

Mark 8:27 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.

Mark 8:31 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.”

Mark 8:34 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 IS JESUS?

Who is Jesus? This is the question that dominates the gospel of Mark. Mark lets the readers of his gospel in on the secret from the very beginning. Who is Jesus? In chapter 1, verse 1 Mark tells us that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1)

On the other hand, the identity of Jesus is not so clear to everyone else. Jesus does what only God can do. He makes the deaf hear and the blind to see. Jesus says what only God can say. He is able to tell people things like, “Your sins are forgiven.”

And yet his identity remains a mystery to the religious leaders, the crowds and even to his own disciples. They think that he might be a prophet. They know that he is a person of great power. They wonder if he might be the Messiah.

But, their vision remains clouded when it comes to Jesus. Jesus is a man that they don't really know or understand.

In the story that precedes our lesson for today Mark tells about the healing of a blind man. And this story is remarkable for one reason. The blind man is not completely healed with the first touch from Jesus.

Jesus takes the blind man aside, touches his eyes and asks him what he sees. The man looks up and says, “I see people; they look like trees walking around.” The man's vision was distorted.

So Jesus touches the man a second time. This time his eyes are opened and he saw everything clearly.

I wonder if this incomplete healing isn't yet another symbol of how Jesus was being received. They could see that Jesus was a person of great power. They could see that Jesus was a person of great insight.

But, they weren't totally clear about who Jesus really was. When it came to Jesus their vision was distorted.

Our lesson for today is a significant turning point in Mark's gospel. The identity of Jesus comes clearly into focus. No longer will everyone have to ask, "Who is this Jesus?" That question is answered, and the answer to that question will determine what happens in the days to come.

CAESAREA PHILIPPI

Up until this time Jesus had avoided questions about his identity. He ordered those that he had healed to keep quiet about it. He commanded the demons that called him the Son of God to shut up.

But, now Jesus brings up the question himself in the villages around Caesarea Philippi.

This was an interesting place to ask the question about the identity of Jesus. The city was noted for its worship of Greek gods, especially its temple to the god Pan.

In earlier days it had been a place where there was significant Baal worship. (Baal you may remember was that ancient fertility God that often found his way into the worship of ancient Israel). And now this region was home to a gleaming new temple dedicated to the divinity of the Roman emperor.

In this place dedicated to pagan Gods and in this place with a name honoring a human Caesar (who often claimed to be a god), Jesus asks his disciples, "Who am I?"

It is one thing to say that Jesus is Lord when we're in church and everyone agrees with us. It is quite another thing to say that Jesus is Lord when we are in a world that believes in different gods ... gods like affluence and greed and political power.

But, that's where the question is really asked and answered, in Caesarea Philippi where all the competitive gods strive for our attention. It is there that Jesus asks, "Who am I? What do you believe about me?"

WHAT DO THE PEOPLE SAY?

Actually Jesus' first question is not about what the disciples believe. It is about what others are saying. He asks, "Who do people say I am?"

Politicians often ask this question. Internal polling plays a big role in what a politician says and does. What the people say about the candidate determines his or her strategy.

Jesus had good reason to be encouraged by the polls. They were saying some flattering things about Jesus.

Some thought that he was the reincarnation of the martyred John the Baptist. John was very popular with the people and was thought to be a person of great integrity.

Some thought that he was Elijah, that prophet of old who was so faithful that he didn't see death. Elijah was taken directly into heaven by God, and tradition held that Elijah would come back some day to proclaim the coming of God's kingdom. Elijah would herald the arrival of the Messiah.

Others thought that Jesus was like the prophets of old, a person of great power and insight who was totally committed to proclaiming God's word.

Now these were all very flattering ideas. Jesus might have been tempted to just let the expectations of the crowd define his ministry. He could have maintained his popularity and his power by doing so.

In fact there are many today who allow the expectations of the crowd to define our view of Jesus.

Who is Jesus?

Jesus is the miracle worker who makes our life easier.

Who is Jesus?

Jesus is the great politician who blesses our particular views.

Who is Jesus?

Jesus is the great entertainer who keeps us happy.

People expect a lot from Jesus, but often their expectations are often out of line with who he really is and what he is really called to do.

WHAT DO WE SAY?

It's important for us to be aware of what others are saying about Jesus, but we should not allow Jesus to be defined by popular opinion. Instead, we need to answer a more basic personal question. What about us? What do we have to say about Jesus? Who is Jesus in our opinion?

Whenever I have a confirmation class I always use this passage because it makes the question clear. I don't want my students to tell me what others think about Jesus. I don't want my students to tell me what their parents or their Sunday school teachers think about Jesus.

I want my students to make a personal confession. What do you think about Jesus? If they can answer that one question for themselves, then the class has been a success.

It's amazing, but people can sit in church for decades hearing stories about Jesus and yet they never answer Jesus' basic question, "What about you? Who do you say I am?" It's not just a matter of giving the "right" answer. It's a matter of knowing the Jesus revealed in Scripture, personally believing in Him and then acting upon that belief.

You'll notice that Peter, perhaps speaking on behalf of the disciples, is able to give the right answer about Jesus. Peter said, "You are the Christ; you are the Messiah."

But, Peter and the rest of the disciples had not traveled with Jesus long enough to really understand the meaning of that title. They believed that the Messiah would be a political/military leader who would defeat their enemies and bring back the glory days of King David.

Just as Jesus would not allow the crowd to define his ministry so he would not allow the disciples to define his ministry either. Yes he was the Messiah. But, he was not the kind of Messiah they were expecting. That's why Jesus told the disciples to tell no one about Peter's confession. Jesus was going to be a suffering servant and not a conquering hero. The disciples weren't ready to make that distinction.

PASSION PREDICTION

This is made abundantly clear in the next section when Jesus teaches the disciples what it really means to be a Messiah. Jesus will suffer many things, be rejected by the religious leaders, be killed and then after three days he will rise from the dead.

Salvation will not come through the power of military might. Salvation will come through a sacrificial lamb who lays down his life for the sins of the world.

The Bible tells us that Jesus was quite clear about this, and that's what made his pronouncement all the more unsettling. When Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him it's not because Peter didn't understand what Jesus had to say. It's because Peter understood what Jesus was saying all too well.

I am reminded of what Mark Twain once said:

"Many people are bothered by those passages in Scripture which they cannot understand; but as for me, I always noticed that the passages in Scripture which trouble me most are those which I do understand." This is a troubling passage, not because we do not understand it but because we understand it very well.

It was the same for Peter. Peter was upset by the demands of God as revealed in Jesus. Peter wanted a Messiah who predicted an easy victory. He got a Messiah who predicted a costly sacrifice.

We try so hard to change Jesus into something that he's not. We, like Peter want a Messiah who will lead us down a path of comfort and safety. Instead we have a Messiah who tells us to deny ourselves, take up a cross and follow him.

Peter rebuked Jesus. He said, "Jesus you've got to be more positive."

GET BEHIND ME SATAN

And now Jesus rebukes Peter. In fact Jesus calls Peter Satan! Jesus tells one of his inner circle of disciples, "Get behind me, Satan."

That last phrase may sound familiar to you. It should. It was a phrase used by Jesus when he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. You'll remember that the last temptation was to take the easy way out. If Jesus would only do it the devil's way, then he could rule all the kingdoms of the world.

But, Jesus did not bow down to the devil and temptation. Jesus knew that he could not overcome evil on its own terms. Instead, he would have to travel the way of the cross. He told the devil to get behind him.

Instead of following the lead of well meaning friends who wanted Jesus to take an easier way (and thus served as instruments of the devil's temptation), Jesus took the way that led to salvation. If the disciples wanted to follow Jesus they would have to get in line behind him on the hard and lonely road that led to Jerusalem and a cross.

And the Bible tells us that the same is true for us. If we say that Jesus is the Messiah, then we have to get in behind the Messiah and follow him. We have to accept the fact that we cannot tell Jesus what to do and where to go.

GOOD PEOPLE, BAD RESULT

The remarkable thing about the passion and crucifixion of Jesus is that good, religious people were responsible for it. One commentator put it this way,

“It is not humanity at its worst that will crucify the Son of God but humanity at its absolute best. The death of Jesus will not be the result of a momentary lapse or aberration of human nature, but rather the result of careful deliberations from respected religious leaders who will justify their actions by the highest standards of law and morality, even believing them to render serve to God (John 16:2).”

The church has often drawn the wrong conclusion from the death of Jesus. We assume that Jesus was condemned by the religious leaders of his day because they were hypocrites and didn't love God.

But, the absolute opposite was the case. They thought that they were doing what was best for their country and their God. They were wrong.

HANK'S COOKIES

Baxter Black, a veterinarian of large animals and a commentator on National Public Radio, told of an experience that occurred to his cousin Hank.

Hank is a farmer who lives in a rural, central Minnesota village. One of his city relatives invited him to come for a visit in St. Paul the weekend of Thanksgiving, so Hank decided to ride the commuter train that passed by his community.

At the first stop, the conductor announced that everyone would be able to get off at the station for a short stop. Hank wandered into the station and found the vending machines where he purchased a carton of milk and six-pack of Oreo cookies.

He then sat down at a small table in the waiting room next to a gentleman who was obviously not from the country--nice suit, overcoat, some of those half-glasses to read with, and he was reading *The Wall Street Journal*. Hank thought to himself, "This fellow looks like Ward Cleaver."

Hank opened the Oreos and took a cookie. As he put it into his mouth, he noticed that Ward Cleaver reached over and took an Oreo for himself and continued reading! Now Hank knew that no one in his little town would just reach over and take an Oreo without saying anything. This was different from the country!

After a moment, Hank took a swig of milk to wash his cookie down, and Ward reached over for a second Oreo! Hank took his second cookie, and not knowing what the stranger would do, he took a third Oreo at the same time and began to eat them quickly. Lo and behold, Ward Cleaver grabbed the last cookie, got up and folded his paper in a huff and walked off!

City folks, thought Hank, were strange indeed. He finished his milk and got up to get back on the train. As he did, he reached into his pocket for his ticket, and he found his pack of Oreos.

We don't always know everything we think we know about what's going on. We can be so wrong when we think we're so right!

GETTING BEHIND JESUS

That's how it was with Peter. He was so wrong, and yet he thought that he was so right. Peter didn't want to do the work of the devil. He thought that he was just helping out his friend, Jesus. He was just being helpful by pointing out the dangers and the problems with what he was predicting.

But, when Peter rebuked Jesus he quit following and tried to remake the Messiah in an image that was more acceptable to him. We often do the same thing.

The point is this. We cannot get in front of Jesus. We have to get behind him and follow. A while back a popular bumper sticker read, "God is my co-pilot." Today's lesson suggests that if God is your co-pilot, you need to change places. In this season when football teams all over the country are shouting, "We're number one" Christians should shout, "We're number two!"

If we are to be a disciple of Jesus we must deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him.

Now what does this mean? In the early church taking up a cross might literally mean dying for the faith. Some took self-denial to an extreme by giving away everything and living as a beggar.

In some cases martyrdom or living the life of a beggar might be a proper response to the call of Jesus. But, in most cases this is not true. It is okay to care for yourself and the ones you love. It is okay to want to live instead of die.

But, according to Jesus, the good life must be based upon something more than self-interest. Denying yourself and taking up a cross is learning to subject all of life's choices to the scrutiny of Kingdom values. Denying yourself means giving up something of value for the sake of something with a more pressing claim.

That probably means something different for all of us, and I guess that's why we all have to take the personal question of Jesus very seriously. What do we say about Jesus? It is more than what we say in words. It is also about what we say with our choices in life.

WE LIVE IN CAESAREA PHILIPPI

In case you haven't noticed, Caesarea Philippi, that place where false gods reign is the place where we live.

We live in a world that came to the brink of economic collapse. Why did it happen? Our troubles came about as a result of highly leveraged over-consumption and crazed self-indulgence.

We were unwilling to deny ourselves in even the smallest way. The real problem was not financial or even political. The real problem was spiritual.

We had an emptiness in our hearts that we tried to fill with things that did not satisfy. Our culture of greed led us down the wrong path, and we followed. We chose to follow our own desires instead of following our Lord, and that led to ruin.

A few years ago, a large department store tried marketing a doll in the form of the baby Jesus. The advertisements described it as being "washable, cuddly, and unbreakable," and it was neatly packaged in straw, satin, and plastic. To complete the package, the manufacturer added biblical text appropriate to the baby Jesus.

To the department store executives, it looked like a sure-fire winner, a real moneymaker. But they were wrong. It didn't sell. In a last-ditch effort to get rid of these dolls, one of the store managers placed a huge sign in one of the store windows. It read:

Jesus Christ
 Marked down 50%
 Get him while you can.

That is symbolic of how many people treat the faith. They want to put Jesus on sale. They want to promote a cheap grace that doesn't require much of us.

We need to put that Satan behind us. The hardships of the past year can lead us in a better direction. Those of us who follow Jesus know that the way to true life is not to get more and more. The way to true life is to sacrifice and prioritize based upon the values of the kingdom. As Bonhoeffer put it, "Grace may come freely but it never comes cheaply."

It is a long and winding path that leads to Jerusalem. Often we will not understand why some things are allowed to happen. Often it will seem like those who mock and crucify the Lord of life are allowed to rule in His place.

Like that blind man who was partially cured by Jesus we might say of the future, "It's as clear as mud."

But, Jesus takes us aside and tells us that he will touch us a second time, and we then we will see clearly. As the Apostle Paul once put it, “For now we see through a glass darkly, but then we will see face to face ...” (1 Corinthians 13:12)

In the meantime Jesus asks us to have faith.

He tells us, “Come, follow me on this difficult path. Embrace the necessary sacrifice. There’s a new day coming, a day of resurrection, a day when hope triumphs even over the grave.”

God help us see more clearly.

Amen.