

Mark 8:27—Who do You Say that I Am?

So far in the Gospel of Mark we have encountered various views of who Jesus is. The crowd said He was the prophet promised by Moses and they wanted to make Him king. The Pharisees said Jesus was the pawn of Satan. Jesus' brothers said He was out of His mind. The citizens of His home town of Nazareth said He grew up in their town as just a regular guy, so He was a blasphemer. Clearly there was a severe problem of recognition when it came to Jesus' identity. It's clear to us as students of the Gospels that Jesus was claiming to be deity, the Son of God. In John 10:30, He said, "I and the Father (God) are one.", and in John 14:9, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father". The problem of recognition was that Jesus was the expected Messiah in the most unexpected manner.

C.S. Lewis gave the great "Lord, Liar, or Lunatic" argument for the deity of Christ. Lewis said that since Jesus claimed to be God, our choices are only those three. You can't say that He is just a good teacher or religious leader or prophet. He is either telling the truth, or He's a liar, or He's a lunatic that is deluded. The Pharisees and citizens of Nazareth chose liar, Jesus' brothers chose lunatic, and His disciples chose Lord. In Mark 8, with less than a year left before His crucifixion, Jesus and His disciples are as far north and as far away from Jerusalem that you can get and still be in Israel. At this point in time, the rest of His story and teaching will be about heading for Jerusalem to be crucified. In Mark 8:27, Jesus stops at Caesarea Philippi and asks His disciples two questions, "Who do other people say that I am?" and "Who do you say that I am?" The contrast of the favorable opinion of the people versus the more accurate opinion of Simon Peter reveals much.

Opinion Polls

In today's political elections, opinion polls are one of the best tools and barometers of how a candidate is doing. A Presidential candidate with a favorable rating below 50% is in trouble and considered beatable. According to Jesus' disciples, Jesus had a favorable rating of about 90%, yet according to Jesus, Peter's opinion was the only inspired and correct opinion. Therefore, in Jesus' view, only His closest disciples (maybe about 100) had the correct view of His identity. The large crowds and vast majority of people thought He was a prophet like Elijah, a godly man, and a religious leader and teacher. Virtually everyone thought this except His brothers, His home town, and the religious leaders. In Mark 8:29 and Matt. 16:16, Peter answered that Jesus is "The Christ, the Son of God". In Matthew's account, he added that Jesus responded to Peter that flesh and blood did not reveal that to Peter, but God in heaven alone could reveal that truth to Peter. Peter and the other disciples had special spiritual truth that God had illuminated to them. At this point we must ask why Jesus chose this particular time to ask this probing question?

Jesus was verifying His deity to His disciples at this point in order to prepare them for the very difficult teaching about the crucifixion. His teaching about the crucifixion is bracketed here between this verification of His identity in Caesarea Philippi, and the Transfiguration six days later in which they hear the voice of God saying "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!" The most important teaching that they must listen to is that

Jesus was going to die a sacrificial death on the cross and then be resurrected and ascend to Heaven. This is what He had taught them just prior to the Transfiguration, and then after, and it is what they refused to believe. In Mark 8:32, Peter rebuked Jesus for teaching that, and even after the Transfiguration in 9:32, we read that they did not understand His teaching about the crucifixion. Therefore both the questions about who Jesus is and the transfiguration, are all about the crucifixion. If Jesus is just a prophet or a teacher, then the crucifixion doesn't make sense, and would have no saving effect. God revealed to His disciples that Jesus was more than a prophet. Jesus is God in the flesh, who came into the world through the incarnation to live a perfect sinless life and die on the cross to provide an atonement for sin.

Get Behind Me Satan!

In Mark 8:31, Jesus for the first time began to teach that He must suffer and be rejected by the priests and elders, be killed, and then on the third day be resurrected. Peter couldn't help but think selfishly when he heard this. The disciples had left their homes, family, and businesses to follow Jesus, but now He was telling them He would soon be crucified. Peter was thinking that they must prevent that at all costs. Just moments after his great commendation from Jesus about correctly identifying Jesus as the Son of God, Peter unknowingly became the pawn of Satan by trying to thwart the plan of God to redeem mankind. Why couldn't Peter and the disciples understand the plan and purpose of God? I think the visions of glory filled their eyes, and the cheering crowds plugged their ears. Right up until the ascension to heaven, they were asking Jesus about when He would set up the Kingdom, and they were constantly arguing amongst themselves about which one of them would be the greatest in the Kingdom. They had to come to realize that before they could realize the glory of the Kingdom, they had to experience the suffering of the atonement. What good would it do for Jesus to set up a kingdom full of sinners? First, sin had to be atoned for, so therefore Jesus had to suffer and die vicariously for us as our sacrifice. Suffering had to come first and then the glory. The same was true of Peter and the Apostles lives. Before they could realize the glory, they would have to suffer for Christ's sake in taking the Gospel to the world, and die martyrs' deaths. First the suffering must come, and then we receive the glory.

Deny Yourself

What is required of the hearer of the Gospel in order to understand it and believe in it? What was necessary for Peter to do before he could understand and be committed to Jesus' teaching about the crucifixion? Clearly the disciples (like us) had their own agenda. Repeatedly throughout the rest of the way to Jerusalem Jesus was teaching them about the crucifixion, but each time the author says "But they did not understand", then they would begin arguing about which of them would be the greatest in the kingdom (Mark 9:32-34). Their lack of understanding was directly related to their selfish agenda. Like all of us, they had no interest in suffering, but were preoccupied with their future glory. Therefore, in Mark 8:34-38, Jesus taught them and us what is required to understand the crucifixion and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "If anyone wishes to follow Me (and understand Me), let him deny himself, take up his cross, and then follow Me". The Gospel demands that we stop thinking selfishly with all our selfish

ambitions, sacrifice ourselves for Christ, and then follow the way of Jesus. The reason presents a bit of a paradox that we give up our physical lives to be given spiritual life from God. In this way we must die in order to live. In Mark 8:35-37, Jesus gave the logical reason for this sacrifice, "For whoever wishes to save his (physical) life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for Christ's sake, shall save it (spiritually)." Then Jesus gave the great contrast between the value of the eternal soul over all the stuff in the world, "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" Then Jesus gave the stern warning of the consequences of rejecting Him in verse 38, "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words...the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory..." I wonder if Peter knew at the time that this teaching was aimed at his denial of Jesus' teaching on the crucifixion, but obviously he realized it and came to his senses later. It is a wonderful thing about the authors of the Bible that they wrote these things about their own selfish agenda and failure to comprehend Jesus' teaching until later after the resurrection. I can certainly identify with them.

Greatness Redefined

Pride is the sin we can't see in ourselves, and yet we easily see it and detest it in others. I think Peter, James, and John, as the inner circle of Christ's disciples, felt special. Naturally rivalries developed, and you can imagine some resentment from the other disciples that these three got to go and see things that they missed out on. Peter, James, and John then expected special positions in the coming Kingdom. With all this going on between them, they naturally failed to realize that Jesus was teaching about His suffering and death, not to mention that they also would suffer the same fate. They were so preoccupied with their own desire to be great, that they failed to understand Jesus' teaching about true greatness until after the resurrection. Jesus did not rebuke them for wanting to be great, but instead He redefined greatness. In Mark 9:34-37, after they argued with one another about who was the greatest, Jesus told them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last, and servant of all." I think this cryptic proverb blew their minds until much later when they were filled with the Holy Spirit and received understanding. The world thinks it is great to be served, to have the first place in line, and the honored seat at the table, but Jesus redefined greatness as being a servant. In order to illustrate this truth, Jesus took a little helpless child, the lowest member of their society who could never repay, and said, "Whoever receives one child like this in my name receives Me". The definition of greatness in the Kingdom of God is being a servant without expecting anything in return. This was Jesus' teaching all the way to the cross in Jerusalem, and even at the Last Supper He washed their feet as only a lowly servant would do in order to illustrate to His disciples how He expected them to be servants. Jesus dined with the lowly, touched the untouchables, and served out of love with no desire for personal gain. He had no throne, no white house, no limousines, and no servants. While the Kings and the Presidents of this world serve no man, Jesus patiently served us and patiently waits for us to come to Him.

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