

You Are the Christ

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, church. Would you turn with me to the Gospel of Mark, chapter 8. We're looking at verses 27 through 33. That's page 792 in the Pew Bible.

Mark chapter 8, 27 through 33. As we turn there, let me pray, and then I'll read for us. Father in heaven, what a mighty prayer that is, that you would be our vision.

Lord, whatever may befall, be our vision. Lord, we confess that there are many things that crowd into our line of sight, the sight of our hearts.

God, we pray that you would clear those things away now in these moments as we come to your word. Let our spiritual blindness be healed and help us to see you in all your glory. That we might love you and serve you and worship you and rest in you as we were created to do.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. All right. Mark chapter 8, verse 27 through 33. And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi.

[1 : 15] And on the way, he asked his disciples, Who do people say that I am? And they told him, John the Baptist. And others say, Elijah. And others, one of the prophets.

And he asked them, But who do you say that I am? Peter answered him, You are the Christ. And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed. And after three days, rise again.

And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he 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. So, the Gospel of Mark. The Gospel of Mark is a very carefully and artfully constructed book.

[2 : 22] You might not notice that the first time you read it because it's so quick and it's so punchy. But it's actually sort of wrought with a lot of care and a lot of detail. The Gospel begins by saying, This is the good news.

The Gospel about Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God. And then Mark's story takes us on this kind of two-part journey. There are two halves to the Gospel of Mark. In the first eight chapters, Mark is essentially trying to help us answer the question, Who is he?

Who is this Jesus? And then in the second half of the book, the last eight chapters, Mark is trying to help us come to see and answer the question, What did he come to do?

And these two halves actually connect right here in our passage. Who is he? What did he come to do? This passage is really the hinge of the whole book. We've come to kind of the burning center of the whole thing.

But you know, this passage doesn't just tell us what Mark, or the earliest apostles, or even what Jesus himself thought about his own identity. It also turns the spotlight on us, the readers, the listeners.

[3 : 35] What about you? What do you believe about Jesus? Who do you say that I am? There's no more important question than this.

What do you believe about Jesus? Who do you say he is? I want to look at our passage in four parts this morning, as we consider this searching and most important of questions.

And in the first part, we see that there are lots of opinions about Jesus. Lots of opinions then, and lots of opinions now. Look again at verses 27 and 28.

Mark writes, And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. Now that's about a 15 mile travel north of the Sea of Galilee, Caesarea Philippi. It was chiefly a non-Jewish region, and it was actually famous for having a pagan worship site dedicated to the god Pan.

Sort of this half goat, half man sort of god that was about fertility and crops and all sorts of things that you would worship if you were a pagan in the first century. So this is Caesarea Philippi. Sort of a strange place for Jesus to take his disciples, to ask them this searching question.

[4 : 51] But they're getting away. They're getting away from the crowds. They're getting away from the hubbub. They're getting away from the activity. And on the way, he asked his disciples, Who do people say that I am?

And they told him John the Baptist, and others say Elijah, and others one of the prophets. So we see that there are a lot of opinions circulating about who Jesus is. And you notice that most of these opinions are pretty pious opinions.

They're even respectful opinions. All of them sort of seek to make Jesus out to be a great, even powerful figure. Right? John the Baptist was a respected and revered preacher.

Perhaps Jesus is continuing the work of John the Baptist. Or how about Elijah? Elijah was a great Old Testament prophet. And the Old Testament actually ends by saying that a figure like Elijah would appear before the great and awesome day of the Lord.

Perhaps Jesus is that great figure. Or how about one of the prophets, or even the prophet? Moses predicted in Deuteronomy chapter 18 that a prophet like him would arise.

[5 : 57] Perhaps Jesus is that prophet that Moses had spoken about. Again, all these are pious, respectful opinions. And today, it's kind of the same, isn't it?

There are a lot of respectful, pious opinions about who Jesus is. A great moral teacher. A prophet. A perfect model of love and compassion.

A martyr who stood up against the injustice of his day. But as we assess these opinions, do they match what the earliest records actually tell us about Jesus?

Jesus is a great moral teacher. But he was much more than that. And what about those things he says that don't seem very likely on the lips of a great moral teacher?

Things like, I am the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through me. Can you imagine sitting in an ethics class and hearing your teacher say that?

[7 : 04] Imagine turning on PBS and seeing one of these self-help gurus saying something like that. You wouldn't think they're a great moral teacher, would you? Jesus was a perfect model of love and compassion.

We've seen that again and again in Mark's gospel, haven't we? As he touches lepers, as he eats with outcasts, as he welcomes the lowly and the sinners. But he was much more than that.

There are times when the disciples are downright afraid at his power and majesty when he calms storms and walks on the sea and casts out evil spirits.

And yes, Jesus did stand up to the injustice of his day. And yet, was he simply a martyr dying for a good cause? Our passage will have more to say about that in just a minute.

But so many of the opinions or the options that circulate today don't really do full justice to the real Jesus. They only see part of the picture, not the whole.

[8 : 10] So are you and I willing to subject our opinion of Jesus or what you might hear circulating about him among your peers or what you see on popular TV or even read in scholarly books?

Are you willing to subject your opinion of Jesus to the full data that we have? And when you do, you'll start to find that those opinions are a bit like a blanket or a sweater that's just a little too small.

No matter how hard you stretch it or pull it, it never seems to cover everything. There's always something that's left out. There's always something that's unaccounted for.

And you know, just because an opinion is popular doesn't mean it's true. The popular opinion during Jesus' own ministry seems to be that he was a prophet of some sort. But that wasn't quite right.

It was close, but it wasn't the full picture. That sweater didn't quite fit. In the second century, one of the more popular opinions about Jesus came to be known as docetism.

[9 : 14] This was the idea that Jesus only seemed to be human. He only seemed to have a body. Because after all, if Jesus was a powerful divine figure, he couldn't possibly have an icky body like you and me.

So that was an incredibly popular opinion. And today we look at that and we think, that's utterly ridiculous. But again, that sweater didn't quite fit either. And down through the ages, popular opinions abounded.

Perhaps Jesus was just a really great human endowed with the spirit of God in a unique way. Or perhaps Jesus was just a mistaken apocalyptic prophet. Or perhaps Jesus was just a religious zealot out to overturn Rome.

And what you find is that these old ideas get recycled again and again and marketed as new ideas. And again and again as the ideas go in and out of fashion. Whether it's a cashmere turtleneck or a fisherman's white wool cable knit, the sweater doesn't fit.

But the opinions just don't match the reality. And that brings us to the second point. There are lots of opinions, but only one real answer.

[10 : 24] Verses 29 and 30. And Jesus asked them, but who do you say that I am? Peter answered him, you are the Christ.

And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him. And here, with Peter's confession of faith, we see for the first time in Mark's gospel, the answer that's been building.

The answer that's been slowly rising like a wave that begins far from shore. And you can see it just slowly gathering energy and power.

And then it rises above the surface in power and in beauty, reflecting the sky and the sun. There it comes, raising up. What other answer could there be?

And yet notice under what conditions Peter makes this confession. Jesus had done a number of great signs, yes, but at the same time, Jesus had no wealth.

[11 : 33] No majesty, no great following, no military power. In so many ways, Jesus didn't look anything like the Messiah that they had been waiting for.

The heads of state didn't recognize him. The religious leaders had all but rejected him. And yet still Peter says, you're the Christ. You're the king.

You're the one we've been waiting for. The Holy Spirit enabled Peter to see what merely human eyes could not see.

As we saw last week, our natural condition because of the fall is one of spiritual blindness. But God can heal our spiritual blindness and give us eyes to see.

Eyes to see what Peter saw. Hearts and mouths that confess what Peter confessed. How about you, friend? Has your sight begun to get clearer?

[12 : 39] Is Jesus no longer to you just a literary character in a story? Is he no longer just some historical figure? Is he no longer just one more religious teacher or leader?

Has the wave begun to rise for you too? Do you see it in all its power and beauty? The loaves that feed the multitude.

The lepers that walk away clean. The outcasts and the sinners who are embraced. The evil spirits that flee. The storms that grow quiet at the mere sound of his voice.

Yes, the popular opinion would say something respectable, something pious even. Perhaps a great moral teacher. But as the wave rises, it doesn't do justice to what you've seen.

Where else do you find such power and such love? Where else do you find such blistering truth and yet such gentle grace? Can he even be compared to a prophet?

[13 : 46] Does he even belong in that category anymore? Or is he in a class by himself? And does your heart reach out to him and say, you are the Christ, the king, the one we've been waiting for?

To put it all to rights. To fix what's broken. To mend what is torn. To make the evil and the sadness come untrue. Like Peter, we should never expect this confession to be a popular one.

We should never expect such a true and clear confession of Jesus as the Christ to win us prestige or position or rank or fame. In fact, it may mean the loss of a lot of those things.

But let us follow in Peter's footsteps nonetheless. If the Holy Spirit is working in the eyes of your heart, then call out and confess him as your own.

Why? If the cost is so great, why do so? But friend, what greater reward could there be to know and be known by the king?

[15 : 08] Isn't that its own reward? And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.

It's the very thing our hearts were created for, to know and be known by him. But as our passage continues, we see that at this stage, the disciples didn't understand everything fully just yet.

There are lots of opinions about Jesus and only one real answer. But this answer is deeper than you think. This answer is a lot deeper than you think.

And this brings us to our third point of our passage in verse 31. You know, did you think it was a little strange that Jesus tells Peter to tell no one? I mean, Peter has just confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah.

Finally, someone gets it. Why not tell Peter to go and spread the news everywhere to everyone? Well, because at this point, not even the disciples have quite the full picture.

[16 : 19] Look at verse 31. And Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man, he's referring to himself there, must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again.

And it's with this verse that Mark's gospel takes a turn and we see the great wave of Jesus' identity begin to crest and see it take its full form.

The disciples, like most Jews of their day, expected a Messiah who would reign in power, not suffer in agony. They had what we might call a theology of glory, a theology of victory, a theology of triumph, not a theology of the cross.

But notice that this message of Jesus' suffering, rejection, death, and rising again, according to Jesus, it's utterly essential to what he, as the Messiah, has come to do.

Notice the word there that he uses, must. The Son of Man must suffer. He must be rejected. He must be killed.

[17 : 36] He must rise again. There's no understanding, Jesus, apart from this must. But what does he mean by it?

Why does Jesus say that he must suffer? Does he mean that he'll simply be unable to escape the jealousy and hatred of the chief priest and the scribe, that they're stronger than him, they're more powerful than him, so it's inevitable that they'll have their way with him?

Is that what this must means? Surely that can't be it. Does Jesus mean that he must leave them a great example of self-sacrifice and self-denial?

Is this why he must die, to merely teach them the importance of self-giving love? Well, that can't be it either. Then why is Jesus so adamant that he must die?

Well, the Messiah was the one who was supposed to put things right, to heal and mend what was broken. But the greatest problem wasn't the Romans, and it wasn't leprosy, and it wasn't a shortage of food, and it wasn't even unclean spirits.

[18 : 58] All those things mattered, but that wasn't the root of the problem. In theory, all those things could be fixed, but still, the greatest problem would remain the one that stood at the root and gave birth to all the rest.

What needed to be put right wasn't ultimately their relationship to Rome or to one another or to the environment or to themselves. What needed to be put right was their relationship with God.

And to do that, the king must suffer, be rejected and killed and rise again. Consider why that is from God's side.

God's side. Again and again, the Bible presents God as utterly holy and just and at the same time utterly gracious and loving. Read the Old Testament. What do you find?

Well, again and again, you find things like Exodus 34, 6 and 7. God is a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty.

[20 : 15] Well, which one is it? Is God perfectly just? He will by no means clear the guilty? Or is God perfectly merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast love?

Do we have to flip a coin and pick? Is God erratic? Does he choose one one day and one the other? No. The answer is he's both.

Always. At the same time. And that creates a dilemma that runs right through the entire Old Testament. How can God be holy and just and yet still live with his sinful people, still be merciful and accepting?

Well, friends, the answer is here in Mark chapter 8 when Jesus says, must. At the cross.

At the cross, the Messiah will represent his people bearing the perfectly just penalty for human sin. God will judge sin perfectly at the cross and at the same time extend perfect mercy because God in Christ is bearing the penalty on himself so his people don't have to.

[21 : 45] Utterly, holy and just and perfectly merciful. And that brings us to the human side of the relationship.

You see, the problem, what we see here in this must of Jesus, the problem of human sinfulness is so great, so intractable, that nothing less can take it away.

We can't possibly be good enough to cover over the offense or to make up for the cost. No, the Messiah must suffer and die to atone for our sins.

If there's ever to be atonement for sins, if humans are ever to be put right with God, then the Messiah must die. And yet, here's the good news.

Jesus willingly did so. Seeing what had to be done, the great cost that needed to be paid, seeing what must happen if ever we could be forgiven, Jesus freely chose to do so.

[22 : 52] The one who had all the glory and the splendor of heaven, who was beautiful beyond compare, would come, as Isaiah 53 says, that we read earlier, and be despised and forgotten and considered of little account.

Why? For us. Friends, this is the centerpiece of the whole Bible. Everything else is secondary to this, that Christ died for sinners.

This is the truth that you can lean your whole weight upon in life and in death, in sickness and in health, that though we deserve nothing, Christ willingly suffered for us on the cross.

And by his suffering, he's purchased forgiveness and eternal life for all who believe in him. This is the one thing that you can rest everything on.

But there's one last thing in our passage that we see. We saw that there are many opinions about Jesus, but only one real answer. Then we saw that this answer was even deeper than we realized.

[24 : 04] Our passage ends, though, by showing us that we can easily lose sight of this central truth. We can easily lose sight of it. Pick up in verse 32, and Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him.

But turning and seeing his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, get behind me, Satan, for you're not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man. Friends, how often are we like Peter?

We want a theology of glory, not a theology of the cross. In other words, we want a Christ who promises us health and wealth and power and happiness, not a Christ who suffers.

We want a Christ who grants us our own wishes and desires, a Christ who follows our agenda and our program, not a Christ who calls us to take up a cross and follow him on the path of self-sacrifice and self-giving.

How often do we, too, set our minds on the things of man and not on the things of God? How quickly, thinking that we're actually honoring God's name, do we end up just playing into the hand of the evil one?

[25 : 24] So, friends, let us learn humility from our passage. Just because we as Christians speak the name of Christ, it doesn't mean that we've always fully embraced the reality of Christ crucified and applied it to our whole lives.

There are still areas of our hearts where we desire human glory and human approval. There are still areas where we refuse to take up our cross and follow him.

There are still areas where we fail to see that my sins are so great that Christ must die for me. So, friends, let us walk in humility knowing that this truth about who Jesus really is has to go deeper and deeper and deeper into our lives, into our thinking, into our relationships, into our church, into our workplaces.

And if we learn humility from Peter here, I think we can also learn charity. Yes, Jesus gives Peter a strong rebuke, perhaps the strongest he could give.

But doesn't this passage teach us not to be too quick to write off another believer because of their errors and mistakes? Within a few verses, Peter got it wonderfully right and then disastrously wrong.

[26 : 55] And he was corrected for it. And yet, that wasn't the end of Peter's story. He would come to see what every true Christian comes to see, that the cross is the very center of it all and that we can't really know Jesus as our king without knowing him as our crucified and risen king.

as every Christian can confess, it takes time for this truth to permeate our whole thinking and our whole living so we can be gracious and gentle and charitable with one another as we work these things out in our lives.

But the truth is, friends, by the Holy Spirit, it will do that. It will begin to permeate everything. and it must do that.

This is what it means to confess Jesus as the Christ, not just as our king, not just as our Lord, but as our crucified king, as our risen Lord.

Not just a theology of glory, but a theology of the cross. So how about you, friend? Who do you say he is?

[28 : 12] And have you confessed him as such? There are lots of opinions, but only one real answer. You are the Christ.

Make Peter's confession your own today. Let's pray together. Our Father in heaven, like Peter, we know that, God, we so often get it wrong.

And so we pause now, having considered this passage, in quiet before you and in stillness, and ask for your Holy Spirit to come and take the blinders from our eyes and from our heart.

Lord, clear away the opinions and help us to truly see and to know and to confess Jesus as the Christ. Christ. And Lord, for those of us who have through your grace come to take you and confess you as the Christ, forgive us, God, for ways in which we have not followed the way of the cross.

But God, thank you for the hope of this passage, that you're healing and good and gracious King. God, come and do a work in us, we pray.

[29 : 42] Make us the kind of people who confess you with boldness and live that out in the gentleness and strength and courage that you provide. Pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen.