

Who Do You Say That I Am?

Luke 9:7-9, 18-27

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Read Luke 9:7-9, 18-27

"(Jesus) said, 'Blessed (rather) are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:28)

Introduction

How many *Jeopardy* fans do we have out there? I know the viewership has leveled off since Alex Trebek's death, but our family watches it enough that I can get sucked into a game very easily. I didn't grow up watching it, but have watched a fair amount in my 40s, especially as my son, Wesley, was on a trivia team in HS and really enjoys watching it. If you watch *Jeopardy* you know how cool it feels to get the answers right (or I should the questions), especially when the contestant has to wait until they've buzzed in to answer, so it sounds like they're echoing you. Alex Trebek's autobiography said that they originally let the contestants buzz in as soon as they thought they knew the answer, but then they realized it was more fun for the viewers to hear the whole clue and be able to shout out the answer before the contestants could buzz in.¹

"It's a two-word alliterative drama that presents the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus."

"What is a passion play?" And then the contestant says it right after me and I feel brilliant.

"Miles Ahead is a classic 1957 album by this trumpeter." "Who is Miles Davis?" And then the contestant says it.

"Haro Strait lies between Washington State and this Canadian island." My answer is

"Victoria," but the real answer is "Vancouver Island." And then I don't feel so smart anymore, especially since I visited there three years ago!

When the the geography and periodic table questions come, I pretend that I'm distracted by a really important text because I have no clue. Bible questions are really fun when the contestants don't know them and I'm screaming, "Ecclesiastes" or "Pontius Pilate" at the TV. "Dad, calm down!"

I like to get answers right, how about you? I don't care if it's Jeopardy, School, Sunday School, or the waitress taking my order, I don't like getting it wrong. In fact, back in middle school and high school, I did not like to participate in class or answer questions unless I absolutely knew I was going to get the answer correct. I got over that at some point in college or seminary. But it feels great to get an answer right. What a different experience when you answer a question in class, and your teacher either says, "No, that's not it at all" or says something gentle and patronizing like, "Well, that's an interesting take, but I was looking for something a little more relevant to the text", versus when you just nail an answer and the teacher says, "That's exactly right."

Today's passage sees Jesus asking His class (which was His disciples) a very personal, very difficult question. And one of His disciples steps forward and nails the answer. And it's not only a turning point for the disciples, it's a turning point in the Gospel of Luke. One of the main themes of Luke is Jesus' identity, so we come to the text at a time when there was great speculation about who Jesus was among the crowds and the authorities. Verses 7-9 explore

I. Who Did Herod Think Jesus Was? (vv. 7-9)

⁷ Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was happening, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, ⁸ by some that Elijah had appeared, and by

¹ Alex Trebek, *The Answer Is... Reflections on my Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), p. 115.

others that one of the prophets of old had risen.⁹ Herod said, "John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?" And he sought to see him.

It's interesting that this Herod who was around for Jesus' ministry and during His death (Herod Antipas) was one of the sons of Herod the Great, who was in power when Jesus was born. The father was the one who tried to figure out from the wise men who the child being born was that was a threat to his kingdom, as well as the one who ordered the killing of all the baby boys under 2 years old. I wonder if Herod Antipas, the son, ever heard that story and connected the dots between the threat that his dad saw 30 years earlier and this man who was a prophet in his day. There is no evidence in the Gospels that he saw that connection. The word Luke uses is "perplexed" to describe Herod's confusion about who this man was doing all these miracles and exorcisms throughout the territory that he ruled. The only popular idea that he ruled out was John the Baptist, because he knew for a fact that he had beheaded John. Actually, Matthew's Gospel records that Herod thought Jesus was John: *"At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, and he said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead, that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him."* (Matthew 14:1). I don't think these accounts are contradictory, I think Herod wavered back and forth. Clearly Jesus being the risen John was a possibility in the royal mind. Luke says that Herod wanted to meet Jesus, but that would not happen until Jesus was on trial at the end of his life, and Pilate sent Him over to Herod.

People had theorized that Jesus was a prophet risen from the dead – most likely Elijah from 800 years ago or John the Baptist risen from his grave. If you think about it, other religions like Islam teach that Jesus was a prophet. They have a reverence for Jesus that says He's one of the great prophets, but that's all He is, don't go any further than that. But that's not Christianity, and that's not how Jesus presented Himself ever. Calling Jesus Elijah may have sounded like high praise, because Elijah was greatly revered, but it wasn't high enough.

It's fascinating that all of the crowds' opinions of Jesus' identity are dead men. Somehow Jesus had to be some prophet who has risen. Why couldn't He just be a wise man who grew up in a tiny village and was now walking around the country preaching and healing? I suppose His appearance seemed so sudden and His miracles were so amazing that He just had to be someone from Israel's past. No one was doing amazing things like that in their time. Of course, Jesus was none of those men come back from the dead. But the crowd was certainly on to something – He would be rising from the dead. But it'll be at the end of His life not the beginning.

Even more important than what the rulers or the crowds thought about Jesus was His own disciples' opinion.

II. Who Did the Disciples Say Jesus Was? (vv. 18-22)

¹⁸ Now it happened that as he was praying alone, the disciples were with him. And he asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" ¹⁹ And they answered, "John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen." ²⁰ Then he said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered, "The Christ of God." ²¹ And he strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, ²² saying, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

Jesus asked the first question: "Who do the crowds say that I am?" perhaps to be amused by the answers, but certainly knowing that He was going to ask the second question, "What about your opinion?" When Peter spoke up, I guess answering for the whole group, notice that he didn't say, "Well, we've been talking, we took a vote, and most of us are of the opinion that you might be the

Christ.”² No, he said with great certainty, “*The Christ of God.*” Christ is not a last name, it is a title. It means “anointed one.” In the Jewish mind, it was the Promised One, the Messiah, the King who was to come. In Matthew’s account, Jesus answers, “*Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.*” (Matthew 16:17) and then there’s a longer dialogue about the rock on which Jesus will build His church. Without going into that conversation, let’s just say that Peter nailed it, he had the perfect answer! Revealed to him by God the Father. And that’s important, because he’s going to be a leader for the apostles and the early church in the years to follow.

In verse 21, Jesus gave His common “keep this quiet” instruction. I think this is bound up in the fact that if the people of Israel started talking about Jesus as the Messiah, they would attach their ideas of the conquering political leader who would overthrow the yoke of Roman rule to Jesus. And He did not want that because that was a misunderstanding of His mission. The end of His life would not look like a conquering hero, it would look like a defeated criminal. Verse 22 - I must suffer, be rejected, and be killed. But I will be raised. Keep my identity quiet now, but soon I will be asking you to tell the whole world about me. And the time is coming, says Philippians 2:10-11, when, “*at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*” It will not be a secret then and there will be no denying it. It will be the greatest and the most obvious truth in the universe.

The final 5 verses are some of Jesus’ hardest commands that come with the question:

III. Will Your Profession of Jesus Change Your Life? (vv. 23-27)

²³ *And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. ²⁵ For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?*

²⁶ *For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. ²⁷ But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.”*

[I’ve dealt with a lot of this text before here at CenterPoint. I preached on the parallel text, Matthew 16, my very first Sunday at CenterPoint, which, of course, was the very first Sunday of the pandemic shutdown that you hopefully watched on your computer or TV. So, if you want to hear or read my thoughts on this section, you can look that one up on our website under the “Easter 2020 Series.”] The main idea that I want to hammer home today is that once you get the answer right to the question “Who is Jesus?”, then you’ve got to respond in faith. And Jesus doesn’t invite us to follow Him from time to time, when it’s convenient. He’s not looking for half-hearted, fair weather fans. Following Jesus means taking up of your cross EVERY SINGLE DAY, of denying yourself, of giving up the right to rule your own life. Darrell Bock explains, “Criminals bore their own crosses as they journeyed to their death. Thus for a Christian to bear a cross is to be prepared to face rejection and death... It means that one has died to the world, separated from its values and lifestyle.”³

There are only two options that Jesus gives here. The first is that you can hold onto your life, reject following Him, and valuing the things of the world more than Him. That road leads to losing your life because you are forfeiting eternal life. Or you can take the hard road of obedience and giving up your own agenda, which will result in your saving your life and being welcomed to heaven by Jesus.

² Michael Card, *Luke: The Gospel of Amazement* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011), p. 123.

³ Darrell Bock, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 265.

Dan Doriani suggests that even though America is supposedly over 75% Christian, you can explain that through 3 labels: Cultural Christians, Convenient Christians, and Committed Christians.⁴

-Cultural Christians are Christians in the sense that they check no other box on the religion questionnaire. “We’re not Jewish or Muslim or atheist, so of course we’re Christian. We belong to that big church downtown; honey, what’s the name of it?”

-Convenient Christians follow Jesus whenever it is easy, when nothing gets in the way. We’ll go to church if the weather’s not nice enough to play golf or go out on the boat, we’ll give some money to the church if we’re doing really well financially; I don’t know about all that “do what the Bible teaches” stuff, though.

-The Committed Christian lives not for pleasure but for the Lord. She knows that Jesus is king, and the king can make whatever demands He wants to on His subjects. The call to obey is a delight because she knows the desperate situation she was in without Christ, the amazing things that He’s done for her, and the perfect character of God. Jesus seems to be saying that this category of Christian is the only one truly following Him. “*For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few*” (Matthew 7:14).

Conclusion

In a 2015 Barna survey,⁵ they found that over 90% of Americans believe that Jesus was a historical person. That’s great! But only 56% of Americans believe that Jesus was God, which is still a majority, but that number goes down the younger the age group. Related to that question of divinity, 52% of people think that Jesus committed sins while here on earth. Close to 60% say that they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ, though that number is higher among older generations, among minorities, and among those with lower incomes. Like the citizens of Israel in Jesus’ day, America is not exactly sure who Jesus is.

Here’s the deal with statistics, though: truth is not determined by how many people believe it. When people thought the earth was flat, it was still round. You could convince a majority of the world that there’s no such thing as gravity, but stepping off a ledge will bring you face-to-face with the truth. Even if 99% of people believed that there is no God, that doesn’t mean He ceases to exist. It would just mean that most people live in denial and ignorance. It doesn’t matter what the prevailing opinion of the crowd is. It doesn’t matter what the spirit of the age has decided about Jesus. What matters is whether you recognize the truth about Jesus. Sometimes people will tell you, “It doesn’t matter who Jesus actually was, it just matters that you follow the gentle spirit of His teaching.” That’s just wrong. It does matter who Jesus actually was. If Jesus was not God incarnate, which He claimed to be over and over, then don’t take any of His teaching; reject it all as lies. All of Christianity is bound up with the factual truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, fully God and fully man.

C.S. Lewis has a wonderful passage in his book, *Mere Christianity*, that I’m betting a lot of you have heard. I’ve heard it in a lot of different contexts, but it’s so good and it’s such a great summary of what we need to acknowledge here, that I want to quote it no matter how many times you’ve heard it. And maybe it will be new to someone here:

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that 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 – on a level with the

⁴ Dan Doriani, *Matthew* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008), p. 101.

⁵ <https://www.barna.com/research/what-do-americans-believe-about-jesus-5-popular-beliefs/>

man who says he is a poached egg – 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. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”⁶

So it all comes down to: Who do you say that Jesus is? You may think that’s a peripheral question that’s not really important, on a par with figuring out whether the JFK assassination was a government coverup or whether Shakespeare really wrote all the plays attributed to him. But I can assure you that this is the most important question that you will ever answer in your entire life because it determines your eternal destiny. I don’t care what other people think about Jesus, what the crowds have come up with – whether they think He’s a historical figure or a myth; or a helpful guru who I can learn from if He mostly agrees with me; or a fraudulent con artist; or a tragic hero who should have known not to anger Rome; or a Gandhi-like figure who should inspire us all to live lives that are beautiful and peaceful. Those are what people who don’t really know Jesus think of Him. But Colossians 1 from our Responsive Reading presents a different Jesus, the true Jesus: *“the image of the invisible God... all things were created through Him and for Him. He is the head of the church... the fullness of God... reconciling... making peace by the blood of His cross.”* Jesus is part of the eternal God, one person of the Trinity, fully divine and yet having taken on full manhood.

We believe both who Jesus is and what He did for us, summarized in verse 22: *“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”* His suffering and death were endured on our behalf. Jesus did not die for His sins, He died for our sins, for the sins of His people. Those of us who have had this truth revealed to us by God the Father, who have been effectually called by the Holy Spirit, who have had our hearts regenerated, and faith given to us as a gift, declared just and righteous before our heavenly Father because of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf, and adopted into the eternal family of God – we say with Peter: “Jesus, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God. I consider everything else in my life secondary to following you. May I find my life by losing it for your sake. Amen.” Let’s pray.

Benediction

Galatians 4:4-5 - *“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.”*

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), p. 52.