

We have been looking at parts of Jesus’ ministry as we move towards Holy Week. It is almost like looking at scenes from Jesus’ ministry. And today we look at a short one that has a lot of significance despite how short it is. So please listen to God’s Word as we look at Luke chapter 9, beginning at verse 18.

Luke 9:18-22

¹⁸ Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, “Who do the crowds say I am?”

¹⁹ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life.”

²⁰ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “God’s Messiah.”

²¹ Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. ²² And he said, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”

In the beginning of this scene we find Jesus praying. Jesus prayed a lot, actually. The gospels tell us this in multiple places including Mark 1, Luke 5, Luke 9 which is what we are looking at today, Luke 22 and 23, Matthew 6, 11 and 26, John 17, and the list goes on. The fact that Jesus prayed a lot should tell us something about our own prayer practices. We also need to pray a lot. We need it. That regular communication with God is so necessary to our relationships with God and with each other as a church. And this is something we can do throughout the day. God does not need long elaborate prayers from us. In fact Jesus tells us in the sermon on the mount to keep the prayers simple but genuine. That is where we get the Lord’s prayer that we pray each week. We can be in regular communication with God as we experience our days. We don’t need to keep God aside while going through the day. God can go through the day with us. For example, when I am in the car on the way to a meeting, any kind of meeting, I can pray for God to be with me in my choice of words at that meeting. I ask God to be with the other people that will be at the meeting and I ask God to show how I can be a blessing to them. It is just a few sentences either silent or out loud on the way in the car. That is it. And I do feel God’s presence more when I remember to do that.

And not only is prayer so important to our relationships with God, but it is also critical for the church’s relationship with God. A few months ago our session looked at a book titled *The Autopsy of a Dead Church*. Not a very nice title. But what the author of this book did was interview people from multiple churches that had closed their doors. That ceased to be churches. And through this interview process the author looked for common features from all of these churches that might have led to their demise. What were the common threads? And he identified about 11 common features that these churches had. And one of them was that they stopped praying together. And he was not talking about in worship. We pray in worship every week and so did they. He is talking about praying together as members. He is talking about the kind of prayer where you call or pull aside another member of the church and either ask them to pray for you or you ask them how you can be praying for them. It is being intentional about praying together. The grandmother’s prayer group that Barbara Alexander leads is an example. An intentional prayer time set aside to pray together.

I will use an example from my own life here at the church. As many of you know I have had back pain since December. And I am seeing the doctor and doing all the things I am supposed to do medically. But it occurred to me weeks and weeks into the back pain, way later than it should have occurred to me, that I had not followed the instructions in James chapter 5 where it says “Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them.” I am a pastor and I had ignored this instruction. So one Sunday I simply asked a couple of elders here at this church to meet me and Pastor Mike about 15 minutes after worship and pray for me. It was a humbling experience but I really felt connected to those elders in that time of prayer. I feel like those elders are now part of my healing process. This is what it means for a church to be praying together. And I strongly encourage you all to find ways to pray together. Let’s face it, we are going into a time of transition as a church. Now more than ever we need to be praying together. We will need to be closely connected in prayer. Please do that amongst yourselves and we will also plan special opportunities for us to pray together.

So Jesus is praying as is necessary for him just like it is necessary for us, and then he asks the disciples with him a question. He asks “Who do the crowds say I am?” And they reply “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life.” Basically they think he is a prophet or someone preparing the way for the Messiah. They don’t think he is *actually* the Messiah. Well, not much has changed. You do not have to look far for people and religions that still label Jesus as one of these things, as a “good person”: or “prophet.” Some world religions write about Jesus as the only prophet without sin. A prophet. Others write about him as a spirit being who was then born into mortality and later became Jesus Christ. That makes him just human, not the Messiah. Many today will still consider him a great teacher and that we should follow his teachings. In a 2015 poll 92 % of Americans said that they believed that Jesus existed. But only 56 % believed Jesus was God. 26 % said he was a prophet like Mohammed or the Buddha. And the remaining 18 % said they weren’t really sure who he was. Yet we have the answer right here in this passage.

In this short passage that we are reading this morning/evening are the two things that make Christianity unique. One, who Jesus is and two, what Jesus does. The identity of Jesus and the death and resurrection of Jesus are the linchpins of our faith. Aside from these two things Christianity has a lot of similarities with other religions. We all have ancient texts or scriptures that we use. We all have a figure of one kind or another that we admire or worship. We all have moral codes that come out of our beliefs. These things can apply to almost any religion. But the identity of Jesus and the death and resurrection of Jesus are unique to Christianity and indeed, make it what it is.

So, if we take the question of the identity of Jesus, who is he? I already told you who most Americans think he is and other religions think he is. But the important question here is exactly what Jesus asked of the disciples in verse 20: “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” That question is directed at every one of us here right now. If Jesus were here right now he would ask “Who do you say I am?” How would we answer? Was he a great teacher who taught us things we should follow? Or was he more? Or IS he more? And why does this matter? Well, first of all accepting Jesus as just a great teacher does not work out. As one commentator put it, “How can one respect Jesus’ religious greatness as a teacher and then reject or

relativize his most fundamental claim to be the unique Son of God? One cannot have it both ways.” We cannot have it both ways. He is either who he said he was, or he is no one at all. He is either God or he is a lunatic none of us should be talking about 2000 years later. Really, those are our choices.

Peter rightly identifies Jesus as God’s Messiah in verse 20. Jesus is the one who has been promised to come and save God’s people. Peter sees Jesus’ divinity as well as the man in front of him. Understanding that Jesus is fully God and fully man at the same time is a tough concept. I do not fault anyone that says this is hard to understand. It is hard to understand because none of us are both divine and human. The only person that ever was is at the right hand of God right now. However, Jesus HAS to be divine, and here is why. If Jesus is not God, then we are not saved. If Jesus is not God, we are not saved. Fleming Rutledge writes it this way and she makes this trinitarian which is necessary. She says: “Jesus of Nazareth was not a free-floating holy man. If he is not the second person of the trinitarian God and the only begotten Son...then God’s self was not directly involved on the cross. In that case, Jesus would be detached from the eternal plan of God shown in the history of Israel, and the cross would be a random event of no more than passing interest.” Wow.

Do you see that seeing Jesus as God is very important to being a Christian? Because if Jesus is not God, if God is not on that cross, then this salvation thing is a bust. We are not saved, we are not forgiven, and we are not spending eternity with God because our sin is still a giant canyon that cannot be crossed. Thus, Jesus being God has to be true. No human being could make the complete sacrifice. If that was the case then we don’t need God at all. Technically we could save ourselves. But we all know that is not possible. We need the sacrifice of Jesus and we need Jesus to be God. So, who do you say that he is? The answer to that question really matters. One scholar wrote “Christian faith cannot compromise either on the full humanity or on the full divinity of Jesus Christ.” In other words he has to be both. Most people believe he was a real human, but you also must accept that he is God as well, or this doesn’t work and I like how that scholar put it. We can’t compromise. Christian faith cannot compromise the fact that Jesus is God.

Then, right after Peter rightly identifies Jesus as God’s messiah, not just the messiah but GOD’s messiah, Jesus has to frame what his being the Messiah will really look like. Because as soon as the disciples start thinking about “the messiah,” they start to envision someone who is going to overturn Roman rule and restore Israel and rule from Jerusalem. They picture a Messiah of power. So Jesus immediately tells them this, verse 22 “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” This would have blown the minds of the disciples. Jesus suffering and dying and then rising again would have been unthinkable for what they envision as the Messiah. And we know from later in the gospels that this did not sink in. They did not get it. Up until Jesus is taken to the cross they are convinced it won’t happen. But Jesus tells them that he must suffer, must be rejected, must be killed, and must rise again on the third day.

The word “must” appears a lot here. All of these things *must* happen. And Luke uses the word *dei* here to indicate that what must happen is God’s plan. God plan for victory looks very different than what they expect. And why does it have to happen this way? Because the work of the cross is necessary. And here we come to the second important truth in this passage for Christians. I said the first is that we have to recognize the true identity of Jesus. The second is the significance of the death and resurrection. These two things are the

foundation of our salvation. Following Jesus and his example is a good thing, but it is not what saves us. I am going to get a little heady here, but Dietrich Bonhoeffer who is one of my favorite theologians puts this into better words than I can. So, this is what he writes as he refers to Jesus: “If he was an idealistic founder of a religion, I can be elevated by his work and stimulated to follow his example. But my sin is not forgiven, and I am still in the power of death. Then the work of Jesus drives me to despair about myself, because I cannot follow his example. But, if Jesus is the Christ, the Word of God, then I am not primarily called to do the things he does. It is through his work that I recognize the gracious God. My sin is forgiven, I am no longer in death, but in life.”

Do you hear what Bonhoeffer is saying? It is not following the ministry example of Jesus Christ that saves us. We can't follow his example perfectly anyway. None of us can live up to everything in the sermon on the mount. I know I can't. And that doesn't save us anyway. It is the work of Christ on the cross that allows us to see the grace of God. That is what saves us. Seeing and saying yes to the grace of God.

Let me ask you a question: what is happening on the cross? Is Jesus showing us something, or is something actually happening? Is Jesus just teaching us a lesson about God by suffering and dying? No. The miracle of forgiveness is what is happening on the cross. And we need to recognize the miracles and accept them. Two miracles: one, the incarnation... the fact that God comes in human form...the fact that Jesus is God. And two, the cross and resurrection. Two miracles. Christmas and Easter. Two windows (east and west windows in sanctuary). To receive God's salvation is to give the two miracles their validity. See them as truth. No dunning them down. No reducing Jesus to a prophet or good person. No reducing the cross to a symbol. They are two miracles and they have to be true.

We also need to realize that this is God's plan. Notice Jesus tells the disciples that he will suffer at the hands of “the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law.” Jesus' rejection and death are not the result of some random act of violence. It is the direct action of his own people. It is exactly what is prophesied in the book of Isaiah. It is God's plan from the beginning to put God's self on the line for us.

So, who do we say that Jesus is? If he is anything less than the Son of God, fully divine, God incarnate, then we underestimate him. We underestimate God if we don't recognize who he is and the fact that it is God on that cross for us. I want to challenge all of us to not underestimate God. It is an easy temptation to do it. And in fact we do it all the time. In regular life we make estimates all the time. We want estimates for any work done on our homes or cars. Every time something breaks here at the church we get estimates on how much it will be to repair. We estimate what it will cost to retire. We estimate our own abilities to do things. “I think I can do that, I don't think I can go there.” But the biggest estimate we can make and the one we usually come up short on is estimating God.” Does God really have the power to come incarnate? Is Jesus really God? Does God really have the power to forgive all my sin? Does God have the power to end all tears in the end? If God has power why doesn't God fix the things I want fixed now?” We put estimates on God. And we are in good company. The Bible is full of this. This is why we have the Word of God. If we look at it we can learn the lesson to not underestimate God. There is the parting of the Red Sea that saves Israel, There is victory in the promised land. There is David and Goliath. There is Elijah and the wet alter that burns. There is our

passage last week where God uses a corrupt tax collector to record the first gospel of our Bible. And the list goes on. We human beings have a tendency to underestimate God. A God that has never come up short.

I think the areas where we underestimate God that really affect our lives are that we underestimate how much God loves us, we underestimate God's power, and we underestimate God's mercy and forgiveness. When we do not give credit to Jesus for being God and for really defeating sin on the cross, we diminish what God can do in our lives. And so I go back to Jesus' original question. "Who do the crowds say that I am?" Well we know the answer to that don't we. Much of our world today still just see him as a prophet, a good man with good teachings, or the originator of a new religion. And we need to get the word out that Jesus is much, much, more than that. The world needs to know that they have a Messiah. That they can be forgiven. And then the second part of Jesus' question, "who do you say that I am?" For all of us Messiah needs to be the answer. He has to be divine, the Son of God. But I don't want to stop there because Jesus does not want to stop there. He doesn't just want to save you. He wants to permeate every area of your life. Other terms that can be used for Jesus are Lord, light of our world, good shepherd, bridegroom, bread of life, mediator, the door, the way, our hope, our rock, and our friend. Jesus wants to be all of those things to us. So, who do we say that he is? He is everything that we need. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.