

Who Do You Say that I Am?

2 of 7 in *Jesus Has Questions for You*

Feb. 28, 2021

Mark 8:27-33

Last Sunday we began a new series called *Jesus Has Questions for You*. We're making our way through a distinct section of text in chapters 8-10 of Mark's gospel. In each scene, we find Jesus and his disciples moving closer and closer to Jerusalem, where his cross awaits him.

We're now in that time of year, where each week, we're moving closer and closer to Good Friday and Easter. And our journey through Lent can become a reflection of the journey Jesus took with his disciples toward Jerusalem. In fact, our very lives as Christians are meant to reflect it.

Because at each stage of that journey, Jesus reveals the way of discipleship—he reveals what it means to truly follow him.

And along the way, we find that Jesus has questions for us. Indeed, throughout the gospels, Jesus asks far more questions than he answers. That's because he knows that a good question can challenge your assumptions. A good question can re-shape how you see reality. A good question can lead to transformation in your life.

So again and again throughout these scenes in Mark, Jesus asks his disciples questions that address their blind spots and their brokenness. He does this so that—to borrow the words of a famous hymn— they might see him more clearly, love him more dearly and follow him more nearly.

And for those exact reasons, Jesus asks the same questions of you and me.

One of those questions is: *Who do you say I am?*

What's your first response to that question? Who do you say Jesus is? If you're watching live, go ahead and type your response into the chat...

"Who do you say I am?" is the question Jesus asks his disciples in today's passage in Mark chapter 8, starting in verse 27:

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."¹

Let's unpack this passage a bit, starting with verse 27. It says that:

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"²

I'd like to draw your attention to the phrase "on the way." Pastor Andrew talked about it last Sunday as well. It's a phrase that Mark uses very intentionally in his gospel. In the section of Mark that we're studying in this series, it occurs four times. On three of those occasions, we find Jesus speaking very directly about his impending death and resurrection.³ On the fourth occasion, Jesus is just about to arrive in Jerusalem, where he will face his cross.⁴

So this phrase "on the way" is highly significant in Mark. The *Way* of Jesus leads to death and resurrection, *and* it is the pattern by which Jesus shapes our lives as his followers. To be "on the way" with Jesus is this continuous process of dying to self and being raised to new life in Christ. In next week's message, we'll explore how Jesus goes on to say that:

¹ Mark 8:27-33 (NIV)

² Mark 8:27 (NIV)

³ See Mark 8:27, 9:34 and 10:32

⁴ See Mark 10:52

“If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it.”⁵

You and I often try to make *our own way*, but Jesus calls us to follow him “on *the way*.” Of course, to follow Jesus, you need to be clear on just who it is you’re following. Otherwise, you might attempt to *remake* Jesus into someone you hope to *use* in order to get *your own way*, rather than following in his.

In our passage, Jesus wants to find out who his disciples think he is. He starts by asking them, “Who do people say I am?”⁶

The disciples have been travelling from village to village with Jesus, ministering to crowds, so by now they’ve heard a mix of opinions from people about who Jesus might be. And so in response to his question:

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”⁷

Herod, the ruthless King of Judea, had already killed John the Baptist, and then Herod came to believe that John had been raised from the dead as Jesus.⁸ It seems like others believed this as well.

There were also those who imagined Jesus to be Elijah, the great Old Testament prophet whose re-appearance was supposed to usher in the coming of the Messiah.

Still others believed that Jesus wasn’t necessarily Elijah, but that he was at least a genuine prophet of Israel. It had been 400 years since God’s people had last heard from any prophet, and when John the Baptist and then Jesus came onto the scene, many hoped that this centuries-long prophetic drought had finally come to an end.

But all of these responses fell far short of the truth of who Jesus really was. Each response represented a view that fit people’s preconceived expectations about Jesus’ identity.

It’s at this point that Jesus makes the question more personal for his disciples:

⁵ Mark 8:34-35 (NLT)

⁶ Mark 8:27b (NIV)

⁷ Mark 8:28 (NIV)

⁸ See Mark 6:16

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”⁹

As we’ll see, the disciples had their own preconceived ideas about Jesus’ identity. They put Jesus into the box that best fit their particular hopes and desires.

You and I can do that too, if we’re not careful.

Here are just a few of the boxes people put Jesus into...

There’s the *crisis counsellor* box. This is a Jesus who we call upon only when we’re in trouble. He’s there if we need him to help us out of a jam, but we pretty much ignore him otherwise.

How about the *mystical Jesus* box? This is a Jesus who is so distant and heavenly—so otherworldly— that he couldn’t possibly want to be involved in the ins and outs of our everyday, earthly lives. This box is quite convenient for those who want to call their own shots.

Somewhat similar is the *eternal life insurance policy* box. This is a Jesus who exists to make sure we end up in the right place after we die, but has little if anything to do with how we live our lives in the here and now.

A popular box to put Jesus into these days is the *political ally* box. This is a Jesus who votes the way I vote, supports the party I support, and sees all the issues the way I do. He also joins me in resenting and ridiculing everyone who doesn’t.

Do you ever put Jesus in these or any other boxes? If you’re watching live, you can let us know anonymously, but honestly, by responding to the poll in the chat area.

You see, Jesus knows that the boxes we attempt to put him into—any false notions we have about who he really is— must be confronted.

Because **how you see Jesus affects how you relate to Jesus**. And how you see and relate to Jesus has everything to do with how you see and relate to God.

So Jesus is insistent when he asks us, “Who do you say I am?” In our passage:

⁹ Mark 8:29a (NIV)

Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."¹⁰

For all the notions other people had about who Jesus might be, Peter actually gets it right! He's been with Jesus day in and day out, he's heard his teachings, he's seen the miracles, and has come to believe that Jesus is indeed the Messiah.

The word Messiah means "anointed one." Kings were traditionally anointed with oil at their coronation, but over time, the term Messiah came to be applied to Israel's ideal king: the King to end all kings, the King who would put everything right once and for all, overcoming evil and injustice, bringing God's rule and reign over Israel and the world.

For Peter and the other disciples, this meant that the Messiah would have to overthrow the ruling Roman Empire by military force, and restore the kingdom of Israel much like it had been back in the glory days of King Solomon.

Many other people in Jesus' day shared similar expectations of Messiah.

Which is why Jesus tells his disciples not to make his Messianic identity known just yet.¹¹ I mean, here they were near Caesarea Philippi, which was home to a new shrine dedicated to the Roman Emperor himself. To start going around publicly declaring Jesus to be God's anointed king might not go over so well with the Romans.

It would also serve to feed the false Messianic expectations of the Jews, and this could become a distraction to Jesus and his true Messianic mission— which he now explains to his disciples:

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.¹²

Peter and the other disciples were confounded by Jesus' words. Their expectation was that Jesus would be a military hero, and in that scenario, his death would mean failure. If Jesus were to die, he couldn't claim his throne as king, and the disciples couldn't take up prestigious posts as his chief officials.

¹⁰ Mark 8:29b (NIV)

¹¹ See Mark 8:30

¹² Mark 8:31-32 (NIV)

Jesus' words went so completely against the grain of their hopes and dreams that Peter takes Jesus aside and tries to set him straight. He tries to force Jesus back into the box of his own expectations and desires.

And here's where we see that even though he got the right answer to Jesus' question "Who do you say I am?" Peter's understanding of Messiah couldn't be more wrong.

This should give us pause. Because like Peter, **you can give right answers about who Jesus is, and still put him into your box**—a box that's about getting your own way rather than following Jesus on *the Way*.

Tim Keller puts it like this:

If your agenda is the end, then Jesus is the means; you're just using him. But if Jesus is the King, you cannot make him a means to your end.¹³

In accepting Peter's declaration that he's the Messiah, Jesus is saying that he is indeed the King, but not like any king they ever imaged. He's a King going to a cross.

When Jesus asks you who you say he is, are you saying the same Jesus said *he* is? Who did Jesus say that he is? **Jesus is the Suffering King**. The suffering Messiah. In fact, he explains to his disciples that the Son of Man *must suffer*.¹⁴

Jesus often referred to himself as the Son of Man. It's a term that harkens back to a prophecy in the book of Daniel that talks about "one like a son of man"—this divine messianic figure who would be sent by God to rule over the nations and set the world right.

Until now, no one in Israel had really connected the Messiah with suffering. But Jesus is saying that as Messiah, he *must* suffer—he *must* be killed.¹⁵ He actually uses the word "must" two times in our text. So he's not just saying, "I've come to die," but "I *have* to die. My suffering and death is absolutely necessary. Sins cannot be forgiven, the world cannot be renewed—nor can your life be renewed— unless I am killed and after three days rise again."

In fact, this divine plan is so crucial, that Jesus sees any opposition to it as satanic. And so when Peter rebukes him, Jesus rebukes him right back. "Get behind me Satan!" Ouch.

¹³ Timothy Keller, *King's Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus*, p. 107.

¹⁴ See Mark 8:31

¹⁵ See again Mark 8:31-32

Jesus wasn't actually calling Peter Satan. But he took Peter's rebuke as a satanic challenge to his God-given identity as the Suffering Messiah. He took it as an enemy effort to thwart God's plan of salvation— a salvation which was only possible through Jesus' suffering and death.

In a similar way, the enemy challenges our own sense of identity in Christ. It happens all the time through the systems of this fallen world that continually tempt us to build our sense of self on things like power, possessions, perfection, performance and people-pleasing.

And like Peter and the disciples, we sometimes come to see Jesus as a means to procure such things for ourselves, rather than finding our sense of identity in Jesus.

When we do this, Jesus lovingly but firmly says to us what he said to the disciples in our passage:

You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.¹⁶

One of God's concerns is to turn us from finding our sense of identity in false sources, so that we can find our true identity in Jesus. Because:

When you know who Jesus really is, you can discover who you really are.

Who is Jesus, really? In our text, he's identified himself to be the Suffering King, the Suffering Messiah—the Messiah who would die for the sins of the world, and who will ultimately set the whole world right, once and for all.

That's why God came into this world as Jesus. That's why Jesus said, "I must suffer and be killed."

But Jesus not only suffered and died for the world — he's the King who suffered and died for *you*— who went to the cross and absorbed the penalty for *your* sins in his own body. Because only in this way could he procure *your* forgiveness, *your* rescue, *your* restoration.

What does this mean for your identity?

It means that **God thinks you're worth dying for**. It means that in Jesus, God has given himself utterly and completely for you. That's how much value you have to God. That's how

¹⁶ Mark 8:33b (NIV)

unconditionally and vulnerably he loves you. Just to reinforce this to yourself, why don't you go ahead and type into the chat, "God thinks I'm worth dying for."

And when that love becomes your identity—when it increasingly defines who you are at the core of your being—you find yourself freer and freer to stop chasing after false sources of identity like power, possessions, perfection, performance, and people-pleasing.

Those things are an incredibly flimsy and undependable foundation to build your identity on. Predictably, they lead to a "me-first" life filled with anxiety, comparison, competition, resentment, strife, and manipulation—a life of taking rather than giving. They lead to a life that's lived at the expense of others—a life where we value others, and even Jesus, only to the extent that they can advance our own egocentric agenda.

Jesus wants to set you free from such a life, and so today, he asks you a penetrating question:

Who do you say I am?

Because only in coming to know who he really is, you can come to know who you really are.

It's true, as author Scott Perkins explains, that:

As we follow Jesus, there is a lot to unlearn... Failure, like we have observed through Peter, is part of opening oneself to the new Way.¹⁷

The disciples were slow to get it, and we can be too. But Jesus was patient with them, just as he is with us. Like Pastor Andrew said last week, Jesus knows very well that every one of us is a work in progress.

But when Jesus asks you, "Who do you say I am?" and your heart can increasingly respond, "You're the Suffering King who gave his life for me," then you will develop a sense of identity so secure that even death cannot shake it.

Because to be "on the way" with Jesus leads to the death of your false self, and it also leads to resurrection of your true self — of your true identity as God's beloved in Christ.

It leads to a life where you can declare with the apostle Paul:

¹⁷ Scott Perkins, *Essential Questions: Following the Way of Jesus by Examining What He Asked in Mark 8-10*, Kindle version, Location 737.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord. ¹⁸

In other words, God's love in Christ is the truest thing about you.

That gives you a new identity in Christ, and it also leads you into a new life-mission in Christ. Because to be that secure in God's love for you, frees you to surrender your own way, and to join Jesus in his way, becoming like him as you lay down your life in self-sacrificial service for the sake of others.

We're going to talk more about that next Sunday when we move into Mark chapter 9. In the meantime, I want to encourage any of you who have not yet been baptized as a follower of Jesus to sign up for baptism. We're hoping to be able to do the next round of baptisms in May. <https://cornerstonechurch.ca/baptism>

Baptism is all about your identity in Jesus. It's the way Jesus gives you to declare that you have come to know who he really is, and that in him, you've also discovered who you really are.

You can find out more about baptism at the link you'll see on the screen and in the chat. On that page, there's also a form you can fill out to let us know that you'd like to start preparing for baptism.

Let me close this message with a word of prayer:

Dear Jesus, our King— help us to know who you really are, as opposed to just who we want you to be. Because only in knowing who you really are will we know who we really are—the beloved children of God. You are the Suffering King, the Messiah who lays down his life for us so that we could have life in you. Forgive us for the times when we've put you into a box, and thank you for your patience with us as we follow you on the way. May all that we were, are and will be, be given over to your transforming love and deep healing, so that secure in our identity in you, we may become, in greater and greater measure, the instruments of love, to one another and to the world around us, for the sake of your kingdom, honour and glory. In your name we pray, Lord Jesus. And all God's people said, both aloud and home, and in the chat as well, amen.

¹⁸ Romans 8:38-39 (NIV)