

Women's Bible Study Fall 2011

Who Do YOU Say I Am? *A study of the names and character of Christ.*

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***Who Do You Say I Am?* Mark 8:27-37**

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I'm very glad to be back with you today. Usually I like to kick off with a lecture that is at least slightly lighthearted – maybe tell a few rustic camping stories, a few family anecdotes – and I like to get you laughing.

I have to warn you, that's probably not going to happen.

I realized when I was preparing this talk that I had dealt myself a pretty serious topic indeed. This fall we're studying the names and character of Jesus Christ, but it's through the lens of the question: Who do you say I am? That question comes from Mark 8, and this particular talk in the series is different than all the others in that it concentrates more on our reaction to Christ rather than on Jesus himself.

But I think there's a lot of urgency to the question, Who do you say I am?

I was at my mother's in August and she asked me to help her extract her phone messages from her cell phone. Since she rarely uses it she doesn't know how to retrieve messages, and there were 6 or 7 of them dating back to last March. The first one I listened to gave me quite a start. It began, "This is the police department at Cal State San Marcos, and we've found a cell phone. Since there's no name on it, we dialed the number labeled "Mom" in hopes that you might know who the owner was." Well, I certainly knew who the owner was...me! I had lost my cell phone at a track meet in early April. I had called the college; I'd tried everything to recover that phone and finally refurbished an old one to avoid having to buy another. Now *that* was a message that was very important to me, but because it wasn't heard in time, it was of no use, and it filled me with regret that I hadn't heard it sooner.

Most of us have been hearing the message of the gospel our whole lives. And many of us have been following Christ for years. But there are also many of us who don't really get what's the big deal about Christianity. Church seems dull. Christians are disappointingly sinful. We don't really have much clarity on who Jesus Christ is. And that's why we're studying him this fall.

Think for a moment of the mental picture you get when you hear the name "Jesus Christ". Did this classic picture come to mind, of Jesus with soulful eyes and honey brown hair, looking comforting but not much like a 1st century Jewish carpenter?

Or do you think of him as the Bible describes him?

As the bread of life

Or the Lamb of God
As the light of the world
Or the vine
Or the Lion of Judah?

These are all names that convey something about Jesus Christ – who he is and what he does. The more we ponder them, the more we'll understand what he wants to convey to us about himself. And the more we understand who he is, the more we'll get what he longs for us to do, which is to follow him without looking back. That's where life really changes. The difference is night and day between being dragged to endless years of church and actually encountering the risen Christ. There is no similarity in trudging along trying to do better vs. racing ahead in the power of Christ, who transforms us.

You see, each of us is faced with the same question that Jesus posed to his disciples in Mark 8: Who do *you* say I am? It's not enough to know what others think of him. We need to answer that question for ourselves. So while it's a sobering topic, it's also an urgent one, because there is a limited time when this question will be answerable. After that, it will be answered for us...whether we agree or disagree, the Bible tells us that eventually, every knee will bow before our Lord Jesus Christ. (Phil. 2:10).

I used to listen to a band called The Moody Blues, which should allow you to immediately calculate my age. One of the great things about modern technology is that I can now locate online all the songs I used to have to wait for hours to come on the radio during my childhood and teen years. Can you believe that a time existed when you couldn't just immediately locate everything on the internet? One of the Moody Blues' songs that I recently rediscovered is called "The Question." Like all bad 60's rock poetry, it seemed really profound to me at the time.

"Why do we never get an answer
When we're knocking at the door
We have a thousand million questions
About hate and death and war..." (Justin Hayward, The Moody Blues)

I realized that the poor guy never quite gets an answer to his questions, even though they are important to him. But that's partly because he's asking the wrong question of the wrong person. He wants the universe to give him answers, while it's the creator of the universe who will make all things clear.

Questions start with our first words and don't end til death. Because they are so universal, Jesus used them to teach. He often began conversations with a query. He said to the woman at the well, "Will you give me a drink?" (John 4:7) when his intention was to offer her living water. He said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" (John 6:5) when he planned to feed the five thousand. And on the particular day we're looking at, in Mark 8, Jesus has just healed a blind man. Then as they move on, he asks his disciples a question. First the blind man receives sight, then the blind disciples receive insight.

So please turn with me to Mark 8, verse 27, and let's look first at

I. The Question (v. 27)

“Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, ‘Who do people say I am?’ (Mark 8:27)

Now Caesarea Philippi was an interesting place, religiously speaking. It had been a center of baal worship. The Greeks believed it to be the birthplace of the god Pan. And King Philip had recently built a gorgeous temple on the hillside to honor the modern deity Caesar. Yet this is the place where Peter discovered that a homeless carpenter from Galilee was the Son of God. (Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, pg. 196) Perhaps because of all the pagan worship around him that Jesus chose this place to teach his disciples who he was.

The disciples are game to provide an answer, which we see in verses 28-30.

II. The Answer (v. 28-30)

“They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.

‘But what about you?’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’

Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ.’

Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. (Mark 8:28-30)

Peter gets it. He blurts out what many of them suspected: that Jesus was the Christ foretold in the Old Testament and looked for with longing by the Jews. “Christ” was not a name, but a title, meaning “The anointed one.” It was equivalent to the term “Messiah” or “Deliverer”. But Peter’s idea of Messiah is completely different than the sort of Messiah that Jesus will be.

Notice that Jesus does not contradict him. Peter has indeed spoken the truth. That immediately makes us wonder why Jesus warned them not to talk. You see, Jesus knew that Peter meant one thing with the name “Christ” and Jesus meant something entirely different. Of course he doesn’t want this not-quite-right truth put around. Jesus needs to prepare the disciples to understand what will come, that while he **is** the Messiah this will not result in a big victory romp over the Romans.

The Messiah that Peter anticipated was a military and political deliverer. Most Jews believed this, primarily from the apocryphal writings - those books between the Old and New Testaments which are not considered to be part of the canon of scripture.

The Jews had worked out a pretty precise description of what the Christ would do. They believed that their greatest days had been with King David, and therefore the Messiah would come from David’s descendants. This Christ, though human, would intervene in history with the help of God. Elijah would return, and then the Messiah would come. The nations would fight against him and lose. Jerusalem and the temple would be rebuilt. Then Christ would gather all the Jews; Israel would become the center of the world, with all nations subject to it, and the Gentiles would be wiped out. You can see why, living as an occupied nation, the Jews longed for this sort of Messiah to come.

But that sort of Christ was not what Jesus intends. He doesn't let them cherish any dreams of victory. Instead, he explains what that title will mean in his life.

So the answer is followed by:

III. The Consequence (v. 31-33)

“He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. ‘Get behind me, Satan!’ he said. ‘You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.’” (Mark 8:31-33)

Where does this name “Son of Man” come from? It’s from the book of Daniel, where the prophet describes a vision of **“One like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven...He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” (Daniel 7:13a; 14)**

This was a messianic title, yet in the next breath Jesus teaches them that he would not be a conquering hero. He would be a Christ who would be rejected. Who would suffer. Who would be spurned and hated by the religious authorities. This is not what the disciples wanted to hear. That wasn't the Christ they had signed up to follow.

Peter, who had just gotten a “A” for insight, now goes to the bottom of the class by demonstrating his complete lack of understanding.

He takes Jesus aside and rebukes him, which is quite socially awkward.

Imagine the scene. Generally disciples walked behind the rabbi as he taught. Peter is not only challenging Jesus' words, he's also showing disrespect by walking in front of the disciples. So when Jesus says “Get behind me, Satan!” he's making a literal statement, telling Peter to return to his position as a disciple and not presume to tell him what to do. Because, you see, Peter is tempting Jesus with the very thing Satan tempted him with in the desert – the misuse of power.

Think about it. Jesus could have taken a pass on the way of the cross, and instead just used his divine power to flatten the opposition, get rid of the Romans and bring the Jews into line. And because Jesus was fully human, we know that he was tempted to misuse his divine power occasionally. Hebrews tells us **“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15)**. That's why the fact that Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine is so important, because it means he has suffered what we suffer in this life. He can empathize with us because he's been there. But because Jesus was also obedient, and an unfallen, sinless human, he was able to resist the tempter and turn his face to the more difficult way – the way of suffering.

We don't usually call our friend's advice Satanic, especially when it's well meaning and given from a motive of love, as Peter's was. But the bare fact is that is when our advice does not promote the glory of God, we are sounding like Satan, who constantly tells us to ignore our conscience, follow our hearts, take the easy way out. Peter's words were giving a human solution – power, military might, domination of others. There will come a day in the future when all will acknowledge Jesus as king. But right now, there is a task to be accomplished, and it can only happen through suffering. And Peter's advice promotes the things of man, not the things of God.

So think for a moment about the many times we are asked for advice, or our opinion. A friend asks, "Should I divorce him?" A co-worker says, "Is it wrong for me to call in sick when I'm really on vacation?" Our children say, "I'm thinking about missionary service in Africa." Do our answers promote the things of God, or the things of men? Satan often uses the voice of love or friendship to persuade others to do what they should not, or to not do what they should, like Peter and Jesus. That, by the way, is a really good argument for knowing scripture well enough to call it to mind when you have to give advice. It gives us something to base our words on besides our feelings.

So the disciples hear about the consequences of being the Christ. As if it's not bad enough to hear that Jesus plans to suffer and die, suddenly the disciples realize that they TOO will be expected to follow the way of the cross.

In verses 34-38
He tells them of

IV. The Cost (v. 34-38)

"Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.'" (Mark 8:34-38)

Talk about truth in advertising. No one could walk away from Mark 8 without knowing that following Christ will involve suffering, loss and denial of self. So here's the conflict. Does this sound anything like the Christian life most of us experience? Does this sound like church life? If it doesn't sound familiar, then we need to look more closely at Jesus Christ to see who he really is and what he's calling us to do.

First, this business of denying ourselves. (v. 34) Denial of self is different than self-denial.

Self-denial as giving up something we like, such as chocolate for Lent. It can be a useful tool or discipline in helping us train ourselves. But it's not the same as denying ourselves. That is more profound and cuts far deeper than self-denial. If self-denial were the same thing as denying ourselves, Christianity would just be a long, hard road of desperately trying to give

up all the things we really liked. That would be a joyless existence where we have to renounce everything that gives us pleasure. And if that was Christianity, who would want it? How dreadful! In fact, self denial sounds a lot more like what the Pharisees were practicing, with their observance of the 613 commandments of Torah.

Denying ourselves is something far deeper. It means that we “say no to ourselves”. We voluntarily say no to that part of ourselves that’s always looking out for Number One. What’s left after we say no to self is beautiful. It gives a glimpse of what we’ll be like in heaven when all the conflicting emotions, all the sorrow, all the sins and all the shortcomings are gone. And it’s not that we’ve lost ourselves. Oh, no, on the contrary, by saying No to the Me, Me, Me mentality, we can finally see Jesus clearly, and allow him to do in us what we could never do through self-denial.

This isn’t a one time transaction, either. Look at Peter. First he said, “You are the Christ.” (Mark 8:29) Then he said “Even if all fall away I will not.” (Mark 14:29) Then he said “I don’t know this man you’re talking about.” (Mark 14:66) And finally he said to the risen Christ, “Lord, you know all things. You know I love you.” (John 21:17). After Jesus’ ascension to heaven Peter said the most extraordinary things to people, and thousands came to faith because of his preaching. And then in his own letter to the churches, late in life Peter wrote, “...After you have suffered a little while he himself will restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.” (1 Peter 5:10) Do you see a progression there? Peter’s acknowledgement of Jesus as Christ was true and lasting. But it was only a starting point for his understanding of who Jesus was. And all of those gains in understanding usually come when we say no to self and yes to Christ.

I became a Christian when I asked Jesus to be my Lord when I was 13. There I was, in the family bathroom with my sister Gail, making a completely serious profession of faith – the kind of profession a 13 year old is capable of making. But I had to keep going back and saying No to self again and again. In my 20’s when I was very ambitious in my work. In my 30’s when I was restless being at home with small children. In my 40’s when I finally said unequivocally, I want to follow Christ. But it crops up all the time, that need to deny oneself. I’ve just finished a great summer. I hiked in England with my husband, I went to the beaches of North Carolina with our family, I enjoyed biking and long dinners at home and tons of reading. I went to family camp, saw my relatives, hiked the John Muir trail. Is it any wonder that when it’s time to buckle down to work or to Bible study or to anything that requires me to stop entertaining myself and start putting the needs of others first, it’s hard? But it’s time to do what God has called me to do – the only occupation that makes me truly happy and fulfilled – the work of following Christ. It boils down to directing our daily lives to reflect eternity rather than the temporary. So what am I doing with my money? What am I doing with my time? And what am I doing with my relationships? These choices all reflect how much I say No to self and Yes to Christ.

Every single person who professes Christ takes this journey, from the simple assent that kicks off our Christian life, to the crisis points when we say no to ourselves and yes to the work of God, til finally we understand that when we said “I do” to Christ it was far beyond what we ever could have imagined.

Then Jesus puts the choice in economic terms. He says, what's the point if you gain the whole world, but lose your soul, the only part that's eternal? Would you trade off long term fulfillment and satisfaction, for something fleeting? And the stakes are high, because when Christ returns he will know what we chose and whether we have been ashamed of him.

So we come back to the big question:

V. Who do YOU say I am?

Another way to ask it is, what does it mean to say, "You are the Christ"?

Like Peter, the answer to this question usually comes in stages. First, there is an intellectual assent. You could say that

A. We see the cross from a distance.

For instance, when we say "I do" to our spouses we don't stop to think that they, and we, will get old. We'll have bad breath in the morning. We'll be sick sometimes and quarrelsome at others. We might suffer greatly together. But that's the key, isn't it. Marriage over time becomes this incredibly important body of shared history, shared only with that other person. Even though we don't know what we're saying Yes to at the outset, the end product becomes far more profound than we ever could have imagined.

No one could have told me that John and I would enjoy talking to each other more after 34 years of marriage than we ever have. And no one could have told me that after all this time we still have the ability to infuriate each other in a discussion of how to set a table. We saw marriage from a distance, just as a hazy and unreal blur, before we entered into it. The reality was far better (and sometimes far worse) than we dreamed.

The same is true of acknowledging Jesus as Christ. The cross is sort of hazily in the background...we know it has something significant to do with his love for us, but it hasn't come into very sharp focus yet because all we've done is to grasp that Jesus saves – not entirely sure why we need saving.

This is generally where we are when we first say to Jesus, "Come into my life".

But after that we move on. For some people the transition to the next stage happens immediately, but I think for many of us, years pass. We trot along to church and Bible studies and gradually the word of God, and our experience of his care in our life, leads us toward a deeper understanding. Then something happens to bring the cross into sharp focus.

Suddenly

B. We see our sin and understand the cross.

A couple of weeks ago I was hiking in the Sierras with my siblings. One day we were resting on the top of a high pass after a hard climb. This is a place where hikers invariably stop, eat something, chat to each other and take pictures. I had a pretty bad case of altitude sickness so was lying with my eyes closed, when I heard a father say kindly to his teenage daughter, "Just remember, everyone has a bottom." This was unusual enough to make me open my eyes and sure enough, there was a lovely young lady with the entire rear ripped out

of her pants. Although she had a shirt tied around her waist everyone was getting a pretty good view of her lacy underwear. But, as her dad pointed out, everyone has a bottom. We just don't normally display it so...vividly. After they left we all had a good snicker about her plight, realizing that they were days of hiking away from being able to replace her jeans.

My comeuppance came within a few hours. I bent over to get something and my only pair of pants ripped dramatically, exposing a substantial swath of Ex Officio "magic underwear", which some of you may recall from a previous camping trip. This provided great hilarity to my siblings, who shouted, "Just remember, everyone has a bottom!" and other remarks about the strain my pants must be under to have split so completely. I spent the rest of the hike with an large area of duct tape on my rear end....duct tape which, as my frayed trousers continued to disintegrate, stuck to my skin, the rocks I was sitting on, and everything else.

One of the costs of backpacking is that you take only what you can reasonably carry, which means you only have one set of clothes. So the rules are, if you wreck your trousers, you just have to make the best of what you have. When I was a novice I tried carrying almost 45 lbs and nearly died of exertion. This year, I under-packed. I took just one pair of dark glasses, but it was the wrong pair. I had to hike for days in brilliant sunlight either wearing clear prescription glasses or uncorrected dark glasses, both of which gave me a headache. You experience the cost of your choices much more sharply, because what you chose to bring on the journey is all that you have.

There comes a point when we recognize that the choices we made on our life's journey don't just affect us. They sent a sinless man, Jesus Christ, to the cross. When we realize that, the cross comes into sharper focus. We recognize that it was our sin, not just the sin of the world, that held him there.

Going on with Jesus should bring a deeper understanding each year of our lives of what the cross cost him, and what it cost God his father to send him there. This is when we see the cross up close, in sharp focus, and feel its pain as well as its glory. And then we are filled with remorse for our sin, and gratitude for its cleansing.

But there's another stage of discipleship, because we can't just stand there marveling at the foot of the cross. That is when

C. We take up our cross.

To take up our cross doesn't refer to the burdens that we bear through life. It's not that person or that illness which is "my cross to bear". Rather, to carry our cross is to set out on a death walk, towards the executioner. But what's being put to death is not our physical bodies...it's our self, the part that dictates our choices, and evaluates everything by thinking, "What benefits me?" The cross was an ugly, ignominious means of Roman execution. It meant humiliation, pain and death. When Jesus made this statement it would have sounded like "Take up your electric chair and follow me." "Take up your lethal injection and follow me." "Take up your hangman's noose and follow me." Doesn't sound very attractive, does it?

Yet this very means of putting our *self* to death becomes the way to make our *soul* eternal. Jesus doesn't want a bunch of followers standing around admiring his good deeds. He wants followers who will FOLLOW.

Ten years ago I taught Bible Study the day after 9/11. I don't remember what passage I taught nor what I said, but I do remember that we fled to church that night for prayer with a natural instinct to turn to God that was replicated all across America. And I do remember that whatever portion of scripture we studied that day, we felt the truth of Psalm 46, that "We will not fear, even though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea." (Psalm 46:2) You see, God's word had the ability to remain the one firm thing in a shifting world, just as it does now.

I recently came across this picture, taken at the moment of impact on the South Tower of the World Trade Center, with the cross of St. Peter's church in the foreground.

The cross towers above time. It stands unscathed in the midst of collapsing buildings and disintegrating society. We can treat the cross and the work of Christ with intellectual assent, when we see the cross only from a distance. We can acknowledge "you are the Christ" but, like Peter, not recognize what the Christ has come to do in our lives.

Or we can come close to the cross and weep over our sins, understanding why it was necessary for Jesus to die there.

Or, in gratitude and obedience, we can take up our cross, knowing that we have set our faces towards death to self, but eternal life for the soul. A hard choice, but incredibly rewarding.

So what will be our answer to the question, "Who do you say I am?"

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