

**Title:** “Who Do You Say That I Am?”

**Text:** Mark 8:27-30

**Date:** April 2, 2023

### **Verse 27**

After Mark described the healing of a blind man in Mark 8:22-26, he transitioned to share about an important encounter between Jesus’ and the Twelve. He began to detail teaching Jesus’ gave concerning His Messianic identity and the work He would perform on behalf of sins. Mark’s story concerning the blind man who progressively gained his sight was intricately tied to Jesus’ teaching that would follow. Whereas the blind man was progressively able to see men and trees more clearly (Mark 8:25), Jesus’ disciples progressively learned more and more about Jesus’ real mission on Earth. Mark gives account of three different occasions on which Jesus taught His disciples about His identity and mission in life (Mark 8:31-33; 9:30-32; 10:32-34).

Mark 8:27-30 provides an account of a conversation that happened immediately before Jesus’ first announcement concerning His mission. The account begins with Mark saying, “Jesus went out with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the road he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that I am?’” (Mark 8:27). Caesarea Philippi was a significant city. It was a rebuilt version of the ancient city of Paneas. The reconstructed city was built in honor of Philip the Tetrarch.<sup>1</sup> The original city was the home of the Greek deity Pan, the supposed god of shepherds. Perhaps Jesus was intentional in revealing His identity in such a place. He wanted His disciples to regard Him as the good shepherd (John 10:11) who was the God-Man (John 8:58).

Additionally, the fact that Jesus asked His all-important question while He and the Twelve were “on the road” is significant as well. The original language of the text used language that literally meant “on the way.” In the New Testament, Jesus is often portrayed as teaching his disciples on the road (Mark 10:32, 52; Luke 24:15). Perhaps “the road” or “the way” was intended as a metaphor for the Christian life. One has said the language provides a “hint to the nature of discipleship as a journey.”<sup>2</sup>

In the first-century world, rabbis were known for teaching as their pupils sat in a circle around them. Jesus often taught His disciples as they walked along a road. His method emphasized that the Christian life involves a walk. God’s children are called to follow Jesus each day. By figuratively putting one foot in front of another in a successive fashion, God’s people progressively grow into all that God wants them to be. Just as walking is something that involves incremental progress, so also the Christian life involves incremental growth. Just as walking is something that marks all aspects of one’s daily life, so also Christian living should mark all that one does.

As Jesus walked with the Twelve through the villages of Caesarea Philippi, He asked them an important question — “Who do people say that I am?” Jesus’ question was significant; however, it must not be overlooked that it was significant for Jesus to even ask a question. In first-century Judaism, rabbis normally didn’t ask questions of their pupils. Learning happened in the reverse fashion. It was typical for pupils to sit in

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<sup>1</sup> Brooks, 134.

<sup>2</sup> Schnabel, 190.

a circle around their rabbi and to take turns asking questions. Jesus intentionally used a different method. By querying His disciples, He demonstrated that He wasn't a normal rabbi.<sup>3</sup> He was different. He was God the Son Incarnate.

The format of Jesus' questioning was significant, but the content of His question was significant as well. Jesus asked, "Who do people say that I am?" Our Lord's interrogative marked a transition in Mark's gospel. It is with His question that Jesus began to explicitly teach His disciples concerning His identity and mission in life. Though they would still struggle to understand His exact purpose in coming to Earth (Mark 14:47), Jesus plainly taught them that He came to suffer, die, and be raised for sins. Notice that our Lord's question revolved around what other "people" said about Jesus, but He used the question to transition to talk about what His disciples thought about Him (Mark 8:29).

### **Verse 28**

In response to Jesus' question, the disciples responded by repeating popular opinions. Scripture says, "They answered him, 'John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others, one of the prophets'" (Mark 8:28). The words of Mark 8:28 echoed words from Mark 6:14-16. That passage spoke of perspectives concerning Jesus from Herod and others. Both passages reveal that there were a lot of opinions concerning the identity of Jesus on the first-century scene.

In speaking about the prevailing opinions concerning Jesus, the disciples made reference to three. First, they said that some said Jesus was John the Baptist. Like Herod (Mark 6:16), such individuals perhaps believed that the Lord had brought the wilderness preacher back to life. They feared that the fiery preacher had been revived and been commissioned to announce judgment.

Second, some said Jesus was Elijah. Mark 6:15 also indicated how this was common view regarding Jesus' identity. Such a perspective was rooted in both Hebrew Scriptures and tradition. From a Scriptural perspective, some interpreted the words of Malachi 4:5 to mean that Elijah would literally return to Earth before Messiah's appearing. Since there were no photographs in the ancient world, no first-century Jew knew what Elijah looked like. When Jesus appeared on Earth and performed miracles similar to the ones wrought by Elijah, some likely assumed that Jesus was the fulfillment of Malachi 4:5. Jesus' miracle of raising a deceased girl (Mark 5:21-43) was similar to a miracle performed by Elijah (1 Kings 17:17-24).

According to Jewish tradition, some believed that Elijah never really left the Earth when he was taken (2 Kings 2:1-12). They maintained that the Lord possibly teleported the prophet to a remote location. Once isolated from humanity, the man received nourishment and food from the Lord, as he had on other occasions throughout his ministry (1 Kings 17:1-16). The belief was that the man would return back to Canaan to preach and usher in Messiah's kingdom at the Lord's appointed time. Because there was anticipation concerning such things in first-century Judaea, it is no wonder that some assumed Jesus was Elijah.

Third, some believed that Jesus was "one of the prophets." This opinion was also mentioned in Mark 6:15. Perhaps some thought Jesus was a reincarnation or

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<sup>3</sup> Brooks, 134.

reappearing of Moses. It seems there was some anticipation that Moses would be sent by the Lord to signify Messiah's coming. Such a view was based on an interpretation of Deuteronomy 18:17. All in all, it was Jesus' powerful teaching (Mark 1:27), along with His ability to perform signs and wonders (Mark 2:12), that made many associate Him with the ministries of John the Baptist, Elijah, and the prophets.

The confusion concerning Jesus' identity reminds us of our need to perceive Jesus correctly. Throughout human history, there have always been a smorgasbord of ideas regarding the person of Jesus. What's important for us is that our perspective of Jesus is in alignment with God's Word. It is only when we see Jesus as He really is that we will experience the transformation that comes with His redemption. One has said, "Thinking and speaking rightly about Christ is Biblical concern for all Christians; it should not be abstract speculation only for theologians."<sup>4</sup> J.C. Ryle once said, "Christ is the mainspring both of doctrinal and practical Christianity. A right knowledge of Christ is essential to a right knowledge of sanctification as well as justification. He that follows after holiness will make no progress unless he gives to Christ his rightful place."<sup>5</sup>

### **Verse 29**

After hearing responses to His question about what others thought of Him, Jesus made the question personal for His disciples. Mark 8:29 says, "'But you,' he asked them, 'who do you say that I am?'" In the original language of the text, the second person pronoun ("you") appeared at the beginning of Jesus' question. The grammatical construction of the interrogative placed emphasis on the pronoun.<sup>6</sup> The intent was to stress the importance of one's personal perspective concerning the person of Jesus. What one believes about the identity of Jesus has eternal ramifications for the soul.

Mark 8:29 tells us that Peter responded to Jesus' question by saying, "You are the Messiah." In Matthew's account of Peter's profession, Matthew said that Peter also called Jesus "the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). In addition, Matthew detailed the way Jesus commended Peter by saying, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:17). Furthermore, Matthew's account contained Jesus' pronouncement concerning Peter's foundational role in the church (Matthew 16:18-20). Mark probably didn't include such details for a reason. Peter was Mark's source and Peter probably withheld such details from Mark out of humility.<sup>7</sup>

Peter's profession revealed that he believed Jesus was more than a rabbi or prophet. The disciple believed that Jesus was the long-awaited deliverer of Israel. Peter regarded Jesus as the final prophet, the one of whom the Old Testament Scriptures frequently prophesied. He saw Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises to

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<sup>4</sup> Crowe, Brandon. *Christ. Tabletalk: Vol. 47, No. 2.* (Sanford, FL, Ligonier Ministries, 2023), 22.

<sup>5</sup> Ryle, J.C. *Holiness.* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), 415.

<sup>6</sup> Brooks, 134.

<sup>7</sup> Robertson, 334.

David in 2 Samuel 7:12-16. He believed Jesus was the long-awaited everlasting king who came from David's seed.

Mark had established Jesus' identity in this regard from the outset of his gospel account. In Mark 1:1, he used the same language of our current verse to say, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus *Christ*, the Son of God." The Greek word Χριστός (Christós) was used by first-century Jews as a title for the promised one, the Davidic descendent who would appear in the last days to liberate God's people.<sup>8</sup> As Mark's gospel reveals, first-century Jews overlooked the fact that it was necessary for Messiah to first suffer for sins. They misunderstood the plain meaning of the protevangelium in Genesis 3:15. They were also blind to prophecies like Isaiah 53:3-6.

Peter professed that Jesus was the Messiah (Christós), but he also was ignorant of Jesus' need to suffer and die for sins. Our Lord began to teach on such things in our current text. All together in Mark's gospel, Jesus would give three plain instructions concerning His death, burial, and resurrection (Mark 8:31-33; 9:30-32; 10:32-34). Peter and the other disciples would remain blind of such realities until after Jesus' resurrection. Even at Jesus' arrest, Peter still regarded Jesus as little more than a political emancipator for the nation of Israel (Mark 14:47).

In Mark 8:29, Peter was like the blind man from Jesus' previous healing incident in Mark 8:22-26. His eyes were opened to see the nature of Jesus, but he didn't have full eyesight concerning the exact nature of Jesus. In time, Peter would receive full, spiritual vision. He would eventually preach on the Day of Pentecost, proclaiming the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus on behalf of sin (Acts 2:22-36).

Despite Peter's limited understanding in Mark 8:29, his profession of faith is still instructive for us. Matthew's account of Peter's profession indicated that the grace of God made Peter aware of Jesus' Messianic nature. In Matthew 16:17, Jesus said, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven."

Peter's experience with grace, along with his subsequent profession of faith, are necessary for salvation and the new birth. Neither church membership, good works, religious involvement, or a moral life can secure salvation from sin and death. Such things indeed have benefit to a degree, but they are only the result of salvation. They do not earn salvation. Jesus' grand question to His disciples demonstrates that it is what we say about Him that matters above all else. A faith in His Lordship and substitutionary death what delivers us from sin and God's coming wrath. This we learn from Peter's profession — we need to fully profess Christ as Savior in order to experience deliverance from sin. Scripture says: "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. One believes with the heart, resulting in righteousness, and one confesses with the mouth, resulting in salvation" (Romans 10:9-10).

### **Verse 30**

In response to Peter's profession, Jesus gave a stern warning. Mark's account says, "And he strictly warned them to tell no one about him" (Mark 8:30). Notice that Mark used a third person plural pronoun ("them") to speak of the object of Jesus' warning.

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<sup>8</sup> Schnabel, 195.

Though Peter was the one who made a grand profession, Jesus warned the entire group of disciples to not disclose His Messianic identity. The fact that our Lord addressed all twelve of the disciples reveals the seriousness and importance of the warning.

Why did Jesus strongly prohibit the Twelve from disclosing His identity? From studying Mark's gospel, it is apparent that Jesus had concern regarding misguided Messianic fervor. As early as Mark 1:25, Jesus had worked to limit knowledge concerning His identity. He knew that the results would be unfavorable if knowledge of who He really was spread. It is for this reason that He often worked to squelch Messianic excitement (Mark 6:45). He knew the Heavenly Father had sovereignly appointed a time for Him to die on behalf of sin (Revelation 13:8).

Fanfare concerning Jesus' nature could have resulted in one or two outcomes that would have been outside the parameters of God's will. First, religious authorities were already plotting to have Him put to death (Mark 3:6); as a result, heightened excitement concerning His ministry could have led to an untimely death. Second, if His knowledge regarding His identity would have become widespread, some may have rushed to make Him an earthly king. Prospects of such an outcome do not seem all that unlikely when we consider the events associated with texts like Mark 6:45-46 and Mark 11:1-11. All in all, Jesus prohibited His disciples from fully announcing who He was because He wanted to fulfill God's will for His life — "... the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28).