

The Cross

Matthew 16:24-25 “Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.’”

Question: Who do you say Jesus is?

Key Verses: 1 Kings 12:7; Galatians 2:20; Psalm 22.

The Question

At the half-way mark of his three-year ministry Jesus peeled off with his Apostles for a watershed moment in his ministry. After this, nothing will be the same. They hiked to the northernmost border of Israel where Jesus asked a simple question. “Who do people say that I am?” (Matt 16:13). Public opinion varied: John the Baptist, Jeremiah, Ezekiel—all prophets, all garrulous, all dead. These perspectives derived from or were at least shared by Herod and his ilk (cf. Mark 6:15; Luke 9:8). Surely, therefore, they are incorrect. Jesus then turned the question inward by asking, “Who do YOU say that I am?” Peter, not surprisingly, gives voice to the group. He vastly improves on public opinion: Jesus is the Messiah—the Christ, the son of the living God. He was spot on. Jesus said so much. Yet lest he puff with pride Jesus continued, “This was given to you by God” (Peter, clearly, wasn’t *that* good!).

This long-awaited confession was anticipated in the opening chapter of all four Gospels (Matt 1:1; 2:4; Mark 1:1; Luke 1:31–35; 2:11; John 1:17, 49). At long last the Apostles confess what the reader has known all along. It is a decisive moment in salvation history when the identity of Jesus is finally (though not fully) understood by his closest followers. It is at this moment when one can begin to speak about Christology. Therefore, it is at this crucial moment that Jesus not only affirms Peter’s confession, but clarifies it (Mark 9:30–32/Matt 16:21/Luke 9:22). For Jesus, the Christ is not a regal figure who gains prominence by crushing his opponents. Rather, the Messiah is God’s envoy who forfeits the exercise of power in exchange for service and sacrifice. This is not a denial by Jesus of his political role but a description of it—a mechanism for realizing it. The true Messiah could never promote himself; that was Yahweh’s role alone. He would not kill his enemies but die for them.

The Objection

Because this was the first corporate confession of his Messianic identity, Jesus felt the need for clarity. Though he was the Christ of God, he was not the Messiah Israel anticipated. He was a suffering servant not a conquering king. God’s design was for him to die in Jerusalem, betrayed by his friends and crucified by his enemies. This idea was nowhere on the mental map of contemporary Judaism. It was utterly inconceivable. More than that, it was unacceptable. If the Messiah is killed how could Israel be saved?

Ironically, Jesus ordered their silence about his Messianic identity (Matt 16:20; Mark 8:30; Luke 9:21) yet spoke boldly about his own sacrificial suffering (Mark 8:32). Why would Jesus openly predict his death but silence the Apostles concerning his regal role? The obvious answer is that the popular understanding of Messiah as a conquering king would create a misunderstanding of Jesus' ministry. There is something deeper, however. The promotion of power is antithetical to true leadership in God's kingdom. We do not lead by power but sacrifice; we do not conquer we serve. Jesus had to model that. In other words, the Messianic secret was a way of life for Jesus, not just a temporary injunction for group management. After the resurrection they would be free to speak of Jesus' royal role because then the nature of his political rule would be clarified by and transformed through God's vindication in Jesus' resurrection. Thus, it would become apparent just how theologically significant was Jesus' suffering and how central it was to his Messianic vocation.

When Jesus pointed out his divine destiny in death, Peter reacted sharply: "May this never be!" The Greek phrase is stronger than the English translation, the kind of vocabulary you expect from a fisherman. Jesus returned the favor with arguably his harshest word ever: "Get behind me Satan!" (Matt 16:23; Mark 8:33). He identified his "right-hand" man as the personification of the Devil. Oddly, the ignorant crowds were closer in their confession than Peter. While the populous "damned him with faint praise", Peter's protest would derail Jesus' divine destiny. His rebuke places Peter in the same category as the demons Jesus silenced after they "correctly" confessed his identity (Mark 3:11–12; 5:7). Jesus is harsh but hardly unfair. Satan's confrontation with Jesus during the temptation ran precisely this same track. The Devil attempted to derail Jesus from his vocation by using his power and prestige to short circuit the cross. Rather than the gruesome call to sacrifice, Satan (and Peter) urged Jesus to assert his divine prerogatives to avoid the human experience.

This temptation predates the gospels. It goes all the way back to the first civil war of Israel that divided the Twelve Tribes. After Solomon's death, his son Rehoboam took the crown. His citizens assemble at the palace to plead their case for reduced taxes. Solomon built his kingdom on the backs of commoners. They wanted relief from the oppressive burden. Before giving his answer, Rehoboam sought counsel. His aggressive young staff told him to show strength (not an uncommon political policy in the Middle East). Rehoboam took their advice, quoting it to the crowds, "My little finger is thicker than my father's thighs" (1 Kings 12:10). In short, their burden is about to get heavier, not lighter! It was because of that insolent answer that Jeroboam led a coalition army into a civil war against the king. He is the one responsible for setting up the golden calves at both Bethel and Dan, leading the ten northern tribes into catastrophic idolatry. It was an attempt to keep his people in his borders and away from worship in Jerusalem. It was political savvy and religious heresy.

At this very moment, Jesus stood in the shadow of the dilapidated altar at Dan. That is why he escorted his entourage to the border. His purpose was to bring his cabinet to the place

where Israel got derailed. If he is to right the ship, he has to circle back to the fork in the road when the king of Israel took the wrong advice. Here now, we return to Rehoboam and the older men whose advice he scorned. Their wisdom was, “If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever” (1 Kings 12:7). As we can see from Jesus’ reply to Peter, he intends to follow the sage advice of the elders. He intends to take Israel back to that pivotal moment and reunify the tribes under a very different king of leadership.

The Call

Jesus follows Peter’s rebuke with what would become his most frequently cited saying. “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt 16:24-25). Now this is curious indeed. Jesus is no longer talking about his own impending death, but his disciples’. The core requirement of a Christian is crucifixion. We don’t typically think that way. We remember Jesus’ death in communion. We wear *his* cross as jewelry. We follow his steps on the *Via Dolorosa*. Yet nearly half of the cross talk in the New Testament is not about Jesus’ sacrifice but our own. Before Jesus was crucified, he commanded his followers to take up their own cross. Long after Jesus’ crucifixion Paul, among others, identified discipleship as cross-bearing. For example, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

The cross is not merely what Jesus did for us. It is what he *modeled* for us. Just as his resurrection precedes and anticipates our own resurrection, so too his crucifixion calls us to similar sacrifice. Being a disciple is not just receiving what Jesus did. It is imitating how he lived. That is especially true of the cross.

The gruesome reality of the crucifixion is not an easy conversation. In fact, we know surprisingly little about this ancient mode of execution precisely because it was so shameful. It was not to be discussed in polite company. Perhaps that is why the clearest description of the practice comes from Psalm 22, which Jesus quoted on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Even though it was composed a thousand years before Jesus’ execution (and six hundred years prior to the Persians even inventing the practice), it contains graphic details: piercing of hands and feet, heart melting like wax, bones out of joint, enemies surrounding him, public mockery, naked exposure, gambling for his garments, and extreme thirst. The prophecy is extraordinarily precise even if the graphic description is uncomfortable.

Equally uncomfortable is our own execution. Perhaps it is not something we want to talk through but we need to. Jesus said if we don’t take up a cross, we are unable to follow him. We must live as the walking dead. Only then will we be able to conquer our sinful passions. That’s a truth we sense in our breast. Nonetheless, there is something more—both more important

and more impressive. Jesus' death saved our souls. That is the theme of enough worship songs to make it self-evident. We thank God for his grace in sending his son to save us for eternity. Clear enough. So what is the purpose of *our* cross? It is not simply self-sacrifice for self-control. It is not to make a better version of you. Like Jesus' death, our suffering and sacrifice has saving power, not for the individual soul but for society as a whole. As Jesus died to atone for personal sins, so we die to reverse the effects of sin in society.

As the church sacrifices themselves, we have the actual capacity to eliminate the Foster Care system. If the church were to focus our medical attention on Malaria, we could effectively eliminate the single greatest cause of loss of life in human history. Only in the church is there a realistic hope of eradicating racism. Only in Christ has Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female been united in fellowship and purpose. The list could go on and it is long. We know this is true because we have a track record that is impressive. Going back to the first century church, the greatest social strides in culture, art, medicine, compassion, education, poverty, protection of women, children, and the marginalized have come primarily from those who follow Jesus with a cross strapped to their backs.

This circles back to our original question: Who do you say Jesus is? If he is merely a prophet from the past, a hero of our faith, we likely have missed the mark of the Messiah. His suffering and sacrifice is his greatest achievement. As his disciple it will be yours as well. If we confess him as Lord, we are obligated to follow his example. We cannot celebrate a Lord we won't imitate.

Key Points:

- Jesus being the Messiah includes (not excludes) his suffering and death.
- Jesus' leadership returns to the political advice of 1 Kings 12:7 to reunify the nation.
- Jesus' leadership praxis is an example for us to follow in taking up our own cross.

Action Step: Identify one area of your life you've not yet submitted to the Lordship of Jesus and identify the first necessary step to release it to God's control.

Further Resources: Brennan Manning, *The Signature of Jesus* (1988).