WHO IS JESUS?

Mark 8:27–30

Key Verse: 8:29

“‘But what about you?’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’ Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah.’”

Today people hesitate to get married without living together first, because they want to know who it really is they’re going to marry. Sometimes we think we know somebody, but then we’re shocked to find out things about them that we never knew. How do we really know someone? Jesus focused his entire ministry on helping his disciples to truly know him. As we think about today’s passage, we want to learn why this was so important to Jesus, that his disciples know who he is. We want to think about what it means that Jesus is the Messiah. And we want to learn how Peter’s confession of faith in Jesus can be our very own. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

To understand today’s passage, we first need to review what’s been happening thus far. At first there’s John the Baptist’s ministry, but the story quickly turns to Jesus. From the start Jesus focuses on proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God and raising disciples (1:15–20). He not only teaches the Bible but also drives out impure spirits. He heals many sick people late into the night. The next morning, he gets up early by himself, while it’s still dark, to pray. Through prayer he finds God’s direction to travel, preaching in the synagogues and driving out demons. His life is focused on serving others. His ministry not only is powerful but also breaks the religious rules of right and wrong. In healing a man with leprosy, he touches him. In healing a paralyzed man, he tells him, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” He calls a tax collector to be one of his disciples, and even goes to his house to eat and drink with the many tax collectors and sinners there. He doesn’t teach his disciples to fast. He doesn’t keep the Sabbath the way the religious leaders want, and when he rebukes them for their hypocrisy they start plotting to kill him. Despite this, crowds of people come to Jesus from everywhere, desperate for his healing, and thirsty to listen to his words. Seeing this, Jesus goes up on a mountainside and calls twelve disciples. He wants them to be with him closely, and he plans to send them out someday to do what he is doing. Jesus’ family thinks he’d gone out of his mind. The religious leaders are saying he’s possessed by the devil. But Jesus won’t deviate. And he makes it clear that those doing God’s will are his true family members. Jesus teaches the crowds about the kingdom of God in parables, and explains them only to his disciples. Then, one evening, as they’re sailing on the Sea of Galilee, a furious storm comes up. Jesus is so tired from preaching that he’s actually sleeping on a cushion. The disciples wake him, and to their great surprise he calms the storm instantly. They ask each other, “Who is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!” (4:41). The next morning Jesus encounters a man with 6,000 demons, and he uses a town’s herd of 2,000 pigs to heal him. He heals a woman no doctors could heal, and even raises a little girl from the dead. When he goes to his hometown, people see him only as a man and take offense at him. But he refuses to be discouraged; he sends out the Twelve to do what he’s been doing. When news comes that John the Baptist has been beheaded, the Twelve also come back to tell Jesus all about their work. Jesus tries to withdraw with them to a quiet place, but the crowds find out and go there. Despite his own situation, Jesus sees them with compassion, as sheep without a shepherd, and begins teaching them many things. He challenges his disciples to give them something to eat, then feeds the large crowd with just five loaves of bread and two fish. Afterwards Jesus sends his disciples away by boat, and after an all-night storm, early in the morning he walks out to them on the water. He tells them, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid” (6:50b). As soon as they land, people come again for his healing. Then the Pharisees come and criticize Jesus for not teaching his disciples to wash their hands before eating. Jesus severely rebukes them for their inner corruption and withdraws to Gentile territory. There he honors a Gentile woman’s faith, and in another Gentile area he heals a deaf and mute man. There the people, remembering all that Jesus had done, said, “He has done everything well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak” (7:37). When another large crowd gathers, Jesus repeats a lesson to his disciples. He really wants them to learn his compassion, and faith in God to bring what they have to him to feed these people. Then he warns them about the bad influence of the religious leaders who only want to see more miracles. He wants his disciples through experiencing his miracles to be learning about *him*. He wants them to learn that in any hardship he’s able to help and bless more than they can imagine. But they’ve become spiritually deaf and mute. It seems they’ve become blinded by his popularity and miracles.

Look at verse 27a. Caesarea Philippi was a city in the north, about 30 miles from Capernaum, at the foot of snow-capped Mt. Hermon. From it one could see not only the gorgeous mountain but also the lush surrounding area with groves of trees, grassy areas and waterfalls, because it was near the source of the Jordan River. It was a place of idol worship and a Roman frontier city with a major East/West trade road running through it. Jesus went there, where few people had heard of him, so that he could focus on helping his disciples.

Look at verse 27b. We wonder why Jesus is asking this question, and why now? Is he checking public opinion polls, worried about his popularity? Hardly. It seems he’s been waiting to ask his disciples this question for a long time. By now he’s been ministering for three years, and all that he’s been doing has been leading up to this question: Who is Jesus? He starts by asking what people were saying. It was a good way to start discussing the topic, to review what the common opinions were.

How did they answer? Look at verse 28. This is exactly what Mark recorded back in chapter 6. When Jesus’ name had become well known, some were saying, “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.” Others said, “He is Elijah.” And still others claimed, “He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago” (6:14,15). The disciples knew what people were saying about Jesus.

People didn’t know Jesus well because they weren’t close to him. But what was obvious to everybody was that Jesus was powerful, like John the Baptist, Elijah or a famous prophet from the past. From a distance, in their superstitious thinking some were confusing Jesus with John the Baptist. And people were still talking about Elijah, Israel’s greatest prophet, who lived 900 years before Jesus. It was because like John the Baptist and Jesus Elijah challenged the people of his time to repent and turn to God. The Old Testament also ended with a prophecy that God would send Elijah back to earth before he would send the Messiah (Mal4:5). Many people thought Jesus was a fulfillment of that prophecy, that after Jesus God’s Messiah would finally come.

Though the religious leaders were saying bad things about Jesus, most people respected him highly. But their thinking about Jesus didn’t go any further. It was because he was known as the carpenter, Jesus of Nazareth, and nobody thought a carpenter from such a small town Nazareth could be the promised Messiah. They just considered him like one of the prophets of long ago.

What do people think of Jesus today? Some think he’s just a myth. Some say he was a madman, or a poet, or a humanitarian, or a great teacher, or a rebel, or a woman’s advocate, or a friend of the poor and socially outcast. Some of that is partly true. Some think his followers turned him into something he was not. But though they don’t know well, so many today still think favorably of Jesus. They take what information about Jesus they like and make their own kind of Jesus. But who is Jesus, really? Mark tells us in the first verse of this Gospel: “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.” This isn’t something we can accept just because someone tells us to. It’s something we have to experience personally, through looking closely at everything Jesus said and did. In fact, we can know Jesus truly only as we read the whole Bible, because the whole thing actually points to him (Jn5:39).

Read verse 29a. Jesus expected his disciples’ view of him to be different from the crowds’. Why? It was because they’d been with him closely the past three years. It’s interesting. Some people have a public persona but quite a different private life. But Jesus’ disciples had seen Jesus 24/7, 365. His life had been totally transparent, like an open book, with nothing to hide. Moreover, they’d heard Jesus’ explanations about God’s kingdom that the crowds didn’t. They’d seen certain miracles Jesus did that the crowds never saw. With all those experiences, by now they should’ve had certain knowledge of who Jesus is. This tells us that learning who Jesus is can’t be a matter of just knowing correct theology; it has to come from spending personal time and having personal experiences with him.

The question “Who is Jesus?” is so important. As we’ve seen, he focused his entire ministry on teaching his disciples, and his teaching them, in turn, was focused on knowing his true identity. Knowing who Jesus is is what it means to open one’s spiritual eyes. Why is it so important to know who Jesus is? Once we know Jesus, we see God, ourselves and the world around us in a whole new light. When we know Jesus, we know who God really is. When we know Jesus, we know who we really are. When we know Jesus, we can see how lost the world really is. When we know Jesus, we can actually find out where our lives came from, and where they’re going. When we know Jesus, we come to know God’s saving grace personally. It becomes like the spiritual foundation for our lives, and like a spiritual rudder to guide us. No matter how much the devil may attack us, no matter how much we may fail or wander, we can always come back to knowing Jesus’ saving grace personally and be renewed and restored.

When Jesus asked, what happened? Read verse 29b. Peter spoke up right away, without any hesitation. He spoke from his heart what he really believed. And he got it exactly right: Jesus is the Messiah. But what does it mean? The Messiah means the Anointed One. To the Jews it meant King. It meant the one God promised King David that he would someday send as one of his descendants. The Messiah wouldn’t be just another king; he’d be a king like David. David had been a true shepherd of his people. David wasn’t just an empty political figure; he had a personal relationship with God. He loved God with all his heart and soul, and he loved his people as himself. He helped his people to love and worship God. His kingdom and his reign were just a shadow of the kingdom of God where Jesus reigns.

The Messiah refers to the one who meets our every need. Isaiah 9:6 describes him as “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Jesus the Messiah is our Wonderful Counselor. He understands us so deeply, unlike anyone else ever could. With his deep understanding and matchless wisdom, he guides us in the best way. Jesus the Messiah is our Mighty God. With his mighty power he protects and defends us. Jesus the Messiah is our Everlasting Father. Like a father he loves us so dearly and provides for us, and he’s always with us. Jesus the Messiah is our Prince of Peace. He takes away all our fears and worries and gives us deep peace in our souls. Jesus the Messiah is our true object of worship. In this world there are so many false messiahs. They are things or people that give us false hope for a better life in this world. But Jesus is our true Messiah because he gives us the true and living hope of the kingdom of God that will never pass away. The Bible says that when we confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead, we are saved. We need not only to believe it in our hearts but also confess it with our mouths. To confess that Jesus is my Messiah means to accept his saving grace personally and identify with him, to stand on Jesus’ side. When we don’t confess who Jesus is to us, it reveals that we’re ashamed of him.

How can we confess like Peter that Jesus is my Messiah? The Bible says we can do this only by the help of the Holy Spirit. But we can’t expect it to happen like magic; we need to spend enough time personally in studying the Bible, learning of Jesus, until we can experience firsthand who Jesus really is. This is what it means to be a Christian. It’s the most important thing we can do. It also should be the main focus of our ministry, helping people know who Jesus really is. It’s so easy to get lost in many other ideas, activities and distractions. It’s so easy to ignore this or take it for granted that people know him when they really don’t. Learning of Jesus never becomes a boring, dead lesson. Even Apostle Paul, after many years of fruitful ministry, kept on wanting to know Christ.

Today Jesus is asking each of us: “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” May God help us repent of our complacency and inspire us to pursue knowing Jesus better and more personally. May God help us really pray for others to grow through Bible study until they can say with full conviction, “Jesus, you are my Messiah.”