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Luke 9:18–27

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# WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?

*SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

Just this past week TIME magazine published an article talking about the beliefs and values of the “Millennial” generation, those 18–29 of age, also known as the “Me Me Me” generation. The article discusses the great strengths and weaknesses of this generation and references a recent National Study of Youth and Religion which found that the guiding morality of the majority of Millennials in any situation “is that they’ll just be able to feel what’s right.”<sup>1</sup> My experience has been that this morality with “self” at the center is wide-spread among all generations.

There is a great danger in this, because when we take God off his throne and place ourselves at the center we are prone to see something as right or true simply because we wish it to be true. There has always been no shortage of feelings and opinions about Jesus and what it means to follow him. The crowds and disciples who followed Jesus were no exception, and in order to bring greater clarity Jesus takes the initiative and addresses the topic by asking them a few penetrating questions.

**Now it happened that as he was praying alone, the disciples were with him. And he asked them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” And they answered, “John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen.” (Luke 9:18–19 ESV)**

The question of Jesus’ identity comes up over and over again in Luke. The scribes and Pharisees wondered about Jesus saying, “Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Luke 5:21). John’s disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (Luke 7:20). Jesus’ own disciples, after witnessing his extraordinary power to still a storm, ask, “Who then is this, that he commands even winds and water, and they obey him?” (Luke 8:25). And as we read last week, even Herod the tetrarch asks, “who is this I have heard such things?” (Luke 9:9). It is the question of the Gospel, “Who is Jesus?”

The disciples have just finished traveling across the region on their first mission, so surely they must have a good feel for the popular view of Jesus. So he begins by asking them, “Who do the crowds say I am?” In reply to Jesus’ question, the disciples repeat almost verbatim the report that came to Herod Antipas (9:7–8). The popular view of Jesus is that he is some kind of prophet, either John risen from the dead, Elijah, or some other prophet from long ago.

The crowds have their opinions, but what do the Twelve believe? Do they see that Jesus is something more? He probes further...

**Then he said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” And Peter answered, “The Christ of God.” (Luke 9:20)**

Peter, speaking on behalf of the disciples, says he is “The Christ of God.” The word “Christ” (*Christos*) means “The Anointed One,” also translated “The Messiah.” It is easy to overstate Peter’s meaning

in this original context. This is not a declaration by Peter and the disciples of Jesus’ deity but of his kingship.

It was clear to the disciples that Jesus was more than just a prophet; he was the Anointed One, the longed for son of King David and heir to all of the Davidic promises. He is the promised Messiah who will lead his people to re-establish the kingdom and will reign on David’s throne. He is the one who will bring deliverance and salvation by triumphing over Israel’s enemies.

Peter’s declaration, that Jesus is “The Christ of God”, is a major turning point in the gospel of Luke. Though this declaration is incomplete in describing all that Jesus truly is, it is a crucial and fundamental starting point from which Jesus can build. It opens the door for Jesus to develop more fully the disciples’ understanding of his mission, and the path that lies ahead for both him and those who choose to follow him.

We can imagine being among the disciples as Peter confesses Jesus to be the Messiah and thinking “great! We all know Jesus is destined to rule, so victory is just around the corner. Surely God will vindicate the righteous now, and we, as his close disciples, will sit next to the king and rule with him with great power and authority!” But immediately after Peter’s declaration Jesus moves to provide the disciples with further insight in order to reorient their thinking.

**And he strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, saying, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” (Luke 9:21–22)**

Jesus follows this confession by Peter with a severe warning for all the disciples to tell no one. Jesus’ command shows that he wanted to enlighten them further before they proclaimed this in public. The reason, of course, is that their understanding of the mission and path of the Messiah is incomplete. Although Jesus refers to himself as the “Son of Man” in his reply, he is not rejecting the title “Christ” that Peter uses. Rather Jesus needs to clarify and define further the totality of his mission. The “Son of Man” is a reference to Daniel’s vision of the one coming on the clouds who is given great power and authority by the “Ancient of Days” to rule over God’s kingdom forever.

There are several passages in the Old Testament, particularly the psalms and the prophets, which speak of a righteous deliverer who will face suffering and rejection, but it was not a standard element of Jewish messianic hope. Jesus will ultimately fulfill all these promises and pull together all these strands unto himself (Messiah, Suffering Servant, Son of Man), but the disciples hadn’t pulled all the strands together yet, and how could they. There was still much to be revealed.

This is the fifth time in Luke where Jesus refers to himself as the “Son of Man,” but it is the first time Jesus mentions that the Son of Man will face such a difficult path. This is new and disturbing information for the disciples, and it baffles them because his path

is opposite of what they expected. They cannot conceive how the promised Messiah, who is to lead his people in triumph over the enemy, would suffer, be rejected, killed, and on the third day be raised.

This path Jesus will face does not derail his mission, in fact he says these things “must” happen in order for him to fulfill his mission. Jesus is making it abundantly clear to his disciples ahead of time that what comes next for him is not some tragic mistake, but a necessary part of God’s plan all along.

Jesus moves from a revelation for the ears of just his close disciples to the entire crowd gathered nearby.

**And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9:23)**

I believe this entire phrase must be taken as a whole if we are to understand and apply it properly. Some focus only on the “deny yourselves” portion of discipleship and believe self-loathing and an austere and frugal life is what Jesus is after. Others dwell just on “take up your cross daily” and are convinced that self-imposed suffering is what Jesus is calling for. But denying yourself and taking up your cross is far deeper and more comprehensive than that. Following Jesus requires offering the totality of all you are to him, making his way our way.

The mention of the cross makes this clear. This is the first time the word “cross” is mentioned in Luke’s Gospel. Death by the cross was a particularly vicious and humiliating way of dying. At the mere mention of it I’m sure the crowd gasped and no doubt recoiled from the thought of personally and voluntarily “taking up the cross.” Jesus makes it clear that those who follow him must be prepared to pay the price that he will pay: public shame and painful death.

Over the following years many of his disciples do indeed pay that price, but when Jesus says his disciples are to deny themselves and take up their crosses “daily” he reveals that what he has in mind is more than just a one-time giving up of our physical lives, it is removing ourselves from the center and placing God there instead. A dear friend of mine told me that ‘ego’ stands for “edging God out.” I think that is about right. As a disciple of Jesus we are called to die to ourselves, to our “me-first” agenda, to our ego.

Throughout Luke Jesus will make it clear that following him means letting go of whatever we place in the center instead of God. To the young man whose wealth was his idol Jesus said, “Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (Luke 18:22). To those who make their family their idol Jesus says, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” (Matt. 10:37)

There is the old saying, “I don’t mind being a servant of Jesus Christ, I just don’t want to be treated like one.” Do you relate to that? We want to be a disciple of Christ on our own terms. We don’t mind at all following Jesus when things are easy and we are treated with respect because of our faith, but we easily distance ourselves from him when it is unpopular and costly to do so.

But Jesus could not be clearer; if anyone wants to follow him they must be willing to give their life in its totality for him. To deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus is to move away from pursuing our own glory, surrender ourselves to God, and seek to glorify him in all we are and all we do. This is what we are called to

do as his disciples no matter how much suffering, rejection, ridicule, or shame is heaped upon us by the world for following Jesus.

Why would anyone be willing to pay that high a price? Jesus gives a most compelling reason...

**“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.” (Luke 9:24–26)**

These words serve as both an encouragement and a warning. Jesus makes it clear that he is the Son of Man who will come again in glory to rule and judge us all, and true life is found in him alone. Jesus develops his point by using the language of commerce and finance. If you invest your life for the sole purpose of gaining all the possessions and power the world can provide, then you have given your life to nothing. However, if you invest your life in the person and work of Jesus then his destiny is your destiny; you reap the eternal and abundant blessings found in and through him.

The fundamental significance in this text is its recognition of who Jesus is. When he comes again in his glory those who cling to him will enjoy eternal fellowship with him, and those who have rejected him and his words will be separated from him for all eternity. To gain all that the world offers, but to lose all that God offers is a tragic trade-off. Living this life only to miss the giver of life is the greatest tragedy of all. It all comes down to clinging to what will truly give us life no matter what price we pay.

The Apostle Paul expressed this well:

**But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. (Philippians 3: 7–9)**

The choice for the disciples is clear. They can either choose the world and what it has to offer, or choose Jesus and the eternal and abundant life he offers. They can only choose one or the other.

Jesus finishes his declaration to his followers with an unexpected surprise, “But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:27)

Given that the kingdom of God is already inaugurated and made evident in the ministry and person of Jesus, what is it that some of the disciples will see? Many believe that Jesus is referring to his miracles or his resurrection and ascension, others say it is when the Holy Spirit descends on Pentecost, and still others say Jesus is referring to the spread of the gospel.

The power and presence of the kingdom of God is evident in all those options, but since this statement by Jesus is immediately followed in all three Synoptic Gospels by the Transfiguration, I believe that is what Jesus is referring to. In just a few days time Jesus will take three of those currently present, Peter, James, and John, up the mountain and they will see the kingdom of God in a whole new way. They will not only see the Messiah in all his glory, they will hear the voice of God himself.

By ending on this note I believe Jesus is putting an exclamation point on what he has been telling the crowd, “If you follow me, if you take my way and not your way, if you release your grip on the false promises of this world and cling to me, then be prepared to pay a high price, but rest assured it is a price worth paying.

As we reflect on this passage there are two questions left ringing in our ears, “Who is Jesus?” and “Will you follow him no matter the cost?” Who do you say Jesus is? Is he merely a prophet to you, someone who awakens your conscience with fire-brand messages and moves you to address issues of justice and morality? Is he merely a teacher to you, someone who stretches your mind with wise sayings and challenges you to live your life with a little more wisdom? Is Jesus merely a healer to you, someone who fascinates and entertains you with his wondrous good deeds and inspires you care for yourself and others a bit more? Is this your understanding of Jesus?

Let me remind you what Jesus said about himself, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John. 14:6). Jesus is not merely a prophet, a teacher, a healer, he is the Christ, Messiah, Son of God, Savior who gave his life for you and bids you to follow him and die, to give your life to him that you may truly live.

Eternal life is found in no other source than Jesus Christ;

**And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 John 5: 11–12).**

If you have not yet decided to follow Jesus I encourage you with all my heart to give your life to him. I pray you will choose the life he gives and that you will choose now because the time of his coming again in glory could happen at any moment.

Whether new-believer or long-time follower, we must all ask ourselves the question, “Am I following Jesus no matter the cost?” It fills me with joy to say I have witnessed the ways in which many of you have denied yourself, taken up your cross and followed Jesus. By your actions you have encouraged me and strengthened my faith. In this church body I’ve seen an elderly woman follow Jesus by caring daily for her debilitated spouse. I’ve seen an unmarried woman in her thirties, wanting with all her heart to be married, follow Jesus by putting her relationship with a man she cares for at risk by insisting on sexual purity before marriage.

I’ve seen a high school student follow Jesus by putting his college acceptance at risk in choosing a Christian mission trip over a SAT prep course. I’ve seen a single woman follow Jesus by adopting two young siblings in need, even though she has no idea where the resources are going to come to care for them. I’ve seen a husband and father say “no” to a promotion in order to spend more time sharing God’s love and truth with his children, wife, and aging parents.

How is the Lord speaking to you right now? How is the Spirit guiding you this moment in ways you can give yourself, in your entirety, to God? Consider the Apostle Paul’s words to the Roman church:

**Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer yourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:1–2)**

For most of my life I’ve always resented a little bit that Jesus said we are to follow him “daily,” for it meant that I could not take any “days off.” I couldn’t take up my cross and give myself to the Lord Sunday through Thursday and pursue my own glory on Friday and Saturday. But now the word “daily” is a great encouragement to me. I choose to see the word as a way to give myself to Jesus one day at a time. I am able to wake up each day focusing not on yesterday and not on tomorrow, but giving all of myself to God today.

This is impossible in our own strength. We do not have what it takes to die to ourselves. It is only because of the transformative work of the Spirit within us that we can live this way. We do not know, we cannot know, all of what it means to follow Jesus, but we are assured that we do not follow him alone. We have the Spirit of God who dwells within us, and we have one another, as brothers and sisters in Christ, to lean on. As always, God provides the resources for all he asks of us. Only through the strength and power he provides can we say “I am yours today, do in me and with me as you choose for your glory.” And the miracle is, he does.

All of us at one point or another have, like the Apostle Peter, distanced ourselves from Christ, ashamed of him and his words. Let me remind you that just like with Peter, who denied him three times, Jesus loves you and offers to you an abundance of mercy, grace, and forgiveness. This is the kind of God we give our life to. By the presence of his Spirit within us, he is able to transform our selfish heart into one brimming with self-sacrificial and generous love every day. All praise be to him!

<sup>1</sup> Stein, Joel (2013, May 20). The New Greatest Generation – Why Millennials Will Save Us All. TIME, Vol. 181, No. 19, page 28

