

The Identity of Jesus and His Followers

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[0 : 00] Father, we pray that you would give us ears to hear, minds to focus and understand, and hearts that might live in light of the truths you teach us today.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, in life we meet all sorts of questions from ones that are not all that important, like what are we going to do for lunch after church today?

What am I doing? Oh no, we're having people around. Good, I'm all organised. Two more important questions, like will I have enough superannuation to retire?

Well, that's an important one, isn't it? It has big implications, it can change everything. Will I get this job, or that job? Will I keep my job? Do I move house or state? Those questions can change everything.

I asked Michelle a pretty important question about 20 years ago, the question, will you marry me? I was so nervous she kept asking if I was okay, and when I finally plucked up the courage to get down on one knee and pop the question, she laughed.

[1 : 16] Not the response I was looking for. Of course, she did say yes to that important question, and my life has never been the same again. For the better.

Is she here? No? She's on creche. Well, today we come to what I think is probably the most crucial of all questions that we'll meet in life.

And it's the question of Jesus' identity. Who is Jesus? Or in his words, who do you say that Jesus is? Now, this question has always been there in Matthew's book or Matthew's Gospel.

But it's been just beneath the surface, only sometimes coming up for air. So in chapter 8, verse 27, when Jesus calms the storm, you might remember the disciples say, what kind of man is this, or who is this, that even the wind and the waves obey him?

And then in chapter 12, when Jesus heals a man who has a demon, and the man is able to speak and hear again, the people start to ask, you know, who is this? Could this man be the son of David?

[2 : 26] And that is, the son of David is the king, the Messiah, the Christ. And we heard that in our first reading, where God promised to raise up a son from King David, and his throne would last forever.

And that son of David would also be known as the son of God. He would be the Messiah, the Christ. His kingdom would rule forever. And people are saying, could Jesus be that person? But for the most time, in Matthew's book, the question of who is Jesus has just sat there below the surface, just in the background, until today.

And it starts with the Pharisees and the Sadducees requesting a sign from Jesus to prove who he is. So point 1, verse 1, Then the Pharisees and the Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven.

In other words, they're saying, show us a sign from heaven to prove that you, Jesus, are from heaven, that you are from God, that you are God's sent king, the Messiah, the Christ, the son of David, the son of God.

Now, at first glance, this seems like a reasonable request. I mean, if someone is claiming to be the king, then you want them to back it up, don't you? And so asking for a sign seems like a reasonable thing.

[3 : 48] Except for three things here. First, we're told that the Pharisees and Sadducees actually come together to make this request. Now, these two groups of people despised each other.

So to see them working together like this should ring alarm bells. It's kind of like if we hear that the Labour Party and the Liberal Party are working together. Or if the footy rivals of Collingwood and Carlton are working together.

Or if Collingwood, if anyone was working together. Alarm bells should be ringing. Second thing, Matthew actually tells us that they have an ulterior motive, doesn't he?

In verse 1 he says they came to test Jesus. And we know the test was in order to try and prove that he was not the Messiah, that he was not the king. And third, Jesus has already actually given them plenty of signs, which they've refused to accept.

And so this request for one more sign, it's not really a genuine request in order to believe. It's actually an excuse so they don't have to believe.

[4 : 52] Have a look at verses 2 and 4. 2 to 4. You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. And so Jesus left them and went away. You see, these Pharisees and Sadducees, they have minds.

They can interpret the signs in the sky. They can draw logical conclusions about whether it might be good weather or bad weather, depending on what they see, overcasts or not.

They can draw logical conclusions for what they see, but they can't seem to do it with Jesus. We can draw logical conclusions about people from what we see. We saw it with the kids talk, didn't we? Or take this example.

If I said, who am I? I wear a blue uniform. I drive a car with sirens. I arrest bad guys. Who am I? You would say? A police person. Yeah. Police officer. And it's as though Jesus is saying, you can interpret the signs of the sky, but you've seen me heal the blind, the mute, the crippled, the paralyzed, the demon-possessed.

[6 : 10] You've heard about my feeding of the 5,000, curing leprosy, raising the dead. You yourselves have witnessed my teaching about the kingdom. All these things associated with the Messiah, the king. And then you say, oh, but just give us one more sign.

It's almost meant to be comical. But actually, it's sheer stubbornness. Because this request shows they have refused to listen to all those signs.

And so Jesus calls them wicked and adulterous, just like Israel was in the Old Testament when they refused to listen to God. And if they refuse to listen to all these signs already, then one more won't make a difference.

They've already made up their minds about Jesus. And so the request for one more sign is simply an excuse not to believe. It's kind of like when my kids have to go to bed. They say, I just need to do one more thing.

And they do it. And then they say, I just need to do one more thing. And then they do it. And then say it again. They don't need to do anything. They just use it as an excuse not to go to bed. Well, here the Pharisees and Sadducees, they're using this one more sign as an excuse not to believe.

[7 : 15] And so Jesus says, you're not going to get anything. No sign except the sign of Jonah. What is the sign of Jonah? Well, Jesus has actually told us already.

So if you're in your Bibles, turn back two pages to chapter 12, verse 38. Turn back two pages, left-hand side, under the heading, the sign of Jonah. Verse 38.

Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, without the Sadducees this time, Teacher, we want to see a sign from you. He answered, a wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

And here's the explanation. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, So the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

See what Jesus is saying? Just as Jonah had a metaphoric kind of swallowing up in death by the fish and was kind of buried in the fish for three days and then was vomited back to life, so to speak.

[8 : 20] Well, the Son of Man, Jesus, is literally going to die, be buried, and then on the third day, rise again. In other words, the sign of Jonah is next weekend.

It's that very first Easter. The sign of Jesus' death and resurrection. And this sign is not just for them, but it's for us too, that we might know who Jesus is.

You see, people have still asked me from time to time, or they've still said, Look, if God just showed me a sign, then I would believe. I don't know if anyone's ever said that to you. They've said it to me. And sometimes we can even wish for a sign ourselves.

Or we can wish that if only God would show my friend or my family member a sign so that they might believe. But the thing is, God already has.

He's given the greatest of signs, the sign of Jonah, the sign we celebrate next weekend, the sign of Jesus' death and resurrection for which we have evidence. I mean, take the resurrection alone.

[9 : 24] Perhaps the greatest sign of who Jesus is. We have such evidence that a renowned Jewish historian, not a Christian, a Jewish historian, said this on the next slide. He says, In purely logical terms, the resurrection of Jesus is the lesser of two evils for all who seek a rational explanation.

And what he's saying is the resurrection is the logical conclusion for all the evidence we have. This is a non-Christian saying this. The resurrection is the logical conclusion from all the evidence we have.

He doesn't want to believe it, which is why he calls it an evil. But it's less evil than being irrational and illogical like the Pharisees. Of course, God may graciously choose to give people a sign or a vision or a dream.

But we already have enough to draw a logical conclusion about who Jesus is and so believe in him. It's just that people don't want to.

Like the Pharisees, they come up with an excuse not to believe. Oh, look, we just need one more sign. And so Jesus warns his disciples against his teaching that ignores the signs and refuses to accept Jesus for who he is as king.

[10 : 35] So point to verse 5, chapter 16, verse 5. When they went across the lake, the disciples forgot to take bread. Be careful, Jesus said to them. Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

They discussed this among themselves and said, oh, it's because we didn't bring any bread. Aware of their discussions, Jesus asked, you of little faith. Why are you talking amongst yourselves about having no bread?

Do you still not understand? And don't you remember who I am? You know, don't you remember the five loaves for the 5,000 and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the 4,000 and how many basketfuls you gathered?

How is it you don't understand that I was not talking about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Then they understood that he was not telling them about guarding against yeast in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

Notice here we're told three times to be on guard. Three times be on guard against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

[11 : 42] So this teaching must be pretty dangerous, wasn't it? So what is it? Well, the Pharisees and the Sadducees not only despised each other, but they hardly taught anything the same.

What's more, on the next slide, up here on Mark 8, in Mark, he adds these words from Jesus, watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod, King Herod. And so you've got these three groups that the disciples are to be on guard against.

So what teaching is the same for Herod and the Pharisees and the Sadducees? What is it that is the same that they're to be on guard from? Well, the only thing it can be is the teaching that Jesus is not the King.

Remember, Herod thought Jesus was possessed by John's spirit back in chapter 14. The Pharisees and the Sadducees, they've just come to Jesus to test him, to prove that he's not the King, the Messiah. And so I take it this is the common teaching that the disciples are to guard against.

The teaching that says Jesus is not the King. Why guard against it? Well, because it's easy to forget it. It's easy to doubt that Jesus is the King.

[12 : 52] I mean, the world says he's not. And sometimes we feel like he's not, if we're honest. And other times we act like he's not. I mean, take the disciples.

Verse 7, they thought the issue was that they forgot bread. But in 9 and 10, verses 9 and 10, what they've really forgotten is who Jesus is. That he fed all those people with hardly anything.

And there was abundance left over. And so he's saying, don't you remember who I am? I'm the King who provides abundantly for my people. So I can certainly provide bread for you lot.

I'm not talking about bread. You see, the disciples forgot who Jesus is. And in so doing, they acted as though he was not the King who provides. And to act like he's not the King, it's actually to not have faith in him.

Do you notice how Jesus starts in verse 8? When they acted like this, Jesus says, you of little faith. Or better, no faith.

[13:53] At that moment. For at that moment, they doubted who Jesus was. And so they were faithless. You see, it's easy to forget who Jesus is.

And to act as though he's not the King. And so to be faithless in that moment. But this warning is not just for them, it's for us too. Because we can forget who Jesus is, can't we?

We can act like he's not the King. We can be faithless. And it's dangerous because moments of faithlessness can turn into a lifetime of faithlessness.

And as we saw last week, it's faith in Jesus that's the difference between being accepted by God or rejected by God. So be on your guard, says Jesus.

So that the false teaching of these Pharisees will not spread like yeast throughout their lives. For Jesus really is God's forever King. Point three, verse 13.

[14:49] When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked the disciples, Who do people say that he, the Son of Man, is? They replied, Some say John the Baptist.

Others say Elijah. And still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. But what about you? Jesus asked. Who do you say I am?

Simon Peter answered, You are the Messiah. The Son of the living God. Here we come to the climax of this first part of Matthew's Gospel.

In verse 21, with that phrase, Verse 21, From that time on, Matthew moves from who Jesus is to what it means for him to be the King.

That is, that he has to suffer and die and three days later rise again. But here, in these verses, the question of who Jesus is, which has always been in the background, for most of the time, has been brought to the foreground.

[15:53] Because Jesus, for the first time, asks his disciples directly, who do you say I am? And Peter, acting as a spokesperson for the others, declares with more clarity and confidence than ever before, You are the King, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Peter is saying that Jesus is God's promised King, the forever King, who will rule forever, who has all authority over all people for all time.

And if this is true, then it changes everything. Because it means that Jesus is now the one that we are to all answer to.

And Jesus is the one we are now all to live for. Jesus is now the one who sets our agenda for all of our life. And whether we realize it or not, he is the one everyone will one day answer to.

And if he is the forever King, then his kingdom will last forever. So his kingdom is the one that is worth being part of. Do you see how crucial a question this is? A little while after Michelle and I were married, there was other questions being asked about kids and timing and so on.

[17:10] And that's a crucial question because kids really do change everything. I'm not sure I said yes, but anyway. But the answer to this question of who Jesus is changes everything, not just for this life, but for the life to come.

For eternity. And yet it's not an answer that we can come to by ourselves. See verse 17? Jesus says, Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, by, you know, human reason, but by my Father in heaven.

You see, while Peter himself has interpreted the signs and has come to this logical conclusion about who Jesus is, Jesus actually says, Well, you know what? It's ultimately God who has enabled you to do this.

It means, by the way, that no matter how many signs people see, God is ultimately the one who enables people to believe. Which is why we need to keep praying for people.

But because God has revealed this to Peter and the disciples, they are incredibly blessed, he says.

For they recognize who Jesus is. They believe he is the king. And so they are part of God's kingdom.

[18:26] And not just part of the kingdom, but also the ones through whom Jesus will build his kingdom, his church. See verse 18? He says, And I tell you that you are Peter, which the footnote says means rock.

And on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

And then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah yet. It's interesting, by the way, here in our first reading, we heard that the son of David, the son of God, will be the one who will build a house for God's name, the temple.

And here is the ultimate son of God. And he's going to build God's house, the temple, by building the church. See, the church is God's temple. And he says he will build it on this rock.

This rock, I know some churches say it's just Peter alone. And so if you can trace your genealogy from the person Peter all the way down to a person like the Pope, then you have the keys of the kingdom.

[19 : 44] And the church is built on you, and what you say determines what the church does. Even more than God's word, actually. That's the Roman Catholic teaching. But notice when Jesus says this.

He says it of Peter after Peter is enabled by God to confess Jesus as king. In other words, Peter is the rock only insofar as he's been given the truth about Jesus.

And so I take it, Jesus will build his church upon his disciples. Peter was the spokesperson for the disciples. He will build his church upon his disciples who are enabled to declare him as the king, the Messiah.

And the keys of the kingdom, well, they refer to the gospel message the disciples will receive. At the moment, they know Jesus is the king, but in verse 21, they will also be told what it means for Jesus to be the king, that he will suffer and die and on the third day be raised to life.

In other words, Jesus will give them the full gospel to proclaim. The message that Jesus is both king and saviour. And it's this gospel message that are the keys to the kingdom.

[20 : 56] For it's this gospel message that unlocks the kingdom and enables people to come in, to enter it. And it's exactly what we see at the end of Matthew's gospel and in the early church.

Jesus sending out his disciples, not just Peter, but his disciples to make disciples of all nations, to build his church. How? By teaching the gospel. And notice in verse 18 that not even the gates of Hades, not even death itself will stop the growth of Jesus' church.

Not ISIS, not this so-called safe schools program, not any government, nothing will stop the growth of Christ's church. And it does, it continues to grow.

For if Jesus is the forever king of God's forever kingdom, then this kingdom will prevail. It will win.

Well, I said at the start that we all meet different questions in life.

And some of these questions we think are important at the time, but are not. So for our kids at the moment, they are asking every mealtime, is there dessert? And if the answer is no, then apparently life is no longer worth living.

[22 : 07] You see, there are some questions we might feel are important, but are not. Yet on the flip side, there are some questions that we forget are important, but really are critical.

And the most critical question of them all, the most crucial question of them all, is, who do you say Jesus is? for your answer will determine where you spend eternity.

So who do you say Jesus is? Do you believe him to be the forever king who died and rose again? The one who at the cross paid for your sins so that we could be forgiven and welcomed into God's family, God's kingdom?

Or, like the Pharisees, have you seen the signs and just refused to accept them? It's a crucial question. As I said, it will shape not only this life, but the life to come.

It's the difference between heaven and hell. So do you, who do you say Jesus is? For those of us who do believe that Jesus is both king and saviour, then three quick things.

[23 : 16] First, do we realise how incredibly blessed we are? For this is not something that we have worked out all on our own, but something God has enabled us to believe. And not because of anything we deserve or anything we have done to earn it, but because God has kindly revealed it to us.

And now we get to have forgiveness whenever we ask. We get to be part of God's family and receive care from one another. We get to have the certain hope of glory before us. I mean, people spend millions and millions of dollars trying to defeat death every year.

God gives it to us for free. We will die and rise again. All because God chose to reveal to us the true identity of Jesus, enabled us to believe in him. So do we realise how blessed we are?

Secondly, do we realise that we have the keys to the kingdom? For now that God has revealed to us who Jesus is, now that we know the gospel message that he is both king and saviour, we have

the keys to let people into the kingdom.

So the question is, will we use them? Will we do what we can to share the gospel? I mean, Easter is coming up next weekend. Why not pray for an opportunity to say something to someone this week? [24 : 35] Michelle's godmother is a lady called Elizabeth and every Easter she gives her grandkids Easter eggs and none of her children or grandchildren are Christians, sadly. She uses them an Easter egg with a sticker that says simply, Jesus is risen.

She cannot say any more than that because if you have relatives who do not believe, then anything you say is often disregarded. She is seen by her grandchildren as old grandma.

She still believes in those fairy tales. But you see, she's seeking to do what she can to use her keys, share the gospel so that the kingdom might be unlocked for her children and grandchildren.

And thirdly and finally, will we continue to live with Jesus as our king? Will we guard against that teaching of the Pharisees that says he's not the king? Because it's easy to doubt, isn't it?

I mean, when we see things on the news and when we suffer things in life, it's easy to doubt that Jesus is the king. So we have to be on guard against those doubts, against that teaching that falsely says he's not.

[25 : 43] How? Well, keep reading the Bible. Keep coming to church. Keep reflecting on the evidence. Keep interpreting the signs. Keep reminding ourselves of who Jesus is and what he's done for us.

So that false teaching of the Pharisees will not spread like yeast throughout our lives, but instead that we'll joyfully keep serving him. I was speaking with a lady on Friday, I think it was, Thursday or Friday, who's going through, a lady from our church who's going through a tough time at the moment, and the conversation started off very negative.

Negative about the church, negative about God, negative about other Christians and so on. And so I listened and I spoke about the truths that we find in scripture.

I tried to remind her of who Jesus is and what he's done for us. And by the end of the conversation, she actually said to me, I needed that. Thank you. I've forgotten who Jesus is.

Nothing to do with me. It's just remembering who he is. That we might not let that yeast spread in our lives, but we might keep serving him. In the words of our next song, the things of earth I leave behind to live in worship of my king.

[26 : 58] His is the right to rule my life and mine is the joy to live for him. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this crucial question that we see asked and answered today.

This question of who Jesus is. Father, we pray that you would help us to keep remembering this truth that he is both King and Saviour. And so continue to keep living not for ourselves, but for King Jesus who died for us and was raised again.

We ask it in his name. Amen.