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Questions Jesus Asked: The Most Crucial Question Jesus Ever Asked

Mark 8:27-33

And 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?" And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

We are looking at a few of these questions that Jesus asked—questions that he asked people just like you and me when he was walking here on the earth.

We have record in the Scriptures of Jesus Himself being asked 187 questions, recorded for us in the Gospels approximately. He answered directly less than ten of them. He didn't answer questions directly very often, but he himself asked well over 300 questions of people just like you and just like me. His leadership style was one to draw people out by asking them questions. He asked them questions about life, about finances, about spirituality, about their beliefs, about many other things.

Last week, we looked at a probing question that Jesus asked, a self-assessment question. The question today that we are looking at is the question Jesus asked on people's beliefs regarding his identity.

The context is this: Jesus was well into his earthly ministry. He had become quite famous at this point. His disciples and many others had seen him perform many miracles. He had spoken to many large crowds. People were coming out to hear what this man was saying. What Jesus was teaching, word about him was spreading. He had shared many parables with them, spiritual stories, stories to illustrate spiritual realities.

He is actually starting to cause quite a stir in and around the many communities in the area there around Israel, and he's developing quite a large following. They didn't have as much peaceful time alone, Jesus and his disciples, as they used to as the crowds thickened and grew.

And so it says, in a quieter moment of travel, when they're traveling from one place to another on the road, out in nature—well, it's likely quite quiet—he asked his disciples a very unique and interesting question.

"He went on with his disciples," the text said, "to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?'"

It's another open-ended question. He's inviting more conversation. It acknowledges or assumes that something is happening. Jesus is assuming or acknowledging there's a lot of chatter about him going on. There are many opinions flying around about him. People are talking, and he wants to know what they're saying.

As he's gotten more and more famous, it's obvious to the disciples something is going on. Chatter is rising, and Jesus is saying, "Hey, let's talk about it." But he's asking more specifically, "Let's talk about what they're saying about who I am."

It's not an often-asked question. I've never asked it before. I did just sort of ask it to the children, but I've never outright asked this question: "Who are people saying I am?" Maybe you haven't either. Maybe you've asked a different genre of this question when you've shown up and people say, "Hey, we were just talking about you." You might have asked the question, "Well, what were you saying? What were you saying?" But you probably didn't say, "Well, who do you think I am?" It's a unique question.

We could deduce from this question that, in Jesus' eyes, what people are giving voice to regarding their belief about his identity must be quite important. He phrases this question very intentionally: "Who do people say I am?"

Well, they answered him. There's a lot of opinions, Jesus. Some say John the Baptist. Others say Elijah. Still others, one of the prophets. And on it goes.

Back then, just as there is now, there are many opinions in the world about Jesus. He remains the most talked about and written about man in world history, by far the most talked about and written about man in all of humanity. Opinions are still rampant. Ideas about him are still flying around. And Jesus knew this back then.

And so he asked his disciples, "Hey, what are people saying about me?" And more specifically, "Who are they saying I am?"

Well, then he turned to them again, and he asked a more personal, direct question. After they had dialogued a little bit about what people were saying, he said to them, "Who do you say I am?"

It's almost like Jesus asked a safe, information-gathering question on the current gossip about his identity in order to get to the asking of a far more personal and direct question for each of his disciples about their true convictions regarding who they each believed he was.

He asked them, "Who do you say that I am?"

Ever been in a classroom where the teacher asks a very personal, direct, specific question that nobody wants to answer? That awkward silence sits there, and no one wants to step out and voice an opinion or share a conviction.

Have you ever been asked a personal question where you were hesitant to answer it?

When we answer a very specific, direct, and personal question, we're risking a little. We're risking being wrong. We might be corrected if we're wrong. We don't necessarily like to be corrected, especially in public, but we don't like to be wrong. Our pride doesn't like that.

We may be risking being laughed at, or rejected, or ostracized, criticized for our answer. We definitely fight for free speech, but in certain settings, sometimes we don't feel free to share our personal convictions and opinions.

Sometimes it takes an enormous amount of courage to step out and, in a word, be vulnerable with what we believe, what we're convicted of.

I don't know if you've ever been in a setting where you've been asked directly, specifically, personally: "Who did you vote for?" "What do you believe about abortion?" "Do you believe it's right or wrong?" "Have you ever stolen anything from anyone?" "Are you being honest with your expense account?" "Are you cheating on your schoolwork or in life in some way?" Or, "Did you kick your sister?" "Did you kick your brother?"

Specific, direct, personal questions.

Jesus has gone from a safe question to a riskier question: "Who do you say that I am?"

And if we bring it to the modern day: Who do you say that Jesus is? What's his identity? Who is he?

Well, Peter stepped forth with—I don't know—great zeal, great courage, I don't know. He was a feisty man, if you study him in the Bible. But he stepped forward with an answer:

"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Peter says, of all these opinions floating around about Jesus, and Peter steps out with a confident answer: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Christ comes from the Greek word *Christos*. It means Messiah, or Anointed One. You're the long-awaited one. You're the Messiah. You're the hope of the world. You're the one anointed by God.

It's a bold confession. And to deepen it, he says, "You are the Son of the living God." It's a conviction. You're not merely human, but you're divine.

"Who do you say that I am?"

"The Christ. The one we've all been waiting for."

Well, Jesus liked Peter's answer. He liked it so much that he did something next that we don't see him do in any other place in Scripture.

In Matthew's accounting of this interaction, we see that Jesus blesses Peter in a way he blesses no other one recorded for us in the Scriptures. He answered him and said to him:

"Blessed are you, Simon"—his given name by his parents. Jesus is going to rename him Peter. "Blessed are you, Simon."

You're human. You came from your parents. He's expressing Peter's humanity.

"Blessed are you as a mere man, son of Jonah"—to emphasize it more. You're the son of another man. But I bless you for this confession.

And then he says this:

"For flesh and blood did not reveal this to you."

This didn't come from some opinion of another man or woman—not from flesh and blood. But Almighty God in heaven showed you this about me. It's a spiritual revelation. It's something that has come into your spirit by God's Spirit. So you understood, beyond comprehension of the human mind, who I am.

Jesus is saying to Peter, "Blessed are you, Simon, as a mere man, son of Jonah, for God has spoken to you about me."

And he blessed him personally, specifically, by name.

And so we focus on the question today: Who do you say that he is?

It must be a very important question for Jesus to ask it this way.

The most influential man in all of history—what does your life say about what you believe about him?

Could this be the most important question we'll ever answer? Could the answer to this question of who he is be the answer to last week's question? What are we all looking for? What are we all longing for? What are we all wanting?

To help narrow down and simplify people's approach to this question, the great author C.S. Lewis wrote an excerpt in his book *Mere Christianity* where he argues that Jesus himself only left three options open to us in answering this question.

In his writing, he says this. He's trying to prevent anyone from saying something really foolish that people often say about Jesus in their answer about who he is.

Don't say this, he said:

"I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God."

That is the one thing we must not say, C.S. Lewis argues.

A man who is merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic, on the level with the man who says, "Hey, I'm a poached egg," or else he would be a devil of hell, a great deceiver of many people down through history.

This man claimed a lot of things while he was here on the earth. And if you call him a great moral teacher, you're missing what he said.

He was not a great moral teacher. He was that as a part of who he was. But if you add some of the other things he said about himself, you have to claim he's crazy, he's a deceiver, or he was who he said he was.

But this idea of Jesus just being a prophet, or just being a teacher, or a mere man who was confused himself—that might be right. But those other ideas, they show your own ignorance if you answer the question that way.

And by the way, many religions in the world answer the question of Jesus' identity that way: as a prophet, as a priest, as another rabbi.

We must make our choice, he writes. Either this man was and is the Son of God, or else he was a madman, a crazy man, or a great deceiver, something worse.

But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher, or just a prophet or a priest. He himself has not left that option open to us. He did not intend to.

The Apostle Paul answered the question this way:

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. By him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, thrones, dominions, authorities, powers. All things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is our leader in the church, the head of the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from among the dead. He is the offer of eternal life. He's the preeminent one. In him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven. He is the mediator between a fallen humanity and God Himself through his peace, offered by his shed blood on the cross."

John writes this:

"Beloved, do not believe every spirit or idea that floats around in the world, but test the spirits to see if they are from God. For many false prophets have gone out into the world.

"By this you know the Spirit of God. Every spirit that confesses Jesus as the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah—those spirits come from God. And every spirit that does not confess Jesus as Lord, as King, as Christ, is not from God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already."

If all this is true, Jesus' question of what do we each believe about his identity must be quite important.

Romans 10:9 says:

"If you and I confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead, we will be saved."

If we don't, we stand condemned already.

We all have to answer this question for ourselves. And Jesus is still echoing it down through history:

"Who do you say that I am?"

Let's pray together.

Father, I am mindful that the Scriptures tell us that we will each individually stand before your judgment seat. And the crucial question we will answer on that day is what we came to believe about your Son Jesus, and the good news that you shared with us about him.

Give us ears to hear, Father, and eyes to see what is really true of him.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.