



***That Radical Jesus:***  
**“DENY YOURSELF AND PICK UP THE CROSS!”**

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*Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.”*

*And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*

*He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” (Mark 8:27-38)*

I remember being at a luncheon in Grand Rapids for a nationally-known political figure. The downtown Rotary Club had been invited along with the local business forum, and lots of important figures, local celebrities and state dignitaries were there. The local TV stations were out in force, people were being interviewed, and everyone was just gathering and mixing as they were getting ready for the lunch to begin.

Being a naturally shy person and inveterate people-watcher, I was standing off the side, watching the crowd, when a young woman walked up to me, looked at me kind of funny, and asked, “Who are you? Are you somebody important?” How do you answer that? People used to

say that I looked like Paul Newman, but that was a long time ago. More recently people were saying I looked like someone else, so I decided to go with that. I held out my hand and said, “Hi! I’m Alfred E. Newman. I’m happy to make your acquaintance.”

If someone were to ask “Who are you?”, how would you answer? Would you tell them what you do? Is that who you are? Would you give them a copy of your family tree and talk about your lineage? Is that what makes you *you*? Would you show them pictures of your grandchildren or talk about your hobbies, explain the things that make your heart sing? How do we decipher the self? I remember a class I took in college where the professor asked us to list ten things that tell us *who* you are. We all did that. He listened to many of our descriptions and then he challenged us by saying, “Everything that you’ve listed tells me *what* you are, but they don’t tell me *who* you are!” When defining the essence of oneself, you find it’s an elusive quality.

Who do you think you are? I have several mental images of who I am. I am Robert Young in *Father Knows Best*. At times I see myself as Robinson Crusoe, learning to fend for myself, stranded alone in a strange land. Sometimes I’ve seen myself as Jerry Mathers in *Leave It To Beaver*, coping with older brother Wally and his mean friend Lumpy. I’m Paul Newman in *Cool Hand Luke*. I’m Frodo on his holy quest in *The Lord of the Rings*. I’m Paul Tillich, the theologian, in his study. I am a little bit William Sloane Coffin and Mouzon Biggs in the pulpit. I am the perfect wise dad, the lost little boy, the Lone Ranger setting things straight, the untamable rebel fighting injustice, the wise and understanding priest.

But every now and then I get a glimpse of how others see me, and their pictures are quite different. They want me to be Christopher Reeves in *Superman*, fighting for the right with a strict ethical code. They want me to be Charlton Heston in *The Ten Commandments*, bringing down the Law. Maybe some see me as Forrest Gump, a slow-witted but sweet-natured consumer of chocolate. To some I’m Marlon Brando in *The Godfather*. I just hope nobody sees me as Jesus. No sane pastor should see themselves as a savior. Are you who you think you are? Or are you the person others see you to be? It’s all very confusing.

Jesus confronts this question head-on in this passage from the gospel of Mark we’re delving into today. Many scholars think this passage is the main point Mark was trying to make in writing his whole gospel. Mark wrote at a very frightening and disruptive moment in history. It had been coming for years because the Jews and this new Jewish sect called “Christians” refused to worship the local gods, which was considered their patriotic duty, and they refused to worship the Roman emperor, which was downright foolhardy. Some of the Jews thought God would help them defeat the Romans, so they started a rebellion. Consequently, the Roman army marched through Galilee and Judea, putting down the rebellion as violently as they knew how because it threatened their empire. In Mark’s time, Jews and Christians were being persecuted in Palestine and in Rome—imprisoned for no good cause, their property confiscated, many executed as rebels.

And that created no little spiritual confusion. This misery wasn’t what anybody had expected the Messiah to bring. I mean, most people choose a religion that will get the gods on their side to prevent them from suffering and help them win all their battles. If Jesus was the Messiah, how could he let Christians suffer and Rome win? Mark wants to explain that this suffering, this

oppression which comes from refusing to worship what the culture around us worships, is exactly what the Messiah brings, because the Messiah brings real and lasting life to us.

What's going on in this passage? What's going on with Jesus? "Who do people say that I am?" Why is he asking this? I see this as a very human exchange. Jesus wants to know if he's fulfilling his calling. He wants to know if anybody's really listening. Jesus wants to know if anybody gets it. And maybe Jesus wants to be sure he gets it, because up to this point in Mark, nobody understands who he is except the demons he cleans from the possessed.

I apologize in advance for going "All-Biblical" on you this morning, but this is one of the most important passages in all of scripture. Notice the flow Mark gives us on how this went down. Jesus is with his closest disciples when he asks them what people are saying about him. Then, as now, there are many different opinions. Then he asks them the million dollar question, which is still the question in our day: "Who do you say I am?"

And here I need to pause and point out something that's often missed in reading this passage. The land of the Bible is often called "the Fifth Gospel" because it tells us so much. And the setting here is significant. At the time it was called Caesarea Philippi. It was an ancient Roman city, named in honor of Caesar Augustus, located at the southwestern base of Mount Hermon. It was adjacent to a spring, grotto and shrines dedicated to the Greek god Pan, considered a holy place. This grotto has high walls around the spring, and in these small cliffs are niches which had been carved to provide space for small statues of the many "deities" which the Romans worshiped. Because it's in the far north of Israel, it's rarely visited by tour groups. The pilgrimage Bishop Laurie and I are leading next January is intentionally including a visit to Caesarea Philippi because it is crucial to the Gospels and to our Christology, our understanding of who Jesus is.

In front of all these graven images, Jesus asks, "Who do the people say I am?" "You're another John the Baptist!" they tell him. "You're another Elijah! You're another great prophet sent from God! That's what people are saying." They don't get it. "But who do you say I am?" Jesus asks them. Why does he ask? Hasn't he been telling them? Is he wondering about it himself? We need other people to tell us who we are, to test our assumptions, to help us overcome our denial and blindness, to share their perceptions and experiences of who we are to them. And for once, Peter gets it right. And he is the first to say it out loud: "You are the Messiah!" Hooray! Peter gets it. Or so it seems.

Then, strangely, Jesus immediately orders them not to tell anybody, at least not yet. It's not the world-wide evangelistic manifesto you might expect here. It's not Matthew's "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations." Why doesn't Jesus want anyone to know? Why wouldn't he want everyone to know? Because he has "some 'splaining" to do. Jesus' self-understanding of "Messiah" is far different than what the disciples understand. "Messiah" means so many different things to different people, then and now. And still, today, when we say "Messiah" we mostly mean somebody who will get us what we want.

There are a lot of things I want Jesus to do for me. Make me successful. Make me popular. Make me rich. Make me happy. Preserve my health. Protect my family. Put my kids through college.

Fix the economy. Build up my church. Solve all my problems. Open up a parking space close to the door of the store when it's raining and the mall is crowded. I'm sure you have your list, too. The point is, we want the Messiah to protect us from suffering. But, you know, he never promised to do a single one of those things.

Calling Jesus "Messiah" doesn't mean much unless you understand what he means by the word. Naming him your "Savior" doesn't make any difference if you don't understand he means to save you from some things you love way too much that may just kill your soul. Following Jesus doesn't mean the path of least resistance through the maze of competing idolatries in the world, that he will bless just anything that feels right to you at the moment. Jesus reserves the exclusive right to tell us what he means in being our "Messiah." So then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. Uh, that's not who they thought Jesus was going to be. Not what anyone wants to hear from the Messiah, whom they are hoping will wipe out their enemies and make them all fabulously well to do. Jesus makes no such promises.

And Peter isn't having any of it. That's not what Peter meant when he said Jesus is "Messiah." And so we see Peter move from brilliant to dimwit in about thirty seconds flat. He tells Jesus he needs to lighten up, he's driving everybody crazy with this suffering, rejection, death talk. And he tries to explain to Jesus what kind of Messiah he's supposed to be, just like most of us do when we're lobbying Jesus for special favors in our own prayers. And Jesus gets angry. Jesus sees this "glory gospel" as nothing less than another temptation straight from hell: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

All this happens with the inner circle, the closest disciples, the soon-to-be apostles of the church. But what I want you to notice is that Mark emphasizes the way Jesus calls everybody to hear his next words. These next words apply not just to the inner circle, not just to the elite, not just to the ordained ministers, not just to the hired staff, but to everybody, to the whole crowd. These words of calling apply to every last one of us: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Jesus told his disciples they should "get lost," that is, to lose themselves into salvation. And, according to the story Mark tells us today, Jesus wasn't interested in half measures and part timers. He told the disciples if anyone wanted to follow him, they needed to be ready to give it up, to lay it down, to "bring it." When Jesus told them to take up their cross, he wasn't talking about costume jewelry. When he told them to deny themselves, he wasn't talking about a gospel that makes your life more comfortable. When he told them to follow him, he wasn't talking about making them prosperous and popular and happy. And, honestly, denying ourselves and taking up the cross is about the very last thing any of us want to hear Jesus tell us to do. Jesus redefines "Messiah" for us, and in doing so, he radically defines who we are to be as Christians. Jesus modeled what it means to love our enemies, to care for the least of these, to lose our lives through loving the people around us. It's a whole different way of living than looking out for number one. "You mean, he was serious about those things?" Yeah, it's hard, radical stuff, but I think he was serious about those things.

Let's go back for just a second. In Mark, Jesus keeps telling people not to spread the word about him, not to tell everybody about his healing miracles. And why? Because it isn't enough to say "Jesus is the Messiah." It isn't enough to confess he is your Messiah. It isn't enough to cry out to the world, "Jesus is Lord!" You have to understand what the word means. Your inner life must have some coherence with your outer life. You have to make your walk match your cry. We can't be Christians with empty words. Following Jesus is not about being a sanctimonious holy talker afflicted with what Professor Lynna Williams at Emory University calls "Jesus Jaw." Following Jesus is about being Christ-like, loving, sacrificial, long-suffering, gentle and strong. There are lots of examples of people who have "walked the talk" that Jesus is the Messiah, spectacular, historical examples like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, Francis of Assisi, Nelson Mandela. But there are plenty of quieter, lesser known examples, too. One of the things I love most about Birmingham First is that we have some of these Christ-like examples right here among us.

Who do you say Jesus is? And who are you? Dr. Fred Craddock tells of the time he was a young boy and his home preacher announced his sermon title for the coming Sunday. The title was "The Member of This Church I Would Most Like to See in Hell." Imagine that title in the local paper, or up on the front lawn on the church marquee. They had a huge crowd that Sunday, people who had never been there before along with a quite a few nervous looking church members. The boys in Craddock's Sunday School class crowded together in the back pew, anxious to hear who it would be. Finally, when he called out the name—and he did call out the name—it was their Sunday School teacher. And they said, "Yeah!" No, not really. But the preacher explained the reason he had chosen her as the one he would most like to see in hell was because she was such a saint that within two weeks, all hell would be converted. That's not what anyone was expecting, but you know, it's true.

And that's what it means to walk the talk, to confess with your mouth and with your life that Jesus is your Messiah. Because God sends us into the hell of this world to bring light and life and love, to bless in every way we can the people we meet, with our words, with our deeds. Isn't that what it means to follow Jesus? To live for Christ? To claim him as our Messiah? Isn't that what it means to be the church, to be Christians? What do you say?