

Date: February 21, 2021
Series: *A First Century Physician Introduces the Cure*
Title: *Who Do YOU Say That He Is?*
Text: Luke 9:18-21
Preacher: Mark Adams

I'm sure most people would agree that Winston Churchill is a hero of WWII. His courage in confronting Hitler is well-known. I for one doubt that the Nazi's would have been stopped if it weren't for Churchill's brave leadership.

This week I read about something Winston did early on in life that showed a different kind of "courage." It happened in 1893 when Churchill was 19 and was trying---for the third time---to pass the entrance exams to Sandhurst---the Royal Military College in Great Britain. He had been told that the geography portion of the exam would include a question on one particular country. Like his classmates, he wondered what that country would be. The other applicants studied every country in the world; imagine that. But young Winston had a "better" idea. He put each of the names of all the countries in the world on pieces of paper and placed them in a hat. Then he reached in and pulled one out. The paper read, "*New Zealand*" That was the only country he studied. He ignored all others completely. Would you call that courageous or foolish? Well, in this case it paid off Churchill writes, "*Sure enough the first question in the paper was: 'Draw a map of New Zealand.' I certainly got very high marks for my paper.*"

I share this story because all people struggle with a far greater test; an infinitely more important question and we don't have to guess what that question will be. Jesus asks it in our text: "*Who do YOU say I am?*" Take your Bibles and turn to Luke 9. Let's read of the day Jesus asked this all-important question. And, as is our custom we ask that if able, you stand in respect for God's Word as it's read. We're looking at verses 18-21.

18 - Once when Jesus was praying in private and His disciples were with Him, He asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?"

19 - They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life."

20 - "But what about you?" He asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "God's Messiah."

21 - Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone.

Let's get the setting of Jesus' Q and A time with the disciples in our minds. It took place about three years into Jesus' earthly ministry, which meant the cross was only six months away. Knowing this, Jesus realized that it was important for Him to have some quality time alone with His disciples to help prepare them for what was to come. I mean, time was growing short and He had to make sure they understood Who He was, why He had been born, what was about to be done to Him and why. So, Jesus took His followers to a place called Caesarea Philippi, which lies about 25 miles north-east of the Sea of Galilee. I am blessed to have been able to visit there

twice; and I remember it being high up in the hills and therefore much cooler than the Galilean lowlands.

By the way, Caesarea Philippi is where the Jordan River has its source as a babbling, spring-fed brook. So to me, the place is like a park up in our Smokey Mountains with the cool fresh mountain air, the mountain stream, and the spectacular views. Even in Jesus' time I imagine this was sort of a "weekend getaway" kind of place. Perhaps the disciples themselves were in a holiday mood that day; anticipating some time in the mountains alone with Jesus.

And they would indeed have been alone because back then the population in Caesarea Philippi was mainly non-Jewish; which means there would have been no interruptions by multitudes clamoring for Jesus' attention. Nor would He have to worry about the Jewish religious leaders who, by this time, were looking for any opportunity to find and arrest Him. All this is to say that, by hiking up to Caesarea Philippi, our Lord would indeed have had much-needed quality time alone with His disciples.

Another thing you need to know is that in Jesus' day the hills of the Caesarea Philippi area were scattered with TEMPLES of ancient Syrian Baal worship. Here's an illustration of how it might have looked. But as many as 14 such temples would have littered the landscape. And, not only were Syrian gods worshiped there. There was also a cavern nearby that was said to have been the birthplace of the Greek god Pan; the "god" of nature. I remember seeing it myself and hearing our tour guide tell us that because of this, Caesarea Philippi was originally called "Panias."

But that's not all. Another huge temple would have stood there in Jesus' day built out of white marble by Herod the Great and dedicated to the worship of Augustus Caesar. I mean, Caesarea Philippi was like a shopping mall for religion. Every conceivable variety was there in one place. It was a cross-section of the religious claims of Jesus' day.

So, understand what Jesus did when He posed this question in verse 20. Our Lord stood in this place that was literally crowded with temples dedicated to the worship of Syrian, Greek, and Roman "gods"—and He asked His followers Who they believed Him to be—wanting them to realize that He was in fact the one TRUE God in the flesh—the long-awaited Messiah.

In fact, I believe Jesus deliberately set Himself against the background of the world's religions in all their history and splendor and demanded to be compared with them and to have the verdict given in His favor. Do you see what I mean? With this setting as a backdrop, Jesus forced His disciples to wrestle with vital questions like: *"Who is the real God?" "Who is worthy of adoration and worship?"* In essence Jesus said, *"Guys, look around at the magnificence of all these temples to all these 'gods' and then look at Me. Who is right? Who is the truth—Me or the 'gods' of one of these temples? Whose voice should you listen to? Whose guidance should you follow in life? Who is the real LORD?"*

Do you see the importance of this moment? Coming here helped force the disciples to deal with this issue—an issue they needed to deal with because, as I alluded to earlier, this was the CLIMAX of Jesus’ teaching ministry. I mean, all the things Jesus had said and done over the past 2.5 years had been in preparation for this moment.

You could say that this question Jesus posed here at Caesarea Philippi was in effect, the disciples’ “final examination”—an exam that consisted of only one question—worth 100 points. No pressure, but get it right you pass with an “A+”. Get it wrong and you get a “0”! Well, if you look back at your text you’ll see that Jesus eased them into this “final exam” with ANOTHER question—sort of a practice test to get them warmed up for the real thing. In verse 18 He asked, ***“Who do PEOPLE say that I am? What are the crowds saying about Me?”***

Now, Jesus knew the answer to this question (no teacher worth his salt asks a question unless he does!) Jesus knew what Herod had said in last week’s text---and He knew people were saying the same things about Him---but He wanted the Twelve to think carefully about those popular perceptions as a way of building a foundation for their own conclusions.

So, please understand, when Jesus asked this first question, He didn’t do so as an insecure leader seeking to learn how He stood in the public opinion polls. No---it was a probing question designed to determine the extent to which His students had discovered the true nature of His ministry and message.

Well, I think there was a moment of silence that day as the disciples considered how to reply. I mean, all of them knew what the crowds were saying. Which means they knew that some people were saying things that were not at all complimentary. Remember? Jesus had been called a wine-bibber and a glutton, a blasphemer, a false prophet. He had even been labeled a madman—but the disciples didn’t share any of these “negative reviews” with Jesus. No—instead they exercised some tact and only told Him the COMPLIMENTS people were paying Him. And don’t misunderstand me, MOST of the people were not criticizing Jesus. The multitudes who had witnessed Jesus’ miracles—the people who had seen what Jesus did and heard what Jesus said---they had high opinions of Him and this is what some of the twelve began to report.

For example, one disciple pointed out that many believed Jesus was JOHN THE BAPTIST reincarnated---come back from the grave to continue his ministry of announcing the Messiah while criticizing the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. Another disciple shared the fact that many people believed Jesus was ELIJAH—considered by some Jews to be the supreme Old Testament prophet. Malachi had prophesied (Mal. 4:5) ...that Elijah would return before ***“...the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord.”*** In fact, to this day in modern Jewish Passover celebrations an empty chair is reserved at the table for Elijah in the hope of his one day coming to announce the Messiah’s arrival. Another disciple shared that some people said Jesus was JEREMIAH. They held this opinion because according to 2nd Maccabees, legend had it that Jeremiah had taken the Ark of the covenant and the altar or incense out of the Temple. And hidden them both somewhere on Mt. Nebo in order to preserve them from desecration

and destruction by the Babylonians. Some Jews thought that before the Messiah returned to establish His kingdom, Jeremiah would return to earth and restore the Ark and the altar to their proper places in the temple.

So, the people who said these things were paying Jesus wonderful compliments by comparing Him to some of the greatest prophets and teachers God had ever sent. They were indeed giving Jesus high praise, but not HIGH ENOUGH praise because in their minds none of these three prophets were the Messiah---but rather just one of the Messiah's FORERUNNERS who had come back to life with God-given miraculous powers.

And this way of thinking has continued. Since Jesus' day much of the world has wanted to speak highly of Jesus without recognizing His deity and lordship. Most people in our day and age will admit that Jesus was a great teacher but they will not concede that He was the Christ—the Son of God, the only Way to Heaven.

Several years ago, Newsweek did a cover story called, *"The Other Jesus"* and it listed the opinions that OTHER FAITHS have when it comes to Jesus Christ. Here are some excerpts:

"MUSLIMS recognize Our Lord as a great prophet. They even revere Him as the Son of Mary—the only woman mentioned by name in the Koran. Many JEWS see Christ as an 'admirable Jew' but not as the Son of God. BUDDHISTS depersonalize the Jesus Who walked this earth and transform Him into a figure more like the Buddha. Some regard Him as a Bodhisattva, a perfectly enlightened being who vows to help others. Many HINDUS are drawn to Jesus because of His compassion and His devotion to nonviolence but they find the notion of a single god unnecessarily restrictive."

So, the opinion of the multitudes of Jesus' day is not that different than the opinion of many people today. They thought that Jesus was great—but not great enough.

Well, at first it looked like the disciples were no different than the multitudes. It looked like they hadn't realized Who Jesus was. I don't know about you but in my mind's eye I see each of the disciples sharing an answer to Jesus' question: *"John the Baptist?" "Elijah?" "Jeremiah?" "One of the other prophets?"* each expecting a *"You're right! You get an 'A'!"* response from Jesus---but instead, they got a look on His face that told them their answer was not correct.

Well, after an uncomfortable silence, Jesus spoke again---and I think the intonation of the NEXT question was almost impossible to capture. To me Jesus was demanding, yet reassuring—blunt, yet warm—confrontational, yet inviting as He asked, ***"What about you? Who do YOU say that I am?"*** (Mark 8:29)

And before we go any further, please understand—no one on the planet at that time was more qualified to ANSWER that question than these 12 men. After all, unlike the multitudes, they had been with Jesus 24-7 for two and a half years. They had heard Him teach—they had seen all His miracles. They were the star witnesses of Jesus' life up until that point. Over the past 2.5 years

at times He had shocked them. At times He thrilled them. At other times He filled them with awe and wonder. Remember? The things He said and did led them to whisper to each other, ***“What manner of man is this!?”*** (Mark 4)

Well, the time had come for them to CONFESS their opinion as to what manner of man He was. It was time to fish or cut bait. It was time for them to take a personal stand. So, Jesus looked each of His “students” in the eye and asked this all-important “final-exam” question. And I think that when He did, while the other disciples were still processing the question like scared schoolboys, Peter spoke up and said what?

What did Peter say? Right! He said, ***“God’s Messiah!”*** In Matthew’s account we get Peter’s full answer: ***“You are the Christ—the Son of the Living God!”*** (Matthew 16:16). And when Peter said this, I imagine a glow of pride showed on Jesus’ face that said, ***“YES! CORRECT! YOU GOT IT RIGHT PETER! YOU GET AN A+!”***

Now, think of it.

Peter—who usually opened his mouth only to change feet—moved to the head of the class and got it right that day! For once he said the right thing at the right time! And it was indeed the RIGHT THING because in his well-worded reply Peter forcefully, confidently expressed two foundational Christian truths. First, he identified Jesus as the Messiah, the One Who was to reign forever on the throne of His great ancestor David. Second, and even more important, Peter identified Jesus as divine, the SON OF THE LIVING GOD!

And I must point out that this was indeed a FORCEFUL confession. In fact, the Greek in Matthew’s account could not have been more so. I mean, this was no half-hearted reply. Peter obviously believed what He said that day! I say this because even though he used only ten words—Peter used the definite article four times. It would literally be translated like this: ***“You are THE Christ, THE Son of THE God, THE living One!”***

Now, let’s move from that classroom setting to our own because Jesus’ question that day is one that we must answer as well. In a very real sense all people face their own “Caesarea Philippi” moment. We all have to answer this question. And Jesus doesn’t care about PUBLIC opinion on this issue—He only cares about YOUR opinion. He wants an answer from you on this---and you can’t avoid giving it.

On some tests teachers tell you to skip over the questions you don’t understand and move on because answering wrong will hurt your score more than leaving it blank will. I think the SAT is set up that way. But this test is not like that—no, we all must answer personally. As Paul says in Romans 10:9-10, ***“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. For it is with YOUR heart that YOU believe and are justified and it is with YOUR mouth that YOU confess and are saved.”***

We MUST each consider HOW we reply because this is the ULTIMATE QUESTION of life. And it is THE ultimate question because how we answer determines so much: our relationship to God—our capacity to experience real, abundant life—our character and our conduct, our capacity to truly love—our courage in the face of death—not to mention where we will spend eternity.

And I know I'm preaching to the choir because most of you present today or watching online have made the same confession Peter made. You've answered the ULTIMATE QUESTION of life correctly. You have affirmed that Jesus is indeed, ***"...the Christ, the Son of the Living God."***

But I still want us to take a few moments to focus on this question for two reasons:

First of all, many of you may have friends or family members who even now are struggling to answer this question and perhaps our study this morning will help you to help them. I pray it does!

And second, there may indeed be an individual present today or watching online who has not yet confessed their faith in Jesus Christ—they're still wrestling with this issue. If that describes where you are in relationship to Jesus, I am praying that today will be the day of your salvation— as you join with the rest of us in confessing YOUR faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord! With all this in mind, I want us to borrow a little help from Max Lucado and review the answers that people give to this question and evaluate each of them.

(1) First, some say Jesus was just a very DECENT FELLOW.

They say He was just an exceptionally good person. I mean, I don't know about you, but I don't know of anyone who says that Jesus was a BAD guy—and who could think that? After all, Jesus was a friend of the poor, the outcasts. Jesus even loved sinners!

But this first answer doesn't work because Jesus claimed to be far more than a "good guy"—far more than a "decent fellow." Jesus claimed to be God Himself. In fact, His favorite self-designation was "Son of Man." This title appears 82 times in the four gospels and only two of those times is it used by someone other than Jesus and even then it refers to Him.

For example,

- In Matthew 8:20 Jesus said, ***"THE SON OF MAN has nowhere to lay His head."***
- In Mark 8:31 He said, ***"THE SON OF MAN must suffer many things."***
- In Mark 13:26, Jesus said, ***"They will see THE SON OF MAN coming."***

Well, people of Jesus' day who heard this would have found Jesus' claim outrageous—and definitely NOT something a "decent fellow" would say. You see, in one of his visions, the famous Jewish prophet, Daniel, saw what he called, ***"One like the SON OF MAN coming in the***

clouds of Heaven.” Then, according to Daniel 7:13-14, the Son of Man was given dominion and glory and a kingdom. All peoples and nations would serve Him. His dominion would be an everlasting one, which would not pass away and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed. So whenever Jesus used this title He was saying, *“That’s Me! I’m Who Daniel was talking about.”* As Lucado puts it, *“Every time Jesus used the phrase ‘Son of Man’ He crowned Himself.”*

So, let me ask, do you think a “decent fellow” would walk around making such a claim? Of course not!

Another thing—Jesus was known for His *“I Am statements.”* He said things like ***“I am the Light of the World”*** and ***“I am the bread of Life”*** and ***“I am THE Way, THE truth, and THE life”*** and ***“Before Abraham was born, I AM.”*** When He used this two-word phrase Jesus was equating Himself with God. Remember? ***“I AM”*** is how God identified Himself to Moses as he stood before that burning bush! Jesus also claimed to be able to forgive sins—something the Jews of His day knew only God could do.

But there’s more.

- He claimed to be greater than Jonah, Solomon, Jacob, and even Abraham (Matthew 12:38-42; John 4:12-14; 8:53-56).
- Jesus said that John the Baptist was the greatest man who had ever lived but implied that He was greater than the Baptist (Matthew 11:11).
- Jesus commanded people to pray in His name (John 14:13-14).
- He claimed to be greater than the temple (Matthew 12:6), greater than the Sabbath (Matthew 12).
- He claimed His words would outlive Heaven and Earth (Mark 13:31) and that ALL AUTHORITY in Heaven and Earth had been given Him. (Matthew 29:18-20)

Does a decent fellow say things like this? Would a “decent fellow” claim to be God? I don’t think so.

And many people agree with me. They cross this off as a possible answer which leads me to a second way people answer this ultimate question of life:

(2) They say Jesus was a DEMENTED FOOL.

They say this because you would have to be crazy to claim to be God. People who choose this option say that Jesus would have had to be a megalomaniac like Alexander the Great or Adolph Hitler to make the claims He did. But this answer to Jesus’ question doesn’t pass muster either;

because, a demented fool could not have INSPIRED people as Jesus did. People didn't just respect Jesus. They genuinely liked Him. They left their homes and businesses and followed Him. Lucado writes, *"Men and women alike tethered their hope to His life. Impulsive people like Peter---visionaries like Philip---passionate men like John---careful men like Thomas---methodical men like Matthew the tax collector."*

And—these people were changed for the good—because of their encounter with Jesus. That's not the way it is with the demented fools of history. Think of it.

- Saddam Hussein created murderers.
- Joseph Stalin created power addicts.
- Charles Manson created wackos.

Jesus' effect on people was good. He made the people who followed Him better. Think of it. Jesus transformed common dockworkers and net casters into the authors of history's greatest Book and founders of its greatest movement.

Theologian James Stalker, who lived 100 years ago, wrote this about how Jesus made people better and therefore could not be a demented fool:

"The first followers of Jesus stand like a row of noble pillars, towering far across the flats of time, but the sunlight that shines on them---and makes them visible comes from entirely from Him, from Jesus. He gave them their greatness—and their greatness is one of the most striking evidences of His."

And what about Jesus' teaching? People were stunned by His authority and clarity. Jesus won the admiration of men and woman from all levels and social structures. No one led and taught like Jesus. His was obviously not the mind of a deranged individual. He could not have been a demented fool, which is why some people cross this reply off and say:

(3) Jesus was a DECEIVING FRAUD.

They say Jesus was nothing more than a skilled trickster, a huckster Who tricked people into believing He was the Messiah. Of course, if this were true, then Jesus would be guilty of leading billions to trust Him with their eternal destiny. So, could He have been nothing more than a deceiving fraud?

Think about that—could a fraud have performed the miracles that Jesus did? He was known for doing amazing things—things only God could do. He multiplied bread and fish, calmed more than one storm, walked on water, healed the blind and lame---He raised the dead. Even secular historians in that day referred to Jesus' wonder-working power. Luke 23:8 says that King Herod had heard of Jesus' deeds and wanted Him to do a miracle for his entertainment. But Herod

wasn't alone. Everyone knew of Jesus' ability to do miracles because He did them all the time.

Plus, these miracles weren't done in a corner. No—hundreds of thousands of people saw and gave attestation to them as eye-witnesses. But Jesus never grandstanded His miraculous powers as a trickster would have done. He didn't seek fame or profit with them. He did them for two reasons: to prove His identity and to help people.

Around 120A.D. a man named Quadratus, wrote a letter to Emperor Hadrian defending Christianity. His apologetic included this statement, which refutes the notion that Jesus was a deceiving fraud,

“The works of our Savior were lasting for they were genuine. Those who were healed and those who were raised from the dead were seen not merely while their Savior was on the earth---but also after His death they were alive for quite a while so that some of them lived even to our day.”

You know, if Jesus HAD been a fraud—if it had all been some elaborate scheme—the church in Jerusalem would have died—but the opposite happened. The church exploded in growth—partially due to the testimonies of those people Jesus had healed---people who had experienced firsthand the wonderworking power of Jesus. Plus—Jesus loved people—ALL people. He didn't care about class or nationality, past sins or present accomplishments. The neediest and the loneliest found a friend in Jesus.

- John 8:3-11 says that Jesus befriended and defended a woman caught in the act of adultery.
- Luke 19 tells us that Jesus became the mentor of an unscrupulous tax collector who had been left friendless because of his misdealings.
- John 4 tells of a time Jesus gave a multiple divorcee his undivided attention.

Could a lying sham love people like this? I don't think so. Plus, if His intent was to trick people out of their money or worship, He did a pitifully poor job because Jesus died broke and virtually abandoned.

So—Jesus could not have been just another decent fellow. Decent fellows don't get by with claiming to be God. He couldn't have been a demented fool and had the profound effect on people that He did. His teachings were lucid and His followers devoted Plus they were changed for the good because of their time with Him. Nor could He have been a deceiving fraud and done the miracles He did. So cross all those answers off the list and, continuing with our alliteration---in my opinion, there is only one option left to us.

(4) He was and is our DIVINE FRIEND.

In other words, Jesus was and is Who He claimed to be, the Messiah, the SON OF GOD Who came to seek and save sinners like you and me. This is the only answer that makes any sense and it means we never need go through life alone. It also means that even though we don't know—can't see what lies ahead—we don't need to be afraid because Jesus knows.

Now—going through the various answers people give to this—the ultimate question of life may have convinced you that Jesus is Who He claimed to be---and that's good but it's not good enough. Saying— "I see now—Jesus must have been the Messiah of God!" is not sufficient. You've got to go a step further. You've got to ACT on what you know in your head in order to enjoy the benefits of this head knowledge. You've got to pray and say to Jesus,

"I believe You are the Son of God and as a sinner I need Your forgiveness. I want You in my life. Forgive me and help me follow You as Lord."

In that simple prayer you will move from knowing ABOUT Jesus—to KNOWING Jesus. As someone who prayed this prayer over 60 years ago, I will bear witness to the fact, that when you pray it, Jesus answers it. He becomes your personal, constant Companion. And, as I said earlier, not only does He give you the gift of eternal life—He helps you to live this life as it was meant to be lived—ABUNDANTLY! I would also point out that you can't really avoid this decision. You can't be neutral when it comes to Jesus. Knowing that He is Who He claimed to be means you have to decide—will I accept Him or will I reject Him?

LET US PRAY