

Some years ago, actress Jane Fonda (**picture**) and the Archbishop of Canterbury, *this is not a joke*, were talking. The Archbishop of Canterbury said, “*Jesus is the Son of God, you know.*” Jane Fonda replied, “*Maybe He is for you, but He’s not for me.*” To which the Archbishop profoundly answered, “Well, either He is or He isn’t.”

Jane Fonda’s response reflects the thinking of our pluralistic world, that truth is somehow subjective, that it’s simply a matter of your opinion. It’s one of the main reasons Christianity is so repulsive to so many.

Christianity claims that truth is objective and exclusive. It rejects postmodernism and philosophical pluralism. There’s only one truth. There can’t be two polar opposite truths any more than 2+2 equals 5. When it comes to spiritual truth, the bottom line is: **Who is Jesus?**

That’s the question facing the Twelve, Luke 9:18-27 (p. 867). Jesus asks His disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” It’s the most critical question any one will ever answer. It’s the question of Jesus’ identity. How we live, where we will spend eternity depends on answering that question correctly.

Prior to this, Jesus interaction with His disciples has been on what He does, His miracles and His teaching. From this time forward, it’s who He is and His mission. We know their confession is vital because Jesus proceeds this dialogue with the Twelve with prayer. It’s characteristic of Luke to mention Jesus praying. He does so in seven places where the other Gospels never mention it. Jesus prayed at His baptism and before choosing the Twelve.

He prays before He shares who He is, why He came and what they must do about it. Very likely He prayed for guidance in asking the right questions so His disciples’ dense minds would be enlightened; their weakness turned to steadfastness. He shares the same with us. May our eyes be opened so we know who He is, why He came, and what we must do about it?

Some are here this morning and you’re not sure who Jesus is. You’re closer than you were but you’re still not there. It’s why you keep coming back. The Spirit is tapping on your heart. The lights are starting to go on. Some here are still asleep spiritually. You don’t know who Jesus is or why it matters. It’s time to wake up! May the Spirit of God bring you out of your deathly slumber and wake you up today. If you’re taking notes...

**1. The most important question you will ever answer is: Who is Jesus Christ?** We all know asking the right question can be crucial. As temperatures soared to 120 degrees, a missionary in South America was tempted to cool off with a swim in the local river, but he was leery because of piranhas. Natives assured him, though, piranhas only bite people while the fish are swimming in schools which they never did in that part of the river. So each afternoon for the rest of the summer, this missionary enjoyed cooling off in the river. Months later he heard reports that a local fisherman had fallen out of his boat and had not been found. Alarmed, he asked his neighbors if perhaps the man was eaten by piranhas. “Oh, no,” they assured him. “Only while swimming in schools do piranhas bite people, and they never swim in schools around here.” “But why not around here?” the missionary asked. “Oh,” his native neighbor casually replied, “they never swim in schools where there are alligators.” Asking the right question is crucial. Asking the right ones and answering them correctly can mean the difference between being safe and being an alligator’s snack.

That’s all the more true spiritually. Asking the right questions can be the difference between eternal life and eternal death. While there are a number of crucial spiritual questions, none is more important than this question Jesus asks His disciples: “*Who do you say that I am?*”

For example, there are millions who believe the Bible is God’s Word, who seek to obey its moral standards, who you’d love to have as neighbors or work for. They believe in the Virgin birth and that Jesus gave His life to free us from sin and death and that all who put their faith in Christ can have sins forgiven and receive everlasting life. Yet, these people are doomed for eternity – they deny the deity of the Lord Jesus. I’m referring, of course, to Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons. Both groups, along with many others, deny the Deity of Christ and the Trinity. Jesus’ question, “Who do you say I am?” is crucial for each person to correctly answer. So Jesus asks...

**a. Do others get it?** If anyone other than Jesus had asked what people are saying about us, it’d be evidence of pride or narcissism. But not with Jesus. People had better know who He is. It’s impossible to be wrong about Jesus and be right with God. “*Who do the crowds say that I am?*’ And they answered, ‘*John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen.*’” Their answers are similar to the reports which reached Herod which we considered in verses 7-9.

Maybe you’re like me. I was first introduced to Jesus as a child singing, “Jesus loves me” and watching Sunday school teachers move cutout figures across flannel graph boards. He was kind of a Mister Rogers type.

At our men's Bible study a couple of weeks ago, we talked about how Jesus is portrayed and that we're told to be like Jesus. But who wants to be like the Jesus most people think of. Josh McDowell wrote a book, *Don't check your brains at the door*. If you have older children or tweens, I'd encourage you to pick a copy up and work through it with them.

In it McDowell outlines some false perceptions of Jesus. There's the Good Teacher Jesus. Jesus is some Confucius type who taught moral truths. Or, there's Superstar Jesus. Just another man, though a good one but not God. Then, there's Pansy Jesus. He's just so sweet, meek and mild. Or, Mystical Jesus in a long white robe who walks around like He's had some really good weed. None of those are Jesus. It's not how the Bible portrays Him. Like most people today, the crowds had it all wrong. They know there's something special about Jesus, but aren't quite sure what it is. They miss who He really is. My friend, you will never know who Jesus is until you're in His Word. But Jesus follows up with the more important question...

**b. Do you get it?** Verse 20, "*But who do you say that I am?*" And Peter answered, *'The Christ of God'*." It's helpful to learn what others think of Jesus. But it's not nearly as important as knowing who His disciples think He is. Jesus asked the Twelve their opinion of His true identity.

The "you" is emphatic, *who do you say that I am?* He's bringing the disciples to the point of personal commitment. He's asking the Twelve, but as we read Luke's Gospel, He's also asking us. This is the most important question in this world because Jesus is the most important person in the universe. Our answer determines our eternal destiny. Scripture says the free gift of eternal life is only for those who know Jesus Christ (Romans 10:9-10). How can we know Him for sure, if we don't even know who He is?

We're not surprised Peter blurts out the answer. Peter always had something to say, even if it's the wrong thing. This time he hits the bullseye. Jesus is the Christ. It's not a matter of inductive reasoning, it's a matter of faith. Matthew 16:17 tells us God the Father revealed this to Peter. When folk are struggling with the claims of Christ, it's not more evidence they need, but a gracious work of the Spirit to open their eyes and to change their heart and mind.

Peter's confession, *"The Christ of God"* is a turning point in Luke. Theologically, this is the most important statement thus far in Luke. It's the first time a disciple refers to Jesus as the Messiah. While Peter's answer is correct, the Twelve still have a picture of Messiah as the reigning King. They didn't yet comprehend the suffering and sacrificial death of Messiah.

This is huge. Jesus knows that what you think about Him, what you believe about Him, who you acknowledge Him to be makes all the difference in the world. Jesus wants to know what His disciples think about Him. It's a question of eternal significance. It's not just significant for their ministry; it's essential for their salvation...and for yours and mine.

**2. You must know what Jesus' mission was.** What leader voluntarily gives up power? What leader doesn't want publicity? Others to know who they really are? What king willingly gives up the throne, power and prestige?

Did you see the movie, *The King's Speech* (picture)? It's about Prince Albert who later became King George VI. He never expected to be king, but his brother, Edward VIII abdicated the throne to marry American divorcee, Wallis Simpson, whom he'd fallen madly in love with. As the British monarch, Edward was the nominal head of the Church of England. The Church didn't allow divorcees to remarry if their ex-spouses were still alive, so out of love, Edward gave it all up.

*And Jesus strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, 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.'*" What Jesus shares is a love story, a humble plan that doesn't fit anything we know or what they knew about power and kings.

First, they weren't to tell anyone. Why don't you want to answer unknown phone numbers these days? Robo-calls. We're inundated by those either seeking power or wanting to stay in power. But Jesus commands them to not tell anyone. That's because while Jesus is the promised and prophesied Messiah, He's not the kind the Jews were looking for. Israel is a captive nation, living under Rome's iron heel. They're looking for a political Savior.

Peter announces Jesus is *"the Christ."* It means *the anointed one*, the Messiah. It's a familiar term for kings and monarchy. But Jesus is not their kind of king. He's not the political deliverer they're looking for.

Their greatest need is our greatest need. They need a Savior to deliver them from their sins. He could only do that by suffering and dying. The Cross is His mission. Jesus came to die. His mission is the total opposite of what the Jews expected. Three powerful, political groups were going to come together to murder Him, *"elders, chief priests and scribes."* Luke 9 is the first time all three are mentioned together and coupled with this diabolical plot. But it doesn't end on the Cross, it culminates with His resurrection and conquering mankind's last Enemy, Death.

The Jews are looking for the wrong kind of Savior. Like us, they thought their greatest needs are earthly and temporal. Our greatest needs are spiritual and eternal. Your greatest need is not someone to love you or to get new things or a new job...or whatever your whatever is. Our greatest need is for someone to pay our unpayable sin debt. Only God's perfect Son could do that. His mission is a rescue mission motivated by love. We're the mission.

I'm sure they're nodding their heads in the affirmative, but they really don't get it. Having history's perspective, we understand what Jesus was saying.

They couldn't wrap their brains around the fact their own religious leaders were going to murder their Master. Put yourself in their sandals. What Jesus tells them is crazy. What king plans to be executed, what king gives "honor" to an instrument of the death penalty.

I just came across this. On August 6, 1890, the first electric chair was used to execute someone in New York. In faraway Abyssinia, now called Ethiopia, Emperor Menelik II (**picture**) heard about it and decided this new method of execution would become part of his modernization plans for his country. He orders three electric chairs from an American manufacturer. When the electric chairs arrived, Menelik is mortified to learn they won't work. His country had no electricity. Determined that his investment wouldn't be completely wasted, Emperor Menelik adopted one of those instruments of death, one of those electric chairs for his own imperial throne.

What Jesus told His disciples, in their minds, was no less crazy. But Jesus doesn't stop with a private message about His own death. He makes a very public declaration about a cross for every disciple who follows Him.

**3. If you truly know Jesus, you know the mission you've signed up for.** Last year, ABC News armed a group of high school students with hidden cameras and sent them into Army recruiting stations (**picture**), posing as applicants. The Army flunked this recruiting ethics test. More than half of the recruiters were caught on tape making what can only be kindly referred to as "misleading" statements. That's a nice way of saying they lied.

One recruiter was filmed telling an applicant his chances of being deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan after basic training were "slim to none." One bluntly stated the Army wasn't sending people to Iraq anymore, they were bringing them home. One said, "War? What war? The war ended years ago." My favorite was a recruit who's told he could quit anytime he wanted to, just by asking – under a "failure to adapt" discharge. Wouldn't you love to be a bug on the wall when the recruit tells his drill sergeant he wants to quit?

What a contrast to what Jesus tells the Twelve and those signing up for His "army. Look at verses 23-27. Does it sound like a great deal, something you can't wait to sign-up for? Being a Christ-follower isn't just going to heaven. It's what Jesus is telling us. After He told the Twelve being Messiah meant a cross for Him, He honestly tells them and us, that it means a cross for His followers, too. And this isn't just for super saints, it's for every Christian.

Please understand, Jesus is talking about *discipleship*, not *sonship*. We're not saved from sins because we take up a cross and follow Jesus. We take up a cross because we're so overwhelmed by His love and sacrifice. After we become the adopted children of God, out of gratitude, we become disciples.

This cross isn't necessarily literal. While it's not a means of salvation, it's very real. Being a Christ-follower means praying, "*Not my will but Thy will be done.*" It's what Jesus has called us to and what it means to be a Christ-follower. Salvation is synonymous with discipleship.

In his Bible study, *Surrender*, Francis Chan (**picture**) asks the question, "*When you surrender to Jesus are you only giving up something or you actually gaining something by surrender? Is it possible that you're gaining more by surrender to Jesus than you're actually giving up?*" Chan refers to this as being a trader – trading something for something much better. What have you already traded to follow Jesus?

Being a Christian, means you're a disciple. A close word for disciple is *apprentice*. A disciple is more than a student who learns by lessons and books. A disciple learns from "hands on" experience. We're not called to be listeners or sitters, filling our heads with knowledge. Being a disciple is about listening and doing. It's about serving and sharing your faith. As Jesus issued the terms of discipleship, He outlines **five steps** of discipleship.

**Deny Self.** *If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself.* It's the opposite of our narcissistic culture. Our world is about me, me, and then there's me. Do you know why so many Christians have the same marital and family problems as pagans? We don't deny ourselves. We've bought the world's lie. We're told to take care of ourselves, pamper ourselves – and that brings fulfillment and happiness. And we see happy selfish people all around us, right? A crucified Savior is not well-served by self-seeking people.

Denying self means taking your ambitions, interests, hobbies and even your natural life and casting them aside, if they're not helping you draw closer to Jesus. All sin has an element of selfishness to it. A.B. Bruce (**picture**) in his book, *The Training of the Twelve*, wrote, "*For the whole aim of Satanic policy is to get self-interest recognized as the chief end of man.*"

It's much like the final lines to the poem "*Invictus*" Timothy McVeigh (**picture**) left before he was executed. *Invictus* reflects the attitude of a life separated from God. Although they'd never consider killing 168 people, many share McVeigh's attitude. The poem ends with, "*I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.*" A self-denying, unselfish life is what Jesus taught. If you're living for self, you're not following Jesus.

**Die Daily.** *And take up his cross daily.* It was a common scene in Palestine, a man headed to his execution. The disciples knew when someone took up a cross and was led away with a band of Roman soldiers, it was a one-way journey. Taking up your cross is the pinnacle of self-denial.

American Christianity knows little of the crucified life or taking up crosses. Often, we'll say, "It's the cross I have to bear." But we're talking about our job, marriage or a physical difficulty. That's not what Jesus is talking about. Those are ordinary troubles, the fruit of a sin-contaminated world.

Cross-bearing is about persecution. It's suffering for your faith. It's losing a job, suffering reproach, being disowned by your family because you're a Christian. It means living out the business, personal and sexual ethics of Christ in your life, family and the world.

Dying to self must be done daily. It's giving all to Christ. But when you die to self, you'll find you're a bit of zombie. You think you've died to self, only to find parts coming back to life or parts which are very much alive still needing to be crucified. Yet, how could a Savior who gave His life for us be content with anything less than seeing us die to self to live our lives totally for Him? How could we be satisfied with anything less?

**Follow Faithfully.** *Follow Me.* The verb *follow* is a present imperative, pointing to a continual process of walking behind Jesus, going where He goes, doing what He does. It means you're not in charge. Instead we submit to His commands. We obey Him. But Jesus didn't mean simply, "Follow My commands," while that's vital. The motive is vital. We obey out of love. Obedience is always to be connected with the personal relationship we enjoy with the Lord. Jesus said, "*If you love Me, you'll keep my commandments.*"

**Invest Wisely.** *For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?* Ironically, those who want to save their life, end up losing it. The word *loss* suggests total forfeit, like a ship sinking at sea with all hands. What Jesus means is not just our physical lives, but more importantly, our spiritual lives. Because if your soul is not worth the world, it's not worth anything in the world either.

This principle applies to all of the Christian life. The principle of losing our life to gain it applies to our service to others. If we live for ourselves, never thinking of the needs of others, we'll be depressed, miserly people. But if we give generously of our time in serving others for Jesus' sake, it comes back to us many times over. I often find if I give time that I don't think I have to spare, the Lord makes up the time to me in other ways.

The principle applies to your family life. We're commanded to love our mates. Sacrificial love requires thinking often of your spouse and their needs, and seeking to meet those needs. It means praying for them. Too many of us, even in our love commitments of marriage, think only of themselves. If you serve your mate and children, it comes back to you in the form of love, kindness and close, caring relationships.

The principle applies to your relationship with the Lord. Many think, "If I spend time in Bible reading and prayer, I won't get everything done that I have to do." They live at a frenetic pace, seldom taking the time to spend in God's presence. They often end up burning out with stress-induced issues and all sorts of other crises making life careen out of control. If we die to self by making time with God a priority, He puts the rest of life into perspective.

**Rewarded Eternally.** *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.* Motivation is important. It's the key to doing some things you'd rather not do. For example, one Mom was worried because her daughter who was away at college and hadn't replied to her Mom's letters. The father told his wife he'd get the daughter to write promptly without even asking her to do so. Dad wrote his daughter a letter, filled with news from home and that sort of thing. Then, he casually added he was enclosing a check...but he didn't actually enclose the check. Guess what? The daughter wrote back promptly, thanking him for the money, but pointing out that he must have forgotten to enclose it. That's motivation!

Though Jesus had just predicted His own rejection and death, He makes it clear that it's not the final chapter. He's coming again in His own glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. A motivation for self-denial and taking up my cross daily to follow Jesus is that He's coming back.

We want to hear Him say before the Father and say to us, "*Well done, good and faithful servant...Enter into the joy of the Lord*" (Matthew 25:21, 23). That's why by His grace, we must seek to live each day so that we'll hear His wonderful words to us, "Well done."

**Conclusion:** Who is Jesus and what does that mean? Our pluralistic world says it doesn't matter who Jesus is. It's hard to believe that nearly sixty years ago, President Dwight Eisenhower (**picture**) said, "*Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith—and I don't care what it is.*" But in a world of Islamic radicalism, it makes a lot of difference what or more importantly, who you believe in. If Jesus is not God, if He's not our Lord and Savior, then life really has no point. But He is God. Since Jesus is God, we must make a decision. Will you trust Him as your Lord and Savior? Or, will you reject Him? There is no third option.

If you've accepted Him as your Lord and Savior, you've accepted His mission. You're a disciple. It means taking up your cross. Too many believers act as if Christianity is a buffet where you pick and choose the parts you want. Christianity is an all or nothing. Yet, many of us are as Wilbur Rees described, "*I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please. Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don't want enough of God to make me love a black man or pick beets with a migrant. I want ecstasy, not transformation. I want warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack. I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please.*" But you can't buy \$3 worth of God. It's all or nothing.

Christians around the globe understand what we don't comprehend in America. Being a Christ-follower may entail a cross. Jesus' words are the opposite of what's commonly taught in American Christianity, that being a Christian means God wants you healthy and wealthy. It's not Jesus' message. Becoming a Christian often makes your situation in life worse.

This week *The Christian Post* released (**picture**) this story that happened in August. ISIS militants in Syria tortured and killed a 12-year-old boy, along with 11 indigenous Christian missionaries, after they refused to leave their homeland or renounce Christ. The militants questioned the captives about whether they converted from Islam and became Christians, an offense punishable by death.

The Christians were honest and admitted they were once Muslims. The militants demanded they reconvert to Islam, but the Christians testified they could never renounce their love for Christ. After they refused to renounce Christ and explained God wanted them to stay in the area to share the Gospel, four were tortured and crucified. Before they were crucified, the militants cut the fingertips off a 12 year-old boy, forcing his father to watch, telling his Dad they'd stop if the father, returned to Islam. When he refused, the three men and the boy were crucified. Eight others were beheaded after they refused to convert to Islam. Two were women, 29 and 33 years old. Before the women were beheaded, they were publicly raped and beaten.

But throughout their abuse, the women continuously prayed. When the eight victims were forced to kneel for their beheadings, they all prayed loudly. Some prayed in the name of Jesus. Others prayed the Lord's Prayer. Some lifted their heads to commend their spirits to Jesus. One woman looked up and seemed to be almost smiling as she said, "*Jesus!*" They kept on praying loudly and sharing Christ until their last breath.

And do you know what's happening, what you're not going to see on CNN or Fox News? More and more Muslims are turning to Jesus. There are so many new believers, the persecuted Church in Syria can barely handle all the work among them.

Who do you say Jesus is? Is He a fraud, a fake? Or, is He your Savior and Lord? If you confess Him, you must cling to His bloody cross as your only hope. You must take up your own cross, deny yourself and follow Him.

**Who is Jesus?** Your answer to that question is everything.