

## “The Most Important Question in History”

Matthew 16:13-24

Series: *Cliff Notes on the Bible Week 11: Jesus’ Teaching*

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Sometimes a student will give an answer on a test, which is very good but completely wrong. Here are some of the best wrong answers to test questions:

Q-1: Write Five Words You Can Spell

A: Five Words You Can Spell

Q-2: To change centimeters to meters you \_\_\_\_\_?

A: Take out centi

Q-3: How can a man go eight days without sleeping?

A: He sleeps at night.

Q-4: 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-5: a) Who is your hero? Dad

b) Why do you consider this person your hero? He is brave

c) Is there anything your hero is frightened of? Mom

Believe it or not, Jesus’ students also give good wrong answers. In our *Cliff Notes* series, we’ve reached the turning point of Jesus’ ministry. After calling four fishermen, a tax collector and seven others to follow Him, after teaching and preaching in the streets, synagogues and shoreline of Galilee, after witnessing growing multitudes who hunger for bread, healing and the Word of God, Jesus pauses and takes the 12 on a retreat. He wants to ask them a critical question.

They journey twenty-five miles north from the shore of Galilee. This region is far more Gentile than Jewish. The capital city, Caesarea Philippi, is named for emperor Caesar Augustus and the local ruler Philip, a son of Herod the Great. If you visit Caesarea Philippi today you see large caves and gushing streams. In Jesus’ day, impressive temples stood in front of the caves. One is dedicated to Caesarea Augustus while another honors the half-goat god Pan who was so wild he gave us the word “Panic.” In fact, one shrine is called the Temple of the Dancing Goats. Caesarea Philippi, this place of pagan worship, of animal and human sacrifice, sits at the base of Mount Hermon, Israel’s highest mountain.

Why does Jesus take His students to this land filled with idols, altars, and opinions? He wants to ask them what opinions they’ve been hearing about Him.

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Matthew 16:13-14

Now those are good answers, but they are dead wrong. Why? Because all those people are dead. Jesus is not some old prophet from the past who climbed up out of a tomb. Even the disciples sense Jesus has come not from below but above. But who is He? They aren't sure. Jesus forces the issue.

“But what about you?” he asked, “Who do you say I am?” Matthew 16:15

While the other students look uncertainly at one another, Peter announces, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). This is the right answer. Jesus even 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 Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 16:17-19

Not bad! Peter got this from God. 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 that he was the Christ.” (Matthew 16:20). Why? Peter has the right answer...but for the wrong reason. So do many others. 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 an everlasting Jewish empire from sea to shining sea. Jesus is not leading that kind of revolution. He does not need that 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:

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Matthew 16:21

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.” (Matthew 16:23) 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. At 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. You can be an elder, pastor, or seminary professor, give all the right answers and still be terribly wrong. You can sit in worship services year after year, teach Sunday School or attend Growth Groups and still not know the Lord. You can know a lot about Jesus and still not know Jesus. Right answer, but all wrong.

The most important question in history is “Who do you say I am?” 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 said He was the devil. They opposed Him. Some said He was a rabbi. They ignored Him. Some called Him a prophet. They rejected Him. Some today say He is a good teacher, a religious leader, a great historical figure, a tragic revolutionary, a cynic, a fanatic, a maniac. 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 most important question in history asks for a Decision. Do you believe the **Truth** about Jesus? The Jewish followers who knew Him first-hand ultimately came to one amazing answer: Jesus is God in the flesh. He is fully God and fully human. Greeks, Romans, Indians, Egyptians, Babylonians believed in godmen or demigods. Not Jews. They believe in One God who lives in heaven. So how did these faithful Jews come to believe a fellow Jew is the Son of God? They watched Him drive out demons, heal diseases, stop storms, forgive sins and rise from the dead. At times they doubted. But ultimately, they could not deny it. When He asks, “Who do you say I am?” they had to reply, “You are the Son of the Living God, God the Son, the Great I AM.”

He still asks us: Who do you say I am? This question demands a Decision. 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.

Important questions don’t just ask for an answer. They also ask 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, the answer requires action. Knowing the Truth is not enough. You must do something. This decision points you in a direction and the direction determines your destination.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “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 will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?” Matthew 16:24-26

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).

If you believe the Truth about Jesus, the next step is to **Trust** Him. You place your life in His hands. What does Jesus mean when He says, “deny yourself”? It doesn’t mean deny yourself chocolate, ice cream or Tiktok for Lent. It doesn’t mean to be in denial, to lie to yourself. In this case, you deny only one thing: yourself. You give up yourself. You give up the ownership of your life. You give your life over into God’s hands. This is the same word when Peter later denies he is a follower of Jesus. So, either you deny you are a follower of Jesus or you deny you are a follower of yourself. There’s no middle ground. In another quote, 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? Jesus says, “Take up your cross.” When someone carries a cross it means one thing: death. Now Jesus doesn’t want you to die. He wants you to put to death your way of doing things. You put to death whatever comes between you and Him, whatever gets in the way of your relationship with Him. 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 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 you believe the Truth and Trust him with your life, then you **Turn** and *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 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 way to lose your life. Give your life to me. I’ll save it for you. I’ll keep it safe.”

Recently, Francis Collins came to speak in a local Presbyterian Church. One of the greatest scientists of our age, Francis was the Director of the Human Genome Project – a team of scientists who broke the 3.1 billion letter code of our DNA. Though he understood the complex science of life, he couldn’t explain the meaning of life.

I was an atheist, finding no reason to postulate the existence of any truths outside of mathematics, physics and chemistry. But then I went to medical school and encountered life and death issues at the bedsides of my patients.

I witnessed numerous cases of individuals whose faith provided them with a strong reassurance of ultimate peace, be it in this world or the next, despite terrible suffering.

My most awkward moment came when an older woman, suffering daily from severe untreatable angina, asked me what I believed. She had shared her own strong Christian beliefs with me. I felt my face flush as I stammered out the words "I'm not really sure."

That moment haunted me for several days. Did I not consider myself a scientist? Does a scientist draw conclusions without considering the data? Could there be a more important question in all of human existence than "Is there a God?"

I had to admit that the science I loved so much was powerless to answer questions such as "What is the meaning of life?" "Why am I here?" "If the universe had a beginning, who created it?" "What happens after we die?" Suddenly all my arguments seemed very thin, and I had the sensation that the ice under my feet was cracking.

My search to learn more about God's character led me to the person of Jesus Christ. Here was a person with remarkably strong historical evidence of his life, who made astounding statements about loving your neighbor, and whose claims about being God's son seemed to demand a decision about whether he was deluded or the real thing. After resisting for nearly two years, I found it impossible to go on living in such a state of uncertainty, and I became a follower of Jesus.

Francis Collins found the Maker of Life and the meaning of life. Jesus is the Truth. Trust Him. Turn His Way and Follow Him.