOHN THE BAPTIST

Let's go back to the first question that Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

How did the disciples respond?

Well, some said, "Jesus was John the Baptist."

For those of you who know the rest of Mark's story, this was quite an unusual statement.

By this time in Mark's story,
John the Baptist was dead.
Herod had him beheaded.

Mark gave us all the gory details in chapter six.

There's a reason Mark give us so much detail about John's death. It helps us learn something about the identity of Jesus.

Jesus' ministry was very powerful.
He said what only God could say.
And he did what only God could do.

So, everyone wanted to know.
Who is this guy?

Not only were the people asking this question.
Herod was asking this question as well.

The king asked,
"What are the people saying about Jesus?"

And the answers the king received
were the same answers that the disciples gave in our lesson for today.

Some said that Jesus was a prophet.
Others said that Jesus was a specific prophet, Elijah. (Many thought that
Elijah would come back from heaven to usher in the kingdom of God.)

And then there were some who said that Jesus was
John the Baptist, raised from the dead.

Mark then tells the story of John's death.
And we learn that Herod knew that John was an innocent and righteous
man.

But, he allowed himself to be influenced by the schemes of a vengeful wife,
and he did what he knew was wrong.

So, filled with guilt and fear,
the paranoid king has no doubt about the identity of Jesus.

He is John the Baptist, raised from the dead.

And we, the readers, have no doubt what the paranoid old king will want to
do.
He'll try to get rid of Jesus too.

Kings can't have rivals.

No unauthorized resurrections in his kingdom!
Not allowed!

Now there was some truth to what the people were saying about Jesus.

John the Baptist was a lot like Elijah.
He did prepare the way of the Lord, the coming of a new kingdom.

And though John was beheaded,
his ministry was not in vain.
In a way John's ministry was resurrected and advanced by the ministry of Jesus.

When the people said that Jesus was a prophet,
there was also some truth in that statement as well.
Jesus' power and his teaching were reminiscent of the prophets of old.

GREATER THAN A PROPHET

But, there was a difference.
Jesus was greater than even the most powerful prophets.

Remember how we summarized the ministry of Jesus:
Jesus says what only God can say.
Jesus does what only God can do.

Everyone is talking about Jesus and speculating about who he might be.

But, his mighty deeds and powerful words
are beyond anything the people have ever seen or read about in Scripture.

Yes, he's like John the Baptist.
Yes, he's like the prophets of old.
But, Jesus is more. Jesus is greater.

Who is he?

That's the question Jesus asks his disciples.
But, what about you?
Who do you say that I am?

And we know that Peter steps up
and speaks on behalf of the disciples.
“You are the Messiah.”

Jesus didn't reject that title.
The disciples had it right.
He was the Messiah and more.

The Kingdom of God was revealed in Jesus.

But, this kingdom would be a whole lot different from anything else that
they had seen or heard.
The ministry of Jesus would, in some ways, be quite different from what the
disciples had been taught from their youth.

Everyone expected the Messiah
to be a military and political leader.

They thought the Messiah would defeat their enemies and restore the glory
of Israel.

But, the kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus
would not match popular expectation.

The title was right.
Yes, Jesus was the Messiah, and more than a Messiah, the Son of God.

But, they had the details all wrong.

God's salvation in Christ would come in a very unconventional way.

God's salvation in Christ would NOT come at the point of a sword.

God's salvation in Christ
would come through a cross and a resurrection.

In order to prevent confusion, Jesus sternly warned the disciples not to tell
anyone about who he was. The language is very strong in this verse.

Jesus told his disciples to “hush up” about this.

Why?

They needed to see and experience more before they could bring his message to the people.

PASSION PREDICTION

So, what was this more that they needed to learn?

In the very next section Jesus begins teaching them about the cross and what it means.

He said that the Son of Man “must undergo great suffering”, be rejected by the religious and political leaders, and be killed. And after three days, there will be a resurrection.

This was totally opposite to what the people expected.

They expected the Messiah to win so much that everyone would be tired of winning.

This didn't sound like winning to Peter.

And not only that, unlike Jesus' warning to keep the Messiah thing quiet, Jesus made this passion prediction quite openly so that everyone could hear.

If Jesus had come in our day and time he would have put it on Twitter. Can you imagine that tweet?

“Son of Man to be rejected by leaders and killed”@[realJesusChrist.com](https://www.instagram.com/realJesusChrist.com)”

Peter and the disciples were aghast at what Jesus was saying.

What kind of Messiah is rejected by leaders and killed?

We've got to hush this up.

DEVIL IN THE DETAILS

So Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him just as Jesus had rebuked those who were demon possessed.

Maybe he reminded Jesus that this was just not how a Messiah acted.

But, Jesus wasn't buying it.
Instead, he rebuked Peter in the strongest terms possible.

He turned his back on Peter ...
and looking at his disciples, he said,

“Get behind me, Satan!
For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

We've been considering two questions today:

What do the people say about Jesus?
and
What do you say about Jesus?

Those are two important questions as my sermon title suggests.

But, they are not the most important question.
In the final analysis,
the most important question is this:

What does Jesus say about Jesus?
How does Jesus define the Kingdom of God?

If we try to take the name of Jesus and then make him into someone who fulfills our desires or does what is politically popular, guess who's work we're doing?

You guessed it.
The work of the devil.

Jesus wants to make this crystal clear,
not only to his disciples,

but also to any who think they want to follow him.

He has the crowd join the disciples,
and he begins to speak openly about the cost of discipleship.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

Salvation does not come through military might.
Salvation does not come through winning.
Salvation comes through self-sacrifice.

This will be true for the Messiah.
And it will be true for those who want to follow Him.

Jesus said that if we don't preach this message,
if we are ashamed of a Messiah who sacrifices and preaches self-sacrifice,
then we can't be a part of his kingdom. (38)

REBUKING JESUS TODAY

Who plays the role of Peter today?
Who rebukes Jesus for his call to deny ourselves and sacrifice for the good
of God's kingdom?

Is it those who promote the power of positive thinking instead of the power
of the cross?

Is it those who think that our faith is measured by the size of our bank ac-
count?

It is those who conceive of the Lord as a warrior God who helps us win our
battles and is always on our side?

That's what a lot of people are saying about Jesus.

I once had an elder criticize my preaching this way,

“You preach too much about the cross.

I know. It's in the story.

But, you've got to tone it down.
You've got to be more positive in your sermons."

That's what Peter thought.

"Tone it down Jesus. Don't say it so openly.
If you want to succeed in politics you have to give people what they want."

But, Jesus wasn't a politician.
He was a Savior.

He told the people,
"There are some things that are worth dying for.
There are some things that are worth more than money.

You can have all the money in the world,
but if you don't have the things that are really important in life, you've lost
everything."

Some people say that the message of the cross
is not the message we need to be preaching in the modern world.

The people in our world are too self-centered.
We need to adapt, to do "church light".

We need to have positive messages on self-development.
We need to make our service more relevant to the needs of the modern
family.

Maybe we could talk about how God friended me on Facebook? Sounds
like a TV show.

Those who have done this have become quite popular with some people.
Their churches are often become mega churches.

And I've noticed that in these churches, sometimes the symbol of the cross
is no longer central.

I heard one preacher say that he removed the cross because people don't understand what it means any more.

So what has replaced the cross?
The projection screen!
I think that's symbolic of the struggle we face today.

SOMETHING WORTH DYING FOR

But, I think we're selling people short.
I think people want to know about the cross.

I think people are dying
for something that is worth dying for.
I think people are looking for someone to whom they can give their life,
their whole life.

A lot of people, young and old, are asking the question that Jesus asked long ago,

"What good does it do me to make a lot of money
and yet have a life that's not worth living?"

Is this all there is?
Isn't there something more?"

Jesus has good news.
There is more.

There is salvation that lifts us above the despair
of this self-centered world.

And that salvation begins with a cross.

That salvation begins when we crucify the old way of life and go in a new direction. Paul put it this way in his letter to the Galatians (2:19b-20),

"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

In the final analysis,
it's not what other people say that matters.

It's not what we say that matters.

It's what Jesus says that matters.
So this is always the most important question.

Who does Jesus say that he is?

He is the Messiah.
He is the Son of God.
He is the way, the truth and the life.

And in the cross and the resurrection
we learn a new way of life.

Salvation begins when we forget about what other people are saying. Salvation begins when we forget about what we want. Salvation begins when we crucify the old way of life.

And when that happens, we begin to hear the call of Jesus clearly.

It is a call to serve and sacrifice in his name.
We lose our life in order to gain it.

Amen.