

“THE GOSPEL: Behold the Man”

A sermon by

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TEXTS: Colossians 2:6-15 and Matthew 16:13-20

Colossians 2:6-15

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Jesus and his disciples are on a field trip. So far throughout his ministry, they have stayed safely within the confines of Galilee and Judea. Rarely have they wandered outside. When they have strayed, it has been to Samaria. For the most part, they have been surrounded by the Jewish people, their religion, and their customs. It is familiar territory.

Now they travel by foot to Caesarea Philippi. It is only twenty-five miles from the Jewish communities, but the contrast is unsettling. They are in an area populated and controlled by Gentiles.

The town that they enter is called Caesarea Philippi.

This area, set at the lush base of Mount Hermon, is a pagan smorgasbord. A temple to Pan, the god of the wild, existed from early times.

Pan was the “horned goat god” who walked on two legs. He was known as the giver of victory in battle. He was known for causing “panic” in the enemy. Pan was the giver of music and the god of goat herds. In the cliff above the city, the locals erected shrines and temples to Pan.

At the base of the cliff was a cave from which issued a spring of water. Since the water came from underground and the people could not trace its source, they assumed it came from the underworld. The locals believed that the cave was the entrance to the underworld, literally the “gates of Hades.”

It was also believed to be the place to which the fertility gods retreated in the winter when the earth was dormant. Then, in the spring, the residents of Caesarea Philippi would encourage their god, Pan, and other fertility gods to return by engaging in sexual acts including bestiality with goats.

The disciples must have quickly realized that they weren’t in Galilee anymore. A good Jew would run screaming from such evil paganism.

As the guy on the infomercial says, “But wait! There’s more!”

Herod Phillip, the son of Herod the Great, when he served as Tetrarch, appointed by Caesar, erected and dedicated a large marble temple to Caesar. Then he named the town, formerly known as Paneas, for himself. Caesarea Philippi means “Philip’s Caesarea.”

Once a year, Roman citizens were required to show loyalty to the emperor by dropping a pinch of incense into the fire that burned on the altar of the temple and proclaim, “Caesar is Lord.”

Pagan gods, fertility rites, emperor worship, the gates of the underworld, and sexual promiscuity . . . yes, Caesarea Philippi had it all. It is in this context that Jesus chooses to ask . . .

1. A PROBING QUESTION

The disciples have been with Jesus almost three years. He has poured himself into them. He has taught them, prayed with them, prayed for them, and performed miracles before them. They have been to Jerusalem with him. They have seen the Scribes, Pharisees, and the Sadducees oppose and confront Jesus. They have come to love their rabbi.

Now, Jesus wants to know what they have heard. What is the opinion of him among the masses? What are people thinking? What are people saying? The people of his home town of Nazareth, the people he grew up with, the people who know him best, have already rejected him. Jesus will soon turn toward Jerusalem for the last time. Jesus wants to know. He makes the request.

A. The Request “Who do men say that I am?”

Here, in this center of paganism and the worship of a human leader, Jesus frames a question concerning his own identity. Jesus begins to challenge his disciples about eternal allegiances, deciding what is most important, and ultimately about the most important decision of life. He does so by asking what other people think.

You know, this is a good place to begin. You saw the video that I showed to begin this morning’s sermon. If people have heard about Jesus or know about Jesus, they will form an opinion about Jesus. Let’s look at what the disciples had to say.

B. The OPINIONS OF THE PUBLIC

“Some say John the Baptist. . .”

John was a holy man, a Nazirite, dedicated from birth to touch no alcohol and to never cut his hair or beard. Think Samson, a fellow Nazirite. John lived out of doors. He brooked no immorality, telling even self-righteous Pharisees to repent and flee the wrath to come.

King Herod murdered his brother Philip and then married his brother's wife, Herodias. John brooked no such immorality. Instead, he stood outside Herod's palace day after day railing at Herod's adultery and murderous deeds. John minced no words. Herod put him in prison. Then to appease his wife's daughter, Salome, he had John beheaded and commanded his head be presented to Salome on a silver platter.

Hear what Herod says of Jesus in Matthew 14:1-2, *“At that time, Herod the ruler heard reports about Jesus; and he said to his servants, ‘This is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead, and for this reason, these powers are at work in him.’”*

Herod thought Jesus a holy man, a resurrected John the Baptist.

Was Jesus a holy man? Yes! Was Jesus something more? Let's see.

“ . . .but others, Elijah”

Jewish teaching and tradition indicated that Elijah would return before Messiah came. Here is what the Prophet Malachi records in Malachi 4:5, the closing words of the Old Testament, *“Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.”*

Elijah was most famous miracle worker of the Old Testament. Elijah called down fire from the sky at Mt. Carmel in his famous contest with the priests of Baal. Elijah miraculously brought rain after three and a half years of drought. Elijah raised a dead boy back to life. Elijah, in a time of famine, went to the widow of Zarephath. The woman fed Elijah with her last meal. From then on, her supply of meal and oil, miraculously, never ran out.

Many people thought Jesus a miracle worker, just like Elijah, and the one to usher in the coming of the Messiah, in fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy.

Was Jesus a miracle worker? Yes! Was Jesus something more? Let's see.

“ . . . and still others Jeremiah. . .”

Jeremiah was a great prophet. He was known as the ‘weeping prophet.’ He was the prophet who promised that God would make a new covenant with His people, a covenant written on the heart and not written on tablets of stone. Jewish teaching indicated that Jeremiah was a holy prophet who also would return to earth just before Messiah came.

The Second Book of the Maccabees is a non-canonical book. It is in what we call the Apocrypha. It is one of the Jewish histories recorded during the 400-year period between the close of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament. 2 Maccabees 2:1-12 records that when Jerusalem was being destroyed by the Babylonians, and the Temple destroyed, Jeremiah instructed the Levites to bring fire from the altar, the

Tabernacle, the Ark of the Covenant, and the Altar of Incense. Jeremiah secured them in a cave deep under Mount Nebo. Mount Nebo was the mountain on the other side of the Jordan where God allowed Moses to see the Promised Land before he died.

Tradition promised that when Jeremiah returned before the coming of the Messiah, he would bring these articles with him so that the worship of the Jews could be restored in a new Temple.

Was Jesus a great prophet? Yes! Was Jesus something more? Let's see.

“. . . or one of the prophets.”

There were other prophets. The actual Hebrew word for prophet is the word “Nabi (nah-bee). It is derived from a Hebrew verb that means “to bubble forth.” Thus, a prophet was one who announces or pours forth the declarations of God.

Was Jesus a prophet and nothing more? So far, all the responses offered by the disciples are opinions. The opinions put Jesus in the category of “Great Men of the Hebrew Faith.” Even so, only a man.

Many would put Jesus in the category of a great man. Some would not even do that. Some would characterize Him as a myth, a legend, a misguided Jewish rabbi who ran afoul of the authorities and died tragically.

This and nothing more. Jesus kicks it up a notch when he asks his disciples . . .

2. A MORE PERSONAL QUESTION

Jesus moves it from the realm of opinion and conjecture to ask His disciples an uncomfortable question. He has heard the opinions they have offered. Now he wants to know what they believe about Him. They, who have been closest, must now get down off the fence and decide going forward. In a just a moment, He will tell them the plan.

He is going to Jerusalem where He will be killed by the Jewish authorities. He will be raised to life again on the third day in fulfillment of the Scripture. He will not remain with them. His ministry comes to an end. Being a disciple is going to be a dangerous thing.

What do you believe, disciples? What do you think of me? You have been with me a while. You have studied me and known me. This is a turning point, as is each moment in each life. Not to decided is to decide. Opinions won't do.

A. The Request “Who do you say that I am?”

In my mind, I picture the disciples suddenly becoming preoccupied with the appearance of their sandals. There is a pregnant pause. No one speaks. Everyone waits for another disciple to break the silence.

Why? Opinions cost nothing! Belief costs everything!

Here in this pagan city, surrounded by temples to pagan gods and representatives of the empire, Jesus as much as says, “Pick a side. Whose side are you on?”

B. The CONFESSION

Out of the silence, Peter speaks. I love Peter. I resonate with his character and personality. He acts before he thinks. He speaks before he thinks. Nevertheless, this is something he has apparently been thinking about a long time. He has been trying to figure Jesus out. He is not content with opinions. He is not satisfied with easy answers. He is willing to go out on a limb. He speaks . . .

a. What Peter says “You are the Messiah (Christ), the Son of the Living God”

Opinion puts Jesus in the great man, great prophet, great moral leader, great teacher category. Peter makes the leap. This Jesus is no ordinary man. This Jesus is more than a man. He is what all humans should be. Pilate would later say of him, “Behold the man.” Pilate would later say of him, “I find no fault in this man.” The centurion at the cross would later say of him, “Truly this man was the Son of God.”

By saying, “You are the Messiah (Christ), the Son of the Living God,” Peter was saying a mouthful. Messiah was the Lord’s Anointed One, the One all Jews expected, the One all Jews hoped for, the One who would bring God’s reign. When Peter calls Jesus the Son of the Living God, I believe he was making more than a simple statement, however unformed.

Our children are reflections of us. LuAnn has often said of our daughter, Beth, “Put a mustache on her and you will know whose daughter she is.” Andrew is built like his mom. Both have some of our mannerisms and speech patterns. My daughter certainly has my warped sense of humor.

Peter could have said, “You are a son of the Living God.” That was one of my frustrations with the movie, “O God!” When George Burns, as God, is disguised as a waiter. He works with John Denver to answer questions people have written to God. One of the questions is, “Is Jesus Christ the Son of God?” He walks away from Denver, then says, “Jesus was my son. (Pause) Buddha was my son. Mohammed. Moses. You. The man who said there was no room in the inn was my son, and so is the one who charges \$11.00 for steak in this one.” (Okay, it’s an old movie!)

The point is this. Peter could easily have said, “You are a son of the Living God.” He doesn’t! He uses the definite instead of the indefinite article. That means that Peter was saying of Jesus, “You are the unique Son of God.”

b. Why Peter says it “For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.”

Jesus commends Peter because his answer is not the result of deductive reasoning, but a statement of faith. “Others may think you are no more than a prophet, a miracle worker, a holy man, a great teacher, but I believe that God is uniquely reflected and available in You. I believe you are the Son of the Living God.”

c. What Jesus says about Himself

Jesus never left us to our own devices in determining who He is or why He came. Jesus regularly made claims about Himself that are reflected in the pages of Scripture. Jesus constantly pointed to the Old Testament to indicate the Scriptures that pointed to His identity. Many of His statements were reflected in the Gospels.

- **John 14:9** (“seen me. . . seen the Father”)
- **John 10:30** (“I and the Father are one”)

- **Matthew 26:63** (Son of God/Son of Man)
- **Mark 2:10** (One who forgives sin)
- **Luke 3:16** (The Baptizer in the Holy Spirit)
- **Luke 18:42** (The Healer)
- **Luke 8:28** (Son of the Most High God)
- **Luke 24: 26** (Messiah)
- **John 8:58** (The 'I Am' of the Old Testament)
- **John 14: 6** (The only way to the Father)

You see, Jesus makes claims about Himself that no mere man could or can make. I know you love me, but if I said, "I and the Father are one," I'm absolutely sure no one here is buying it, especially LuAnn. I can heal no one. I do not have the power to forgive sins. I cannot say, "No one can come to God except through me." No one could say such things!

Jesus does.

C.S. Lewis frames the problem very well in *Mere Christianity*. He set out to disprove the Christian belief in Jesus and ended up a believer himself. Here is what he wrote: *"I am trying to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.*

"We are faced, then, with a frightening alternative. This man we are talking about either was (and is) just what He said or else a lunatic, or something worse. I have to accept the view that He was and is God." (Mere Christianity, p. 55-56)

We end with . . .

3. A CLARIFYING QUESTION

In the end, it doesn't matter what the people of Jesus' time believed about Him. It doesn't matter what His disciples believed or even the people in the "man on the street" interview video we showed at the beginning of this sermon.

The only real question that matters this morning is the question Jesus asks of each of us, "Who do you say that I am?"

What do you believe? To whom are you willing to commit?

Who do you say that I am?

This side of eternity, that is the most important question you will ever have cause to answer.

Soli Deo Gloria! To God alone be the glory. Amen.