

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

SERIES: QUESTIONS JESUS ASKED

by Steve Zeisler

In this series of messages on the questions of Jesus (Discovery Papers #4569-#4575 and #4660-#4661), we have looked at questions that call us to examine ourselves: "Do you not yet understand? Do you have eyes but fail to see?" Other questions were intended to correct faulty perceptions about the ways of God: "Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign?" The questions we will examine in this message will focus our attention squarely on the person of Jesus himself.

Commentators generally consider Mark 8:27-38 to be the turning point in Mark's gospel. The previous chapters have moved us toward a crescendo in the form of Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" What follows is Jesus' preparation of his disciples for the cross that is before them in Jerusalem. Let's look now at Mark 8:27-38.

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 Christ."

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, chief priests and 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 things of God, but the things of men."

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

There is tension in this passage. The disciples find Jesus' words difficult to hear and understand. There is confusion about the role of Messiah in the world. Jesus asked, "Who do you say I am?" Peter replied that most thought he was one of the prophets, perhaps even Elijah or John the Baptist. Prophets spoke for God. They were called to proclaim God's truths in a specific time and place, and to do so with authority. In many ways, Elijah was the prototype who defined the way in which future prophets would be understood. John the Baptist was a contemporary of Jesus and believed by most to be the last of the prophets.

However, many people today still believe that Jesus was a prophet, that he was a good teacher who spoke the ways of God. Prophets are ordinary people. We can choose whether or not to respond to their messages. We determine the nature of our relationship with a prophet. It is much safer to consider Jesus a prophet than it is to recognize him as the Son of God.

Then Jesus asked, "Who do *you* say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ." The word "Christ" is the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew word Messiah, which means "anointed one." There are many prophets, but there is only one Messiah. The Messiah commands obedience. He is a king, the Son of David. He is the one who will bring about the kingdom of God, the era of righteousness. He cannot be ignored. This Messiah is God himself. To say "You are the Christ" is to say "You are the one to whom we give our allegiance." The question "Who do you say that I am?" requires us to proclaim our convictions, to take an oath of allegiance.

The question still resonates. Who do you say that he is? Many people say, "I believe that he was a prophet, that he said unique and

wonderful things, that his life is worth emulating." Peter answered differently. "You are the Christ. You are the savior of the world, sent by God. You are the one with authority."

If you read this account in Matthew's gospel, you see that Jesus commends Peter, saying, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:17). However, Jesus warned the disciples not to tell about him. Why? Peter had just declared Jesus to be the long-awaited Messiah. Shouldn't this be a call to action? In verse 38, the Lord warns them of being ashamed of Him in their generation, yet for now they are not to say anything about him.

The reason for that is in the next sentence, verse 31: "He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer" Before you can speak, you need to learn. The reason Peter and the other disciples were not ready to share what they knew immediately is that there was something more to learn about their Messiah. What sort of Messiah is he? He is the Savior, the Lord, the one around whom everything else revolves. He is unlike any other spokesman of God. But what sort of Messiah is he? We don't know until we learn, so the word of allegiance is spoken first, and then words of instruction from the Lord follow.

Much harm is done in the world today by zealous disciples who love Jesus but have not taken the time to be instructed by Him. They represent their faith and their loyalty to him in ways that actually contradict what he is about. Jesus wisely told Peter to be quiet until he learned what sort of Messiah he served.

In verse 31, Jesus calls himself the Son of Man. That is a messianic title. Jesus was agreeing that he is the Christ. The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law; he must be killed and after three days rise again. Jesus had challenged the corrupt religious leadership in Jerusalem. The people expected their Messiah to relieve suffering, but Jesus said that the Son of Man must himself suffer. Rather than cleansing the corruption and replacing it with godly leadership, the Son of Man will be killed.

What kind of Messiah is this? What good is a messiah who will not change the world? Peter was the only one with courage to say what other disciples thought, and he rebuked Jesus. "What kind of Messiah are you? The world is a mess. Unless you do something, it will be even more of a mess. You shouldn't suffer; you should relieve suffering. You shouldn't undergo rejection in Jerusalem. You shouldn't die; you should heal those who are dying."

I remember an episode of *The Twilight Zone*, a television show that was popular in the 1960's. In this particular episode, the world was filled with evil, corruption, and pain. One day, aliens arrived from space, and before long disease was eradicated, human problems were solved, and peace reigned. The people had everything they had ever longed for. The aliens had a little book, the cover of which read, "To Serve Man," or something like that, but no one could decipher the book. Finally, the alien visitors arranged for humans to accompany them on a return trip to their home. People were so thrilled by all that had been done for them that wave after wave of people volunteered to go to wherever this spaceship was going. At the end, a cryptographer, who had been working to decipher the alien script, discovered that the book was a cookbook and that "To Serve Man" was actually a book of recipes for rendering human beings as delicacies at a feast. Foolish people thought their "saviors" had come to do good, but in reality things were horribly worse. Something like that must have been in Peter's mind. Lord, what kind of terrible Messiah are you? You are going to strengthen the hands of our enemies.

Jesus answered in two parts. First he said, "Get behind me, Satan." His heart was pained. The cross that lay in Jesus future bore down on him every day of his life. He was tempted every day from the beginning of his ministry to the night of his arrest in the garden at Gethsemane. Every day, the tempter said "You don't have to do this. You don't have to live with the humiliation. You don't have to live with the limitations of your humanity. You don't have to be misunderstood. You don't have to do any of it." Day after day the temptation was close at hand, and day after day Jesus resisted it. Now here was his friend adding pressure, and the response from his heart was, "Stop it! This is hard enough without hearing it from you. Your voice is adding to the voice of evil."

The second part of his answer is this: "You are thinking the way men think, Peter, not the way God thinks. You are concerned about the kind of salvation you would bring if you were God. You would throw off the Roman yoke and install new priests in Jerusalem. You would make sure the good people were happy and the bad people would suffer. You would do all of that with a wave of your arm." But acting as if we were God does not fix anything. We are terrible at being God. The way our Lord brings righteousness is by interior revolution. Jesus must suffer so that we can be free to receive life from God. He offers us self-denial, a cross, and a Messiah to follow. Jesus is not the kind of messiah people expected, but he is the Messiah of God. He is the Messiah who gives life, the One in whom we may hope.

Now let's look at verse 34. "If anyone would come after me he must deny himself," the Lord declares. Coming after him is a privilege. He invites us to follow him, but he doesn't appease his followers. We are invited to have life from him on his terms; we follow his way or not at all.

There is another point to his message here. Jesus offers allegiance to him as an opportunity, but he also issues a warning: "Depending on the choice you make, you will either save or lose your life. You will either gain or forfeit your soul. You will either find approval or disapproval when the Son of Man comes in his father's glory. You are playing for very high stakes."

Two vivid pictures come to mind here. The first is of people who have immense riches and world renown. Their every word and deed are recorded, but they have lost their capacity for any good thing. Such people are not capable of love, friendship, prayer, or worship. They have it all, yet they really have nothing. They are nothing. The other picture is of people with worldly religion, who avoid all the stigma of faith in Christ. They never have to suffer for faithfulness to the Lord. They never take a stand if it will cost them something. They are ashamed of the one who has bought them with a price, who has included them in his embrace, and at the end of the day, when the Lord comes in his Father's glory, he will withdraw from them as they did from him. These are very powerful pictures. Such people gain the whole world but lose their souls. The way of discipleship is given in three phrases in verse 34. Jesus said that anyone who would follow him must: first, deny himself; second, take up his cross; and third, follow me.

Ray Stedman's writings have helped me in understanding the difference between denying one's self and self-denial (see [Discovery Paper #3315, The Way of the Cross](#)). Self-denial happens every January when many of us make New Year's resolutions. We say, "I am going to give up chocolate for a month. I am going to be disciplined and I am going to deny myself something." Jesus was not talking about self-denial; he said that anyone who would follow him must "deny himself." To deny your *self* is to be willing to set yourself aside as the center of everything, to no longer regard the world as existing for your sake. To deny your *self* means to no longer imagine that you are the God of your own universe. It means a refusal to measure and praise yourself for successes in competition, and it is a refusal to wallow in sorrow and slights when you lose the competition. Denying our *selves* means not imagining ourselves to be heroic in our anguish at the unjust ways in which we have been treated. It is a refusal to defend the indefensible or to promote what is truly inadequate.

A follower of Jesus must deny himself and take up his cross. As followers of Jesus, we must be willing to be humiliated, broken, set aside. We must be willing to undergo whatever treatment the Lord requires of us to destroy the love of self and confidence of self with which we are all born. Our *selves* need to be crucified. Instead of resisting the corrective surgery God intends for us, we should embrace it.

I remember an occasion when I was college pastor, very new in ministry, and I was teaching a group of college students about courage. With my eyes cast humbly down, I told a story about an intrepid servant of God who was in a difficult situation and stood firm for the Lord. He was rejected at first, but eventually people came to Christ because of his humble attitude. It was a true story; however, I told it as though it were my true story when in fact it was someone else's, and I was totally humiliated when that someone else walked in halfway through my telling of the story.

It was an awful experience; I felt like a fool and wondered how I could have done such a thing. But it helped me realize who I am. If I don't let the Lord bring these parts of me into the light and put them to death, then I will live with them forever. I know that my *self* wants to be the hero of every story. I want all the good stories to be about me, so I need someone to crucify that. Our Lord says, "Deny your *self*. Let the cross do its work in you. Take up your cross and follow me." That does not mean simply to conform to the Christian culture in which you live or to become like all the other Christians you know. It does mean to become like Christ. We are to go where he sends us. He will change what needs to be changed and teach what needs to be taught. He wants us to become what only he can make us to be. "Follow me."

Who do you say that he is? Is it time for you to make a decision about who Jesus is? Is it time to acknowledge what you already know to be true? If you say he is Christ, if you declare that he is God's answer from heaven, are you willing to hear him if he calls you to follow him? Will you give your allegiance to a Messiah who wants to change you from the inside out? If you have never named him Messiah, today is the day to do so for the first time. If you already know him as Messiah, but you are resisting him, this is the day to give up your resistance to his call to discipleship. The time to make the decision is now.

Scripture quotations are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

Catalog No. 4662
Mark 8:27-38
10th Message
Steve Zeisler
January 16, 2000

[Back to Index Page](#)

Copyright© 1999 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.