“I AM,” SAID JESUS

Mark 14:53–72

Key Verses: 14:61b,62

“Again the high priest asked him, ‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?’ ‘I am,’ said Jesus. ‘And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.’”

In your life have you ever had to hide your identity? Has someone ever confronted you with really tough personal questions? We tend to shrink from answering because we’re afraid of what might happen if people know the truth about us, or we’re ashamed of something. In Mark’s Gospel Jesus has been keeping his identity a secret, but in today’s passage he finally discloses who he really is. The setting is sometime after midnight early Friday morning of Passion Week. In today's passage Mark draws a sharp contrast between Jesus and Peter. Mark is writing to the early Christians in Rome, who would soon suffer severe persecution under Nero. Today we’re probably not facing death threats, but in any place and time, it’s hard to have a clear Christian identity, and it’s especially hard for young people living in the midst of peer pressure daily. Today we want to learn what Jesus’ identity means, and why it’s so important to know who he really is. We also want to learn how to follow him closely and have a clear identity in him. May God speak to us through his word today.

Look at verse 53. The people bringing Jesus from Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives back into Jerusalem were a crowd armed with swords and clubs (43,48). From the outset of this chapter the religious leaders had been scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him (14:1). Now that they have him, they start gathering at the high priest’s house in Jerusalem in the middle of the night, to settle on some charges against him. The high priest’s house was recently excavated. It was a two-story palace with a courtyard, the kind of house in Jerusalem that only wealthy people had. The owners lived on the second floor, and the servants and others would be below. According to verse 50, everyone had deserted Jesus and fled. But look at verse 54. Here we see Peter has come back. Peter loves Jesus. He promised never to fall away or disown him (29,31). So, despite his initial fear during the arrest, he’s doing his best to keep his word. But as we’re going to see, even Peter’s best couldn’t cut it. The operative expression here is that he’s following “at a distance.” It’s a safe distance. This expression has deep meaning for us. We often try to follow Jesus at a safe distance. We want Jesus, but we want to save ourselves as well. But in following Jesus, we can’t have it both ways. There’s no gray area, no middle ground, no safe hiding place. Jesus said, “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it” (8:35). Either we identify with Jesus, or we don’t; either we’re ashamed of him, or we’re not (cf. 8:38). It's radical. But it says here that Peter is sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire. He’s trying to blend in. He seems really smart, but it’s not going to work.

Then Mark turns the attention back to Jesus. Look at verse 55. It didn’t take long for all 70 Sanhedrin members to gather. Verse 55 says that they’re looking for evidence so that they can put him to death. So this isn’t really a trial; it’s what we call a kangaroo court, with a preconceived conclusion that he’s already guilty, regardless of the evidence. They’re looking for evidence, but can’t find any. Look at verse 56. If they’ve already decided that Jesus should die, we wonder why they’re even bothering to look for witnesses. But it’s because God had given his people clear standards for judging cases. One of the basic Ten Commandments is not to give false testimony against someone else (Ex20:16; Dt5:20). And in Moses' law God repeatedly said that there had to be two or three witnesses to agree on a crime committed before a person could be put to death (Nu35:30; Dt17:6; 19:15). But it says in verse 56 that “many” testified falsely against Jesus. These false witnesses were brought in to the high priest’s house in the middle of the night. But none of their statements about supposedly wrong things Jesus said or did actually agreed with each other.

Look at verses 57–59. They’re trying to portray Jesus as a threat to the temple, a threat to the worship of God, a kind of religious terrorist. In the ancient world, destruction of places of worship for any religion was considered a capital offense. As we saw in chapter 11, Jesus had cleansed the temple and rebuked people for corrupting the worship of God. But he never said he would destroy the temple. He predicted its destruction (13:2). And he once challenged people, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” But the temple he had spoken of was his body (Jn2:19,20). Jesus never actually said, “I will destroy this temple.” They were twisting his words. False testimony is often full of distortions and half-truths. But even the witnesses testifying against Jesus here can’t agree on what he said, so it’s not enough for a death penalty conviction. What happens next? Look at verse 60. People’s so-called eyewitness accounts don’t agree with each other, and the burden of proof is on the accusers, not on Jesus. But the high priest can tell that after many false testimonies, they’re not going to get any further, so he turns to Jesus. The high priest at this point is losing his patience.

And how does Jesus respond to him? Look at verse 61a. If someone accuses us of something, even if it's true it’s hard to just stay quiet. It’s really hard to stay quiet when the accusations are all false. But it says here that after many false accusations, Jesus “remains” silent. Why is he just standing there, silent? Why isn’t he even trying to defend himself? Has he despaired? Is he scared? No. He’s fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah about the suffering servant. Isaiah 53:7 reads, “He was oppressed and afflicted, but he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” How beautiful is Jesus, silent as a lamb before people with lying lips! In his first epistle Apostle Peter wrote that at this moment Jesus is an example for us. 1 Peter 2:21–23 reads, “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” These verses tell us that Jesus remained silent by faith in God. The Bible says it’s so hard to hold our tongues (Jas3:1ff.). So we need not only faith but also the Holy Spirit to give us self-control (Gal5:22,23), to remain silent when we really need to remain silent.

Read verse 61b. The high priest’s questions here are not sincere. With these questions he’s egging Jesus on. The high priest suspects that Jesus has a messianic complex, an over-inflated view of himself—basically, he thinks Jesus is a madman and a megalomaniac. The high priest has a hunch that he can draw this out of Jesus at last. How does Jesus respond? Read verse 62a. Jesus clearly agrees that he’s the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One (cf. 1:1). To the Jews, anyone who said this would be considered speaking blasphemy (64a). Jesus knows that. He knows that identifying himself like this will give them the grounds to kill him. And he knows that his saying this is not going to change their minds even in the least. So why does he say it? It’s because it’s the truth. Jesus is unafraid to tell the truth about himself. He’s unashamed of his true identity. He’s not just a carpenter from Nazareth; he’s not just a man; he’s the promised Messiah, the one and only Son of God. Why is it so important to know his true identity? The Bible says that when we confess with sincere faith that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, we’re saved (Ro10:9). The Bible also says that like Jesus, we need to hold onto our good confession even in the presence of hostile witnesses (1Ti6:12,13). Later, Apostle Peter counseled the early Christians who were suffering in the midst of persecution: “But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. ‘Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.’ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” (1Pe3:14–16). In our hearts we need to hold onto a reverent faith that Jesus is Lord. When faith in Jesus is living in our hearts on a daily basis, we’re prepared at any moment to share our faith with people who may ask about it. And the very best time to talk about our faith in Jesus is when people actually ask us about it. But when will people ever ask us about our faith in Jesus? Peter says it’s when people close to us notice the purity and reverence of our lives (1Pe3:2). It’s when we live such good lives among non-Christians that they can see our good deeds and begin to respect us (1Pe2:12; 1Th4:12; Tit2:7,8). Our confession of faith can’t be just lip service; it needs to be matched by godly living.

Read verse 62b. Here Jesus is referring loosely to Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13, prophecies concerning the Messiah. This is the same vision that Stephen saw of Jesus through the Holy Spirit when he looked up to heaven while he was being stoned (Ac7:54–58). Currently Jesus is being humiliated by these hypocritical, self-righteous religious leaders. But one day he will be exalted in great power and glory before the whole world (13:26). Jesus says here in verse 62, “…you will see.” He’s talking not just to the Sanhedrin members, and not just to sincere Christians, but to everyone. Revelation 1:7 says, “‘Look, he is coming with the clouds,’ and ‘every eye will see him, even those who pierced him’; and all peoples on earth ‘will mourn because of him’” (cf. Zech12:10). The Bible repeatedly says this will happen when Jesus comes again (Ac1:11; 2Th1:7–10). It’s not a terrible day we should be dreading; if we believe in Jesus, it’s a day we should be longing for as our hope. 1 John 3:2,3 reads, “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.” Let’s read verse 62b again. We really need to believe Jesus’ words. When Jesus said this, the high priest was confident that he had caught Jesus talking crazy, so with great drama, tearing his clothes, he got everyone to agree to sentencing Jesus to death (63,64). This was the signal for people to start treating Jesus badly, spitting at him, blindfolding him and striking him with their fists (65).

In verses 66–72 Mark records Peter’s denials of Jesus. He only had to face a servant girl, but he still chickened out. Why did he fail so badly? It was because he hadn’t prayed. He hadn’t listened to Jesus’ words, “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” (38). Read verse 72. This tells us that failure was not necessarily a bad thing in Peter’s life. When he remembered Jesus’ words, he could begin to repent. The Greek says that he wept “deeply.” He’s finally realizing what a sinner he was.

Today we learned how important it is to know who Jesus really is, to hold onto a personal confession of faith in him in our hearts and to live like we really believe it. We also learned how important it is to identify ourselves as believers in Jesus, and to have the living hope of his second coming, to see him in his glory. May God help us not to be afraid or ashamed, but clear about our faith in Jesus.