

“Who Do You Say I Am”

The Twenty-Fifth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 8:22-30; Isaiah 61:1-11

The burning question on the minds of many of the people of Israel is “who is Jesus?” It has probably been at least a year since Jesus first appeared in Capernaum as an apparent successor to John the Baptist. Like John, Jesus came preaching that the kingdom of God was at hand. But the miracles Jesus performed indicated that his ministry far exceeded that of John. The religious leaders of Israel (the scribes and Pharisees) see Jesus as a threat. They say Jesus is a false teacher, and some have even said he’s demon possessed. The people of Israel, by and large, are divided into three camps. Some say that Jesus is John the Baptist, come back to life. This was Herod’s fear. Others thought that Jesus was Elijah, while still others thought that Jesus was one of Israel’s prophets. These people knew that Jesus was a miracle-worker and exorcist, but were not quite sure how Jesus and his ministry fit into God’s plan for Israel. And then there were the multitudes of poor, desperate, people who sought out Jesus because they were sick and were suffering. These people hoped that Jesus could help them. They followed Jesus wherever he went, even crowding around him to the point that Jesus could not eat or rest. Ironically, the only group so far who truly recognize Jesus are the demons, who repeatedly identify Jesus as the “Son of God.” Then there are the disciples. And it is to the disciples’ own understanding of the person and work of Jesus that we now turn.

As we continue our series on the Gospel of Mark, we come to the climatic turning point of Mark’s Gospel, as well as the critical moment in Jesus’ ministry to the disciples when they finally come to grips with Jesus’ true identity. This can be seen in Peter’s dramatic confession that Jesus is the Christ. This awareness that Jesus is Israel’s long-expected Messiah does not occur in a vacuum. This closely follows upon a whole series of events which have been serving to prepare the disciples for this very moment. Slowly but surely, Jesus has been revealing himself to these men, and the light is beginning to dawn.

Recall that before Jesus returned to the area on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, he had passed through the Decapolis, where he healed a man who could not hear—we’ll talk about the significance of that miracle momentarily. Last time, we read that yet another huge crowd gathered to hear Jesus teach in the wilderness, and that Jesus miraculously fed over four thousand people from but a few loaves of bread and a few fish. Those who sought heavenly bread (Jesus’ teaching) were given earthly bread to sustain them. In this second miraculous feeding, the messianic significance was once again present, but downplayed in the account since both Jews and Gentiles were present together, making this miraculous meal symbolic of the fellowship which Jew and Gentile would enjoy together in Christ’s church.

And then when Jesus returned to the Galilee, he was immediately confronted by the Pharisees, who demand from Jesus yet another miraculous sign. Jesus knew their hearts and that they were trying to trap him. Jesus simply refused to give to give them such a sign. How can these men accuse Jesus of being a sorcerer one minute, and then in the next, turn right around and demand that Jesus perform a miraculous sign to prove that he is who he claims to be. The hypocrisy of these false shepherds knows no bounds, and Jesus quickly leaves the area.

When Jesus and his disciples get into the boat to leave Dalmanutha, where the Pharisees had accosted Jesus yet again, Mark informs us that the disciples forget to re-provision the boat before setting sail. Jesus uses the occasion to warn the twelve about the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod (referring to their

sinfulness), but the disciples mistakenly thought that they were in trouble because someone forgot to go to the grocery store and buy bread. Jesus had been making an important theological point and instead, the disciples were bickering about who was at fault because they forgot to restock the boat! Overhearing their conversation Jesus tells them that the reason they still do not get it is because they are hard of heart. They saw his miracles, but did not grasp their meaning. They heard Jesus' teaching, but did not truly understand. Did they not remember all that Jesus had said and done? Sadly, the disciples are just like the crowds in the wilderness who ate and had their fill. But unlike the crowds, the disciples are about to hear and understand, see and perceive. Jesus will grant this to them.

The reason for the disciples' inability to connect the dots is because the disciples still have not made the connection between Jesus' words and deeds and the true nature of his mission. Jesus came into the world to save sinners. But the disciples still do not seem to grasp the fact that they can do nothing to save themselves. They know that Jesus' ministry is the work of God. They have seen and heard enough to understand that much. But what seems to be missing is the awareness that Jesus came to save *them* from their sins, because they were helpless sinners who could do nothing to save themselves. It is not as though the disciples rejected the truth. As we have seen, there is a sense in which they are still a work in process and understanding is being granted to them—even when they fight about bread. But what they have not yet grasped is that Jesus was doing all of this to save them from their sins. And this it is understanding of the true purpose of his mission which ties together the particular miracles they had just seen, along with Jesus' power over nature, as well as the intense nature of Jesus' on-going conflict with the Pharisees and the demonic.

As I just mentioned, Jesus had recently healed a deaf man in the Decapolis (Mark 7:31-36), and now he was about to restore sight to a man blind. These two miracles frame what follows and point to the disciples' own spiritual deafness and blindness to the true purpose of Jesus' ministry.

Although I raised this matter last time, I think it important to consider it again. We read throughout the gospels that Jesus healed all manner of sickness and disease. But the miracles that receive particular mention in the gospels are primarily miracles associated with the restoration of sight and hearing, although there are also miracles of healing the lame, along with those associated with the removal of various forms of uncleanness (such as leprosy). Why do we not read of Jesus healing cancer or diabetes, although he surely did so? The miracles which receive particular mention in the gospels—especially at this point in Mark's Gospel—are miracles which graphically depict something absolutely essential to our own understanding the essence of Christ's mission, which is to save sinners.

The miraculous restoration of sight points to our need to see these events through the eyes of faith (which God must grant to us). The miraculous restoration of hearing, points to the work of the Holy Spirit in illumination, in which the Spirit enables us to not only hear the words Jesus speaks, but understand them. The miracles associated with lameness show us that we need God's grace to walk in the way in which we must go as we follow our master, while the miracles associated with the removal of uncleanness point to the cross and righteousness of Christ, which removes the sinners' guilt and provides the means by which we might be reckoned as righteous. Since the miracle of healing the deaf man in the Decapolis is so closely followed by a miracle of a blind man recovering his sight, Mark is likely setting the stage for Peter's dramatic confession in verses 27-30. Just as sight and hearing are restored to the blind and deaf, so too, Peter's own spiritual blindness and deafness is miraculously removed.

As we pick up with Mark's account in verse 22, we learn that Jesus and the disciples have arrived by boat in an area along the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee in the territory of Herod Philip. This was a

well-populated area which was a series of continuous villages.¹ Mark tells us that “*they came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him.*” Once again, Jesus’ reputation has preceded him. As soon as Jesus and his disciples arrive in the area, word spreads quickly, a group of people get wind of this, and bring a blind man to Jesus. These people, we read, are insistent that Jesus touch (heal) the man. They know that Jesus alone can help them.

Jesus’ actions in healing this man are admittedly difficult for us to understand. This can be seen in verse 23 which informs us that “[Jesus] *took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, ‘Do you see anything?’*” We do not know why Jesus took the man outside the village. Most of the other miracles were performed in the open, in the presence of the crowds. While critical scholars used to make a big deal out of Jesus repeated comments to people not to tell others about what happened to them, the so-called “messianic secret,” quite the contrary, most of the miracles in Mark’s Gospel are performed with large crowds present.² In fact, it is the public nature of Christ’s miracles which is the reason why people immediately flock to Jesus, whenever he appears in a particular area. They have all heard about Jesus’ miraculous power. This blind man’s friends were going to get their friend to Jesus because he is their only hope!

The reason for Jesus doing what he did here—leading the man out of the city and then putting spittle on the man’s eyes (just as he had done back in Mark 7:33)—is a matter of speculation. Jesus may have done this to establish a bond of trust with the man (the blind man shows his confidence in Jesus by being willing to be led away from a familiar area). Certainly, when Jesus places his own spittle in the man’s eyes, this is a most personal form of contact, something very important for someone without sight.³ It may also be that this is kind of ritual that the healers of that age would have used, and by doing this, Jesus is showing the man that he is the great physician and that he alone has the power to heal.

When Jesus asks the man, “do you see anything?” the man’s answer is the kind of thing that only an eyewitness would report. According to verse 24, “[the man] *looked up and said, ‘I see people; they look like trees walking around.’*” When the man begins to see again, we learn that not only did the man possess sight at some point earlier in his life (he clearly knew the difference between people and trees), but this healing was accomplished in stages. It is also clear from the Greek text that the man is quite excited about all of this and had probably not been able to see for some time.⁴ Since the healing was accomplished in stages, we read in verse 25, that “*Once more Jesus put his hands on the man’s eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.*” After Jesus touched the man a second time, his sight had completely returned. The man could now tell the difference between people and trees. He saw everything clearly. His sight was restored.

As we see throughout Mark’s Gospel, Jesus does not want to attract attention to himself because his mission to Israel is not to wipe out all disease. Jesus knows that what he does will attract attention, but since attracting attention is not his purpose or his goal, he seeks to minimize this. Jesus’ mission is to

¹ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 284.

² Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 284-285.

³ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 324.

⁴ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 285; Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 265.

deal with sin, which is the root cause of all human suffering. And so in verse 26, “*Jesus sent him home, saying, ‘Don’t go into the village.’*” If the man went into the village and told everyone what had happened to him, then people from all over the area would flock to Jesus, hindering his mission. While Jesus has compassion on the crowds and although he healed countless people because of that compassion, nevertheless, Jesus must be about his father’s business, which is rescuing us from something far greater than blindness, namely, rescuing us from a spiritual blindness which prevents us from seeing and understanding what God was doing in Christ, to save us from our sins.

Remember, that throughout the writings of the prophets, the healing of the blind was one of the sure signs that the messianic age had dawned (cf. Psalm 146:8; Isaiah 29:18; 35:5). Another sign of the messianic age was the restoration of hearing to the deaf. In Isaiah 35:5-6, the prophet foretells of the messianic age as follows; “*Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.*” Mark’s point is that Jesus is the Messiah and that the miracles he has just performed proves as much. The time has now come for the disciples to realize who Jesus is, because his mission will now take a dramatic turn away from Galilee toward Jerusalem. The disciples must be given sight and understanding in order to fully understand the messianic mission of Jesus. That Jesus can heal the blind and deaf, tells us that he can give the disciples the very thing they need to come to trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins (faith and understanding into the things of God). Indeed, the messianic age is at hand. The disciples will soon see and hear. Their own blindness and deafness will be removed.

With this, we come to the turning point of the whole gospel, and the recognition on the disciples’ part that Jesus is the Messiah.

When you step back and look at the gospel as a whole, it is truly amazing that from Mark 1:1 through Mark 8:29, there has not been a word about Jesus being the Messiah (although there was some messianic speculation at the feeding of the five thousand, although this was reported by John, not by Mark). Everything seems to come to a head during this journey through the region along the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. People have seen Jesus’ miracles, and have been asking all kinds of questions about him. In fact, speculation was running rampant. After all that the disciples had seen Jesus do, and after all that he had taught them, the question Jesus asks them in Mark 8:21, “do you not understand?” is finally answered in Mark 8:29. “You are the Messiah.”⁵ From this point on, everything changes.

That the confession of Jesus as the Messiah comes from Peter is quite significant. He is clearly the leader of the twelve, he serves as their spokesman, and Mark’s Gospel reflects again and again a perspective that could have only come from Peter, who recounted these events to Mark. His confession that Jesus is the Christ serves as a wonderful moment, which marks the end of the first half of the Gospel and begins a dramatic change in emphasis. Jesus will now direct his teaching primarily to his disciples, rather than to the crowds. Jesus’ ministry will move from Caesarea Philippi (the area around the Sea of Galilee) south to Jerusalem.⁶ Furthermore, the joy associated with the disciples’ confession quickly turns to the sober recognition that these men have been called to follow someone whose messianic mission must take him to a final confrontation with Israel’s religious authorities and then to a cross, where Jesus must suffer and die to save his people from their sins. If this was to be Jesus’ fate, the disciples will

⁵ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 288.

⁶ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 266.

begin to realize that they too must take up their cross, suffer loss, and follow Jesus wherever he will take them. This has all been a slow and painful process, but the critical breakthrough has finally come.⁷

Jesus and the disciples have made their way about 25 miles to the north from Besthsaida. As we learn in verse 27, “*Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi.*” This was an area dominated by Rome, as the city itself was built in honor of Caesar. Therefore, Caesarea Philippi is a rather interesting place for the disciples to confess that Jesus is the Messiah, since citizens of Rome were already become quite comfortable affirming that Caesar was Lord. The two kingdoms (the kingdom of God and city of man) stand side by side in stark contrast.

It was on the way to this region that Jesus “*asked them, ‘Who do people say I am?’*” Jesus will frequently ask such questions as a means of making a point. Jesus will use this first question (“who do *men*”—that is outsiders, those to whom insight has not been granted, “say that I am”) in contrast to the question of Mark 8:29, “who do *you* say that I am?” Thus a contrast is clearly established by Jesus between believers and unbelievers. So, we could paraphrase the question along the lines of “who do unbelievers (or to put this in contemporary terms—“non-Christians”) say that I am?”

The answer the disciples give in verse 28, reflects the kind of speculation we have seen all along. “*They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’*” Sadly, after all that Jesus has said and done, his true identity and dignity remain largely a mystery. Jesus is not someone who is easy to figure out. The default setting for most people of that age was to try and equate Jesus with some great figure from Israel’s past. Since Jesus appeared in some ways as a successor to John, it was thought that he was John come back to life. But anyone who had seen Jesus baptized by John knew that could not be the case. Elijah is also a powerful figure from Israel’s past, who was expected to appear before the coming of the Messiah. But as Jesus himself had said, John functioned as the new Elijah, which meant that Jesus was the Messiah, not merely a forerunner. But the people of Israel didn’t make this connection. Others were not so sure and argued that Jesus was yet another prophet, in the order of Isaiah, Ezekiel, or Jeremiah. Sadly, all three of these answers assign to Jesus the role of someone who prepares the way for someone greater. It is clear that people do not see Jesus as that one who will play the definitive role in God’s plan.⁸ It were as though they were saying, “Jesus is great, but when does the real guy get here?” This blindness to Jesus’ true identity stems, in part, from the popular misconception in Israel that the Messiah would be a great king who would lead Israel back to her former greatness. The people thought that the Messiah’s first order of business was to defeat Rome. But Jesus knew that our real enemy was the guilt and power of sin.

Having asked the general question (“who do they say I am?”), and having heard what he already knew to be true (that the people did not understand his true identity), Jesus now follows up with a much more direct and pointed question. “*But what about you?*” [Jesus] *asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’*” Jesus knew that the pivotal moment in his ministry was at hand. Jesus must soon begin that journey which will eventually take him to Jerusalem. His disciples must openly confess that he is the Messiah, (Jesus was the Christ), and that in confessing this to be the case, Jesus would prepare them for the cross and resurrection. He would now teach his disciples what it would cost them to follow him, and this would prepare them for what lay ahead, when he ascends into heaven when the church age begins.

⁷ France, The Gospel of Mark, 326.

⁸ Lane, The Gospel According to Jesus, 290.

Although the question was put to all of them, it was Peter who answered it. “*Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ.’*” In uttering these remarkable words, Peter is confessing that Jesus is the Christ (the Messiah). The Messiah is the anointed one, who has been chosen and called by God to deliver God’s people from sin and the oppression of God’s enemies (sin and wages, death). The Messiah was someone in whom the kingly, prophetic and priestly offices in the Old Testament would converge. This person was expected to come from David’s line and throughout the Old Testament, key figures in the prophetic, priestly and royal lines were anointed with oil to indicate their devotion to God and their consecration to his service. This, of course, pointed to Christ’s anointing when he received the blessed Holy Spirit at his baptism. The Messiah would enjoy God’s blessing and protection, and would be the one through whom God delivered his people.

With this confession, Peter is affirming that widely-known messianic passages like Isaiah 61:1-11 (our Old Testament lesson) refer directly to Jesus, who is fulfilling them by healing the blind, deaf, and lame. Just listen to a few of these words from Isaiah. “*The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion— to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.*” Peter now understands that these words were written of Jesus.

Therefore, Peter’s confession stands in complete contrast, not only to those who think that Jesus is merely a forerunner of someone else, but also to Israel’s religious leaders, who see the messianic age as involving absolute devotion to the law of God as interpreted by the oral tradition of the Pharisees. There was even a growing chorus of those who saw the Messiah as the leader of some sort of nationalist movement devoted to overthrowing Rome. When Peter confesses that “Jesus is the Christ,” he is saying that Jesus has come to save his people from their sins, and that Jesus has been chosen and sent by God to do exactly that. Peter is saying that Jesus is the one who was predicted throughout the Old Testament, and that he is the culmination of everything that God had promised to redeem his people. And Peter can now say this, because he (and the disciples) have been granted sight and hearing. Now they get it.

And so after making this profession, we read in verse 30 that “*Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.*” Jesus’ time had not yet come, as we will see next time, now that the disciples understand who he is and what his mission entails, in Mark 8:31-9:1, Jesus will begin to instruct them about his coming death and resurrection. The disciples understand who Jesus is. Now, everything will change.

The application that we must draw from this is given to us by Jesus himself. It does not matter what “men” say about Jesus. It doesn’t matter whether others give the right answer to that question or not. The only thing that matters right now is Jesus’ second question, “who do *you* say I am?” And you must answer that question before you leave here, one way or the other.

Jesus has put the question to Peter, now I must put the question to you. “Who is Jesus?” If you think Jesus is a merely great religious figure who can show us profound religious principles, then you’ve missed the point. You are as blind as the man Jesus healed. If you think Jesus is merely a prophet, then you’ve missed the whole point and are as deaf as the man in the Decapolis. If you think Jesus is but a mythological figure, then you are hard of heart and still in your sins. But if you know yourself to be a sinner, and if you’ve come to believe that Jesus has come to save you from your sins, then now is the time to confess of Jesus with Peter, the disciples, and Christ’s people throughout the ages, that “you are

the Christ.”

There is not a moment to waste, this is God’s appointed time for your salvation. This is the time to bow the knee and say, “you are the Christ, please save me from my sins.” And if you do so, what has happened to you is every bit as miraculous as the healing of the blind man. For all of this has been granted unto you, because God is merciful and his Messiah (Jesus) sets captives free. He gives sight to the blind. He gives hearing to the deaf. And he has come to save you from your sins. “Who do you say that I am?” Amen!