

Who Am I?

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 9:18-20

“But what about you... who do you say that I am?” What a compelling moment we see here. After months of walking together from town to town, witnessing miracles, hearing teaching, enduring controversy, Jesus turns to his disciples and says, “So... who am I?” It’s such a simple, powerful, and utterly central question.

It reminds me of the question I put to every single profession of faith candidate I ever interview. Go through a lot of personal stories and theology as part of the profession process, but ultimately I always ask the same question. Pretend you are in the profession of faith interview. How would you answer this? Because I think every sincere Christian person should have a good personal answer to this question. Imagine you are sitting at a coffee shop with a friend you made in your neighborhood. This friend is a nice person, someone whose company you enjoy, but when it comes to religion, she’s unaffiliated. She’s one of these modern people who never went to church growing up, who spent her Sundays sleeping in, reading the morning paper, and watching football. She’s not hostile to Christianity; she just has never really been exposed to it; she just doesn’t get it. But she knows that you are a Christian, that you go to church every Sunday, that you call yourself a follower of Jesus. So you’re sitting there together sipping your lattes when she says to you: *“Explain to me this Jesus thing. You seem like a normal person like me, and most of what you do makes sense to me, but I don’t understand the Jesus thing. How come you follow Jesus? How come you go to church every Sunday and sing songs to this Jewish guy who lived 2000 years ago? Explain that to me? What’s so great about Jesus?”*

What would you say to that question? Does a good answer come immediately to mind? Or do you find yourself mentally stumbling over your words, thinking to yourself, “Hmm. I’m not sure what I’d say? If you do have an answer, is your answer in churchspeak? Would you find yourself saying things like: “I follow him because he died on the cross to save me from my sins,” or, “I follow him because he’s my Lord and Savior.” Those are true answers that make sense in church, but in a coffee shop, in the ears of a person who knows nothing about Jesus, they don’t make sense. They sound like technical jargon. I’ve found that 95% of the people to whom I’ve asked this question have a terrible time answering it. They get stuck in the clichés.

Why is this question so hard? It’s a simple question: “Why do you follow Jesus?” It’s the central question of your faith. It’s the central question of your life, and it’s essentially the question Jesus asks his disciples here: “Who do you say I am?”

If you struggled to come up with a good answer to that question in your own mind a moment ago, take heart; you’re in good company. The gospels show us that almost everyone was struggling to figure out who Jesus was. It’s clear the disciples were struggling. Earlier in the gospel, the disciples see Jesus calm the

seas. What was the disciples' reaction when the wind died and the water smoothed? Do you remember? "Who is this? Who is this that the winds and the waves obey him?" Herod was struggling to figure out Jesus too. Just a little before our passage, back in chapter 9:9, Herod hears about Jesus and his miracles, and he becomes greatly perplexed and wonders if John the Baptist is back from the dead: "John I beheaded, but who is this I hear such things about?!" Who is this man?? John the Baptist struggled to figure out Jesus. After boldly proclaiming that he was God's chosen and the Lamb of God, John gets thrown in prison and finds his old certainties suddenly slipping. He's not so sure about Jesus anymore and he sends out his disciples to ask him; "Are you the chosen one, or should we look for another?" And even in our passage, it's not like the confusion goes away. Peter answers Jesus' question and he answers it correctly: "You are the Messiah!" Correct Peter. Gold star on your Sunday School paper. But does Peter really understand what he's saying? Almost certainly not. In the other gospel accounts of this story, Peter rebukes Jesus for all this talk about being a suffering Messiah. He doesn't really understand. Who is Jesus? No one seems to know. No one seems to have a good answer.

Now it's 2000 years later, and we've had 2000 years to work on improving the disciple's level of comprehension. The gospels have been written, along with the New Testament, and in every age an army of the best and the brightest have made it their full time job to study the Scripture and figure out what it means. Archaeological teams have gone out to study the places where Jesus walked. Ministers and elders have debated these matters at synods. Book after book after book has been written. Billions of sermons have been preached by earnest preachers, and what do we know? Do we know more than the disciples? Have we got it figured out? When Jesus looks at us and asks us who he is, do we know the answer?

It still seems like there's a lot of confusion and debate. You can go down to Schuler Books and there will be a half dozen new books on the shelf, all of them claiming to have the right answer to who Jesus really was: You can go down to Schuler's books and find a whole bunch of books about Jesus. They will all say different things. Some of them will make Jesus into the consummate leader—a model for corporate CEO's; another will make Jesus sound like a shoeless hippie. You go to different churches in town and they can have totally different pictures of Jesus: one will make Jesus sound like a communist; another will make him into a free-market capitalist. Sometimes it seems that there are as many different portraits of Jesus as there are churches in this world. Who do you say that I am? People all around us are shouting so many answers to that question, it's no wonder we get lost, it's no wonder we get confused.

While I want us to acknowledge the difficulty of answering Jesus' question, I don't want us to despair. This book is given to us as a revelation – it's meant to make things clearer. It's meant to show us Jesus; it's not meant to hide him from us. It's meant to help us find our way; it's not meant to get us lost. And with the Spirit's help, when we read this book there are many things we can say in answer to Jesus' question, and say it with conviction. Jesus is the Son of God. In Jesus, our Creator has come to earth and made himself known to us. Jesus loves us. He loves people, he calls us friends and lays down his life for us. Jesus accepts

outsiders and cares for the weak. People that society ignores and dismisses, he notices and accepts. Jesus is the perfect human being. When you watch him live his life, you say: that's what human life should look like! Jesus calls people to repent! He is here to get human beings to leave their sin and embrace righteousness. Jesus comes to change the world, but he doesn't do it by using a normal kind of hard power; he does it with sacrifice and love, and ultimately, by dying for us. Jesus was raised from the dead by God, so we know that death is not the end for us. Jesus is still alive, and someday he will return to make all things new. With the Spirit's help there is plenty in here that allows us to say with some confidence who Jesus is and why we love him.

But then there is also much in here in the book itself that keeps us from answering the question with too much proud certainty! This book reveals, but it also keeps us from theological pride that thinks it has all the answers. Sometimes Jesus is so gentle and kind: welcoming children, forgiving the woman caught in adultery; and other times he could be so severe: cursing the fig tree! Blasting the Pharisees calling them hypocrites, whitewashed tombs, even sons of hell (Matthew 23)! And if you want to be knocked off balance, compare Luke 9:50 with Luke 11:23 sometime: In Luke 9 Jesus says, "Whoever is not against us is for us." In Luke 11 Jesus says, "Whoever is not with me is against me." Seems like he says completely opposite things two chapters apart. I don't think this is Luke making a mistake, this is Jesus! It's Jesus keeping us from thinking we have all the answers. Jesus showing us that, when it comes to him, we will always have so much more to learn!!

One of my favorite passages in the gospels comes right at the end of the gospel of John. John is closing his book off and he writes: I wrote down these things about Jesus so that you could have faith, "but there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose the world could not contain the books that could be written." And what about you, who do you say that I am? Lord, there are not enough books in the world to contain the mystery of Jesus.

There is one more interesting thing to note together as we think about Jesus' question in this passage. Jesus reverses the order of understanding and commitment. In just about all our life's doings, the order we do things is: understanding first, then commitment. When you have a decision to make in life, how do you go about things? If you're buying a house you research neighborhoods, and prices. When you settle on one house, you get it inspected and you walk around it and through it many times to make sure nothing is amiss. You call friends and family members and have them go through the house with you so you can get their opinion. It's only after massive reflection that you make the commitment to buy and sign on the dotted line. It's like that for buying a car, taking a job, choosing who to vote for, getting a dog and even to some extent, for choosing a spouse. In all these things the order is understanding and then commitment.

With Jesus it's different. With Jesus commitment comes before understanding. With Jesus, he calls us to follow before we get it. When Jesus called the 12 disciples, he didn't say to them: "*Hello, allow me to introduce myself; my name is Jesus, I'm looking for a few followers and I was wondering if you'd be interested. Here's a folder with some of my materials – I think you'll find most*

questions you might have are answered there – if you have any more questions don't hesitate to call. Why don't you look this over and I'll come back in a few days to see if you've made a decision." No! Manifestly no!

Jesus' method is in sharp and striking contrast. Jesus just says: "Follow Me." The following comes first and the understanding comes later. It's not that understanding isn't important to Jesus – it certainly is. It's just that it comes after commitment. "*Whoever wants to save their life will lose it; whoever loses their life will save it.*" You can only begin to understand discipleship after you have thrown yourself, lost yourself in it. That's hard for us to accept, and hard for us to do. We're so used to needing to understand things first that we hold back from discipleship and sort of hover around the edges of commitment and discipleship, watching and analyzing and making lots of clever observations. Jesus would have us follow.

We do get the order right sometimes though. I think I see it work in a scene like this. You gather together with fellow believers in a church Bible Study. And you spend 45 minutes grappling with some passage of Scripture. *In that 45 minutes you learn things about Jesus.* You grow in the knowledge of his word and his ways. There are things you learn about Jesus. *But in that Bible study you also grow in understanding of what you don't know.* People around the table disagree about issues. One thinks Jesus meant this and the other thinks Jesus meant that, and they debate. And then there are parts of the Bible passage you can't really explain, you're not sure what it means, and when you go consult the commentaries, you realize that they don't really get it either. And then there are the people who can't understand what God is doing in their life, they understand what the Bible says, but they don't understand how that fits with the terrible thing that's happening to them right now. As you close your Bibles at the end of the study for every fact you've captured, two new questions have been raised.

But then at the end of the study everyone closes their eyes and bows their heads and together, we submit our lives to Jesus. We say, "Lord, here are our lives. Take them." And then we all go back out into the world and we deny ourselves, we put aside all our questions and differences, we pick up our crosses and we follow him. In our families, at our jobs, in our neighborhoods, in the hard places of the world, in the face of our disappointments, we follow him on the path of love and sacrifice and hope.

I think that's an honest picture of how people live in the church and I think it's a picture of people who have understanding and commitment in the right order. We're not following him because we understand, we're following him because we want to understand. He's the shepherd and we're the sheep. He will lead us into wisdom. He will show us the path and teach us things along the road. And he will lead us home. © Rev. Peter Jonker