

WHO DO YOU SAY JESUS IS, REALLY?

Matthew 16:13-28

Key Verses 15,16

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

This past week I made a goal to survey Northwestern students randomly with this question: “Who do you say Jesus Christ was?” I didn’t say “is” since that would imply that he is alive, which only a believer would believe. I collected 12 answers. Here they are: (1) Someone important to a lot of people. (2) Whoa, that’s a deep question. A religious leader (from a nominal Protestant). (3) A martyr for his own beliefs, because it went against others (Catholic believer). (4) A man who walked the earth, died on a cross, and rose again on the 3rd day (Catholic believer). (5) No comment. (6) A historical figure. (7) God’s Son, our Savior (a Lutheran girl who is currently attending Catholic church with her very Catholic boyfriend). (8) Son of God (Christian in a Bible study and attending a church). (9) A guy, real or not? I’m not sure. (10) A person who was a prevalent influence on society. (11) <laughter> and walked away. (12) Not willing to take time to reply. Three of these 12 gave no comment. Four of them identified as believing Christians, 1 more as nominal Christian. Two regarded Jesus a mere historical figure, one was not sure if he lived or not, one said Jesus was someone important to people did not express any personal view or comment about Jesus. Varying ideas about Jesus are somewhat similar to the varying responses to God’s word in Jesus’ parable of the sower, in which the seed fell on the path, among rocks, among thorns or on good soil.

We are all faced now and daily with the serious question of Jesus’ identity. But just as important is the issue of what Jesus came to do. In addition, disciples of Jesus need to know the implications of all this. We will see that Peter got right the first issue regarding Jesus’ identity, but he was completely clueless about the second issue of what Jesus came to do. In fact, he was terribly wrong about this. Peter and the other disciples were really following a Messiah of their own imagination and hope. This is more common than we realize. So we have to be very careful not to make the same mistake, and rather understand what is really required of a disciple of Jesus. May the Lord reveal to us not only the right answers, but the right attitudes and the secrets to a new life in Jesus, for Jesus and through Jesus.

First, who is Jesus, really? This important discourse between Jesus and his disciples happened at Caesarea Philippi, a city far north of Galilee in Gentile territory. Jesus intentionally went there with his disciples to have alone time with

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them. There Jesus asked his disciples two questions. The first one was merely observational: **“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”** Of course, **“Son of Man”** was Jesus’ most common way of referring to himself in the third person. Jesus asked his disciples what peoples’ general view of Jesus was. The disciples merely had to know what people thought of Jesus, or simply what they were saying about him. Their answer was, **“Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”** It is noteworthy that people regarded Jesus as a prophet come back to life, or a prophet whom they thought was promised to come again. Even today, many Jews celebrate the Passover, leaving a seat for Elijah to return. It means they are still hoping for Elijah to return some day. It is interesting that the common view of Jesus was not that he was a prophet in his own right, but that he was a returned prophet. Perhaps they didn’t have enough faith to believe that a prophet could actually be born in their own society and generation. In any case, they regarded Jesus as a man with prophetic connection to God and divine authority.

The next question Jesus asked his disciples was personal: **“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”** This question required a personal opinion and stand. Jesus’ disciples could not hide behind the opinions of others. They had to take a stand with their own opinion. Peter spoke up, perhaps and probably on the disciples’ behalf saying, **“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”** We see that Peter’s answer was more respectful, and more advanced, and was in fact a higher view of Jesus. For Peter, Jesus was the long-awaited, promised Messiah, spoken of in the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament.

“Messiah” is the Hebrew word equivalent to the Greek word, **“Christ,”** which both mean, **“Anointed One.”** In Jewish thought and history there were three offices that could be anointed by God: kings, priests and prophets. This anointed Messiah would be a great King, the King of kings, like David, but even greater (Isa 9:6-7). This anointed one who be a great high priest, a mediator between God and people (1Sam 2:35). This anointed one would be the greatest prophet or messenger of God (Deut 18:15). Peter understood the Messiah to be **“the Son of the living God.”** The Son of the living God is the one who is in the closest intimate relationship to God.

We already know from Matthew’s own witness that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, beginning with the opening sentence of his gospel, which says: **“This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham...”** Jesus has already been called **“son of David”** three more times in this gospel: by two blind men (9:27), by an astonished crowd (12:23), and by the Canaanite

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woman (15:22). Again, in Matthew's account of Jesus' life story, Jesus has already been called "**Son of God**" by the devil (4:3,6), by two demon-possessed men (8:29), and by Jesus' disciples after he walked on water (14:33). The disciples of Jesus should have known that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. Then why did Jesus ask them this question?

There are two reasons. The first reason is that it is important to make a personal declaration of faith in Jesus. The apostle Paul explained this, writing in Romans 10:9-10, "**If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.**" Important here is not merely a mouth declaration, but a heart belief, that is, a genuine belief in the heart. The writer of John's gospel says similarly: "**But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**" Eternal life is knowing the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom he sent (Jn 17:3).

The second reason that Jesus asked his disciples this question has to do with what Jesus was about to tell them, since it was going to shock them to the core of their being. We'll get to that soon enough.

How could Peter make such a declaration of faith in Jesus' identity as the Messiah, the Son of the living God? As already mentioned, others already testified to Jesus as the "**son of David**" and the "**Son of God.**" But there is more than mere observation from others. The truth of Jesus' identity was a truth impressed upon Peter's heart by God himself. Jesus noted this saying, "**Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven**" (17). To know Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, and our Savior requires a revelation from God. This is important for us to remember when we are praying for others to believe in Jesus or sharing our faith with them. The eyes of their hearts need to be opened up by God. We cannot force this. We cannot argue people into the kingdom, into a personal declaration of faith in Jesus. It must come to them from the Father in heaven, by the enlightening of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus continued saying some amazing words to Peter (18-19): "**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. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.**" It is a misunderstanding to think that Jesus is making Peter himself, whose name means "rock," the man whom

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Jesus will build his church upon. But that's not consistent with the rest of the New Testament. You can read a commentary or study Bible to understand the various interpretations of these verses. For the sake of brevity, I'll condense what I think is the best understanding in three sentences. Jesus' church is built on the foundation of "all" the apostles, and all Christians are being built as living stones into Christ, with Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone (Eph 2:20-22; 1Pe 2:5). So Jesus himself is the chief rock. His church is built upon him, and all who follow him are living stones being built into him. Jesus also says "**I will build my church.**" Jesus will build his church, and what Jesus builds, no one can destroy, and even the powers of hell and death cannot overcome it. The door to heaven is open to all who declare Jesus Christ as Lord and who follow him.

Second, what did Jesus come to do, really? It was not yet the time to tell the world that Jesus was the Messiah. So Jesus told them not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. At least, not yet. They first had to understand something very important, which they didn't yet know. In fact, the disciples really didn't understand what Jesus came to do. They didn't know his primary mission or purpose of life. Healing the sick? Great! Driving out demons? Wonderful! Proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of heaven? Fantastic! Suffer, die and rise again! What?

It was these very words, which they never expected, nor wanted to hear, which Jesus spoke next. Look at verse 21: "**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.**"

All the disciples were convinced through Jesus' grace, wisdom, power and love that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. But they still had no idea that Jesus' mission on earth involved suffering, rejection, torture and death. Yet Jesus said these things "must" happen. It was not optional. There was no plan B. Jesus had to go to Jerusalem. He had to suffer many things at the hands of his opponents. He had to be killed, and then on the third day he would rise again to life.

Until then, the disciples obviously had the rosy idea that Jesus would rise to a throne in Jerusalem and be crowned as King. Probably they thought the Roman Empire would then dissolve or be destroyed, and they would reign with Jesus in a splendid mansion or palace. Jesus' words were like throwing water on the fire of their human desires and aspirations. It shocked them to the core, and Peter would have none of it. It sounded too dark and pessimistic to Peter, who thought he had a

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much better picture and idea of what was to come. Jesus' words made no sense in Peter's plan and hope. Peter thought he had to speak some sense into Jesus. Jesus was really losing it this time. So Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him.

“Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” Wow, Peter really sounded like he loved Jesus. After all, who wants to see a loved one suffer? No one really.

Jesus was not impressed with Peter's sympathetic words. Rather, Jesus felt the words were straight from hell, a terrible temptation posed to Jesus by his top disciple, Peter. Jesus would have none of it. Jesus turned and said to Peter, **“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”**

In one moment Peter spoke words revealed by God that were indeed marvelously true of Jesus: **“You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.”** Jesus even called Peter **“blessed”** for the declaration. But in the next moment, Jesus called Peter **“Satan,”** or **“Evil one,”** and Jesus said, **“Get behind me, you stumbling block!”** Peter's protective words for Jesus sounded loving, but they were from the devil. The devil also thought that Jesus should take an easier way. **“Turn stone to bread, Jesus. Aren't you hungry, Son of God?...Jump off the temple, Jesus, for God says he'll save you!...Bow down to me, Jesus, and I'll give you the kingdoms of the world.”** To that Jesus replied, **“Away from me Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only’”** (Mt 4:10).

But before we get too harsh with Peter, we have to ask ourselves: “Am I following a Jesus of my own making or imagination, or the Jesus revealed in the four gospels?”

Two of the most common unbelieving views of Jesus today are as follows: Jesus was merely a good man, or, Jesus was a myth. Actually these views are one and the same. C.S. Lewis astutely argued in his book *Mere Christianity* that one cannot call Jesus a good man—Jesus never left us that option. In other words, for Jesus to make the claims that he made—to have authority to forgive sins, to be the unique way to God, and so forth—if these claims were not true then Jesus was not a good man. Rather, he would either be a liar or a lunatic. Of course, a more convenient denial and rejection of Jesus is to say that he is just a legend, fabricated as a heroic fairy tale. If that is true, it is not even necessary to defend his character at all, since he never actually existed, at least as the Bible presents him. But if indeed he really died on the cross for our sins and really rose again from the dead,

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then the words and promises attributed to him in the Bible are completely trustworthy, even with our lives.

Third, what does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus, really? There is still another serious false view of Jesus. It is the idea or hope that Jesus is like a heavenly genie or Santa Claus, who is there at my bidding to make my life easier, to solve all my problems, so I can enjoy better things in this world. Though that would be nice, that is not the Jesus of the Bible. That is a fictional Jesus, who is not presented in the Bible, and therefore whom we don't have the option to follow.

Simply listen to Jesus' next words to his disciples, **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”** (24-26)

Deny yourself. Take up your cross. And follow Jesus. Jesus' call is not to a comfortable and easy life, not to worldly glory and honor and recognition. Jesus says that whoever desires and labors to save their life will lose it, but whoever gives up their life for Jesus will find it. Jesus says it's not worth it to gain the world but lose one's soul.

Jesus closed this conversation with the following words: **“For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done. Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”** (27-28) Jesus twice here mentioned his coming again. And he will come with rewards according to what we have done.

So we are each left with a personal question: **“Who do I say Jesus is?”** Christians can say with Peter, **“Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Jesus is my Lord and Savior.”** Is he really? Does it show in your life and mine? Are you following the Jesus in the Bible, or a softer, kinder, more gracious Jesus, who might look more like Santa Claus than the Jesus Christ of the Bible. There are no Satanic substitutes for the real Jesus. Jesus gave all for us. He died the death we deserve to give us the life we do not deserve. Jesus faced the cross all alone, but promised to be with us always to give us glory, victory and peace with him. So who do you say Jesus is?

If we are honest, we all know we don't deny ourselves enough, or take up our crosses daily, and we fail again and again at really following Jesus. Even

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Jesus' top disciple Peter didn't want to follow a suffering Messiah, but preferred the power and glory of an earthly kingdom. We are just the same. No one naturally chooses suffering, rejection and death. Our impulse and natural inclination rather, is not to deny ourselves, but to save ourselves, isn't it?

Can I be honest with you for a minute? Yesterday I extended my hand to an old friend and he refused to shake it. I held it up longer and said, "As a human being?" But he still refused. I was shocked by his inhumanity, not to mention his un-Christ-like behavior. I wish I could say that I responded in a Christ-like manner, saying, "I'm sorry if I've ever offended you personally in any way. Please forgive me." But hours later, as I wondered more over this, I remembered a time in the past year when I wouldn't shake a person's hand, since I felt wounded and disrespected, and I felt the person's gesture was shallow and insincere. So, I did the same thing, not being willing to shake a person's hand. So who am I to judge?

The bottom line is I need a Savior. We all need a Savior. We need supernatural help to live the supernatural life that Jesus calls us to. This is only really possible by the help and power of the Holy Spirit - Jesus himself living in us. This is only possible when we repent of our sins and surrender our life dreams, plans, ideas and control over to Jesus. Lord, help us to surrender all to you, for you really are the Messiah, the son of the living God.