

GOD WITH US

Part 8: JESUS

Message 12 – Decision Time “Who do you say that I am?”

Introduction

Jesus ministered throughout the land of Israel for about 3 years, proclaiming the kingdom of heaven and performing miracles that proved He was the Messiah, the Son of God. Toward the end of the 2nd year, He reached a turning point when He began to speak about His own rejection, death and resurrection in Jerusalem.

“From that time Jesus Christ began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day” (Matthew 16:21).

His movement toward the cross would be His primary focus from this point forward. Yet, before He turned His eyes toward Jerusalem and the cross, Jesus brought His disciples to their own turning point. He asked them to openly declare their understanding and belief that He was the Messiah, the Son of God. He brought them to a great “confessional moment.” Jesus moved His disciples to this moment of declaring their faith in Him by *first* asking them to define the popular opinion(s) of Him. Then He asked them to make their own confession, over against the backdrop of public opinion.

Jesus asks the Disciples about Public Opinion

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets” (Matthew 16:13,14).

As the ministry of Jesus progressed, people formed various opinions as to His identity. We find many of these opinions being expressed by humans, by angels, by demons, and by God the Father:

He is Immanuel, God with us (Matt.1:23).

He is the Son of the Most High (Luke 1:32).

He is the King of the Jews (Matt.2:2,11).

He is the Lamb of God who removes sins (John 1:29,36).
He is the beloved Son of the Father (Matt.3:17).
He is the Holy One of God (Mark 1:24).
He is the Commander of diseases and demons (Matt.8:8,9).
He is a glutton and a drunkard (Luke 7:34).
He is the Son of David (Matt.9:27).
He is possessed by Satan (Matt.9:34).
He is insane (John 10:20).
He is the Expected One (Matt.11:3).
He is the son of the carpenter, Joseph (Mark 6:3).
He is John the Baptist raised from the dead (Matt.14:1,2).
He is God's Son (Matt.14:33).
He is Elijah the prophet raised from the dead (Matt.16:14).
He is Jeremiah the prophet raised from the dead (Matt.16:14).

The major purpose of the gospel writers was to make their case that *Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God and Savior of the world*. But they did not hide opinions to the contrary. They gave an accurate account of the wide variety of ideas people had about Jesus.

Jesus asked about opinions in a very fitting location – Caesarea Philippi. *“The region was strongly identified with various religions: It had been a center for Baal worship; the Greek god Pan had shrines there; and Herod the Great had built a temple there to honor Augustus Caesar” (W.Wiersbe, Commentary, Vol. I, p.57).*

Why did Jesus ask the disciples to tell Him the public's opinions about Him? It is certain that Jesus was *not* trying to find out how popular or unpopular He was. Further, Jesus *already knew* what people were thinking about Him. The reason Jesus asked the disciples to give voice to popular opinions was because *He wanted to see if they were willing to stand against the tide*. He was about to ask for *their view of Him*, and He knew that their view would necessarily run contrary to public opinion. In effect, Jesus was asking His men if they were prepared to *be His witnesses in the future, no matter what the cost to their own lives and reputations*. He had previously said to them:

“Therefore, everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But, whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven” (Matt.10:32,33 and Luke 12:8,9).

Today there are many opinions about WHO Jesus was/is. He was a good man, a teacher, a spiritual guide, a prophet, a magician, an angel, or, he did not even exist. Further, we live in an age where the very idea of "truth" is being questioned. Thus, one's opinion about Jesus does not really matter. But Jesus Himself (and the other biblical writers) said that one's opinion about Him DOES MATTER. Jesus Himself said: **"Unless you believe that I am He, you shall die in your sins" (John 8:24).** Paul wrote: **"If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation" (Romans 10:9,10).** John wrote: **"Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also" (1Jn 2:22-23).** Again, John wrote: **"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world" (1John 4:1-3).** Does one's opinion about Jesus matter? If we take Jesus and the apostles seriously, one's opinion about Jesus is of eternal consequence. It is ESSENTIAL to believe that JESUS is the DIVINE SON OF GOD, the SAVIOR, in order to be a part of God's forever family. This is why it is so important for Christians, today, to continue to declare that **"Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:11),** regardless of public/popular opinion.

Jesus asks the Disciples to Declare their Faith

Against the backdrop of public opinion, Jesus turned to the disciples and asked them to voice their own belief in Him:

"But who do you say that I am?" (Matt.16:15).

Peter was regarded as a leader among leaders, and he was often the spokesman for the group. It is no surprise that He spoke for them all when He made his great confession of faith in Jesus:

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt.16:16).

The gospel writers were not only recording history (Peter's confession), but also providing theology and instruction for the early Christian church. Thus, Peter's confession is *the ideal confession that a person must make to become a disciple of Jesus*. (Note: The 4 gospels were addressed to and read by the first Christians several decades after the life and ministry of Jesus. Thus, the gospels all have instructional purposes aimed at the Christian communities that they were delivered to.)

In response to Peter's confession, Jesus said several things:

1. It was GOD Who had brought Peter to this point of confession.

And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven" (16:17).

From the very first moment that Peter met Jesus, God the Father and God the Spirit had been working to reveal the true identity of God the Son to Peter, and to woo him to a point of complete belief. As Peter saw the repeated evidences and responded with small steps of faith, God brought him to this final moment of confession. It is always a cooperative effort: the hand of God inviting, and the heart of a person responding to each little invitation.

2. Peter would, in the future, continue to be a leader among leaders.

"I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church" (16:18).

There has been much debate over the identity of "this rock" upon which Jesus would build His church. Was it Peter (whose name means "rock")? Was it Jesus (Who is the cornerstone of the church)? Was it Peter's confessional statement (which people need to make to become part of the church)? A common view that makes good sense is that Jesus was pointing to Peter as a future leader among leaders in the early church. The passage does not support the idea of Peter's infallibility, nor does it point to a succession of "Peters" who would be rulers of the church. The simplest idea here is that Peter would continue to function as a leader among leaders, a key spokesperson for the first Christians. As it turned out, Peter gave the first great sermon (confession) about Jesus the Messiah on the day of Pentecost, which resulted in the birth of the Christian church (see Acts 2).

3. Jesus made the first mention of His “church” here.

“I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it” (16:18).

This is the first place where the word “church” is used to refer to the followers of Jesus. Greek readers would have been familiar with the word *ekklesia*, as it was commonly used to describe various community groups and assemblies. But Jesus gave the word new meaning. The root word means: *called out ones*. Jesus was saying that His followers would be those called out of the world into the kingdom of God; called out of darkness into light. He also indicated here that His church would be a fighting force that the gates of Hades (hell) could not resist. The imagery pictures the church on the *offensive*, attacking the “gates of hell,” not on the *defensive*, trying to fend off the forces of evil.

4. Jesus gave Peter (and the disciples) His authority on earth.

“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven” (16:19).

“Keys” were symbols of “authority.” (See Revelation 1:18 where the risen Christ says that He has “the keys of death and of Hades,” i.e., He has complete authority over the realm of death.) Peter and his companions were being granted authority to act as Christ’s agents upon earth. They had been granted this authority before (see Matthew 10:1) and would be granted it later (Matthew 28:18-20). In Matthew 18:18, this same authority to “bind and loose on earth” is granted to the wider group of disciples, not to Peter alone.

5. Jesus told the disciples to keep His identity a secret.

“Then He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ” (16:20).

The reason for this secrecy command was that Jesus needed to be rejected, to go to the cross and to die for the sins of the world (as He explained in the next few lines). A popular uprising hailing Him as the long-awaited Messiah was not appropriate given the timing of His unfolding mission, thus He commanded His “apostles” (“messengers”) *not* to spread the message at this time.

6. Jesus told the disciples that He would die and rise again.

“From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day” (16:21).

This was the first of several predictions that Jesus made concerning His death and resurrection. The Greek word *dei* (“must”) indicates a divinely appointed necessity.

Peter’s objection

Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You.” But He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s” (16:22-23).

The high point of Peter’s great confession is followed by the low point of his great blunder. *He dared to tell Jesus that what He was predicting was not correct! He was trying to save Jesus from negative thinking, from a public relations disaster.*

Jesus set him straight in the most humbling way: *Get behind Me, Satan!* Of course, Jesus was not calling Peter Satan; but He was indicating that Satan was at work in Peter’s mind, causing him to evaluate things in human terms, rather than through God’s eyes.

God says this: ***“My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8,9).*** Satan’s strategy is to get us to view things through lenses other than God’s. When we do so, we start arguing with God (as Peter did). Someone dies, and we say: *That was not right!* God says, ***“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His godly ones” (Ps.116:15).*** ***“To live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil.1:21).*** Or, suffering comes to us and we say: *Why me, God? Why this? Why don’t you love me?* God says, ***“Count it all joy when you encounter various trials knowing that the testing of your faith produces a maturity that honors Me” (James 1:2,3).*** Looking through the wrong lens results in distorted thinking – and foolish arguments with God. Peter heard the word “cross” and he thought “defeat.” Jesus said the word “cross” and He thought “VICTORY!” Ask God to help you see things through His eyes, not your own.

The Call to Discipleship

Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels and will then repay every man according to his deeds” (Matt.16:24-27).

After Jesus predicted His own death on a cross, He turned and invited all His disciples to “die” on “crosses” of their own. He was teaching them that in many ways they would need to die to their own agendas, their own self-will, their own worldly pursuits. They had a choice to make: they could live for themselves and forfeit eternal rewards, or, live for Jesus and forfeit earthly rewards.

This is always the choice before us: To live with an eternal perspective, or, to “eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (Luke 12:19; 1 Cor.15:32). Jesus constantly taught His followers to live with the end in view; to store up treasures in heaven; to seek the approval of the heavenly Father more than the applause of men. In Matthew 16:27 Jesus was saying: Payday someday! Not here in this world, but in the next. Believe it. Live it! You’ll never regret it!

The Father’s View of Jesus: Matt.17:1-8; Mk 9:2-8; Lk.9:28-36

In light of the foregoing discussion concerning *Jesus’ identity*, what followed was very fitting. Jesus took Peter, James and John with Him up to a high mountain and He was transfigured (His glorious appearance was briefly restored) before their very eyes. (Peter refers to this significant event later, 2Peter 1:16-18.) Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus, and they were discussing Jesus’ “departure” (literally, His “exodus” – a metaphor for His death, resurrection and ascension back to heaven) which He would soon accomplish in Jerusalem (see Luke 9:31). Peter suggested that it would be fitting for them to construct three “tabernacles” (sacred tents), one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah. Then, a voice from heaven thundered the appropriate response to this idea:

While he was saying this, a cloud formed and began to overshadow them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My

Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!” And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone (Luke 9:34-36).

God the Father had declared HIS OPINION of Jesus. No, Jesus was not a religious leader on the same level as Moses; nor a great prophet on the same level as Elijah. No, JESUS did not belong in a trio of sacred tabernacles on the mountaintop.

THIS IS MY SON, MY CHOSEN ONE. LISTEN TO HIM!

It was as if the Father was cutting through all the chatter, all the static, all the fake news, all the misguided ideas about Jesus. The Father was making His own confession about Jesus. By including this important moment, the gospel writers were saying, in effect: *Here is the definitive opinion you need to consider. If you have any view of Jesus other than the view that God the Father uttered, you are on the wrong side of the debate!*

Discussion Questions

1. What are the most common opinions about Jesus that you hear from people that you interact with?
2. Read Acts 4:11,12. What did Peter say about the identity of Jesus.
3. Read 1 Peter 3:15. What attitudes should govern us when we speak to others about our belief in Jesus?
4. What is the most difficult thing (for you) about holding to a strong belief in Jesus in a culture that prefers less-defined beliefs?
5. There are many simple study-guides that can help people study the evidence and come to a personal decision concerning the identity of Jesus. Would you ever consider inviting someone to go through a study-guide focused on the person and work of Jesus?
Examples:
Looking at the Life of Jesus – Rebecca Pippert. Jesus 101 – Bill Donahue. The Uniqueness of Jesus – CRU. Many more online!
6. Christmas is one of the best (and most natural) times of the year to INVITE people to come to a church service to learn something about Jesus. Are you preparing to INVITE someone to our Christmas or Christmas Eve services?