

# The All-Important Question

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 07 April 2019

Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

- [ 0 : 0 0 ]     He's showing us who Jesus is, and he has been showing his disciples who he is. And the next part will be showing us how this Jesus will be the one to suffer and die for the world.
- And as we've been going through this part of Matthew and seeing who Jesus is for us and for the world, think of what the number one question is as you start the journey of knowing God.
- What is the most important question that must be answered? Is it what is truth? Or is it who is God? Or what is humanity all about?
- Or how should we live? It might be, is there a purpose to life? What is the purpose for life? Or the question might be, who is my neighbor that I must love?
- These are all tremendous questions, and they're questions that come up in the gospel, in the New Testament. And each of them is very, very important. But none is more important than Jesus' question that we hear today.
- [ 1 : 1 4 ]     Who do you say that I am? And that's what we're going to talk about in this sermon, from this passage. Who do you say that Jesus is?
- That is the big question, the all-important question, because it searches our hearts and our minds. And to answer it rightly means that God's truth will change your life.
- This is the question, if you encounter Jesus, if you hear about him, and the answer to that question, if it is the true answer, means that you come into the place of God's blessing.
- You know his life. Now the problem is that there are distortions in this life. There are things in our life, around us, that blur, that distort the answer to that question.
- Catherine and I, this past Friday, did some late season skiing, spring skiing up at Whistler. And it was a marvelous day.
- [ 2 : 1 6 ]     It was beautiful. The mountains were just wonderful to see and to be surrounded by. At the end of the day, towards the end of the day, it started snowing.
- It was wet snow that kind of turned to rain at the end of the run. And what happens when there's wet snow, for me, is that my goggles start to cloud over.
- And things look very distorted. You can see a bunch of snowflakes and things through that very dimly. And so I started my run going down, and I was very thankful that there were no people on these runs.
- It was empty up at Whistler, because I think I would have hit them. So I was sort of skiing by faith, and in the middle of the run, I stopped, and I finally took a cloth and wiped my goggle.
- Well, of course, everything became clear. The beauty of the mountains, what I could see in my way before me, was made perfectly clear. And I think that this is a picture of this passage today, because we are going to see two things that distort a clear vision of the beauty of Jesus, of who he really is, and our way forward with him.

[ 3 : 33 ] We are going to see that wonderfully come at the end of the passage, though, that the vision is cleared, that the distortions are taken away, and there is this clear confession of who Jesus is in Peter's words.

So I want to talk about the two things that distort kind of the goggles of the eyes of our heart. And the first thing that distorts a true answer to Jesus' question, who do you say that I am, is a heart that rejects Jesus.

That is what distorts. We see this in the Pharisees and the Sadducees in verses 1 through 4. If you turn to the passage, these people were very different from each other.

They were like two political parties. And we've seen this, of course, in our life today, what that can look like. That's nothing new. The Sadducees were the aristocracy of Israel.

They were the political power elite. They worked with the Romans pretty closely. They were happy with taking on the secular thinking of the day, the Greek thinking.

[ 4 : 46 ] And they also, though, maintained the temple life and the ceremonies. The Pharisees, on their other hand, were the blue-collar party. And they were a movement.

They were a movement that actually and literally was a self-righteous movement. Because they were all about, as you know, living a very moral and perfectionist life.

Keeping the letter of the law and all of the traditions around it as well. They were like oil and water. They did not see eye to eye.

And they attacked each other. But there was one thing that brought them together. And that was their common rejection of Jesus. He was a threat to them.

Because at the heart of their rejection was that they were actually exercising a faith in oneself. They rejected their need for a savior.

[ 5 : 45 ] In fact, they were so deeply threatened by Jesus that they sent representatives down from Jerusalem to test him. To get him to say something that would turn people against Jesus.

And when you think of the contrast, think of the woman who comes to Jesus who is a Gentile Canaanite. Who asked Jesus in faith to give the crumbs that come from the master's table.

You see, her great faith contrasted with the Sadducees and Pharisees' rejection in their hearts of their need for a savior.

There's no need for them. They demanded that Jesus show them a sign from heaven that would satisfy their own desires. To prove that God was behind what he was doing.

Now Jesus, in the last chapter, of course, has fed thousands. And just before that, they had healed people of every kind of affliction. The worst kinds of conditions that doctors cannot cure in Palestine.

[ 6 : 51 ] Crippling illness, physical deformity, even blindness. So, of course, the Pharisees and Sadducees were not open at all to see what God was doing. They wanted to manipulate Jesus.

And so Jesus, seeing through that, says, I'm only going to give you one sign. And that is the sign of Jonah. You know, who was in the depth, the belly of a fish for three days and three nights.

And what Jesus was saying there was, I'm going to give you the sign of the resurrection of Jesus. That Jesus would die for the sins of the world. That he would be buried.

And on the third day, rise again. They would soon see that sign. It is God's ultimate sign. Because in it is the fulfillment of God's plan to save the world.

To rescue it from separation from God. And that gift is for all people, including the Sadducees and Pharisees. It is the sign that he gives to them.

[ 7 : 51 ] But as you know, they persisted in their rejection. And they put all of their effort to deny the need for salvation. To turn people away from Jesus. And finally, to eliminate him as well.

This is what a rejecting heart looks like. Now, Jesus uses that clash with those political parties to teach his disciples a very important lesson for us too.

And that is, how do we deal with a world that rejects Jesus? That has a thinking that has no room for him? And it was the thinking of the time.

Jesus says, I'm not going to give you who are part of a evil and adulterous generation. A generation that rejects the very one who loves you.

I'm not going to give you a sign. And he says to his disciples, watch and beware of the leaven, the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees. You see, what he's saying is that their false teaching permeates society.

[ 8 : 56 ] Just like yeast permeates a loaf of bread. And it does that. It is ubiquitous. It is everywhere. Because it really appeals to sinful and self-centered hearts.

It says you don't need a savior. You need to work harder. You need to follow our rules. The rules of our society. And what Jesus does for us and for his disciples is to teach them the gift of discernment.

Discernment. It's critically important, Jesus is saying, to hold on to God's truth in this world. And to recognize when that truth is distorted. It's a warning relevant to us particularly today.

Because our society is also permeated by self-righteous thinking. By this idea of self-determination and self-reliance that rejects the need for God's savior.

That rejects the need for a king to rule and to rescue. It's the teaching of our age that is constantly working like yeast to form our minds.

[ 10 : 05 ] And to form our hearts into its mold. And that's why we constantly need to be catechized by God. And what that word means is that we need to be formed by his word.

Formed by the good news of Jesus Christ. You see, that is the way that we take in God's discernment of what is true and good. And that we recognize when the world is trying to shape our minds.

I think it's why Jim Packer says it is the most important thing for the church right now. To be catechized in many different ways. Because the world is trying to catechize and form us.

To be taught God's ways. To be able to recognize what is distorted. Is to have our minds formed by him.

And it is important for us to, no matter how long we've been a Christian. To be involved in catechism of some sort in the life of the church. And I know many of you have actually taken catechism courses here too.

[ 11 : 09 ] So here's the gift that really helps us with the rejecting heart of the world.

Now the second distortion is something that I think all of us Christians who know Jesus struggle with. And that distortion is a distracted mind.

A distracted mind. And this is what keeps us from a true answer to Jesus' question, who am I? We can actually be distracted from it. It's not something that's conscious.

We don't sit down and say, I'm going to be distracted from Jesus. But it is forgetting Jesus' provision. Completely missing out on his teaching because of pressing need.

Because of crises that happen in our life. And I want to show you an example of this in verses 5 through 11. And I wonder if these verses, Matthew is giving a self-deprecating humor.

[ 12 : 10 ] Because he is one of the 12 who look really clueless in this little passage. They get fixated on forgetting bread. So he says, listen to what he says.

He says, And so what did they do?

They began discussing it among themselves saying, we brought no bread. And Jesus was aware of this and said, oh, you of little faith. Why are you discussing among yourselves the fact you have no bread?

Don't you perceive? Don't you remember the five loaves for the 5,000 and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the 4,000 and how many baskets you gathered then?

How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Forget that. And then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

[ 13 : 21 ] Now, how could the disciples have missed that clear teaching of Jesus and his warnings? How could they forget that Jesus had so recently provided food for thousands out of nothing?

Well, it's because of pressing need. This need of being without bread and far away from home. It filled their minds. And Jesus' truth was crowded out.

They completely forgot about Jesus' power to provide. And they felt this anxious need to take things into their own hands. That is the little faith that Jesus chides them for.

Now, we may smile at the disciples for not getting it. But if you have been following Jesus for any amount of time, you have experienced that distraction in your own life.

I see it in mine, too. You go through a difficult time, a time of real crisis and challenge, and you pray to God, and you ask Jesus to help you and to lead you through it.

[ 14 : 25 ] And you see God's provision in extraordinary ways. Eighteen months later, you have the same experience, and you forget. You forget that Jesus is the one who provides.

You are anxious. And the teachings of Jesus, the teaching to trust in him, and his marvelous provision is something that's crowded out. Our anxieties fill our minds instead.

And we lose sight of Jesus' promises for us. We forget his authority, that he's strong to save, and that everything good and needful comes from his hand.

Now, what is the antidote for that distraction? What does God do for us? Well, he gives us his word. And what he does with his word is to remind.

It is God's gift for us to remember. That's what Jesus does for his disciples here. He reminds them of this incredible provision that they had just seen.

[ 15 : 25 ] He chides them, and he's exasperated with them. But in that, he patiently explains to them, again, his warning of the false teaching of the world, of the elites of their society that was being spread.

Now, Jesus is our perfect patient teacher as well. Because wonderfully, those disciples begin to understand. God gives this gift to us as well.

By the Holy Spirit, he reminds us over and over again in God's living word that Jesus is God with us. That's why Jesus meant for his followers to say the Lord's Prayer every day.

They are a daily reminder that Jesus has all authority. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we are reminded that he provides all things that are needful. Our daily bread, our daily forgiveness of our sins, the continual leading us out of temptation.

In our gathering today, there are some of you with excellent memories. You remember the slightest details. You recall things very quickly. And then there's a group of us who are very forgetful.

[ 16 : 37 ] We forget what happened yesterday. We don't know what we had for breakfast. But all of us, every one of us, suffers from spiritual forgetfulness. It's the condition that we all live with.

And we need the ministry of the Holy Spirit who makes our minds and our hearts to remember the truth of Jesus as we read God's word, as we hear the good news of Jesus over and over again.

He is our counselor. He is our helper so that we can remember. And the passage closes with this wonderful gift.

We've seen distortion of this answer, who is Jesus, through spiritual forgetfulness, distraction. We've seen it through the rejecting heart.

But in the end here, Jesus clears away all the distortions and reveals very clearly the answer to his question. It is by faith that God gives that things are cleared away.

[ 17 : 41 ] So look at this last section, verses 13 through 20. Because in it, Jesus is bringing his disciples to a beautiful city. It's called Caesarea Philippi.

It's on the foothills of Mount Hermon, which is a ski mountain, actually. It has lots of snow in the winter. And there are lush, cool streams that come out of it. In fact, water from there is what gives life to Israel today, too.

And Herod built an incredible, impressive temple there. And he gave the city to Caesar. So it was a jewel in the crown of the Roman Empire.

The ruins are very impressive. I was there and I saw them in June of this last year. They're in the Golan Heights, near Israel's border with Syria and Lebanon.

And at the time of Jesus, it was the meeting place of the lands of the Gentiles and the lands of the Jews. So it was a place where all people were gathered together from all parts of the world.

[ 18 : 46 ] And I think there's a symbolic thing here. Because Jesus is going to talk about life for the world. He asked the disciples as they're walking towards this city, who do people say that I am?

Now the disciples give the survey answers. They said some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets. And it shows that the people of Israel were thinking about Jesus in terms of the greatest people in their history.

And they were all people who pointed to the someday coming of the king that God would send to make things right, to bring his rescue. They were all people who were preparing for a great work.

They can't conceive of anyone greater than that. Well, Jesus pushes that further. And he asks this personal question. He looks at the 12 and he says, who do you say that I am?

And that is the question that Jesus asks us this morning as well. Who do you say personally that Jesus is? It's the all-important, life-giving question.

[ 20 : 00 ] And imagine there was silence for a little while amongst those 12 disciples. And then, of course, it's Peter who breaks the silence. He stands up and he replies, you are the Christ, the son of the living God.

You are the Christ. And we must understand how important the words that he's saying are because Christ means anointed one.

And anointed one always means king in Israel. And what Peter is saying is that the true and living God has given earth his own son and Israel's king.

And not only that, but the king of the whole world. He is Jesus, God's king that the prophets all had promised so many years ago.

He's saying that, Jesus, you are the fulfillment of all God's plans for the world to save it and to bring things to rightness again. And he is doing that now in Caesarea Philippi where Jews and Gentiles live.

[ 21 : 14 ] Now, Peter doesn't know how Jesus is that king until it's answered on the cross. And if you jump down to verse 21, Jesus is going to say, he's the king who will suffer and die and rise again on the third day.

Peter doesn't like that. Jesus rebukes him because he tries to stop Jesus from being that person. But now Jesus says, blessed are you, Simon, bar, Jonah.

He's saying, you are blessed, Peter, in confessing this because they are words of salvation for the world. It is the truth that brings life to the world, just as those streams from the mountain that they see going by them is giving life to Israel in their farms.

He says, there's no way, Peter, that you came up with this on your own. Flesh and blood hasn't revealed to you this. But my Father, who is in heaven, has done this as a gift.

And this morning, you and I are blessed like this. If you can answer that Jesus is your king, God's son given to you by the living God, because God the Father has given you that faith, you can only believe and confess that if this, because God the Holy Spirit has worked in your heart and in your mind, if you believe this, you are blessed by God himself.

[ 22 : 43 ] And if you don't believe it, ask Jesus for that gift of faith and he will give it. This is what he is offering here in this passage.

And Peter's answer and his confession is what we leave this passage with. It is true and it is blessed not because of Peter's sensitivity or because of how intelligent he is or because he is one who is particularly close to Jesus because he has great character or sincerity.

No. It is only because God the Father gave him that faith, he opened the eyes of Peter's heart to see who Jesus is.

And that is true for all of us. Faith in Jesus is the gift of the Heavenly Father that he gives to anyone who asks for us. And as we leave this passage, I want you to see these last verses because they have, they're very personally to do with Peter, but they have everything to do with each of us as well.

He says this, he says, I tell you, I tell you, Peter, on this rock, I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

[ 24 : 04 ] Now I know that probably lots of you know that there's a lot of debate about those verses because the Roman Catholic Church says this is where Peter was made the first pope and all the other popes come from that authority.

Special status was given to Peter to lead the church and the special status was given to his successors. Well, the Eastern Orthodox Church and all the Protestants would not agree with this view.

They would see that this is a unique historical moment where the confession of Peter for all Christians is given to us. But no matter that disagreement, there is something about this passage that all Roman Catholic churches and all Protestants and Orthodox churches would agree on.

And that is the important thing here is what Peter confessed, not Peter himself. And so it's Jesus, not Peter, who is the rock upon which the church is built.

Jesus is our rock. After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, it is only because Peter faithfully points to that Jesus, the risen Jesus, that Jesus builds his church.

[ 25 : 16 ] So Peter boldly preached Jesus as Lord and King who was crucified for our sins and risen from the dead. And what you see happen is that life, new life, is given to those who receive that message, that preaching.

It's life that even death cannot prevail against. It is that powerful. And that preaching of the good news is the key that opens up the kingdom of God to anyone who trusts in Jesus as King.

And that's the news that we have. It is the news that frees people from bondage, from slavery to sin, to worship the living God. It is news that if anyone rejects it, actually binds oneself.

You remain in slavery. This is the critical importance of that gospel. So Peter's message, Peter's ministry, is our ministry.

And heaven is behind it. As we point people to the true Jesus of Scripture and they believe, people are released by the power of heaven.

[ 26 : 26 ] God's power to know and to love God fills their life. And as they reject Jesus, if anyone does that, they remain bound in sin and separated from God and his life.

So as we leave this passage today, know that everyone who follows Jesus has that key that Jesus gave to Peter.

The key to open the God's kingdom to people in your life. The Holy Spirit will strengthen us as we ask him to use our confession and our testimony, our unique way to point to Jesus, our rock, so that our friends and our neighbors enter that kingdom so that Jesus is glorified in their life.

May God give us that grace that we will know his goodness, the answer to that question, who is Jesus? He is my king.

He is the one who has given me life. Amen.