THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION IN THE WORLD

Mark 8:27-33

By

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Special Easter Message

The Most Important Question In The World
Mark 8:27-33

If you could receive the answer to any question, what would
that question be? That’s another way of asking, “What is the most
important question in the world for you?”

If you’re young and single, that question might be, How can I
be popular? Or, How can I get a particular boy or girl to like me? If
you’re facing graduation the question may be, What career should I
pursue? Whom shall I marry? For those who have been married a
few years, it might be, How can I have the kind of fulfilling mar-
riage I long for? How can I properly raise my children? Or, How
can I find a satisfying job? For those further along, it might be,
How should I plan for retirement? What should I do with the final
years of my life?

All of these are important questions. But none is the most im-
portant question you could ask. The reason is that the answer to all
of these questions ultimately rests on your answer to another ques-
tion: Who do you say Jesus is? You may be thinking, “That’s an
abstract, irrelevant theological question if I ever heard one!” But,
what you think of Jesus will determine whether you receive or re-
ject Him as your Savior and Lord. If Jesus truly is the Lord and
Savior, and you recognize that and follow Him, then you have a
basis for answering all of the other fundamental questions in life. If
you have not grasped the meaning of that most basic question,
then you have no consistent basis to grapple with all of life’s other
pressing questions. Also, your relationship with Christ affects not
only your life on this earth, but your eternal destiny. So,

The most important question in the world is:
Who do you say Jesus is?

Jesus put that question to His disciples as they traveled near
Caesarea Philippi, about 25 miles north of the sea of Galilee. Jesus
was seeking to bring the disciples to a more clear knowledge of
who He is: the Messiah (Christ, = “Anointed One”) sent by God.
In one sense, they had believed that from the beginning. When
Andrew first told his brother Peter about Jesus, he said, “We have found the Messiah” (John 1:41). But they still were confused about what that meant. Jesus had brought them to this point of outward confession. But, they still had a ways to go.

Mark 8:31 is a hinge verse in this Gospel. The first half of Mark emphasizes Jesus as the Son of Man who came to serve; the second half emphasizes that He came to give His life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). From this point, Jesus began to teach the disciples about His coming death and resurrection. Three times in chapters 8, 9, and 10, Jesus tells the disciples that He is going to be killed and raised from the dead (8:31; 9:31; 10:33, 34), but the disciples didn’t get it. Jesus follows each of these predictions of His death with a call to discipleship, to self-denial and servant-hood. Mark wrote his gospel initially for suffering Christians in Rome. If they were going to endure persecution and be faithful to the Lord Jesus, it was crucial that they understand who Jesus truly is as He revealed Himself. The matter is just as relevant for us if we want a faith that remains strong, even through trials. So I want to explore with you some of the ramifications of this most important question, “Who do you say Jesus is?”

1. **The question has an objectively correct answer.**

   I mean, only one answer is correct. It is not, “Jesus, however you conceive Him to be.” A person may say, “For me, Jesus is always accepting and loving.” One popular TV preacher says he likes Jesus because He is always a positive person. But Jesus isn’t whatever you want Him to be. There is a single correct answer to the question. And that answer is not based on subjective feelings or personal opinions, but on objective truth.

   This is important to affirm because we live in a day when people think that spiritual truth is not objectively true. Rather, they see it as existentially true. They do not view spiritual truth in terms of propositional revelation, where God has spoken to us in the Bible in language we can understand. Nor do they see spiritual truth in terms of verifiable history, centered in the historical Jesus of Nazareth, whose teaching, miracles, death and bodily resurrection are reported in the New Testament by eyewitnesses.
Rather, our generation views spiritual truth in terms of each person’s experience of it. As such, it is not verifiable. If it’s true for you, then it’s true. If your spiritual experience is different from mine, one is not necessarily right and the other wrong, even if they contradict one another. They can both be true, according to the existentialist view of truth, because spiritual truth is determined by personal experience, not by objective, verifiable means.

The way this filters into the church is that people are encouraged to “invite Jesus into their hearts.” They are promised that He will help them with their problems. But in many cases they have no idea who Jesus really is or what He came to this earth to do as revealed in the Bible. But, they prayed or walked the aisle. Maybe it was even accompanied by tears. At first, they felt better and thought their problems would go away. But then, some problems got worse and they didn’t understand why Jesus wasn’t “working.” So they fall away. At the heart of this sort of defection is a faulty concept of the nature of spiritual truth, especially concerning the person of Jesus Christ. The person who professed to believe never knew who Jesus really is.

Thus it’s important at the outset to affirm that the question, “Who do you say Jesus is?” has one correct answer and many incorrect or partially correct answers. It is not just a matter of personal opinion or preference, where any answer is as good as the next. A wrong answer can be eternally fatal!

2. The question divides people.

This is always the case with objective truth. It divides people into opposing camps. Like Peter and the disciples, you may have to go against public opinion to arrive at the correct answer concerning Jesus.

I wonder if you’ve ever thought about how difficult it must have been for the disciples to commit themselves to Jesus as the Christ. For centuries, faithful Jews had been waiting and looking for God’s promised Messiah. Many lived and died without seeing that hope fulfilled. Sometimes prophets came on the scene, raising hopes that they might be the Messiah. But they died and the people kept waiting. Then, suddenly this young carpenter from Nazareth began preaching and performing miracles. Could He be the one?
He certainly didn’t fit everyone’s image of what Messiah would be like. But the disciples committed themselves to Jesus as that long-awaited Messiah.

Remember, they didn’t have 1,900 years of church history to confirm their faith, as we do. They were the first ones to say, “This is the One!” And they had to say it in the face of public opinion that didn’t agree with them. This fact is underscored by the contrast between Jesus’ first question, “Who do people say that I am?” and His second question, “But who do you [emphatic in the Greek] say that I am?”

The disciples had to stand against three public currents to affirm their conviction that Jesus is the Christ. First was the Roman government, which didn’t care if Christians worshiped Jesus as long as they also affirmed Caesar as Lord. But the disciples insisted, “No, Jesus is the only Lord!” That narrow view cost many of them their lives. In the same way, if you take your stand with the disciples in affirming Jesus as the only way to God, you will have to go against the pagan culture of our day. People don’t mind if you hold your personal beliefs in Jesus, just so that you don’t contend that He is the only way! That’s too narrow and dogmatic. I saw a bumper sticker that said, “If you’re against abortion, don’t have one.” The idea is, “You can have your personal views of morality, but don’t tell me that my behavior is sin. If you want to believe in the Bible, that’s your privilege, but don’t judge me for my beliefs!”

The disciples also had to go against the opinions of the Jewish religious crowd, who had varying notions of who Jesus might be. Some heard His powerful preaching against sin and thought of John the Baptist. Others saw Jesus’ miracles and were reminded of the powerful prophet, Elijah. Others thought He might be another of the prophets. All of these were perhaps flattering, but inadequate, ideas of who Jesus really was. The disciples had to stand apart from the Jewish religious crowd to affirm Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

In a similar manner, you may have to go against the Christian crowd of our day. Many who call themselves Christians have ideas about Jesus which fall far short of affirming Him as Lord and Christ. Some see Jesus as the all-tolerant, loving One, who never speaks against anyone’s sin. They seek to get their denominations
to affirm sins such as homosexuality and abortion. Others use Jesus to endorse their worldly views of feminism or politics. Still others mix Jesus with some brand of pop psychology. You have to stand against these popular views of Jesus to confess Him truly as Lord and Christ.

The third, and most formidable, group the disciples had to oppose was the Jewish religious leaders (8:31). The disciples were not formally educated in the Hebrew Scriptures; these men were. The disciples had no public influence; these men were the recognized leaders in Israel. They were the interpreters of Moses, the guardians of the Jewish law. Who did this bunch of uneducated fishermen think they were to go against the common judgment of this august body of scholars?

You will often have to join the disciples in pitting your view of Jesus against the religious scholars of our day. Even some who call themselves evangelical deny the trustworthy nature of all Scripture. They interpret Jesus in light of the most recent “scholarship,” which invariably comes from men with an anti-supernaturalistic bias. One flagrant example is the recent “Jesus Seminar,” where a bunch of supposed scholars got together and voted on which sayings of Jesus were authentic. How did they determine this? They begin by assuming the gospels to be myth unless proven otherwise. From there they proceed with other dubious assumptions combined with pure subjectivism. Using their methods and assumptions, we could probably conclude that the members of the Jesus Seminar really didn’t say what they claim to have said! This question, “Who do you say Jesus is?” divides people. You must take your stand with the disciples.

3. The question has deepening levels of correct understanding.

Peter’s answer, “You are the Christ,” is certainly correct. But, Peter had a different conception of what that meant than Jesus did. Peter meant, “You are the promised Anointed One who will sit on David’s throne, subduing the nations under Israel’s feet.” That is quite correct when understood of Messiah’s second coming. But, in regard to His first coming, the more correct answer was, “You are the One Anointed by God to be crucified as our sin-bearer and raised from the dead by the power of God.” Jesus had to fulfill
Isaiah 53 and other Scriptures which point to Messiah’s bearing the sins of His people before He would reign on David’s throne. Peter was correct, but he needed to come to a deeper level of correct understanding.

There is even a deeper level of correct understanding revealed here: “You are the crucified, risen Christ who is the Sovereign Lord.” Jesus’ prophecy (8:31) makes it plain that He did not die as a helpless victim. The Jewish leaders who crucified Him did not thwart God’s plan for Jesus to reign on David’s throne. They were guilty of the terrible sin of crucifying their Messiah, but at the same time, Jesus willingly offered Himself as the sacrifice for our sins. He was in sovereign control, even in His death. Peter later grasped this as he preached on the Day of Pentecost, “This Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death” (Acts 2:23).

One of the beautiful things about the Christian life is that you grow into deeper and deeper levels of understanding about the infinite, unfathomable, sovereign person of Jesus Christ. Do you know Him as your Savior? That’s great! You start there. But don’t stop there! There’s much more! If I could pick one place in history to return to, it would be to join those men on the Emmaus road that first resurrection Sunday, when the risen Lord Jesus, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures (Luke 24:27). All the seminary educations in the world could not compare with that one experience!

So, begin with knowing Jesus as the Christ, the Anointed One of God, the Savior. But go on discovering all that He is as the Sovereign Lord of the universe. The joy of the Christian life is growing to know our Bridegroom more intimately.

4. The question reveals the state of our hearts.

This point is revealed by the Lord’s strong warning that the disciples tell no one and by Peter’s subsequent rebuke of Jesus and Jesus’ rebuke of Peter. Peter’s notion of Messiah meant power and dominion, not suffering, rejection, and death. So, when Jesus began to speak plainly about His coming death, it jarred Peter so much
that he took Jesus aside to rebuke Him. But Peter’s rebuke drew from Jesus the strongest rebuke He ever gave to one of His followers: “Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s” (8:33).

I think Peter was truly concerned about Jesus. He didn’t want Jesus to die. But his mistake was that he didn’t see things from God’s perspective. He wanted Jesus to spare Himself, not realizing that if He had done so, the cross, which secured our redemption, would have been subverted. It was the same temptation Satan put before Jesus when he showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and said, “All these things will I give You, if You fall down and worship me” (Matt. 4:9). So Jesus met Peter’s temptation the same way He met Satan’s: “Begone, Satan!”

The disciples were in sympathy with Peter, which is why Jesus addressed His rebuke so they all could hear (Mark 8:33). And that explains His strict prohibition that they tell no one that He was the Christ (8:30). Both the disciples and the Jewish people were looking for a political Messiah who would put a chicken in every pot and a donkey in every stable. But Jesus wasn’t sent by the Father to make everyone happy, so that they could go on living self-centered lives. He came to deal with the fundamental problem of the human race: sin. The essence of sin is our stubborn self-will that says to God, “I’ll run my own life, God. Just help me feel good when I need You.” The cross, where the Lord of Glory took the penalty we deserved, was the only divine solution for our sin problem.

A. B. Bruce said it well: “For the whole aim of Satanic policy is to get self-interest recognized as the chief aim of man” (The Training of the Twelve [Kregel], p. 180). For Jesus to have avoided the cross would have been for Him to seek His selfish interests. Satan would have triumphed. But Jesus came to do the will of the Father. That’s why He said, “The Son of Man must suffer” (8:31). He came to glorify the Father by being obedient, even to death on the cross. The “must” was the necessity of obedience to the Father’s will above all else.

So you can see how your answer to the question, “Who do you say Jesus is?” reveals the state of your heart. If your Jesus is an Aladdin’s Genie whom you use to make you feel good, then your heart is in bondage to self and sin, not subject to Jesus as Lord.
You actually are following the Jesus Satan tried to establish, not the Jesus sent by the Father. The Jesus sent by the Father was delivered up on account of our sins and was raised so that we could be right with God (Rom. 4:25). We who follow Him are also to die to ourselves and live to God (2 Cor. 5:15).

Through the trials we encounter, God is seeking to break us of our sinful self-will and make us subject to His will. Instead of living to please ourselves, He wants us to live to please Him. So when He challenges our will, if we submit to Him, we grow to be more like Jesus. If we resist His breaking process, we’re setting our minds on the things of man, not of God.

So tell me what kind of Jesus you follow and I’ll tell you where your heart is at. The Jesus of the Bible is the Christ of the cross. If anyone wishes to follow Him, he must deny himself and take up his cross (8:34). He is the risen Lord to whom all must submit. Until we understand that, we haven’t grasped the primary reason Jesus came to this earth.

**Conclusion**

What’s your answer to Jesus question: “Who do you say that I am?” You may be standing with the multitude, saying, “Jesus is a fine example, a great teacher. But He is not the Sovereign Lord of my life.” That is a terribly mistaken answer. You may be standing with Peter, saying correctly, “You are the Christ,” but not understanding the sort of Christ He really is. That’s an improvement over the first answer, but it is inadequate. You must stand with Jesus who came as God’s Anointed to bear your sins, who was raised in triumph over sin and death, who calls us to follow Him in obedience to the will of the Father. As Peter later preached, “God has made Him both Lord and Christ--this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). If you stand there, ready to do God’s will no matter what the cost, you have correctly answered the most important question in the world: Who do you say Jesus is?

If Jesus is not your sin-bearer and your Lord, I encourage you to read the Gospels with the prayer, “God, show me who Jesus is. If You show me that He is my Savior and Lord, I will follow Him.”
Discussion Questions

1. How would you answer the person who said, “If Jesus works for you, that’s great, but He’s not for me”?

2. Is it right to appeal to a person to believe in Jesus for the temporal benefits they will receive?

3. What expectations of Christ did you have which He has not fulfilled? Were they biblical expectations?

4. Discuss: “The whole aim of Satanic policy is to get self-interest recognized as the chief aim of man.”