

THE IDENTITY OF JESUS

Leader pages on pp. 110-113

THE POINT:
JESUS INVITES US TO IDENTIFY WITH HIM.

LUKE 9:18-26

¹⁸ While he was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?”

¹⁹ They answered, “John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others, that one of the ancient prophets has come back.”

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²⁰ “But you,” he asked them, “who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “God’s Messiah.”

²¹ But he strictly warned and instructed them to tell this to no one, ²² saying, “It is necessary that the Son of Man suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and be raised the third day.”

MEMORY VERSE

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²³ **Then he said to them all, “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me.**

²⁴ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me will save it.

²⁵ For what does it benefit someone if he gains the whole world, and yet loses or forfeits himself?

²⁶ For whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and that of the Father and the holy angels.

KEYWORDS

“God’s Messiah” (v. 20)—The Hebrew title translates as Messiah, the Greek title as Christ. Both titles mean “Anointed One.”

Deny himself (v. 23)—Those who follow Jesus must put Him first in their lives by denying their own desires.

Take up his cross daily (v. 23)—Biblical salvation is not merely a single commitment at a point in time (although it begins that way).

His glory (v. 26)—When God brings history to a close at the time of final judgment, Jesus will return in glory.

HOW DOES THE CHURCH AFFIRM JESUS AS THE MESSIAH?

We come in contact, both in person and online, with hundreds – if not thousands – of people every day. As we do, we tend to subconsciously divide these people into a series of concentric circles. These circles represent our relationship to those people, moving from simply being in their vicinity, to being an acquaintance, and eventually to our inner circle of those closest to us. In general, the further out a person is in our concentric circles, the less we have to concern ourselves with them. If a person is on the outer ring, they do not have to be “dealt” with; we can simply encounter them and then move on about our day.

Jesus breaks this mold. He is the only person in history who must be dealt with. His identity demands this and our identity is shaped by how we respond to him. Much as a person might try to keep Jesus in that outer circle, He demands to be dealt with. The question, in fact, is not whether every human being will deal with the identity of Jesus; it’s a question of when and how they will deal with the identity of Jesus.

Acknowledge Him // Luke 9:18-19

Jesus is the most well-known and influential human being in the history of the world. For over

2,000 years, people have pondered, speculated about, and mused on the question of His identity. Even here, during Jesus’s earthly ministry, we see the same question of identity being played out. Jesus had heard the chatter; He knew the opinions abounded, and so He asked His disciples the simple question: “Who do the people say that I am?”

This was a question of popular opinion, and one of the disciples was ready to answer, for then, as today, the opinions abounded. It seems that everyone has always had an opinion about Jesus, and those opinions were wide and varied. As Jesus continued to minister, teach, and display His power through miraculous signs and wonders, it’s easy to see how rapidly rumors would spread about just who He was. As the disciples reported, some were saying that He was John the Baptist back from the dead. Similarly, some looked to the law and the prophets and saw the spirit of Elijah at work in Jesus. If we took the same polling today, we would find similar answers:

- Jesus is a moral teacher.
- Jesus was a misunderstood revolutionary.
- Jesus was a prophet but nothing more.



THE POINT: JESUS INVITES US TO IDENTIFY WITH HIM.

The great apologist C.S. Lewis once summarized the limitations of these opinions when they come to Jesus. According to Lewis, there are really only three potential options when it comes to Jesus' identity. Lewis based his argument on the seemingly outlandish things that Jesus claimed. As we read the Gospels, we see Jesus claiming that He has divine authority, an eternal nature, and even the ability to raise people from the dead. In light of those claims, Jesus is either the Lord, a liar, or a lunatic.

- **The liar.** In this case, Jesus knew who He was, but claimed He was something else. If He lied about His own identity, then everything else He taught must be disregarded as well.
- **The lunatic.** In this case, Jesus genuinely thought He was the Son of God, which would have been a sure sign of insanity. Once again, everything else He said should be disregarded.
- **The Lord.** The third option is that Jesus knew who He was, made perfectly true statements about who He was, and is therefore the Son of God and Lord of all.

Despite the best efforts of society, Jesus cannot simply be a moral teacher; He likewise cannot be only a prophet. He must be something more. And yet we know that not everyone will see Jesus as He is. He is, in this sense, like a boulder in the middle of the pathway of all our lives. He is a stone that must be reckoned with. As Peter would later write:

"As you come to him, a living stone—rejected by people but chosen and honored by God— you yourselves, as living stones, a spiritual house, are being built to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: **"See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and honored cornerstone, and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame"** (1 Pet. 2:4-6).

The only two options are to stumble over the stone of Jesus, or to build our entire lives on Him. There is no in-between.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE WAYS YOU'VE HEARD OUR CULTURE WRONGLY DESCRIBE JESUS?

Believe in Him // Luke 9:20-22

There is a "narrowing" quality of Jesus's questions in this passage. He starts with a purely informational question, "Who do people say that I am?" But Jesus is not content for this question to remain informational. What started as a question of public opinion moved to a question of personal conviction. "Who do you say that I am?"



DIGGING DEEPER THE CHRIST OF GOD

When Peter states that Jesus is the "Christ of God," (*christon tou theou*), he acknowledges that Jesus is God's power. Peter's exact statement is drawn from the Greek version of Leviticus 21:12 (called the Septuagint). In this verse, God states that the High Priest cannot leave the sanctuary when the "anointing of God" (*christon tou theou*) is upon him. This is because God's anointing, or power, was to always remain within the location of God's choice. In the case of Jesus, the power of God was able to move out of the sanctuary to be among the people because Jesus would always properly represent God. The irony is that all of the people who should have been seeking to display God's anointing are the very ones who sought for him to be crucified (Luke 9:22).

How does understanding that Jesus gives you access to God's power help you to bear the cross of being His disciple?



This is, in reality, the most important question in the universe. It's the question that in some form or fashion, and at some time, every human being will have to reckon with. It is, in other words, not just a question; it's *the* question. It's not who your friends, or who culture, or your church, or your family says He is. Jesus is still asking this same question to every one of us today: "Who do *you* say that I am?"

As we see the answer to this question, we should notice at least two things:

1. **The question is specifically about Jesus.** While that might seem obvious, it is important nevertheless to note because of the increasing prevalence of "spirituality" in our culture. One of the marks of that spirituality is a general friendliness toward the concept of "God." By and large, people have no qualm with believing in God, discussing God, and encouraging others to believe in God. At the same time, the idea of God is so generalized that one can never be sure what another person means when they talk about "God." This is why this question is specifically about Jesus.

As soon as the question moves beyond the overarching, catch-all term "God" down to the specific level of "Jesus," then there is disagreement and division. Jesus is the last and final line of demarcation. The true question, once and for all, is what we will do with Jesus?

2. **The answer is specifically about the cross.** Peter stood ready to answer the question of Jesus's identity, which kind of makes sense. Peter was the first one out of the boat to try and walk on water; he would be the first one to make grand promises about his loyalty; why would he not also be the one to step from among the disciples and take a shot at answering Jesus's question.

Peter was correct in his answer, and yet he was incorrect at the same time, because Peter was using the right words without fully comprehending their meaning. He was still thinking of the Messiah as a political kind of leader, one that would conquer his earthly enemies and sit on a throne of earthly power. But Jesus corrected his assumption, and in so doing, provided one of the most clear, unambiguous descriptions of the true mission of the Messiah anywhere in the Bible.

His mission and identity are absolutely inseparable from the cross and the resurrection. To seek to understand who Jesus is apart from these things is to completely miss the center piece of His work, mission, and identity.

HOW IS JESUS'S DEATH AND RESURRECTION THE KEY FOR UNDERSTANDING HIS IDENTITY?

Commit to Him // Luke 9:23-26

Jesus was, and is, the Messiah, but He was not the kind of Messiah anyone expected. He would lead but He would do so through serving. He would conquer not the political enemies of Israel but the enemies of sin and death. He would win the battle not through sword and shield but through suffering and death. And He would reign not from a throne in Jerusalem but at the right hand of God the Father. In light of this, we should remember at least three things regarding the identity of Jesus:

- **Jesus's identity is clear.** Jesus was absolutely clear about His own identity. There was no question to Him about who He was and precisely what He came to do. That clarity allowed Jesus to move through His ministry with precision and intentionality, knowing that everything was leading to the cross and eventual resurrection.

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- **Jesus's identity is validated.** Jesus taught with an unbelievable authority that was so out of bounds that many considered it blasphemous. And yet all of His claims, teaching, and authority were validated when He died the exact death He predicted and then rose from the dead with full authority.
- **Jesus's identity is demanding.** Jesus told all His disciples clearly. All of them, both past and present, must take up their crosses daily and follow Him. Though the symbol of the cross is plentiful in our day, it was not so for these first disciples. The cross meant one thing and one thing only—death. Jesus was laying out the demand of those who seek to follow Him, and that demand was everything.

No one can follow Jesus unless they follow Him with empty hands. To take up our cross means we willingly give over our hopes, dreams, ambitions, talents, time, and everything else to the Lordship of Christ. We hold nothing back from Him. What's more, this is a decision that must be reaffirmed time and time again. We don't take up our cross once and follow Jesus; we do it every single day.

WHEN HAS DENYING YOURSELF LED TO JOY IN YOUR LIFE?

DID YOU KNOW?

Jesus's command in Luke 9:21 might appear to counter the Christian commitment to spreading the gospel. Often, we are encouraged to proclaim the gospel at every opportunity. In this case, Jesus tells his disciples to refrain from revealing his true nature. The main reason the disciples are called to refrain is that they would only be telling part of the story. It is unhelpful for someone to learn that Jesus is the Christ, or the power of God, without learning that they must give up their own power to be His disciple. Jesus did not want to create more people like Herod, who simply want to seek a miracle for their own entertainment (Luke 9:7-9; 23:8). Instead, Jesus desired that the full gospel message be proclaimed to all. As such, we should be diligent in both sharing and making sure that all parts of the gospel are communicated.

Biblical Truth: God's power can and does make up for our weaknesses, but this does not mean that we shouldn't be faithful with the time God has given us.

How has God used your "gospel-sharing" moments in your spiritual development?

LIVE IT

How does Jesus's identity empower you to understand your identity?

The question of personal identity shapes culture. Many people in our society continue to seek different ideologies, movements, and individuals that they can use as the foundation for shaping their own identity. When a foundation has cracks in it, at some point or another, these cracks will become apparent. Until our society learns that Jesus is the only sure foundation, they will continue to chase false promises and question Jesus's identity. The question for us is what we will do with that truth.

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- **Your Thoughts.** In your own words, write out the answer to life's most important question: "Who do you say that I am?"
- **Your Research.** Search the Scriptures to find biblical support for your response to who Jesus is.
- **Your Identity.** Based on your response to who Jesus is and the Scripture evidence, take some time to and the question, "who are you?"

DAILY READINGS

1. WHOM DO YOU SAY? // LUKE 9:18-20

“Why do we have to have a test? So that I can see if you know and understand what I have been teaching you.” This could be an exchange between a student and the teacher. We come to know and understand through teaching and observation. Having been amongst the crowds of people and His disciples, Jesus wanted to know whom they were saying He was. He seemed to have been more curious about His disciples impressions. Were they identifying with Him? Soon they would be charged to speak about Him in His name. The question is such an important one. It speaks to the strength, value, and power of the relationship. It is asked of us everyday through our conversation and actions.

Who does your life say about who Christ is? Does it reflect that He is the Messiah?

2. INSIDE INFORMATION // LUKE 9:21-22

Being in a relationship with someone often includes shared personal information that everyone may not know about. That relationship may also mean being responsible to someone else. Therefore, the relationship carries a trust factor. When Jesus invites you into a relationship with Him, it must be cherished and guarded. It is the greatest friendship that one could ever have. Luke records that Jesus shared with the disciples the Father’s plan for His ministry—His life, death, and resurrection. He especially emphasized the importance of them not telling anyone until the appointed time. Because of Jesus, we have access to the Father’s plan.

Jesus entrusts us with the responsibility to share the gospel. Our appointed time is now!

3. YOUR LIFE WITH ME // LUKE 9:23-26

Have you ever volunteered to do something without knowing all the requirements? Often not knowing the requirements at the onset leads to not finishing. Most people do not set out to do something with the intention of not finishing. That should never be the intention of a follower of Jesus. To follow Jesus is to imitate Jesus. He is a finisher and He also wants you

to be one. He tells all who want to follow Him what is required and expected. To follow Him is all about God’s will, and not yours. It is about God’s ways, and not yours. It is a life of letting go of the things of this world, and taking hold of the things of God, no matter the cost.

Life with Christ is far greater than one without Him. Others may gain the world, give me Jesus!

4. A GOOD DEATH // LUKE 23:32-49

Jesus told His disciples they would know the truth if they stayed with Him. Many probably wondered, after seeing the miraculous works of Jesus, why He did not save Himself from being crucified. Moreover, we would have wondered too, if we did not know the answer. He was crucified for what He was not, a sinner. He died because of who He is, the Savior. He died asking the Father’s forgiveness on those who crucified Him. The punishment for sin was bad. Yet, the gift of the cross is so good (Rom. 6:23). Only in Jesus could something so bad according to the world, turn out so good for the godly. God’s ways will never be the world’s ways and that’s a good thing! Death is never easy. It is painful and at times unbearable. But Jesus did it.

Only Jesus could turn a bad punishment into a good death.

5. THE PEACEMAKER // ISAIAH 53:4-6

“Why did that happen?” Sometimes, we can answer this question immediately. Other times, it could take years, decades, or even centuries to understand and have peace about it. Isaiah prophesied that “punishment for our peace was on him” (Isa. 53:5). This prophecy foretold the death of Jesus. According to Isaiah, while He was dying on the cross, He was simultaneously making peace on our behalf. A peace that reconciled us back to God. A peace that puts us in relationship with the Prince of Peace and access to the Jehovah Shalom, “The Lord is Our Peace.” His death was not pretty, but it was peace-making. How much do you value your peace that cost Jesus His life?

Jesus is our perfect Peace Maker. Lord, we thank You for our peace!



IT'S ALL ABOUT JESUS: Living a Christ-Centered Life

BY PASTOR BREONUS M. MITCHELL, SR.

Sir Edwin Landseer was one of the most famous painters of the Victorian era. His talent developed early, and he had the first showing of his work at the Royal Academy when he was just thirteen years old. He was commissioned to do several official royal family portraits and gave Queen Victoria and Prince Albert private drawing lessons. But he was best known for his depictions of the natural settings and life in the Scottish Highlands.

One day as he was visiting a family in an old mansion in Scotland, one of the servants spilled a pitcher of soda water, leaving a large stain on the wall. While the family was out for the day, Landseer remained behind. Using charcoal, he incorporated the stain into a beautiful drawing.

When the family returned, they found a picture of a waterfall surrounded by trees and animals. He used his skill to make something beautiful out of an unsightly mess. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:1-9,

“And you were dead in your trespasses and sins in which you previously walked according to the ways of this world, according to the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit now working in the disobedient. We, too, all previously lived among them in our fleshly desires, carrying out the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts, and we were by nature children under wrath as the others were also. But God, who is rich in mercy because of his great love that he had for us, made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace! He

also raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might display the immeasurable riches of his grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift—not from works, so that no one can boast."

Most, if not all, can identify one individual who has made a difference in our lives. If it had not been for their involvement, our lives would be vacant and void of certain accomplishments and achievements. We owe them a debt of gratitude because their intervention, involvement, and in most cases, interruption in our lives have made a difference. Likewise, we should live our lives striving to be and become all that God has purposed because He made us better than what we used to be through Jesus Christ. How can we live Christ-centered lives?

- **First, by remembering our past.** Before we were made alive with Christ, we were deeply affected by evil, determining influences. Our life before Christ is described as best as without life.
- **Second, by remembering our pardon.** We have been pardoned because of the mercy and unconditional love of God.
- **Third, by looking at our present state.** We have been raised with him. We have been seated with him in the heavenly places. Why? So that in the ages to come, he might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. God wants to show off His extravagant love using you.

The late Fred B. Craddock, professor of Preaching and the New Testament at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, says that this Ephesian text answers the question, "What does it mean to become a Christian?" He says: "The language is vivid: You were dead."¹ This is to say; you were caught in a futile way of life, obedient to the desires of the flesh, seeking the approval of your culture, heeding every inclination that led away from God, aimless and helpless to extricate yourself. But God, rich in love and mercy, by free unmerited favor,

quicken your life and set you in a safe place in the constant presence of Christ. You are now alive, but not simply in order to enjoy God's grace. You have been created again as God's masterpiece for two purposes: to show what God can do through Jesus Christ, and to serve human needs, engaging in good works which reflect the nature of God as gracious love. We have been made alive, but not simply in order to enjoy God's grace. You have been created again as God's masterpiece for two purposes: to show what God can do through Jesus Christ, and to serve human needs, engaging in good works which reflect the nature of God as gracious love.

Here is the point—we live in a world where there exist competing voices for our achievements and accomplishments. As we examine the life and work of Jesus, we are called to respond to who He is by denying ourselves, trusting Him, and following Him daily. Whatever our accomplishments or achievements, nothing exceeds what Christ has done for us and continues to do through us.

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