“BUT WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?”

Luke 9:18-26

This is the last of our lessons in the Gospel of Luke. For the past 2 months we’ve been focusing on Jesus’ ministry in Galilee looking at several key events recorded by Luke (left off in Luke 6). This passage is in Luke 9. We have fast-forwarded in time and are now at the end of Jesus’ 3-year ministry. Also Jesus has left Galilee. He has traveled to the northern part of Israel. He and His disciples have come to a place called Caesarea Philippi. We know this from Matthew’s account of this same event (Matt 16). So that sets the stage for this lesson. In a few months Jesus will head down to Jerusalem for the last time where He will be arrested and crucified.

READ Luke 9:18-26

V 18 The narrative opens with Jesus praying. This is His regular habit. He’s talking to His Father. His disciples are in close proximity. When Jesus finishes praying He asks His disciples a question, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” What crowds is Jesus referring to? He is talking about the masses of people who have been following Him around in Galilee and elsewhere. Why do the crowds follow Jesus? Because of the miracles He’s been doing – the healings, raising of the dead, making the lame to walk, the blind to see and the last event Luke records before our passage here is the feeding of a large gathering of people (5,000 men) with just a few loaves and fish. Frankly most people are following Jesus to watch the Jesus show. What’s Jesus going to do next?

But why did Jesus perform miracles? He didn’t do it for entertainment. There was a specific purpose behind His miracles. Two reasons why He performed miracles – first, to show that He was the Messiah prophesied in the O.T. After John the Baptist was thrown into prison by Herod he sent some of his disciples to Jesus to ask Him, “Are you the one who is to come (are you the Messiah), or shall we look for another?” Do you remember how Jesus responded? He said, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.” What Jesus was saying is, “Look at what I’m doing. I’m doing the things that Isaiah 29 and 35 said that the Messiah would do when he came.” So am I the Messiah? Look at the evidence. So that’s one reason why Jesus did miracles, to fulfill Messianic prophecy. But there’s a second reason and that was to validate His claims to be the Son of God, to be God (this is one of the primary reasons the religious leaders wanted to get rid of Jesus, His claim of deity). Jesus didn’t just say He was God, He did things that only God can do. Last week we saw where Jesus restored a man’s withered hand; raising dead people back to life; feeding of the 5,000 where Jesus created food. Only God can do these things. Jesus performed miracles to validate His claims of deity. And He’s been doing this regularly for two and a half years.

So then, according to v 19 who did the crowds say Jesus was? The Messiah? The Son of God? Is that what they said? No, not quite. They speculated that Jesus was some sort of prophet, perhaps even John the Baptist or Elijah or “one of the prophets come back to life.” People by and large really didn’t know what to make of Jesus. They conjectured that He was somebody, perhaps supernatural, perhaps even from heaven, but all their ideas were wrong.

Today most people out there will give you some opinion about Jesus. Very few argue that He was a true historical figure. Here are just a few: “He is the most influential person to have ever lived.” In Islam, Jesus (Isa) is one of God's highest-ranked and most-beloved prophets but not the Son of God. The Baháʼí Faith considers Jesus to be one of many manifestations of God. Scientology says that Jesus was one of many good teachers. Unitarians believe in the moral authority but not necessarily the divinity of Jesus. And on and on we could go. Like I said, there are a lot of opinions about Jesus.

V 20, Jesus now turns to His disciples and He ask them, “But who do YOU say that I am?” Peter speaks up on behalf of the disciples and declares, “The Christ of God.” He says, “You are God’s Messiah” (note: the word Christ means anointed one, a reference to the Messiah). In the Matthew account Peter’s confession is, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Now let me ask you. Was Peter correct? Yes. And Jesus confirms this response is right on the money when He says in Matt 16:17: “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”

So the crowd’s ideas about Jesus were merely speculation, human wisdom and reasoning. No doubt they were influenced by their religious leaders. They had preconceived ideas about the Messiah and, frankly, Jesus didn’t quite fit into their box of an ideal Messiah. The bottom line is that they were wrong about Jesus. He wasn’t just a prophet. He wasn’t just a great moral teacher. On the other hand, Peter and the disciple’s response here is based on divine revelation – God revealed it to them. That’s what Jesus said. And as a result, they got it right.

By the way, the only reason you and I believe in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God isn’t because we are so highly intelligent or that we are just so much smarter than all those unbelievers out there. It’s because God, by His grace, thru the insight given by the Holy Spirit revealed that truth to us and by faith we believed it.

Well, Jesus then does something surprising. READ Luke 9:21.

Why did Jesus command this? Let me give you a couple of reasons. First, the people had wrong ideas about the Messiah. They felt their promised Messiah would be a political king and that He would overthrow the Romans. But that’s not why Jesus came, was it? So Jesus wants to distance Himself from the people’s wrong ideas about Him. That’s part of it. But there is a much more profound reason – this is God’s judgment against an unbelieving nation. For two and half years Jesus has been preaching God’s kingdom and the messages of “repent” and “come unto Me” and “I am the way, the truth and the life.” He’s been making claim after claim to be the One sent from the Father; and then proving He was the Messiah and God by what He said and did; yet apparently the people have rejected the idea that Jesus is who He claims to be. You heard what they said about Jesus – “He is merely a prophet, a good guy, a good teacher. But we don’t believe He’s the Son of God.”

So, after Jesus commands His disciples not to say anything to anyone, He drops a bombshell, v 22: “He, the Son of Man must suffer many things (Isaiah 53 prophesied this about the Messiah) and be rejected by the [Jewish religious leaders] and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” This is all part of God’s plan. The people and even the disciples had a certain expectation of their Messiah. They thought He was going to save them from the Romans and set up His kingdom. But Jesus came for a different reason – to save them from their sins. This is the very first time that Jesus predicts His death and resurrection. He would do it several more times (Luke 9:44, Luke 18:33, John 12:8, John 12:32). This is God’s plan. God’s Messiah will be rejected, will suffer and will die. But then He’ll be raised back to life. And we know that this is exactly what happens.

V 23 thru 26 Jesus summarizes for His disciples the heart of His gospel. God comes into the world and takes on human flesh, Jesus the Son of God. John says in his gospel, “we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). And while He is here He confronts sinners and their sin. He says, “repent,” “believe in Me,” “submit,” “obey” and finally He says, “Follow Me.” And now Jesus lays out what it really means to be a follower of His. Full disclosure. And it is not an easy road. Being a follower of Jesus, becoming a Christian is not easy. Here Jesus lays out the terms, v 23, “If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me.”

“Deny himself” means to die to yourself, leave everything behind. Let me give you a good passage that will help to clarify what this means. First John 2:15-17: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world--the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life--is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.” What Jesus is saying in Luke 9 is that you have to give all that worldly stuff up. Give up the earthly for the heavenly. Trade in the temporal for the eternal. After all, the world and all it contains is passing away. It’s not going to last.

“Take up his cross daily” is a reference to one’s total commitment to Jesus – every day, not just on Sundays. This speaks of a willingness to follow Jesus unconditionally even if it means dying for Him (of the remaining faithful 11 disciples, 10 would die martyrs deaths). Today many Christians around the world give their lives for Jesus. Jesus warned His disciples that persecution for them, for all believers is going to come. Are you willing to stay the course no matter what happens?

“Follow Me.” Obey Me. Do what I tell you.

V 24 the great paradox is that if you want to save your life, you have to be willing to lose it. The process of salvation brings us to a fork in the road. One road, the narrow road has a narrow gate (Jesus). There aren’t very many people on it because you have leave your stuff before you can go down it. If you take that road, not an easy road (steep uphills, jagged rocks, drop-offs, slippery surfaces), but it leads to eternal life, to heaven. Or you can take the other road which is wider, smooth, paved, has a broader gate and a flashing neon sign that says “This way to heaven.” The only problem is the sign is wrong. That road doesn’t lead to heaven. It leads straight to hell. The bottom line is this: if you don’t travel thru Jesus you won’t make it to heaven. Narrow minded teaching? Perhaps. But it is what the Bible teaches.

V 25 addresses the problem people have with leaving their stuff at the gate and following Jesus. The question is, “what does it profit a man,” what good does it do if you could had everything the world has to offer you, material possessions, power, prestige, money, fame, all of the indulgences of the flesh fulfilled – and end up losing your soul and winding up in hell? Going down THAT road is not be a very wise decision.

V 26, following Jesus requires a public confession, an oath of allegiance. In Luke 12 Jesus says, “Everyone who acknowledges Me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, but the one who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God.” Being a Christian is not a clandestine operation. It requires that we openly take a stand for Jesus, that we let people around us know who we are following. A pastor I had once said, “There are no secret agent Christians.”

In closing, admiring Jesus is not enough to be saved (the crowds in Jesus’ day admired Jesus). Serving Jesus is not enough (Judas served as Jesus’ treasurer for 3 plus years). Recognizing Jesus’ deity is not enough (even the demons believe Jesus is God). Fellowship with Jesus’ followers is not enough (in Luke 13 people say, “we ate and drank in Your presence and You taught in our streets.” Jesus’ response is “Depart from Me!”).

The question, “Who do YOU say that Jesus is?” requires a response. It’s the most important question ever. And the way each person answers that question will determine their eternal destination. How are we saved? How do we go down the right road? Romans 10:9-10: “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”

Make no mistake about it. Being a Christian is a commitment for life. That great hymn of invitation says it well: “I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back… Though none go with me, I still will follow… My cross I'll carry, till I see Jesus… The world behind me, the cross before me… no turning back, I’ll follow Him.”