

## **The Most Important Question in the World**

Luke 9:18-22

After worship today we will share a fellowship meal together. Many of you have brought food and we will lay it all out on the table buffet style. Don't you just love buffets? You can pick and choose between many scrumptious dishes. Some restaurants like the Golden Corral or the Grand International Buffet have that kind of set up. If you go with a group of people everyone can get what they want. They can go down the line and pick and choose ... Mexican food, Seafood, Chinese, Italian, good old American. You can try something new, and if you don't like it ... set it aside and go back for something else...

That's great when you're eating out (except that you may over-eat trying to get your money's worth). But it doesn't work so well when you take the buffet approach to your faith. A lot of people think of "religion" as a kind of smorgasbord. They take a little of what Buddha said over here and try out some of what Mahatma Gandhi said over there with a little Jesus sprinkled over it and some Scientology sauce on the side. And for dessert they try some Dr. Phil and Dr. Laura with a big dollop of Oprah on top. If it all tastes good, they keep it ... and they've put together their own buffet of life. If they lose their taste for any part of it, they can set it aside and try something else.

The only problem is: the Bible doesn't offer a Buffet. God isn't a buffet kind of God. The Bible presents ONE God and ONE way to be saved. Some people accept that as truth. Others don't like it. They want to set it aside and find something else on the buffet table that looks better to them.

Ravi Zacharias in his book, JESUS AMONG OTHER GODS, says, "We are living in a time when sensitivities are at the surface, often vented with cutting words. Philosophically, you can believe anything, so long as you do not claim it to be true. Morally, you can practice anything, as long as you do not claim that it is a 'better' way. Religiously, you can hold to anything, as long as you do not bring Jesus Christ into it."

Today as we look at Luke 9 we are going to find that what we believe about Jesus is the most important thing in the world. It literally is a matter of life and death. The question is:

### **Who Is Jesus?**

Let me take a minute to set the stage for this encounter between Jesus and His disciples. At this point in His ministry, Jesus was at the height of His popularity but Jesus didn't come to earth to be popular; He came to die for us. Jesus had just performed a great miracle, the feeding of the five thousand. John's gospel tells us that this miracle feeding resulted in what almost seems to be mass hysteria. "Could they find a better candidate for Messiah than Jesus?" "Could they wish for any better things from Messiah?" The people had not concluded that God had appointed Jesus to be Messiah, but they did determine to draft Him as their king.

Such hysteria caused Jesus to do several things. *First*, according to Matthew and Mark, Jesus sent His disciples away, maybe so that they would not get caught up in this frenzied enthusiasm (Matthew 14:22; Mark 6:45). *Second*, Jesus Himself withdrew from the crowds for a time of private prayer (John 6:15; cf. Matthew 14:23; Mark 8:46). *Third*, Jesus began to introduce the subject of His sacrificial and substitutionary death to the crowds. Jesus began by exposing the selfish motivation of the crowds in wanting to make Him their King (John 6:26) and then He went on to speak of Himself as the "Bread of Life."

Once Jesus began to speak of His suffering, the crowd quickly lost its enthusiasm. John tells us the result of Jesus' teaching: "From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more." (John 6:66).

Now Luke tells us that Jesus was alone with His disciples. Matthew and Mark tells us that it was in a region north of Galilee near Caesarea Philippi. Apparently Jesus spent at least a week here with His disciples, because we are told by Matthew and Mark that they had come to the region, then here in Luke 9:28 he writes that some 8 days after this conversation Jesus went up 'the mountain' where He was transfigured.

So this was a time of seclusion far from the multitudes that had been following Jesus around, spent alone with His disciples before going one last time to Jerusalem, where Jesus would be arrested and Crucified.

It seems that this trip was a spiritual preparation, for Jesus Himself, and for the disciples who would need the fortification that this discourse and the heavenly vision they would receive on the Mount would later give them. Part of that preparation was prayer. Luke tells us in 9:18, "**he was alone praying, his disciples were with him.**"

Luke tells us it was at this time that Jesus questioned His disciples. And His first question was, "**Who do the crowds say that I am?**" Jesus did not begin by immediately asking the disciples who they thought He was, but rather who the crowds thought He was.

They all began to suggest answers that they had heard. You see, everyone was talking about Jesus. Luke tells us back in 9:7 that even Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was going on and what people were saying about Jesus. The disciples gave the very same report that Herod heard, "**John the Baptist, but some say Elijah; and others say that one of the old prophets has risen again.**" (9:19).

These answers tell us some important things:

(1) There was no consensus about who Jesus was. People had various views, and it seemed no one was sure who He was. There was no general agreement as to His identity.

(2) There was agreement that Jesus was somehow a man "sent from God." All three of the answers imply that Jesus was viewed as a good man, a man sent from God, and a man of great power.

(3) There was no wide spread belief that Jesus was Israel's Messiah. How can it be that after the testimony of John the Baptist, that of our Lord (through statements, e.g. Luke 4:13-21, and deeds), and even of the demons, that the nation would not grasp the Jesus was the Messiah, and not just a prophet or one sent from God? How could any thinking Jew of that day not conclude that Jesus was the Messiah?

Thus, the fact that the people's answer to our Lord's question does not include any option that He was the Messiah is not surprising. It is not that no one had thought of it, but that once Jesus informed them of the kind of Messiah He was, no one wanted Him as their Messiah. They could accept Him as a prophet sent from God, but not as their Messiah. The disciples' answer shows the fickleness of the crowds and of their acceptance of Jesus.

It's not so different today is it? People will accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, as an example, as a prophet, or a friend. But it is an altogether different thing to say that Jesus is more, that He is the Christ of God.

There is no shortage of opinions today about Jesus. There are a lot of groups and people in our culture who have some strange ideas about Jesus. Let me give you a few quotes from some of these groups:

UNITY: "Jesus is the human man and Christ is the divine ideal."

HARE KRISHNA (New Age): "Christ is considered to be one of a long line of 'ascended masters' who had themselves realized divinity." (He's right up there with Luke Skywalker and Yoda).

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES: "The evidence indicates that the Son of God (Jesus) was known as Michael before he came to earth. Jesus received His messiahship at age 30, on the day of His baptism. Following His ascension, Jesus, once again as Michael the archangel, returned to heaven and sat down at Jehovah's right to await the end of the 'times of the Gentiles.' This means that Jesus Christ began to rule as head of God's heavenly government in 1914."

MORMONS: "Jesus is the among the spirit children of Elohim, the firstborn, to whom all others are juniors. He visited the Israelites or Indians of North America after his resurrection and established the true church among them."

If we were to go around today and ask people who Jesus is we would probably get even more answers than the disciples had heard. Muslims will say that He was a prophet, but that He did not die on the cross or be raised from the dead. Buddhists will gladly call Jesus a "guru" and one of the incarnations of Buddha. Mormons say that Jesus is "a son of God" along with many others. Philosophers may acknowledge Jesus as one of the great minds of the ages. Historians point to him as one of the most influential people that has ever lived. Jesus has been called a first rate teacher, a political activist, and a worker of miracles. Although these answers to the question of who Jesus is may sound wonderful they all fall short of the full truth—the most important truth.

Then in verse 20 Jesus asks the more important question, "**But who do you say that I am?**" **Peter answered and said, "The Christ of God."**

These words of Peter, very concisely put, tell us that Peter recognized Jesus to be God's Messiah. In contrast to the views held by the masses, Peter has come, by means of the revelation of the Father (Matthew 16:17), to recognize that Jesus is the Messiah whom God has sent. Peter's confession is monumental. It is the watershed of the gospels. Let us take a moment to make a few observations about this confession.

The word "Christ" is a title meaning, "anointed king." It's the Greek form of the Hebrew word Messiah, meaning the anointed one. Peter was acknowledging Jesus was the anointed King who fulfilled all the Old Testament prophecies. Then he said, "of God." That tiny preposition "of" is a powerful Greek grammatical expression called a genitive absolute. Peter was saying Jesus not only came "from God" but that He was part "of God."

At this point Jesus "**strictly warned and commanded them to tell this to no one.**" Jesus is the Christ of God. Peter was correct in his confession. But he was incomplete in his understanding. He knew Jesus was the Messiah, but he did not know what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah. Peter's "messiah" was surely not a suffering messiah. Matthew and Mark tells us about Peter's violent reaction to Jesus' disclosure of His imminent rejection, suffering and death. The very same Peter who rejoiced in Christ's identity as Messiah, rejected the possibility of Him being a suffering Savior. Peter's idea of "messiah" was a distorted picture, a messiah of his own hopes and aspirations.

So at this point Jesus begins to clue them in to their future travel itinerary. He said, "**The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.**"(9:22).

Who is the Messiah?

**(1) The one who must suffer.** The cross of the Christ was mandatory. Notice how Jesus uses the word "**MUST**." This was His divine mission. He had to go to Jerusalem to suffer.

**(2) The one who must be rejected.** The cross of Christ involved more than the physical wooden cross, the instrument of His death. Jesus had to suffer the rejection of His people and their leaders. The Lord had to suffer not only the rejection of men, and death on that cross, with all its physical pain, but He had to suffer the alienation from God while bearing the sins of the world. The extent of His suffering is infinitely beyond our ability to grasp.

**(3) The one who must die.** Jesus' death was God's plan for our salvation. It was no accident, or coincidence, it was His whole mission. Leave out the death of Jesus, and you have no Messiah. The Christ had to suffer death on our behalf.

**(4) The one who would be raised to life.** The good news is that Jesus did not stay dead, but destroyed sin and death by His resurrection. The third day He came back from the grave. And now He gives life to all who come to Him in faith.

The question which our Lord asked His disciples is the most important question any man or woman will ever answer. The difference between salvation and condemnation, between heaven and hell is bound up in the answer to the question, "Who is Jesus?" The correct answer is that He is the Son of God, God's Messiah, and my Savior, the one who died on the cross of Calvary, in my place.

At one point or another, every person will have to acknowledge that Jesus is the Messiah of God, the Savior of the world. To answer in this way now is to have eternal life. To wait until later is a vastly different thing. Someday, everyone who has denied Jesus as the Christ will have to acknowledge their error, but when it is too late for salvation:

**Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11).**

This is what every living creature must do, who has rejected Jesus as the Christ of God before His coming to reign and to rule forever. But the good news we proclaim is that men can confess Him as the Christ of God today and be saved from their sins:

**that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." (Romans 10:9-11).**

Just as this question was an individual matter, to be answered by every man, so it is today. Frankly, the view of the masses will never be the right view of Jesus. You must stand apart from the crowds who reject Jesus as the Christ, and in so doing you will find a cross of your own to bear, but this is God's way of salvation. I ask you now, as Jesus asked His disciples, "But you, who do you say Jesus is?"

Can you honestly say, "I believe Jesus is the King and He came from God and is God, that He died for my sins and was resurrected? I believe He has ascended into heaven and is going to come again?" Do you say that because you heard your pastor, your parents or your Sunday School teacher say it? Or is it something you can confess personally, like Peter? That's the first step of discipleship.

In the New Testament, people openly confessed their belief in Jesus by being baptized. Christian baptism is your confession of faith. Have you done that? If not—why not? Look at the strong words of Jesus in verse 26, **"For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father's, and of the holy angels."**