

JESUS IS THE MESSIAH

Mk 8:27-9:1

Mk 8:29 “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

This morning, we find ourselves exactly in the middle of Mark's Gospel. Today's passage is a turning point in this Gospel. In Mk 1-8, everything revolves around the question: Who is Jesus? On our journey of faith, Jesus asks us this question. This is not an optional extra credit question, but a core question upon which everything hinges. Our life of faith is a lifelong journey of knowing Christ and following him.

In our passage, we can see dramatic contrasts. Peter's amazing confession of faith is followed by Jesus' shocking teaching on the suffering Messiah; taking up the cross is followed by the coming glory of the kingdom. This sharp contrast challenges us to radically rethink the meaning and mission of the Messiah. Who do you say Jesus is? What kind of Jesus do you follow? God invites us to truly know Jesus and radically follow him in this adulterous and sinful generation. This is a challenge and invitation of grace that is extended to each of us.

1. The Identity of Jesus: “Who do you say I am?”

Jesus and his disciples took a road trip to the villages around Caesarea Philippi, far north of Israel, some 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. It was a remote region. Jesus probably wanted to avoid public exposure to focus on teaching his disciples. There Jesus asked two questions: “Who do people say I am?” and “Who do you say I am?” Having closely followed Jesus' ministry chapter by chapter, we are now finally being asked to make up our minds about who he is.

To recap briefly: Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God and brought about the kingdom to people's lives; he healed the sick and drove out demons; he revealed the mercy of God and became a friend of sinners; he revealed the power of God by raising the dead and calming the stormy sea; he fed five thousand with five loaves, and healed the deaf and the blind. Do you remember all of these stories?

Now, Jesus asks his disciples the first question: “Who do people say I am?” He is asking for a report on what people are saying about him. It is rather a simple factual question that can be answered easily. (You can ask people or google it.) Some said, “John the Baptist”; others said, “Elijah.” Still others, “One of the prophets.” These are not bad reports; they are undoubtedly positive views of Jesus. They all agreed that Jesus was a man from God. But it falls short of the truth about Jesus.

Today, many say something positive about Jesus: that he was a spiritual leader or great moral teacher, but this is a shallow view. According to a recent survey (by Ligonier Ministries), 52 percent of American adults believe that Jesus was a great teacher and nothing more. This shallow view is problematic for many reasons and C.S. Lewis shows why: *“People often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic... or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher”* (*Mere Christianity*). So, this shallow view failed the test.

Now Jesus asks his disciples, “How about you? Who do you say I am?” (29a) Jesus anticipates a different answer from his disciples because they closely followed Jesus. This is a personal question that requires a great deal of soul-searching. Your grandparents/parents may say Jesus is the Son of God; your neighbors may say he’s a prophet; your professor, a philosopher; your friends, a great moral teacher. But Jesus asks, “What about you? Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the Messiah” (29b). The Messiah or Christ literally means the Anointed one. Peter is saying, “You are not one of many kings, but the true King and Savior who will put everything right.” The fuller version of this confession in Matthew’s Gospel reads, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Peter got the right answer. It was not his human wisdom, but God the Father who revealed it (Mt 16:16-17). Peter’s confession is a monumental moment that affirms the Gospel’s opening statement in Mark 1:1 “the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.” It was the decisive moment in Peter’s journey of faith. By confessing Jesus as the Messiah, he committed his life to Jesus.

This personal confession of faith is vital to each of us. Why? It is not merely an intellectual matter; it is a matter of heart and salvation. Romans 10:9-10 says, “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. With the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” Confession expresses and seals what we believe in our hearts. It’s like a marriage vow; as the husband and wife say “yes” to each other, they enter a lasting covenant relationship. In our journey with God, our knowledge of Jesus may not be perfect. But when we confess Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, we enter a personal relationship with Jesus that leads to eternal life (Jn 17:3). With this commitment, we start growing in the knowledge of our Savior and experience life with his amazing blessings. By God’s grace, many of us entered this

blessed relationship with our Savior through personal confession. May God help all of us to know Jesus personally and confess him as Lord and Savior!

2. The Mission of Jesus: The Suffering Messiah

After Peter's confession, Jesus strongly warns them not to tell anyone about his identity (30). Why was Jesus saying that it is not the time to proclaim his identity, but to be silent? The mainstream view of the Jews of that time was that the Messiah would be a military conqueror who would free them from foreign rule. So, if word got out that Jesus is the Messiah, everyone would make a banner, "Jesus Is the King," and grab swords and clubs to fight their enemies. The disciples were children of their culture, and Jesus knew this was how they grew up.

With Peter's confession, Jesus' identity was revealed. (But In a sense, Peter's confession resembles the first, incomplete phase of the previous healing of the blind.) When his identity was revealed, Jesus started to disclose an even deeper revelation. Look at verse 31: "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."

The "Son of Man" is Jesus' favorite title to refer to himself. It indicates the heavenly Messianic figure in Daniel 7 who will come with glory (see 38; Dan 7:13-14). Jesus said that the Messiah must first suffer many things. He would not sit on the throne to send an angel army to kill all his enemies; instead, he must be rejected and killed. It sounds like Jesus was going to be defeated by his enemies rather than defeating them. This concept was completely new and foreign to them. Jesus' kingship is radically and scandalously different from popular expectations. He spoke openly about his suffering, death and resurrection.

So, how did the disciples respond? Peter, the spokesman of the group, was shocked and took Jesus aside, "Get over here, Lord" and began to rebuke him. "Must the Messiah suffer many things and be killed? You have a wrong ministry vision. Stop this foolish talk."

How did Jesus respond to Peter? Turning and seeing his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." (33) Jesus calls Peter "Satan." It sounds quite harsh. Jesus does not mean that Peter is Satan, but that he is talking like Satan, the ultimate adversary, who always tries to tear Jesus' mission apart (Mk 1:12). Peter did not intend to play an adversary to Jesus. But the problem was that Peter was setting his mind on the things of the world, not on the things of God. Can we ridicule Peter for his reaction? Are we any better than Peter?

We may also struggle with the true concept of the Messiah. Like Peter, we get the title Messiah right, but tend to make our own version of Jesus. Many of us love things that are “Made in America.” But several Evangelical leaders warn about a “Jesus Made in America” or an “Americanized” Messiah that fits our cultural values. Christians are susceptible to cultural idols such as materialism, popularity, worldly greatness, success, and the avoidance of suffering/failure (Peter Scazzero). There is also a “Moralistic Therapeutic” version of Jesus that characterizes many young people’s religion of our times: Jesus is made to make us morally good people and make us feel good about ourselves (Christian Smith, *Soul Searching*). In the political arena, “blue Christians” make Jesus a socialist, while “red Christians” make him a moralist. Christian nationalists make Jesus an earthly Messiah. All these cultural versions of Jesus are skewed and miss the heart of Jesus. Who can save us? It is definitely not an “Americanized” Jesus.

God’s way is radically different from our human way. Jesus’ way is the cross. Do you know what the cross represents? It is the epitome of shame, defeat and pain. There is no dignity for the crucified, who hung stripped, helpless and shameful. Jesus emptied himself of all his divine rights, power and glory. He died the most scandalous death on the cross. The prophet Isaiah describes this suffering Servant like this: *“His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness”* (Isa 52:14). *“He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem”* (Isa 53:2-3). Why “must” the Messiah suffer so many things? Mk 10:45 says that Jesus came to “give his life as a ransom for many.” He suffered a shameful death to atone for our sins and to redeem you and me. No one recognized him. Our pride despised him; our selfishness rejected him. *“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.”* (Isa 53:5). Jesus came not to crush his enemies, but to die for sinners like us.

As a teen boy, I confessed Jesus as Christ, expecting him to make me successful in this world. In college, I was proud of myself for being a philosophy student, but was in reality a self-conscious, lustful, and hypocritical slave to my sins. I was rebellious and cynical. I viewed God as impersonal and controlling. In my deep darkness, my soul cried out for help. Then through Bible study, I saw Jesus on the cross, praying for his enemies: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” To my surprise, God was not like a dictator, but infinitely humble and sacrificial. When I confessed all my sins to him, he took them all away by his blood and opened my eyes to see his eternal kingdom. His love of forgiveness and presence overwhelmed my soul and changed my life forever. By his grace, I committed my life to Jesus, my Savior and King. In my mission life, I had ambition to be successful as a Bible and theology teacher, yet

language hurdles humbled me time and again. But whenever I look at my Savior, his grace renews my heart, and I rejoice in his presence and the heavenly kingdom. Praise God. Only Jesus who suffered, died for our sins and rose again gives us the heavenly kingdom. Amen.

3. The Way of Discipleship: "Follow me!"

Look at verse 34: Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

This is a divine invitation given not only to some Christians. Here, every Christian is addressed. It is about radical discipleship: to deny yourself, to take up your cross and to follow Jesus. Does it sound too hard?

At the core, discipleship is all about following Jesus. We are not called to follow an idea or principle, but the person Jesus. Our focus is always on Jesus who died for us and rose again. Our goal is to know him, follow him daily and worship him as Savior and King. This comes with some challenges.

Deny yourself. Self-denial is not about harming or beating yourself up. Neither is it about depriving ourselves of material things such as a nice car or vacation because you are a Christian. Self-denial is the denial of the self itself. To deny myself means to say "No" to my nature that is apart from God. For Peter, it meant to lay down his agenda and submit to Jesus' lordship. For us, it is to say "No" to my selfish ambition and agenda however much we like to spiritualize it.

Take up your cross. The early Christians understood exactly what that meant. Condemned people carried their own cross to their execution. So, Jesus was saying, "If you want to follow me, be willing to die." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian, who was executed by Nazis expressed this, "*When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die*" (*The Cost of Discipleship*). In fact, many early Christians (including Peter) died by crucifixion for the cause of Christ. For many of our brothers and sisters worldwide, following Jesus means risking their lives daily for the gospel. Every day, 13 Christians worldwide are killed because of their faith. Every day, 12 churches or Christian buildings are attacked. And every day, 17 Christians are unjustly arrested or abducted. Over 309 million Christians worldwide live under extreme persecution because of their faith. (The 2021 World Watch List). And persecution is only increasing. Paradoxically, the church grows stronger, when persecuted. As Tertullian, an early church father said, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

But for us today living in a land where we have religious freedom, we're not going to be killed for our faith. Then, how can we follow Jesus and lose our life? In our affluent society, we are at war with our old self that seeks selfish ambition, physical pleasure

and self-complacency. Following Jesus means to die to our old self. Following Jesus means to want to know him and love him wholeheartedly; it means to grow in Christ's grace and humility and share his love with others. This cannot be done by our own willpower, but by God's grace. It is possible when I live "by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal 2:20)

Why is following Jesus so radical? Jesus says, "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it" (35). This is a divine paradox. True life is found only by dying to ourselves. Jesus helps us to do some quick math: Is it wise if you save your temporary life but lose your eternal one? Is it wise if you gain the whole world and forfeit your soul? No, all of us can see that that would be foolishness. But when we lose our life for Jesus and the gospel, we gain eternal life, starting here on earth.

Jesus says in verse 38, "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels." Following Jesus puts us at odds with our culture because this world is adulterous and sinful. In the Roman world, Christians were the most persecuted group, but eventually, they became very influential. How could this be? It's because they were not ashamed of the gospel, but testified to Jesus in words and deeds; submitting to Christ's lordship, the church was multi-racial, committed to the marginalized and poor, non-retaliatory, practicing high sexual ethics (Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods*). Christian radical discipleship made the church incredibly attractive and influential.

Can this happen today among us? In this post-Christian era, the gospel of the cross is offensive to a relativistic mindset. You can see yard signs across our neighborhood which declare a secular creed, "*In this house we believe that: Black Lives Matter; Love Is Love; Women's Rights Are Human Rights...*" This is confusing because Christian and secular ideas are mixed up in the same category of equality. Shall we embrace this secular creed? Or crush it completely? As the author of "*The Secular Creed*" (Rebecca McLaughlin) suggests, we need to fall to our knees and repent for what we have neglected; we need to seek God's discernment and submit to Christ's lordship. As followers of Jesus, we don't subscribe to a political agenda, but go back to Jesus, who laid down his life for sinners. We believe that black lives matter because they matter to Jesus. We believe that women's rights are human rights because men and women are equally created in the image of God. And we believe that love is not arbitrary, but that *God* is love. We are not ashamed of Jesus who showed us what love is by laying down his life for sinners. As we follow Jesus radically and share his gospel, the life and power of Jesus will permeate our campuses and society.

The way of the Messiah ends with glory and victory. This world is fading away, but the final word will be spoken by Jesus who died for us and rose again. He is coming in his Father's glory with the holy angels. This is our hope and confidence. In this world, we all suffer in one way or another. But when we suffer for our Savior and his gospel, we are truly blessed because he gives us glorious victory. Christian life is not about suffering after suffering, but about enjoying Christ's glorious presence. While preparing for the upcoming World Mission Report and Missionary and Leaders Conference, I have been moved by many missionaries and leaders who faithfully follow Jesus even in adverse circumstances. They display the beautiful image of our Savior through their hardships. Through all of this, they are more than conquerors through him who loved us. When we are not ashamed of the gospel, God is not ashamed to be called our God, and we can rejoice in His kingdom that is now and forever.

Who do you say Jesus is? Do you follow the right Jesus? He gave all for us freely. He surrendered his life on the cross for us. He was raised from the dead and is glorified forever. Jesus is the Messiah; he is the Servant and King. What a wonderful Savior we have! When we lose our life for Jesus and the gospel, we will save it now and forever. Amen!