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## THE CRUCIAL QUESTION

Luke 9:18-22

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Luke Lesson 42

## The Crucial Question Luke 9:18-22

Sometimes asking the right question is crucial for your well-being. When the temperature soared to 120 degrees, a missionary in South America was tempted to cool off with a swim in the local river, but he was leery because of the man-eating fish. The locals assured him, though, that piranhas only bite people while the fish are swimming in schools, which they never did in that part of the river. So each afternoon for the rest of the summer, the missionary enjoyed cooling off in the river.

Months later he heard reports that a local fisherman had fallen out of his boat and had not been found. Alarmed, he asked his neighbors if perhaps the man had been eaten by piranhas. "Oh, no," they assured him. "Only while swimming in schools do piranhas bite people, and they never swim in schools around here."

"But why not around here?" the missionary asked.

"Oh," the neighbor casually replied, "they never swim in schools where there are alligators." (Adapted from *Reader's Digest* [7/96], p. 48.) Asking the right questions and answering them correctly can mean the difference between being safe and being an alligator's lunch!

The same is true spiritually. Asking and answering correctly the right questions can mean the difference between eternal life and eternal condemnation. For example, one of the first major controversies to erupt in the early church was the question, "Must a man be circumcised to be saved?" (Acts 15:1). The apostle Paul said that if a person answered that question affirmatively, he was under God's condemnation (Gal. 1:6-9)! Some errors are fatal!

While there are a number of crucial spiritual questions, none is more important than the question Jesus asked the twelve in Luke 9:20, "But who do you say that I am?" For example, there are thousands of people who believe that the Bible is God's Word. They seek to obey its moral standards. They believe in Jesus' virgin birth. They believe that He sacrificed His life to set us free from sin and death and that all who put their faith in Jesus can have their

sins forgiven and receive everlasting life (these statements are affirmed in "What Does God Require of Us?" [Watchtower Society, 1996], pp. 6-7). Yet these people are going to hell because they deny the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. I am referring to the Jehovah's Witness cult. The same could be said of other cults, such as Mormonism, that claim to be Christian, but deny either Jesus' true deity or His true humanity. Thus

Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" is crucial for each person to answer correctly.

As I pointed out in our study of Luke 9:1-9, the matter of Jesus' identity is one that Luke has repeatedly emphasized. It was in the birth narrative, where the angels announced the birth of the Savior, who is Christ the Lord (2:11). The forerunner, John the Baptist, denied that he was the Christ and pointed people to Jesus (3:15-17). Even the demons knew Jesus' identity as the Holy One of God (4:34) and the Son of God (4:41). The theme surfaced again when Jesus forgave the paralytic's sins and the scribes and Pharisees reasoned, "Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone?" (5:21). The same question was asked when He forgave the sinful woman (7:49). When Jesus stilled the storm, the disciples even marveled, "Who then is this, that He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey Him?" (8:25). Herod raises the question when he hears of the miracles taking place: "Who is this man about whom I hear such things?" (9:9).

But now Jesus directly asks the twelve, first, "Who do the multitudes say that I am?" (9:18); and then, "But who do you say that I am?" (9:20). Peter's confession, "The Christ of God," is a turning point in Luke. Walter Liefeld observes, "Theologically, this is the most important statement thus far in Luke. It is the first time a disciple refers to Jesus as Messiah (cf. 2:11, 26; 3:15; 4:41)" (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary* [Zondervan], 8:922). Peter's answer is correct, even revealed to him by God (Matt. 16:17). But the disciples had the notion of Messiah as the reigning King. They did not yet understand the suffering and sacrificial death of Messiah.

Thus Jesus immediately mentions His impending death and resurrection (9:22) and the cost of discipleship for His followers (9:23-26, 57-62). Suffering has been hinted at before (2:35; 5:35),

but this is the first explicit mention of it. It will become a frequent theme as Jesus sets His face to go to Jerusalem and the cross (9:51; see 9:44; 17:25; 18:31-33; 24:7, 46-47). But the disciples didn't really comprehend it until after the resurrection (9:45; 18:34; 24:25-26, 45-46). It was their full understanding of the matter, that "the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead," that enabled them to go forth as bold witnesses, proclaiming repentance for forgiveness of sins in His name (24:46-48).

I want to explore with you several ramifications of Jesus' crucial question, "Who do you say I am?"

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." Jesus didn't say, "Great answer, Peter! Do any of the rest of you have any different thoughts? Yes, Judas, how do you feel about Me?" Some say, "For me, Jesus is always accepting and loving." But Jesus isn't whatever you want Him to be. How you feel about Jesus doesn't change who He is. There is a single correct answer to the question that is not based on feelings or personal opinions, but on objective revealed 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 personally true. They do not view spiritual truth in terms of propositional revelation (doctrine), 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 postmodern world 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 right and the other wrong, even if they contradict one another. They can both be true, according to the current view of truth, because spiritual truth is determined by personal experience, not by objective, verifiable means.

This faulty view of spiritual truth is a central tenet of the unity movement that is urging Catholics and evangelical Protestants to drop their doctrinal differences and come together for worship and

witness. Doctrine is viewed as divisive. Love for Jesus and for one another is all that matters. But the movement allows for “Jesus” and “being born again” to be defined any way that you conceive. For example, at the 1994 Promise Keepers rally in Portland, Oregon, Bill McCartney said that Promise Keepers didn’t care whether you were a Baptist, a Pentecostal, or a Roman Catholic. The main question, he said, is, “Are you born in the Spirit of God?”

Pastor James Singleton astutely responded,

What does that mean? Some people believe that they are born again in the waters of baptism. Others confess that they are born again at the time of their confirmation. Still others believe that they are receiving Christ and are born again each time they attend Mass. The problem with the unqualified question is that it can mean *whatever you want it to mean*. That philosophy fits with the spirit of the age that minimizes objective Biblical truth in favor of a subjective experience. (Cited in “The Evangelical Eroding of the Deity of Christ,” by Tom Watson [Countryside Bible Church], p. 9; italics in original.)

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. It’s a matter of God’s truth as revealed in His Word.

## 2. The question divides people.

Some of you have already affirmed this point, because you didn’t like what I just said against the unity movement! You have to be careful here, because none of us *likes* confrontation or division. We all prefer peace and unity. But if you go by your emotions, you will fall into serious doctrinal error and defection from God’s revealed truth. But read your New Testament: more than any other thing, it warns against false teachers and false doctrine. Objective truth always 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.

Have you 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 the multitudes 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 strong 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. If you take your stand with the disciples in proclaiming 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 wrong. If you want to believe in Jesus, 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, which 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 (9:22). 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 pure subjectivism. Using their methods and assumptions, we could easily 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, "the Christ of God," 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, ruling the nations with a rod of iron." 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 (9:22) 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. And God raised Him up again" (Acts 2:23-24a).

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! Jesus tells us how we can know more of Him: "He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him" (John 14:21). Jesus promises to reveal more of Himself to those who obey Him.

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 the Lord Jesus more intimately.

We've seen that this crucial question has an objectively correct answer; it divides people; and, it has deepening levels of correct understanding. Finally,

4. The question requires a personal response of faith and obedience.

Jesus goes on to warn the disciples not to tell anyone and then He tells them of His impending death. Luke omits Peter's rebuke of Jesus and Jesus' corresponding rebuke of Peter (Matt. 16:22-23). But we know that Jesus' words were not what the disciples expected to hear or wanted to hear. Their idea of the Christ was a political Messiah who would put a chicken in every pot and a donkey in every stable. They were thinking of power and dominion, not of suffering, rejection, and death.

But Jesus wasn't sent by the Father to make everyone happy, so that they could go on living self-centered lives with God's help. He came to deal with the fundamental problem of the human race: sin. The essence of sin is our stubborn self-will that says, "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. If you haven't come as a sinner to the crucified Christ and trusted Him as God's provision for your sin, you have not responded correctly to Jesus' crucial question.

If the disciples had gone out and proclaimed Jesus as the political Messiah who would lead a revolt against Rome, they would have met with widespread response. John 6:15 reports that after the feeding of the 5,000, the crowd wanted to take Jesus by force to make Him king. But God's sovereign plan was the way of the cross, both for Jesus (9:22) and for those who follow Him (9:23). To follow a crucified Savior and to live a crucified life requires faith and obedience. It goes against the mentality of our day that says, "You're worthy; feel good; use God for your own happiness." But, clearly, it is the only response for those who see who Jesus really is.

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" (9:22). He came to glorify the Father by being obedient, even to death on the cross. The "must" was the necessity of obedience to the Fa-

ther's will above all else. It shows that Jesus' death was a necessary and inevitable part of the divine plan (13:33; 17:25; 22:37; 24:7, 26, 44). Understanding that Jesus is the Christ of the cross means that we who follow Him must walk in the way of the cross, which means trusting and obeying Him, even when it may not feel good for the moment.

### Conclusion

What's your answer to Jesus' crucial question, "Who do you say that I am?" You may be standing with the multitude, saying, "Jesus is a fine example, a great teacher, even a prophet. But He is not the Sovereign Lord of my life." That is a badly 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 obey God no matter what the cost, you have correctly answered Jesus' crucial question, "Who do you say I am?"

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 Your Anointed Savior and Lord, I will trust Him and 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."

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