

Mark 7:31-8:33

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Preacher: Rev. Jordan Senner

[0 : 0 0] Well, from the children's talk, it looks like we are training a whole fleet of little theologians. David told me that now I need to come up here and explain the doctrine of the Trinity, which I will not be doing. I will leave that to him for next week.

But Will was right. The question that Jesus poses here, right in the center of the gospel, is the defining question of the gospel. And not only of the gospel, it's the defining question of every Christian life, and I would dare say it's the defining question of every human life.

Chapter 8, verse 29, who do you say that I am? And Jesus, in his goodness and graciousness and his wisdom and his love for us, does not allow us to sit on the fence on that question.

Who do you say that I am? In a world of competing opinions, he does not allow us to skirt the question, and he does not allow his disciples here to settle for a comfortable pluralism. He looks at them directly at the face in each one of us, and he says, who do you say that I am?

It's a deeply personal question. And it doesn't matter where we're coming from in life, whether we come here today skeptical or seeking or well-settled in the Christian faith, or whether we come here unchurched or de-churched or churched for a long time, you will never be asked or have to answer a more important question for your life than, who do you say that I am?

[1 : 3 1] I was struck by the uniqueness of this. On Friday, I was at this kind of trendy coffee shop. I'm learning that Vancouver has a few of these. It's scattered throughout the city, about every other shop.

And I was in one of them, which I was loving. And I was standing in line behind a woman who, as she was paying, I saw that she had a book, a little book.

She was going to get a coffee and read her book, and it said Natural Essence. And this intrigued me. I said, ooh, what does that mean? Is this a spiritual book on spirituality?

Is this a book on philosophy? And so I just asked her. I said, that's a really fascinating title. Can you tell me what interests you in it? She goes on to tell me that, she says, well, it's really about how none of us have an individual personal essence.

It's all about how we're actually part of one essence, which is called nature. And the whole world, from the rocks and the trees to you and me, is one flow of energy in which all things are animated by and essentially connected to one thing.

[2 : 4 1] And so she said, really, we're kind of all the same when it comes down to it. It was a highly mystical view of the world, but also it struck me a highly impersonal one.

And I wish I could have sat down with her and had coffee. I don't think she was interested in doing it, but I wish I could have. But it highlighted for me the uniqueness of the Christian story and this question that Jesus asked us.

We're talking about a personal God who created all things by the power of his word, personal speech, who comes down as a human person, draws near to people like you and I, and asks a very personal question of each one of us, who do you say that I am?

And one of the marvels of the gospel of Mark is that Mark tells us at the very beginning and at the very end of the gospel what the answer to that question should be. At the very beginning, he says, the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Peter confesses Jesus is the Christ here. The Son of God. And then in Mark chapter 15, verse 29, as Jesus breathes his last breath and his corpse is hanging on the cross, the sincerian cries out, truly this man was the Son of God.

[3 : 5 5] And so from beginning to end, Mark makes it really clear to the reader what the answer to this question should be. And yet everything in between, all the characters that are interacting with Jesus, show that it is anything but clear to the people who are actually traveling with Jesus.

On the one hand, you have all these people that are hostile to Jesus and see him as a threat and want to do away with him. They want more proof in order for him to prove themselves to him. On the other hand, you have all these people, you have about 13 of them in the gospel of Mark, who see in Jesus their Savior. They know their desperate need and he is the only source of hope and they come to him for healing and for fresh life.

And then in between is where you get the disciples, oscillating back and forth between belief and unbelief. And I think the beauty of the gospel of Mark is that it gives us clarity about what the answer should be to this question, but it recognizes that each one of us in our journey of faith never have that sort of clarity.

because Jesus has to help us grow into it. Jesus has to help us grow into it. Who do you say that I am?

[5 : 07] It's the central question of the gospel. It's the central question of our lives. It's the central question of every human life. And I think the key to answering it, we can't cover all of it, is what comes before the question and what comes after.

In chapters 6 through 8, about two and a half chapters before the question, Jesus is teaching about the bread. You have to understand the bread in order to understand how to answer Jesus' question. And then the two and a half chapters after the question, Jesus teaches all about the cross. You have to understand the cross in order to understand the question. Because the question is the culmination of everything that's come before and it is the catalyst for everything that will come after. So we're going to begin with the bread. You must understand the bread in order to understand, answer Jesus' question. Did you talk about this last week, David?

Yeah. Was this part of your sermon? Yeah, it seemed to be. Yeah, yeah, this is good. Chapters 6 through 8, all about bread. Go on this journey with me. Feeding of 5,000 people, 12 baskets full of bread.

[6 : 22] Mention of the bread after Jesus walks on water and the disciples are totally afraid. And it says their hearts were hard because they didn't understand the bread. It's kind of an interesting place to put that.

The Sarephoenician woman comes to Jesus and says, yeah, I'm not worthy to be at the table, but even the crumbs that fall from the children's bread, I'd be happy with.

Jesus warns of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Herodians. The disciples forget their bread.

There's the feeding of the 4,000. And then there's Jesus questioning the disciples, saying, don't you understand this whole bread thing?

Throughout chapters 6 through 8, bread is a picture of the power and the abundance of the grace of Jesus Christ towards a world that is deeply hungry and in need. It's a grace that fills and nourishes and satisfies and sustains.

I think this is why Jesus warns about the leaven of the Pharisees and the Herodians. Because in verse 11, we see that the Pharisees come and begin to argue with Jesus, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him.

[7 : 32] And Jesus, after sighing deeply in his spirit, he says, why does this generation seek a sign? Truly I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.

And then Jesus moves on. And then Jesus warns his disciples, be careful of this leaven. See, ultimately, I think the request of the Pharisees is about control.

They come to Jesus and they see the things that he's doing, but what they're really interested in is they're interested in Jesus doing things on their terms. And Jesus does not bend his will to their agendas or their manipulation because he sees that they are motivated by control.

And the Pharisees and Herodians have been motivated by this from the very beginning. Chapter 3, verse 6. They're wanting to get rid of Jesus because they desire to be in control and maintain control and place the boundaries of God's power and grace.

It's this mindset that Jesus says that is like yeast or leaven. You put just a little bit of it in the dough and eventually it is so toxic or so active it will work its way through the whole dough and affect the whole person and the whole community.

[8 : 45] Because a controlling mindset or heart posture has no place for grace. No place for what we do not earn or what we cannot achieve.

No place for gift or gratitude. No place for abundance or thankfulness. It is a mindset and a heart attitude totally at odds with the gospel of Christ where nothing is earned and everything is freely

received.

And so Jesus warns them. He says, do not be like the Pharisees and the Herodians. But Jesus presses the disciples even further because while the Pharisees and Herodians want to control the power and abundance of Jesus' grace, Jesus' disciples are blind to the power and abundance of Jesus' grace.

Verse 51. Oh, sorry, not verse 51. Verse 16 of chapter 8. And they began discussing with one another that they had no bread and Jesus, aware of this, said to them, why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread?

Do you not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes, do you not see? Having ears, do you not hear? Throughout the gospel of Mark, he uses lots of different images for faith.

[10:01] Seeing, hearing, perceiving, understanding, following, coming after. It's all the language of faith. Do you not remember when I broke the loaves, the five loaves for the 5,000, how many baskets full of broken pieces there were?

And the seven for the 4,000, how many baskets full of broken pieces there were? And so Jesus is highlighting for his disciples this bread issue over and over again.

How much bread have you seen me produce over the course of the last three chapters or three years of your life? The point is this.

There's something about what the bread symbolizes that the disciples can't see. There's something about what the bread symbolizes that the disciples can't see about Jesus' life.

It's like they have spiritual cataracts. They have a lack of clarity about Jesus' generosity, and it clouds their vision of who he really is. Because unless we see Jesus as the one who is abundant in grace, and Paul is great in this.

[11:09] I love this about Paul. All of his letters trying to impress upon us the abundance of the good news, that it is good news of great joy for all the people. Because Paul does not settle with just saying, God was merciful towards us.

He says, God was rich in mercy. Paul doesn't settle with just saying, God loves us. He says, oh, the great love with which he loved us. Paul doesn't settle with just saying, oh, God's been gracious to us.

No, he talks about the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness toward us. He doesn't just settle with saying, oh, God's powerful towards us. He says, the immeasurable greatness of God's power toward us who believe.

And I think that's part of the point here. Part of the point is that the Christian life is a bit like holding a little paper cup at the bottom of Niagara Falls.

Christ supplies more than we could ever possibly capture, and more than we could ever possibly need. There is a surplus of grace in the kingdom of God.

[12:19] And we struggle with hardness of heart because we want to control it. We want it to be on our terms. And we struggle with blindness because so often there are seasons and circumstances in our life where, man, it's really hard for us to see it.

And so one of the searching questions that I think comes out of this question of Jesus for us is what is it that blinds us to the abundance of God's grace in our lives? What is it that makes us forgetful or want to control?

What is it that prevents us from ever trusting it in the first place? One of the great gospel hopes of our passage is that Jesus, in his abundance, has the power to heal our insensitivity to his grace. He can heal our blindness. And our deafness and our muteness. And this is part of the purpose of the story of the healing of the blind man in chapter 8, verses 22 to 26.

It holds out hope to us who are blind. Hope to us who have spiritual cataracts. Because it says to us, Jesus has the power to restore sight. It's a picture of salvation.

[13:38] The power of Jesus persistently and patiently and progressively restoring someone's sight and enabling them to have a clear view of the abundance of his grace. It's also what the story of the healing of the deaf and mute men is about.

It holds out hope to us that Jesus can open our ears to hear his word, and Jesus can loose our tongues in order to proclaim his praise. It's a picture of liberation.

The point is this. The power and abundance of Jesus' grace can overcome our blindness to the power and abundance of Jesus' grace. When I was here at St. John's previously, I had the privilege

of helping lead Ecclesia, the kind of young adult university group.

And there was a young grad student who was going to UBC studying theoretical physics. I never knew what he was talking about. It was great. He then went on to Paris to do a PhD in theoretical physics.

Got a lot of those type of people. And he was from Mauritius, a little island country off the coast of East Africa. He started attending Ecclesia because he was looking for community.

[14:53] And we had a meal together every week, and he thought that was great. After about six months of being there, I said, I said, Hey, mate, you want to get coffee once a week and read the Gospel of Luke?

He's like, Yeah, that sounds good. So, he's not a Christian. So, we start reading the Gospel of Luke one chapter at a time. And it was amazing to see how he responded to this. But about halfway through the Gospel of Luke, I said, Hey, we've been reading this for like two months now, but I've got to ask you a question like, who do you say Jesus is?

Not just what everybody in the Gospel is thinking about him, but you personally. How are you grappling with this? He said, I like Jesus. He does all things well. He seems like a really great guy. I would love to know him. But I can't follow him. Because if I follow him, that means I'm going to be rejected by my Hindu family at home. And that's a cost that's too much to bear.

And when I left St. John's, that's where he still was. I knew him for about two years. I'm at Scotland for about a year or two, and I get a phone call. And from Paris, it's funny how things move around the world.

[16:05] Geopolitical evangelism. But, he says, Hey, I just want to tell you, I've become a Christian. I'm like, what made the penny drop?

What made the difference? He said, I joined another Bible study when I got to Paris. Some Christians. And we were reading the same Gospel. But this time, I saw the abundance of Christ. He said, it might cost me to follow him. But with Jesus, there is far more abundance than there was cost. Because with him, everything is grace. And grace changes everything.

And I can, you know, you can tell just sometimes by the joy and buoyancy in somebody's voice. It's coming from a deep place. It's a marvelous thing when the penny drops and we discover the abundance and the power of God's grace in our lives.

But how is it that Jesus reveals that power and abundance to us who are spiritually blind? How does that happen? Well, in the Gospel of Mark, and this leads us to our second point, it's by teaching them about the cross.

[17:19] That's where the whole Gospel of Mark is heading. Now, it's true that the rest of the New Testament bears witness to the inward work of the Holy Spirit, to bring conviction and confession and conversion.

But the Holy Spirit does this in the Gospel of Mark by opening our eyes to see the unfolding of God's magnificent and gracious and powerful plan for the redemption of the world in the cross of Jesus Christ.

And this is precisely where Jesus is taking his disciples for the next three chapters. He says, who do I say I am? You need to understand the bread and you need to understand my death. Verse 29, or verse 30, and he strictly charged them to tell no one that he was the Christ.

Then verse 31, and he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again. There's four things, suffer, rejected, killed, rise. Verse 32, he said this plainly. It's not trying to be obscure here.

[18:23] And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. Can you imagine feeling that strongly? Maybe sometimes you have in your life wanting to rebuke Jesus.

But turning and seeing his disciples, verse 33, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, get behind me, Satan, for you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.

Your vision is not God's vision of the world. It is a very small human perspective. Now there is so much gold packed into this passage.

This could be a whole sermon in and of itself, but I'm just going to highlight two little nuggets. First, is Jesus does not bend his will to any human agenda or expectation about what he should be or do or not be and do.

Think about this. Peter is like his primary chosen disciple. He's going to be the ringleader afterwards, and Jesus is not going to bend his will to what Peter thinks he should do.

[19 : 35] Note that little word, must. The Son of Man must suffer many things. Jesus, throughout his life, and we'll see as he goes towards the cross, has this palpable sense of what the Father has called him to do, of what the Father has given him to do.

That's why Jesus is always tucking away from the crowds to get away by himself, because he wants to make sure he knows precisely what the Father says you must do amidst all the things that are competing and claiming and clamoring for your life.

And I think this is a wonderful thing that encourages trust for us, because you cannot trust someone whose will is constantly dictated by the expectations and opinions of those around them, because they'll constantly be a shifting target.

But Jesus shows us here in his unwavering commitment to the salvific will of his heavenly Father alone that he is supremely trustworthy. He will not be deterred from what the Father has given him to do.

He has come to save, and save he will. And so I think this is a rich word of strong assurance for us. The second nugget is that according to Jesus, to set your mind on the things of God is to set your mind on his suffering, his rejection, his death, and his resurrection.

[21 : 02] Truly, this was the Son of God, said the centurion. And so to be heavenly-minded is not to constantly be living in the clouds. To be heavenly-minded is to think on these particular earthly events in the life of Jesus Christ and see in them the triumph of God's grace over all forms of sin and death.

That's why the secrecy theme is so prevalent throughout the Gospel of Mark. Did you notice in our passage, like every time somebody's healed or seems to get something right, Jesus keeps saying, now be quiet, don't tell anybody about this.

Or even when he does his healings, he pulls people out of the public eye so that it doesn't get large acclaim. I think it's because Jesus is constantly wanting people to understand his identity and mission in light of the cross.

And he wants them to wait to see and witness and hear about that moment before they finally come to a judgment about the question, who do you say that I am?

Because it's in that moment, the moment of scarcity, the moment when it seems like he's abandoned by everyone that loves him, the moment when it seems like he has no power, it's the deepest of injustices, that the extravagance of the love and grace of God for the world is actually being poured out.

[22 : 23] And so it's not until we see the cross, it's not until we hear that word, it's not until we see it from God's point of view and from the inner purity and holiness of Jesus that we will come to understand the abundance of the grace that Jesus has come to give.

Who do you say that I am? It's a simple yet searching question. And wherever you come from today, you may have lots of questions that you're asking in your life.

Like, why am I here? Why me? Why this suffering and anxiety? Why this identity crisis or this career crisis?

Any number of questions that each one of us are bearing in the inner depths of our hearts as we come here. And I want to submit to you that no question will have a greater impact on whatever question that you're asking here today than that question, who do you say that I am?

Because if you understand the bread and you understand the cross, it totally reframes and transforms whatever other question you come here on your heart and mind today.

[23 : 44] My brothers and sisters, I speak these things to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen.