

CHECK HIS ID
Mark 8:27-32

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Amarillo, Texas
October 15, 2023

So what do you think? Who is Jesus? I'm not the one asking the question. In our text today, Jesus Himself is posing the question. "Who do people say that I am?" he asked in Mark 8:27. Then He asked the most important question: "But who do you say that I am?"

The crowds of people [were] coming out to see Jesus. He was a hot topic of conversation, a first-century celebrity. And celebrities, then and now, are the object of rumor and speculation. Evidently, Jesus had been getting some [social media-type coverage]. The apostles told Jesus the stories that had been going around about Him. Rumor had it that He was reincarnation of some hero of the past, some religious leader of days gone by. (Preaching, May-June 1994)

And still there were other ideas, but the disciples did not have the stomach (verse 28) to share with Jesus the other things which they had heard. In fact, in Mark 3:22, what they heard was that the scribes from Jerusalem were saying that Jesus wasn't the Messiah at all; rather, He was a man possessed by a devil.

In Mark 6:14-16, there were other rumors. Herod was frightened of Jesus, thinking that He was the resurrected John the Baptist. You remember that Herod had foolishly sworn that he would give the daughter of Herodias anything she desired up to one-half of his kingdom. He was sorry when she exclaimed that she wanted the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Herod was scared of John and intrigued, if somewhat confused, by his preaching. But he had promised her anything, and he had John beheaded. So Herod was frightened when he heard about Jesus – frightened that John the Baptist had come back to life.

The prophet Malachi had said that God would send Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord, so others thought He was Elijah. Still others saw Him as another prophet. Throughout history, until this day, people have responded differently to the question, "Who is Jesus?"

Josephus, the ancient historian of the first century – himself, not a Christian – wrote this:
Now there arose about this time a source of further trouble in one Jesus, a wise man who performed surprising works, a teacher of men who gladly welcomed strange things.

Forget about what Herod or Josephus thought about Jesus. This morning you are being asked, as a reader of Mark's Gospel, the most important question that

anyone will ever ask you. There are many serious questions in life that we all face: What will you be when you grow up? or Who will you marry? But the question of ultimate concern is: What do you say about Jesus? So what do you think? What do you think about Jesus?

The question is not, “Do you agree with my teachings?” The question is not, “Do you think I manage conflict with the authorities well?” Nor is the question, “Are you impressed with the miracles you’ve seen me perform?” The real question is a question of identity. “Who do you say that I am?”

If we say that Jesus is strictly a teacher, then all we need to do is tune up our cognitive equipment and learn His lessons. If Jesus is a political revolutionary, intent on overthrowing the unjust powers of the world, then we need to take up arms and let the shooting begin. If Jesus is a harmless, caring guy, then we need to be careful never to offend or make others uncomfortable with what we say and do. (*Preaching, May-June 1994*)

If Jesus is just the economic equalizer, then all we need to do is sell all of our goods and live a simple life of quiet poverty.

But He is ultimately not a teacher, not a politician, not an equalitarian economist.

He is the Holy Son of God, God’s Anointed.

So what do you think? What do you think about this man named Jesus?

Leonardo Da Vinci’s painting *The Last Supper* has been retouched, refurbished and renovated. It can be seen by the viewing public. It’s back – and it’s beautiful, sharper, and more colorful than ever!

But everyone is not happy about the results.

It took two decades to scrape 500 years of grime off perhaps what is the world’s most famous painting. But finally, now that the face-lift is complete, visitors to the Santa Maria delle Grazie church in Milan can see a much brighter, clearer depiction of the last meal shared by Jesus and His disciples.

Literally, in painstaking fashion, paint and dirt were flaked away a millimeter at a time to get to Da Vinci’s original 1497 masterpiece. The painting had been subject to nine known retouchings, destruction by Napoleon’s troops (who had actually used the church grounds as a stable), grease buildup from a nearby kitchen, and the Allied bombing of 1943.

So somewhere beneath all the dirt and the grime, the grease from the kitchen, the dust from the horses, and under nine different layers of touch up paint – underneath all of that was the real masterpiece of Leonardo Da Vinci, the real Jesus and His disciples as they were depicted in the mind of the famed artist.

See the artisans now – carefully, slowly, with the smallest of instruments trying to flake away the phony in order to make over the masterpiece. The task was important enough that it took \$8 million and two decades to complete. Each artist who through the years had touched up the masterpiece never thought that he was straying very far from the original. In fact, in some sense of irony, each artist thought that he was, indeed, restoring the masterpiece while, in reality, he was putting layer upon layer on top of another layer of cover-up over the real work of the real master. The cover-ups and touch ups took place at such a rate that, in the end, it was very questionable as to how much was actually the work of the hand of Da Vinci. Jesus and His disciples had been touched and retouched until the original was all but lost.

The task of peeling away the paint from Jesus is a task that still happens today.

I have a tendency – and you have a tendency – to make Jesus in our own image. Once in our own city, we saw billboards that were put up by PETA. The billboards encouraged Christians to avoid meat because, “Jesus was a vegetarian.”

I hate to be so crass, but I could only suppose there wasn’t a theological advisor at the advertising agency. Surely he or she would have realized that Jesus was no vegetarian. There are plenty of examples, but let one suffice. In John 21, Jesus said to His disciples, even after His resurrection, “Come and have breakfast.” “Jesus came (verse 13) and took the bread, and gave them, and the fish likewise.” By the way, this is part of a larger narrative in which He helps them catch 153 fish – so many that their net was bulging, though it didn’t break. When they dragged the net to shore, there they see the charcoal fire ready. And Jesus already has some fish cooking on the fire.

What’s funny about the PETA campaign is not so much the inaccuracy but the freedom that the organization used to call Jesus to their side, to draft Him to be on their team, to press the deity into human service, to mold the Master for human causes, to add – like the artist who put on layers upon Da Vinci’s Jesus – another layer, another interpretative twist to the Almighty. To remake Jesus into the form that fits.

How do we peel away the paint? How do we wade through all the interpretative innuendos, the cultural conditions and the many misinterpretations to find at last, beneath the paint and all the retouching, the historical and authentic Jesus of Nazareth? How do we find the real Jesus?

Peeling back the paint. Flaking off the phonies in order to get to the facts. Who was Jesus? Who is Jesus?

Jesus comes to us as an intriguing character because He turned upside down virtually every aspect of everyday life. He taught an economics of generosity which contrasts sharply with our economics of acquisition. He says to the rich young ruler not “acquire more,” but “go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor.” He challenged the accepted political practice by declaring that those who want to be really great, those who want to really lead, should lead by serving – and He takes up a towel as one of His very last acts, and washes the feet of the disciples, even at their protest.

Not even family values were safe from Jesus' radical rethink. He described family relationships as common interest in the Kingdom causes rather than blood ties. "You want to see my real mother and my real brothers," He said in the Gospel of Mark. "Who are my mother and my brothers?" He asked (Mark 3:33). "Behold," he said, looking at those who were sitting at His feet and listening to His teaching. "Behold, these are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."

And while this radical rabbi turned the world upside down in every category of life, there is no category in which He overturned the apple cart more than in the category of religion. Literally, He turned over the tables, as you know. Probably more than once. His re-reading of the scripture, His reading of the prophets was so radical that He drove the religious leaders, the very people who were thought to be closest to God in that day, to have homicidal thoughts.

In Luke 4, as He sits down and reads from the prophet Isaiah, the people are astonished. They are ready, it says, to cast Him out of the city, to throw Him over the hill. They are ready to stone Him – because He has claimed to be the Messiah, because He has claimed to begin the great kingdom of God. They begin to mumble to themselves. "We know him. Isn't that Joseph's boy? We know his folks. How can he be so great?"

Let's look at our passage again, Mark 8:27-32.

And Jesus went out, along with His disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way He questioned His disciples, saying to them, "Who do people say that I am?" And they told Him, saying "John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; but others, one of the prophets." And he continued by questioning them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered and said to Him, "Thou art the Christ." And He warned them to tell no one about Him.

In Matthew's version, Jesus replies, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona (that's Peter), because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in Heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it" (Matthew 16:17-18).

In Caesarea Philippi there was constructed a temple by pagan peoples because of this deep spring (feeding the Jordan River) which some believed to have no bottom. Animal sacrifices, and even children, were thrown into this deep, dark chasm. The hillsides were lined with statues to countless gods. Rock carved niches with Greek inscriptions. Illicit activity. This opening to the cave began to be known as the "Gates of Hell." Perhaps when Jesus asks the question, even in the background stands this gate of hell, representative of all that was evil in Caesarea Philippi and all that was evil within men.

And then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And He was stating the matter plainly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him.

Rumor had it that Jesus was the reincarnation of some hero of the past. A prophet – maybe Elijah. A religious leader of days gone by. The real question concerned just who He was. What was His

real identity? Of all the people who have walked the earth since its beginning, one thing separates them – how they respond to a single question. As Jesus talks to His disciples, He poses the all-important inquiry: “Who do you say that I am?”

As you read Mark’s Gospel, He calls Jesus “the Messiah” in chapter 1, verse 1 – at the very beginning. “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” That means Jesus the Messiah.

But as you read his Gospel, from chapter 1 to chapter 8, we’re not really told who Jesus is up to this point. Oh, don’t get me wrong. Jesus has done some remarkable things in these chapters in Mark. He has performed acts to astonish His countrymen. He has provoked them to ponder. Where does Jesus get all this authority? Where does He get all this power?

In Mark 1:27, notice it reads, “And they were all amazed, so that they debated among themselves, saying, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him.”

Jesus has had the power to rebuke the demonic spirit from a man in the synagogue in Capernaum. They ponder the power – one who has power even over unclean spirits. There had been no technique, no spells, no incantations necessary to gain the upper hand over the demon. There had only been the word. It was strange. Never before had they seen anyone with the sovereign authority which Jesus demonstrated. “What is this? A new teaching? He even commands the demonic spirits and they obey Him.” Thus, they do not know who Jesus is, nor do they fully understand what His presence means. But the impression has been made – it cannot be avoided. His authority demanded the question, “Who on earth is Jesus?”

Look at Mark 2:7.

Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?”

Back in Capernaum once again, he’s at Peter’s house. The presence of one so powerful could not be concealed for more than a few days. A large crowd had formed within the house and about the doorway. Jesus was teaching those gathered about God’s Kingdom. Jesus was saying that in His coming to earth, God’s Kingdom was in the “here and now.” The reign of God, the long-awaited rule of God, was inaugurated with His ministry. Do you understand the magnitude of the message? “God’s Kingdom is now here,” Jesus is declaring.

Even while He is speaking, the debris begins to fall from the ceiling into the crowd below. At first He tried to keep teaching, but He lost the crowd’s attention as sunlight exploded into the room from the ceiling above where the men were tearing open the ceiling. Everyone else was startled by the strange behavior, dumbfounded. But Jesus knew what was in their hearts, and He watched as faithful friends brought the paralytic to Him. Jesus declared to the pitiful man, “Your sins are forgiven you.” So the scribes and the experts in the law began to inquire, “Hey, how can he talk like that? He has no ability to forgive sins. Only God can do that. Who does Jesus think he is, anyway?”

Fast forward in the gospel again, to Mark 6, verse 2.

And when the Sabbath had come, He began to teach in the synagogue; and the many listeners were astonished saying, “Where did this man get these things, and what is this wisdom given to Him, and such miracles as these performed by His hands?”

Jesus is in Nazareth, His own hometown. As He returns, He appears to be a rabbi accompanied by His disciples. On the Sabbath day, Jesus attended the synagogue and was given the opportunity to expand on the reading of the Scripture. He was the guest preacher, you might say. The whole congregation was astonished at His teaching. “Hey,” one of them said, “is he not Mary’s boy?” “Why, he’s a carpenter.” “He repaired my cupboard when he was a teenager,” perhaps another one said. “Who on earth does this carpenter boy think he is?” “His brothers, Judas and Simon, built my house,” another one added. “His sisters live in our village.”

“Who is he to teach and how can he perform these miracles?”

The tension builds in the gospel. Who is Jesus?

In this gospel, the tension has built. Jesus has cast out demons. He has fed the five thousand. He has healed the multitudes. He has taught about God’s Kingdom and commanded the turbulent sea to hush and be still. He has walked on water. But it has yet to be clearly seen by His disciples that He, Himself, is none other than the promised one from God, God’s Anointed, the Messiah.

When we come to Mark 8:27, we come to a pivotal point in the Gospel narrative. The people are pondering the identity of Jesus. The scribes are skeptical. The disciples themselves are doubtful. So we finally have to face the question. The most important question in all of history. Who is Jesus?

All the people who have ever walked on the earth are separated by the one great question. So what do you think? So what do you think about Jesus? Who was He? Who is He? The answer to that question will change your life for all eternity.