

“The Most Crucial Question in History”

Mark 8:27-38

Series: STEPS Week 8

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Sometimes a student gives an answer on a test which is really good but not what the teacher wanted. Here’s how one student gave the best wrong answer to every question:

Q-1: Where was the Declaration of Independence signed?

A: At the bottom of the page

Q-2: What is the main reason for divorce?

A: Marriage

Q-3: If you throw a red stone into the blue sea what will it become?

A: Wet

Q-4: How can a man go eight days without sleeping?

A: He sleeps at night.

Q-5: If you had three apples and four oranges in one hand and four apples and three oranges in other hand, what would you have?

A: Very large hands

Q-6: How can you drop a raw egg onto a concrete floor without cracking it?

A: Any way you want. Concrete floors are very hard to crack.

Q-7: What is the main reason for failure?

A: Exams

Believe it or not, Jesus’ students also give good wrong answers. When he asks his disciples, “Who do people say I am?” (Mark 8:27), they repeat what they hear the crowds say. “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets” (Mark 8:28). Now these are good answers, but they are dead wrong. Why? Because everyone they mention is dead. Jesus is not some past prophet who climbs up out of a tomb. Even the disciples sense Jesus is from above not below. But who is He? They aren’t sure.

So Jesus forces the issue. “But what about you?” He asked, “Who do you say I am?” (Mark 8:29). While the other students look nervously at one another, Peter steps forward and announces, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). That is the right answer but it’s also wrong. It’s right because Jesus is the Christ. He praises Peter saying,

Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my

church, and the gates of Hell will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 16:17-19

Not bad! Wouldn't it be great if God whispered test answers in your ear?

Immediately after Peter's answer, "Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him" (Mark 8:30). During our STEPS series on the Gospel of Mark many ask me, "Why does Jesus want to keep it quiet that He is the Christ"?

See that you don't tell this to anyone. Mark 1:44

But he gave (the demons) strict orders not to tell others about him. Mark 3:12

He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this. Mark 5:43

Despite His attempts to hide His identity, every time Jesus swears someone to secrecy, the word gets out and larger crowds turn out. Curiosity and suspense are building like a shaken up champagne bottle. Suddenly, in chapter 8, the turning point of the whole Gospel, the top pops off with Peter's reply. He gives the right answer...but for the wrong reason. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Yet Peter probably has a popular misconception of the Messiah. He pictures a warrior hero who drives out their enemies, conquers every nation, and spreads a Jewish empire from sea to shining sea. Jesus is not leading this kind of revolution. He does not need this kind of publicity. This is why He tells His disciples to keep it quiet. In fact, when Jesus describes His true mission, it shatters Peter's imperial dreams. For the first time, the Master reveals His strategy:

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. Mark 8:31

Grabbing his Master by the arm, Peter pulls Him aside and says, "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!" (Matthew 16:22) Jesus' fiery reply sears deep into Peter's soul. With the voice He uses to cast out demons, the Master turns and says to His pupil, "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." (Mark 8:33) Get out of my way, Satan! You are a temptation, a trap, an obstacle in my path. That's your will, not God's will. Right answer. Wrong reason.

One moment Peter is a blessing, the next, a barrier. First the voice of God speaks through him and then the voice of Satan. Peter stands at the door of heaven with the key in his hand. In the very next instant, he finds himself in the dreadful shadow of the gates of hell. What happened? You can have all the right information about Jesus, and still be terribly wrong. When I was at Princeton Seminary, Bart Erhman was a Ph.D. student and one of my teachers. After we both left Princeton he lost his faith in Jesus and God, but became one of the leading authors and authorities on the New Testament and a distinguished professor of religion at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He knows more about the Bible than I'll ever know and yet he doesn't know Jesus. You can be an elder, pastor, or seminary professor, give all the right answers and still get it wrong. You can sit in worship services year after year, teach Sunday School or attend Growth Groups and still not know the Lord. There are even multitudes who claim to believe in Jesus or in God and yet want nothing to do with His family the Church.

The most crucial question in history is “Who do you say I am?” (Mark 8:29) The way you answer this question will determine how you live in this world and how you will live in the next world. Some in Jesus’ day say He is the devil. They oppose Him. Some say He is a rabbi. They ignore Him. Some call Him a prophet. They treat him like the other prophets and don’t do what He says. Some today say He is a good teacher, a religious leader, a great historical figure, a tragic revolutionary. They want to dismiss Him, avoid Him, bury Him. Trouble is: Jesus won’t stay dead. He keeps showing up and asking this question: Who do you say I am?

The people who know Him first-hand ultimately come to one amazing answer: Jesus is God in the flesh. He is fully God and fully human. His divinity shines through his miracles, healings and exorcisms. At the same time, His complete humanity is evident when He sleeps in the boat, sighs deeply, and gets hungry. Jews believe in One God who lives in heaven. Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Babylonians might believe in a godman. Not Jews. How then can these devote Jews say a fellow Jew walks on water, casts out demons, heals diseases, forgives sin, tells storms to shut up and a dead girl to get up? They met Him. They watched Him. At times they doubted. But ultimately they could not deny it. When He asks, “Who do you say I am?” they have to reply, “You are the Son of the Living God, the Great I AM.”

He still asks us: Who do you say I am? In a famous quote C.S. Lewis writes,

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

Crucial questions don’t just ask for answers. They call for action. ‘Where are you going to college?’ ‘Will you take the job?’ ‘Will you marry me?’ If you call Jesus your Lord and Savior, that answer requires action. Jesus wants to set Peter and the disciples straight.

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? Mark 8:34-37

Jesus gives a three point sermon on what it means to be His disciple: 1. Deny yourself, 2. Take Up Your Cross, 3. Follow Me (by the way, in Greek all three phrases start with the same letter: A – Three points, same letter – this proves Jesus learned to preach at Princeton Seminary).

What does it mean to **Deny Yourself**? It doesn’t mean to deny yourself chocolate, ice cream or Tik Tok for Lent. In this case, you deny only one thing: yourself. You give up yourself.

You give up the right to yourself. You sign the deed of your life over to God. In another quote from Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis describes Jesus as saying:

“Give me all of you!!! I don’t want so much of your time, so much of your talents and money, and so much of your work. I want YOU!!! ALL OF YOU!! No half measures will do. I don’t want to only prune a branch here and a branch there; rather I want the whole tree out! Hand it over to me, the whole outfit, all of your desires, all of your wants and wishes and dreams. Turn them ALL over to me, give yourself to me and I will make of you a new self---in my image. Give me yourself and in exchange I will give you Myself. My will, shall become your will. My heart, shall become your heart.”

How do you do that practically? That’s Jesus’ next point: **Death to Your Way**. Jesus says, “Take up your cross.” When someone carries a cross there is one destination: death. Jesus doesn’t want you to die. He wants you to put to death your way of doing things. We put to death whatever comes between us and Him, whatever gets in the way of our relationship with Him. In order to gain the Lord, you must make room for Him by losing a few things. You may have to

- Release your control on the people in your life.
- Surrender your right to feel sorry for yourself.
- Let go of the expectations you impose on yourself and everyone around you.
- Loosen your grip on some possessions.
- Stop reaching for the next rung on the career ladder.
- Put down the addiction that holds you in its clutches.
- Clear out the guilt, the shame and the resentment stashed up in your soul.
- Admit that you were wrong and ask forgiveness.
- Quit listening to the criticisms in your head that tell you God will never forgive you.

When we begin to put to death our way we start to **Daily Follow His Way**. Jesus says the last step is “daily follow me” (Luke 9:23). It all comes down to this question: Do you have in mind God’s concerns or human concerns? Is it “Thy will” or “My will”? Your way or God’s way? Our culture says, “Grab for everything you can. Try to gain the whole world.” Jesus says, “What good is having the whole world if you’re not around to enjoy it? Let it go, you don’t need it.” People say, “Take charge of your life, be the master of your destiny.” Jesus says, “That’s the best way to lose your life. Give your life to me. I’ll save it for you. I’ll keep it safe.”

Some of you still remember the tiny kitchen in our old Fellowship Hall. Every time our kitchen crew served a meal from this kitchen it was a miracle equal to the feeding of the five thousand. When, in 2008, we gutted the kitchen to prepare for construction, we took out the cabinets and counter and found a stash of candy: red Swedish fish and lollipops. A mouse worked very hard to save and store up all these goodies. Notice, however, that not one lollipop is unwrapped and all the fish are still there. He gained all this stuff and never got to enjoy it.

This week someone asked me, “What is the purpose of life?” To gain stuff: a possession, a position, popularity, power? According to Jesus our purpose is not to acquire, aspire, achieve. Why? There is never an end to all that. Even if you get the whole world, it will never be enough. If you surrender your life to Jesus, put to death your way and daily follow His way, you will receive a love that never lets go, a joy that never grows cold, a peace beyond all grief, a hope

beyond all belief. The purpose of life is to be loved by God, to love God and to love like God. Follow Jesus. He will show you how.

Every day is precious. Every day of life is a gift from God. That's why we must daily follow Jesus and daily ask, "What is your will? Your will be done in my life today." All of us know our first day on earth. None of us know when our last day will be. I received an email from the Presbytery that a fellow Presbyterian pastor named Don went to a movie to celebrate his birthday and when the movie was over he so was his time here on earth. I was saddened by his loss. Yet I know he followed Jesus. His journey didn't end when it ended here on earth. Jesus' way leads to life.

Today I want to give you the opportunity to place your life in His hands, to commit your life to Jesus Christ. This may be the first time you ever received an invitation to give your life to Christ. I hope you will take that step. Or maybe you've gone to church your whole life and you know the right answer, that Jesus is Lord, but for the wrong reason. I pray that the Father will speak to you. It's possible that you already committed your life to Christ, but there is still something in you that blocks your walk with Him. Ask God to show you how to let go of that thing or person. Invite Jesus to come in and smash that stumbling block and help you make a breakthrough. It's never too late to learn the right answer for the right reason.